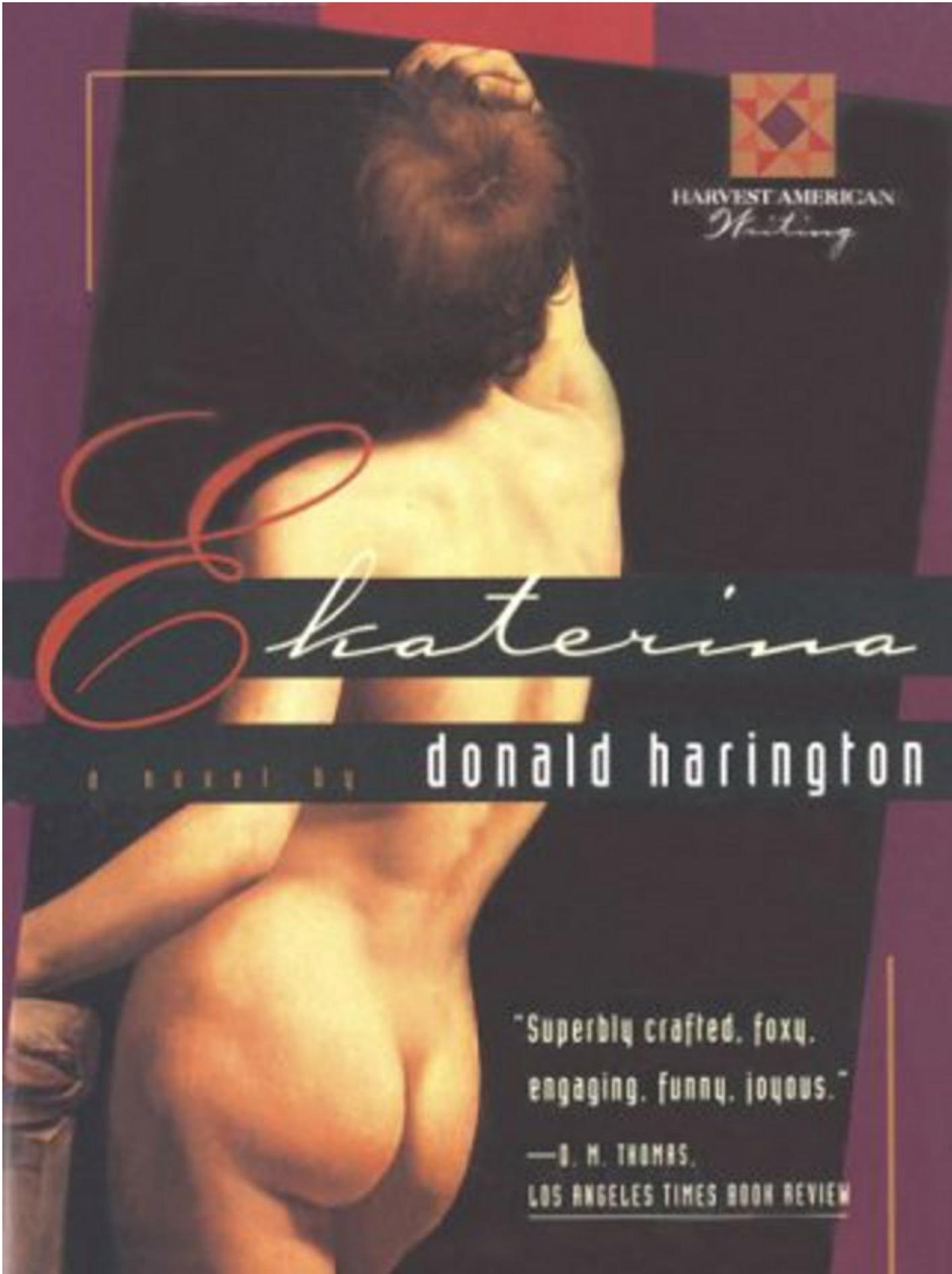




HARVEST AMERICAN
Publishing



Katerina

A NOVEL BY **donald harrington**

"Superbly crafted, foxy,
engaging, funny, joquous."

