

EIGHT

And to whom
Was this second letter
Addressed? Well, from the stamps and the postmarks,
It seemed to have been sent
By surface mail from Hungary, via a few
Other places,
And the name—I couldn't really
Read the handwriting—
The last name might have begun with *L*, ended,
Maybe, with an *S*, and beyond that
I had no clue.
But the street name was legible—the post office was improving
Its aim: this letter
Had found its way to the right street,
The right block, the right
Digits even:
To 1731 instead of 1713.

I knew the building well: 1713 was a small
Modern brick thing that I
Would never
Consider living in myself, but I'd been told
By some of my customers
That for someone in a wheelchair, it was the only
Affordable
Place for miles. So each day
As I walked past it, going to and coming
From the store, I tried
Not to disdain
The quasi-Soviet
Dullness of its architecture, not to see it
As a blight
In the row of otherwise
Interesting old facades. After some incomprehensible
Squawking on the intercom,
The door buzzed and I took the elevator—I felt
Stupid but I couldn't
Find the stairs—all the way up
To the second floor and I found apartment

215 and knocked
Several times on the door.

It wasn't surprise, this time, not exactly
Shock, either—
The tingle that ran up
And down my spine when that door opened
Was more
The confirmation of something I didn't know I expected
Coming true.
For there in front of me,
Blue tubing in her nose, framed by the radically
Rectangular
Modern lines of her door, was the wheezing old woman
Who had wheeled her private
Atmosphere past me
The morning before.

The conversation that followed I don't
Remember exactly—
It didn't make much sense
At the time—I was mainly trying
To save her the effort, the excruciating labor
Of expressing herself
In what was, for her, an anaerobic
Foreign tongue—and I thought I could do this
By prompting,
Filling in the blanks, translating
Her ominous
Gestures and the furrows
Of her frustrated face into the appropriate
American word:

She was most—
Most gratitude to me, to the mandrake, in the chairs
Not the chairs, the boxes, the benches,
The handcuffs?

Yes, I said, I had been in the D.A.'s office
Yesterday morning—
Yes, she
Had been there too, yes, yes—
The two of us...

With myself, with my hand, with my
Other hand? My other
Self? In handcuffs? No, no—not handcuffs—
With my...
My... brother!

No, I told her, that wasn't my brother, my brother lived
In Florida,
Yes, in the flowers, yes...

And the letter, apparently, was from her niece
Who lived in Budapest
But not in Budapest, no, not there, yes
In Budapest, her niece, and
She was most gratitude to me for throwing it away,
In my box,
No accident, no,
No, no accident, the mandrake, yes? in the box,
Just like Budapest,
No mandrake, no, not here,
Not follow her...

So I tried telling her that I myself
Had asthma,
That I understood
How hard it was to talk sometimes, and then she clasped
My hand in one of hers and thumped
My chest
With the other and told me that my lungs
Not long, not like her,
Like her niece? the air
Not her lungs, not long, in my box—
In her box?
No, not there, not long, not the air,
No, no mandrake, no, not like Budapest.

That night I called my girlfriend
To thank her
For the postcard. She's in graduate school out west,
Anthropology.
She's actually fourteen years
Younger than me. I met her when she was a waitress
And I was bartending

At one of Paulie's restaurants. That's what I've mainly
Done with my life—
Bartend for Paulie, and of course
Go to movies—
When the chance for the video store came up,
Three years ago, I just had
To jump at it—
It was in my field, if I still had a field—
And, well, I thought I was ready
For a job more conducive
To a monogamous lifestyle. That night, I wanted to tell her
About Gunther Mandrake
And the black minister and the wheezing
Old woman, but, you see—
It seemed hard to bring up without mentioning
The Vulmer case,
And she didn't like to be reminded
That only months ago
She had spent three or four nights a week
In a mirror-image
Of Richard Vulmer's apartment.

But she was very chatty, almost bubbly, that night
When I called. "Tomas says
It's very interesting," she said, "that you're
Writing a book
On Toshiro Mifune." Tomas was the guy
She hung out with all the time, the one I wasn't
Supposed to worry about
Because he was practically, totally gay.

"Why is that?" I said.

"What was interesting about Toshiro Mifune?" she called
Off into the background.

"Oh, yeah," she continued, back into the phone, "Tomas says
That of all the great
Macho heroes, Mifune plays the ones
Who never get laid.
Tomas says the samurai were all queer. Did you
Know that?"

"Queer is a contemporary concept," I said, "It doesn't
Really apply."

"That's a very good point," she said, closing
The subject, and then I listened
To her talk

For a while about her classes and her crowd
And the pressure and the job market for Anthro Ph.D's
And the difficulty of learning
Gujarati,
The language she needed for her fieldwork.