

## NINE

Was it becoming routine, the next day  
     When I found  
 The third letter? Well, not quite, but let's say  
     I took it in stride: no secret  
         Electric  
     Current flowed, no dogs were silent  
 That should have been barking, the moon did not shine  
     In the middle of the day—there was nothing  
         The least bit  
         Eerie  
 About the moment. And this one—it was a more  
     Normal mistake—if mistakes  
 Were what they were. Inside my copy of *Film Comment* I found  
     Another copy. Someone else  
     Around here was a subscriber. Now that's  
         A very simple  
 Sorting error, isn't it? You don't need to introduce  
         Baroque  
     Conspiracy theories or systems  
     Of occult connections to explain that one,  
         Now do you?

        The address was right  
     Across the street from me, a Victorian  
 Red brick house with its own yard and hedges, once nearly  
         A mansion  
         But long since  
     Divided into many apartments. Now I've always  
         Been curious  
     About this place, not least  
 Because the woman on the main floor, who apparently  
         Owns it, also owns  
     Four high-strung pure-bred dogs: two large  
         Snow-white Afghan hounds  
     And two tiny, equally snow-white  
 Toy poodles. The five of them promenade, ensemble,  
         Twice a day  
     Past my apartment.

There were seven mailboxes but only one doorbell  
On the broad porch stacked  
With old rotting  
Screens and storm windows. I looked around  
For a moment, then pushed  
The round  
Button. First the silent  
Pair  
Of ghostly afghans  
Came bounding to the glass-paned door, then the two  
Yipping poodles,  
And then their mistress, in a platinum wig, her face powdered  
As white as her dogs,  
Came gliding in her caftan. She apprised me  
Brusquely that Apartment 6A could only be reached  
By the fire escape  
Around back.

The fire escape  
Led to a small, turret-like porch, where there was an hibachi  
Grill, a window, a door, and two  
Identical  
Mountain bikes  
Locked together, front to rear.  
On the door was thumbtacked a fading poster proclaiming  
The First  
Lesbian Martial Arts Convention  
In some town in Connecticut. The woman  
Who opened  
The door while I was reading  
The fine print  
On the poster was smaller, more  
Delicate than I would have expected, but her stance  
Was as solid  
As Bruce Lee's in the life-sized  
Photo behind her.

"I heard someone on the stairs," she said.

"Yes," I said, "They are noisy. This—I think it's yours.  
Or your roommate's. It was wrapped in  
With mine."

"*Film Comment?*" she said. "It's mine. I don't have  
A roommate."

"Well, good," I said, and I turned to leave, taking care  
Not to bump  
The bikes or hibachi.

"Wait," she said, "I know who you are.  
"You were in the D.A.'s office on Monday—you  
And your twin brother. You're that guy who works in the little  
Video store."

"I'm the manager," I said.

"I never rent there," she said, as if stating  
A profound, inalterable  
Law of nature. "But I've heard of you. You're writing a book  
On Akira Kurosawa."

"On Toshiro Mifune,"  
I said. "Many of the same films, of course.  
Different emphasis."

Then she began to interrogate me. Why Mifune  
Not Kurosawa? Narrow  
The focus,  
I said, perhaps a broader public appeal. So I was writing  
For money? No, not primarily, but I wouldn't mind  
If it sold. A coffee-table book?  
Well, it would be  
Large-format, and illustrated, of course. Had I  
Studied kendo?  
No, I hadn't. Any other  
Martial arts? I shook my head, deciding  
Not to mention  
The Tat Chi video I rented once. Did I speak Japanese?  
Only the few phrases  
I'd picked up in my research. Then she stopped  
And looked at me as if considering  
Going for the kill,  
But I guess she decided  
I posed no danger, so she thanked me  
For bringing the magazine and watched me as I clattered  
Down the escape.