—D. M. THOMAS,
LOS ANGELES TIMES BOOK REVIEW

Ekaterina

a novel by Donald Harington

Copyright © 1993 by Donald Harington

ISBN: 0156000474

To Kim

PART ONE

BEGINNING

winter

SHORTLY AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR, or the Great

Patriotic War, as Ekaterina was taught to call it, the fabulous American poet Theodore Roethke wrote a long poem called "The Lost Son," the conclusion to a volume of the same title. Critic Lawrence Brace said of it, "No poem in the English language has better light." The fifth section, last section, is entitled "It Was Beginning Winter," and it concludes:

A lively understandable spirit

Once entertained you.

It will come again.

Be still.

Wait.

ONE

EKATERINA YOU WERE, and you were not at all. You were from a land far away, once upon a time and upon no time at all, where stories always begin, "There was, and there was not at all . . . ," as if to confute truth or affirm invention, in celebration of the

imagination's freedom to transcend the stubborn facts of "reality": you were, and still are, Ekaterina: all of this is real, and not a word of it is true: you escaped the clutches of a sadist named Bolshakov (a real name) who could not separate truth from fiction, and you came to America.

There was and there was not at all a great city in an eastern state, a city devoted to the manufacture of a hard but malleable metal commonly used in straight pins, a hilly city at the confluence of two rivers of Indian names and the beginning of a third, a city that, like you and I, gave up smoking—oh, why do I have to shield its name? You did not choose the city, except to whatever extent it may have been chosen for you by your guardian angel, Anangka, and you suspected that Anangka was still . half-asleep from jet lag or, at best, becoming frustrated and grim in her efforts to provide a destiny for you.

No, you were sent to this city involuntarily, under the aegis of the Fund for the Relief of Russian Writers and Scientists in Exile, whose New York (a real name) office had met your plane, had interviewed you (in both Russian and English, noting that you were not sufficiently fluent in the latter, and, making you a gift of a purse-size paperback,

Akhmanova's Russian—English Dictionary), had given you in dollars the equivalent of 176 rubles, enough to last out that month of December, and had put you and your pasteboard suitcase (containing one change of clothes, basic toiletries, and a few souvenirs from "camp") on a bus for the ride of 365 miles to the city of your referral. "Wait," you'd said in English to your agent from the Fund, before he put you on the bus. "Am I Writer, or am I Scientist?" He had laughed, thinking your question in jest, and had made no move to answer it.

The bus ride took you through some snow-covered farm country where the people, called Amish (a real name), still wore old-fashioned clothing and the women wore black bonnets. You were wearing a black scarf wrapped around your head like a bonnet, or babushka, knotted into a bow beneath your chin. It covered all of your hair—or rather, your lack of hair, which was just beginning to grow back from the last time it had been shaved in camp. None of your fellow passengers seemed to make anything of your headgear; maybe they thought you were some kind of Amish.

You were, and you were not at all, at least not any longer, Svanetian. It was nothing like Amish: rural and old-fashioned, yes, but not deliberately so, and not particularly religious. Just as the county in which I spent my last years, and our ultimate destination in this story, was and is the most remote of all the seventy-five counties in that (unnamed) state, Svanetia is the most remote district, formerly a principality, of the rugged mountains of the Southern Caucasus in Georgia, once part of a Communist confederation called the Soviet Union, now independent again but anxiously so. You had not been home for three years, not since they sent you to camp at the age of twenty-four, and that was a dozen

years ago from now, and you still have not been home . . . except in some of your splendid writings.

Just the other year, and not any year at all, the people of Georgia, making a bold move to assert their independence from the still-existing Soviet Union, established as their president the selfsame Zviad Gamsa-khurdia who had been your mentor and friend and whose arrest as a political prisoner by the Communists had led to your arrest. Zviad (your stringing of consonants is going to give me some trouble, although we

ghosts are multilingual) was not a Svanetian but a native of Tbilisi, or Tiflis, the capital, and a son of the writer Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, whose work you admired; and Zviad was a lecturer in English (American literature) at Tbilisi University when you taught there (not, alas, in English). He had published your first poems in his *samizdat* journal *Okros Sacmisi*, which means in Georgian "Golden Fleece," and you can remember when you fantasied being Medea to his Jason—you were twenty-three and he was thirty-six—and in his fifties he became president of the whole country, something you couldn't have comprehended in those days when the Kremlin still had all of you under its iron fist.

But you hadn't gone to jail for Zviady. You had gone to jail for Georgia, and for Svanetia, and for the honor of the royal name you carried, Dadashkeliani, and for human rights everywhere: after Zviady's arrest you became co-chair of the Tbilisi Watch Committee, to observe and protest the violations of human rights that were occurring all around you. By then you had stopped writing poetry. No one, as I discovered myself some years ago, reads poetry.

TWO

Standing ON the sidewalk below the mansion, you studied again the slip of paper in your hand, to verify the address. You had expected perhaps one of those singular dwellings you had seen so often from the bus, what we call "suburban ranch style": one-story, low or flat roof, cozy, convenient, conventional. But this was urban, and miles from the nearest vestigial ranch. This was a castle, nearly, larger than the ancestral manors of the Dadashkelianis in Etseri and your own village of Lisedi, manors that had been broken up into apartments when Svanetia, along with all of Georgia, was collectivized by the Communist Soviets. This castle had no tower looming over it, but it was made largely of dark stone, with enough busy classical details in wood to decorate it like certain town houses of Tbilisi. You looked up and down the avenue to see that there were other mansions of similar size if not similar style in the neighborhood, and, in the distance, the soaring gothic tower of the city's university.

"*Im, imte, imetchu, Anangka?*" you addressed in Svani your unseen purveyor of Providence. "Have you got in mind for me to live *here?*" Surely these Elmores were very

wealthy capitalists, with servants.

The door was answered not by a servant but by a comely youth: a smiling lad of twelve years who instantly struck you as a synthesis of your Islamber and your Dzhordzha: he was tall for his age and skinny, like Islamber, with the Svane's slightly hood-lidded eyes that made him

look sleepy or sly or Oriental, depending upon whether he looked straight at you or sidelong; but he seemed to possess Dzhordzha's quality—aura or emanation—of *makap*, precocious sexuality, of being what your fellow writer and near-compatriot, Nabokov (a very real name, of whom you had not yet heard), called (coined and minted) *a faunlet*: the male equivalent, if there is one, of his immortal nymphet.

"*Ivasu khari, Anangka!*" you said aloud, which is to say, Thank thee, Anangka. The boy stared at you, and his smile was uncertain. You were tempted to give him his first lesson in elementary Svani on the spot, or even to introduce him to your invisible companion, but instead you announced, "I am Ekaterina Vladimirovna Dadeshkeliani."

The boy made a sound like "Whew," and then he said, "How do you, like, *spell* all of that?" but he giggled (Islamber's vulgar giggle!) to let you know he didn't really require you to spell it for him. And then he said, "You must be the die sinner."

You attempted to repeat the words, "Die sinner?" and your hand instinctively reached for the dictionary in your purse.

"What Mom calls you," he said. "I'll go get her." He turned to leave you on the doorstep but turned back, remembering what little manners he had: "Hey, come on in." And he motioned to a spot in the spacious foyer where you could stand and wait for Mrs. Elmore.

But in Svanetia one never crosses a threshold without express invitation from the male head of the house, and, unless this pubertal youth was already as mature as you hoped, he was probably not the head of the house. So you remained standing outside the door, the cold air at your back (mild, even balmy by Svanetian standards) rushing through the open door.

You brought out the dictionary. You were sure of *die*, but checked it anyway for other meanings: singular of *dice*; to desire greatly, as if pining away; stamping device; but also possibly just *di-*, prefix meaning twice, double, or two, as in *dicotyledon*. Of course! *Sinner* you did not know at all, and you found it quickly: one who sins. *Sin*: any offense, violation, fault, or error.

You were meditating upon the idea of being a double sinner and the fantastic chance that these people already knew about *both* Islamber

and Dzhordzha, when the hobbledehoy returned, saying first, "Don't you understand 'Come in?'" and then, "Mom's upstairs trying to, like, help Professor Ogden. I think that old sinner is *dying!* Anyhow, she says for me to, like, fix you a drink and she'll be down in a minute. I hope you don't drink, though. Do you?"

Still you hesitated outside the door, searching for the English word for *baba* (Svanetian), *mama* (*sic*, Georgian), *otyets* (Russian), and remembering it without having to look it up: "Your fadder. Is home?"

"Dad? No, he's at the Hillman." (I ought to shade the library's name, as I'm taking pains to shade so much else, but I like the real name, being a hillman myself.) "Hey, if you're not coming in, we'd better shut the door." The faunlet put one hand on the doorknob and the other on your coat sleeve, and began tugging each, to see which would move first. You reluctantly entered the house.

The entrance hall was enormous, with a floor of marble, and all the walls were covered with mirrors. Throughout the house, you would discover, there were mirrors everywhere, as if the original builder of the house were either extremely vain (he was) or inspired by Louis XIV. In Leningrad you had seen buildings that had many mirrors, but not like this, and in Svanetia there were several houses that had no mirrors at all.

You glanced at yourself in one. At a rest stop on the bus route, because you had noticed that some of the other women on the bus had been wearing them, you had taken the one good pair of *dzhinsy* out of your suitcase and had put them on: they were comfortable and kept your legs warm, and you saw now how they matched almost identically the pair of *dzhinsy* that the boy was wearing, just as faded. But your coat, the prison-issue *palto*, was shabby, grimy, and patched, and, with the black babushka around your head, it made you look like a peasant.

Reading your thoughts, the boy held his hands as if to pinch your shoulders and invited, "You wanta take that off?" and helped you out of your crummy coat. Then he gestured to the left: "This is our apartment," and led you through some slid-open sliding doors into a suite of rooms, one flowing from the other, each layered with more mirrors, and with shelves and antique furniture festooned with bric-a-brac and lace.

He led you to a polished buffet truly covered with bottles of all sizes and shapes. " 'Name your poison,' " he said and giggled again, and you knew he was quoting his elders, so you did not bring out the paperback to look up *poison*. His fingers began to hop from bottle to bottle: "Rye . . . Scotch . . . rum . . . bourbon . . . gin ..." His hand stopped and lifted a bottle. "I guess you'd want this one. Vodka. There's hundred-proof Smirnoff and eighty-six-proof Popov."

You thirsted. The night of your leavetaking from camp, the other women had pooled their

rations of tea to brew a quantity of *chifir*, a powerful drink, black and thick, invented by inmates, that requires fifty grams of tea leaves; and, in flagrant violation of regulations, they had toasted you with it and helped you consume it, enough of it to make all of you quite tipsy. The *chifir* had given you your first real high since your arrest and your last one until the possibility that now lay before you.

"But like I say," the boy was saying, setting the Smirnoff back down, "I hope you don't drink. You're, like, too pretty to drink. I could give you a soft drink, I mean, you know, some pop, Coke or stuff." Your fingers were groping for your purse, for your paperback. But you did not resort to it, waiting, and trying to understand him: one of his strange words had seemed familiar: *Coke*.

"Coke?" you said.

"Oh, cool!" he exclaimed. "I'll get you a Coke from the fridge." He turned to go but turned back. "Because, you know, everybody in this house, and I mean everybody, is, like, getting fried all the time, you know?"

While he was out of the room you looked up *fried*, without much success.

THREE

"That *Kenny!*" the woman said, flapping her hand in dismissal, then snatching the aluminum can out of your hand. "He doesn't have the manners of a billy goat! I'm Loretta Elmore, and I'll bet you'd like some vodka, right?"

"Mayest thou be victorious," you said in a fairly good English rendering of the common Svanetian greeting.

"Do what?" said Loretta Elmore. She held the bottle of Smirnoff above a crystal glass, raising one eyebrow in expectation of your approval, and when you nodded she splashed a couple of jiggers into the glass. "Ice?" she said.

It sounded nothing like the Svanetian *kvarmal* nor the Russian *lyod*. "I am having much problems with the English," you said. "How spells 'ice'?"

She took the lid off the ice bucket and lifted out a palmful of cubes. "I-see-ee," she said. She dropped the cubes into another glass, into which she poured some of the amber liquid from another bottle, as if in demonstration. She held it up, said, "Bourbon and branch on the rocks. Can you say that?"

You were always good at mimicry, at repetition. You repeated her exactly, with just a slight misinflection.

"Very good," she said, and pointed her glass at you and said, "Cheers," and drank most of

it in one swallow.

You drank your vodka, without ice, in one swallow. It was the real stuff, as we say, and the first you'd had since the days in Tbilisi when you spent too much of your university salary on a daily dose of it.

Loretta refilled your glass and asked, "Don't you want to take that scarf off your head and sit down?" When you hesitated, she pantomimed removing the scarf and sitting.

"Sit, ya," you agreed. "But 'scarf,' no. I am having no hair."

"You don't mean to tell me!" she said. "Now that's terrible. Is that what they did to you? Did they cut it all off?" She scissored together her first and second fingers and you nodded, and she said, "That really sucks! How long were you in the die sinner's slammer?"

"Pardon. What means 'die sinner'?"

"What you were. Weren't you?" She spelled the word for you and it did not spell exactly as she and her son had spoken it.

You brought out your paperback, showed her the cover, and apologized, "I am having to use."

"Use," she said. "Go right ahead."

You looked it up: one who dissents, as one who refuses to accept a religious doctrine. Your finger moved a short distance down the page, to another, better word. You tried not to sound didactic, let alone superior. "I think," you told her, "thou want other word, *dissident*, not *dissenter*."

"Yeah, that's right!" she said. "That's the word Kenneth—Big Kenny, who's Pa—that's the word he uses. I just got it mixed up. You're not a die sinner. You're a dissident!"

You smiled. And that was your first awareness, dear Kat, that all of us have problems with English.

FOUR

Big Kenny, OR Pa, came home from the Hillman in time for supper and was delighted to find that you had arrived safely, since it had been his idea in the first place: in the course of the evening, and with much help from your paperback dictionary, you were able to determine that your host, or rather your landlord, or perhaps a little of both, Dr. Kenneth L. Elmore, Sr., 71, was a retired professor of anthropology at the university who, in his superannuation and idle hours, espoused several worthy social causes, including

Save-a-Child and Urban League and Amnesty International, and had somehow got his name on the mailing list of the Fund for the Relief of Russian Writers and Scientists in Exile. He had not contributed any cash to the Fund, and he did not now intend to contribute anything at all to your welfare, other than excusing you from paying your first month's rent, or rather what remained of the month of December, and it was to be hoped that you would be able to pay your January rent out of your salary from the university, assuming that his efforts to help you find employment there were successful. Thus far, his efforts had been limited to sending interdepartmental memos to his colleagues in Biological Sciences and Slavic Languages and Literature; he was prevented from phoning or visiting them by an advanced hearing impairment that, in addition to what problems you already had with the English language, rendered communication between the two of you almost impossible. ("The stubborn old gomer refuses to try a hearing

aid," Loretta said in the presence of the nonhearing old gomer, a word not in your dictionary.) Dr. Elmore had received, in reply to his memos, an offer to have you interviewed by Dr. Schvann of Slavic and Dr. Dal-rymple of Biological Sciences, and, as soon as you got settled into your apartment upstairs (adjacent to, on one side, Dr. Edith Koeppe of Sociology and, on the other side, Dr. Knox Ogden of English), you would be expected to appear for your interviews. ("I'll loan you the borrow of one of my dresses," Loretta offered generously. "I think we're about the same size. And you really ought to wear some of my jewelry, at least a necklace.")

But Dr. Elmore had very little to say to you, that evening or later. At the supper table (Kenneth, Jr., "Little" Kenny, the only sober person at that late hour, cooked and served a supper of cheeseburgers and french fries), Dr. Elmore casually remarked, not looking at you, "I have the greatest respect for dissidents, particularly those against the Bolshevik ideology," but in a voice so hoarse and weak that Loretta had to repeat the words for you, slowly, and yell at her husband, "SHE HAS TO LOOK 'EM UP!" while you successfully found *ideology*, which sounded pretty much the same in Russian, with a different accent. Then the three Elmore, including smiling Kenny, waited for your response to that remark.

"Dissidents," you said, "are being . . . Excuse"—you looked up a couple of words—"successful only if famous. Like Solzhenitsyn. I not famous dissident. I, nobody know."

Loretta yelled this at her husband, and he smiled politely and shook his head in sympathy, or in disavowal of having heard; you could not tell which.

You were not drunk, and neither, precisely, were Dr. and Mrs. Elmore, although all three of you had consumed large quantities of, respectively, vodka, Scotch, and bourbon. You were out of practice, and a quantity of vodka that would have given you only a pleasant buzz in Tbilisi or Leningrad now rendered you a bit stuporous and stuttering and

inattentive. Each time Loretta got up to refill your glass, her son would whine, "*Mom!*" and roll his eyes in disgust and give you assorted facial contortions of disappointment, pity, concern, and beseechment.

At one point during the evening, Loretta observed that your unusual name was difficult, to put it mildly, and she delivered herself of the opinion that you ought to pick one of the many American translations, Cathy, perhaps, or Katy, or Cassie, or Kitty, or perhaps just Kay. At the very least, Catherine. "What can we *call* you?" she wondered aloud. Without wishing to be unfriendly or in the least aloof, you announced, "Ekaterina Vladimirovna," dropping, at least, your unwieldy surname.

Finally, when Dr. Elmore seemed to have withdrawn entirely into himself and was making no effort to respond to his wife's shouts of "SHE WANTS US TO CALL HER EE COTTERINA VLAH DEEMER ROV NAH!" Kenny said to his mother, "Can't you see she's *tired?*" and Loretta suggested that maybe it was time that Kenny showed you up to your room, and the boy leapt at the chance.

FIVE

YOUR ROOM, on the second floor of the mansion, west side, was large enough to house, by Soviet standards, an entire family, but you had it all to yourself, and even a bathroom! You could not believe, at first, that you would not be sharing the bath with Professors Koeppe and Ogden, who, Kenny tried to convince you, both had separate bathrooms. The mansion contained a total of ten apartments, each with its own bathroom, each populated by a single faculty member or graduate student, the latter on the third floor. Each apartment even had its own small cooking niche (Kenny gave you the word: *kitchenette*.) Yours had a gas stove, a small refrigerator, and a sink, but there were no pots, pans, dishes, or cutlery. ("I could, like, snitch you some stuff from downstairs just to get you started," Kenny offered.)

Kenny had already taken from his parents' apartment a table lamp and a reading lamp, which he now put upon your desk and plugged in and turned on. Then he struck a match and lit the gas heater embedded in the exterior wall, and he showed you how to adjust it. The same exterior wall had five tall windows interspersed with mirrors, four of the windows with a view of the busy avenue, now traversed by many car lights; one of the windows (as Kenny, pulling aside the heavy drapes, showed you) had an oblique view of the illuminated window of your neighbor Professor Ogden. He had not drawn his blinds, and his undraped window revealed a dim glimpse of his person, supine upon his couch, one arm flung over his face to shield his eyes or comfort his head. ("That old nerd's really, really sick," Kenny said. "I mean he's, like, barfy and gross, you know? He oughta be in the hospital, but Mom can't make him go.")

The furniture of your room consisted of a small circular dining table with three simple dining chairs (two for company, said our Thoreau, and a third for society); a sofa like the one Ogden was confined upon; a spacious desk with desk chair; a comfortable stuffed armchair; two empty bookcases waiting for you to fill them up (you possessed at this point only three volumes, including the Russian—English dictionary: the other two were a fragment [less than half] of a coverless, torn, much-used Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the only thing you'd been able to read in camp, where books were forbidden and this fragment had served several inmates as a toilet-paper supply before falling into your possession, as if Anangka wanted you to learn a little about the language you would be using for the rest of your life, even in its Middle form, and even without any help from a Russian—English dictionary; and a slim hardbound of Gunter von Buren's *Protomycetaceae of Switzerland*, which the KGB man had permitted you to browse for and purchase cheaply under his suspicious eye at a Zurich bookshop before driving you on to the airport); a chest of drawers waiting for your undies and socks and such, once you acquired some; and a pair of what we call "occasional tables": good for ashtrays, magazines, clocks, spare change, TV dinners (your room had no TV). In fact, there was a clean crystal ashtray already upon one of them, and you looked wistfully at it and asked your boy guide: "Thou do not objection if I take . . . *papirosa*, cigarette, no?"

"It's *your* room," Kenny pointed out and, looking around him, noticed the door was still ajar and closed it. "Can I have one too?"

It's ironic, my Kat, that you, who had already throughout the long dull course of exchanging civilities with the Elmores amused yourself with elaborate plans for a soon seduction of this lad, now scrupled against "corrupting" him by letting him have a cigarette. You studied him and his eager face for a long moment before shaking your head. His face fell. His face, you realized, was much more mobile, expressive, mercurial, than Islamber's. But you hadn't shaken your head in denial of his request,

only in the realization of your corrupting him. *A cigarette is as nothing compared to what I am going to give you*, you thought, but in Svanetian, not English. You held out the pack of Virginia Slims (its colors had attracted you, and you'd smoked two entire packs since leaving New York, thinking of the coarse shag *makhorka* that you'd only occasionally been able to smoke in camp), and his face brightened all over again, and the two of you lit up and smoked.

There was one essential piece of furniture missing from the room, and you wanted to ask about it but did not know how for the simple reason that the tiny word for it eluded you, that basic appurtenance that is *laqvra* in Svanetian, *logini* in Georgian, *postyel* in Russian, but less than half as many letters in English. You could have tried to look it up, but you would have felt a certain embarrassment in mentioning it, so soon, to Kenny. Staring at the

sofa, you supposed that either that was it, or even perhaps the sofa was convertible for sleeping . . . and seduction.

And then—it was so uncanny the way he seemed to read your thoughts, or perhaps Anangka, bless her, was on the job and sending messages to him—Kenny hit himself on the brow (not with the hand holding the Virginia Slim) and said, "Hey, I almost forgot!" He moved to the wall and grasped two of the tall mirrors by crystal knobs attached to them, and the mirrors swung out like doors, revealing a recess in the wall containing a contraption that you recognized even in the instant that he began to pull it out and down. "Your Murphy bed!" he said when he had it fully in place on the floor. It was almost a double bed, you realized, as you filed the word *murphybed* into your vocabulary, but the mattress was bare. Again, as if reading your thoughts, he declared, "I guess you'll have to buy some sheets and stuff, but I could, like, snitch you a pillow and some stuff from downstairs, just for tonight. Soon as I finish this." He indicated his cigarette. Suddenly he laughed uproariously at some thought—you hoped not the same thought you were teasing—and he said, "Listen, have you ever heard of Murphy's Law?"

You knew *coleslaw* but not *murphyslaw*. You shook your head.

He said, "It goes, like, 'Anything that can possibly go wrong is sure enough going to go wrong.'" He studied you. "Get it?" You nodded,

although you were not certain of the connection between the *murphyslaw* and the *murphybed*. Or was he insinuating something, subtly? Perhaps that your attempt to love him would go wrong. He said, "I'll be right back," and put out his cigarette and left the room.

Within minutes he was back, bringing a pillow, blankets, sheets, and a pillowcase. "Oh, *ivasu khari!*" you said. "Thank thee!"

"I nearly got caught," he declared proudly. "But if you ever need anything, hear, I'm your man." You smiled, enjoying that expression, and thinking in English, *Thou art my man*, and you wondered how you could possibly tell him at this point, with your limited language, what you most needed. He began to make the *murphybed* for you, and you searched for words to protest but could not find any. There are no good words to tell somebody to permit one to make one's own bed. Finished, he looked around the room, as if searching for other hidden doors behind the mirrors to show you anything else he had neglected to show you. "Well, I guess that's it," he declared at last. "I hope you're comfy and all. I hope old Professor Ogden doesn't bother you. Sometimes he, like, makes a lot of noises in the night, coughing and stuff." The boy made facial expressions of both wonderment and annoyance. "But," he said, "maybe his noises will, like, keep you from hearing the *other* noises." He waited to see if this had registered with you before he went

on, "I hate to tell you, but this place is haunted."

"Excuse," you said, and took up your paperback. "H," you said, "O, N . . ."

"A, U, N," he corrected you, and you found it quickly, your fingers getting better and nimbler in their constant turning of the pages.

Finding it, learning it, you closed your eyes for a moment in ecstasy. "*O sakvrel Anangka!*" you uttered, which is to say, O marvelous Fate-Thing. The boy's announcement was, as we like to say, too good to be true. But it was true. I, who am a ghost of sorts myself, and have to be, to get this strange story told, can tell you: Lawren Carnegie, the cousin of Andrew, and the man who built this mansion in 1893, a man who had made his fortune supplying his cousin with coal from mining interests in West Virginia, on the night in 1901 when the Titusville mine disaster took the lives of 187 of his employees, tried to put himself to

sleep with cognac but, being a corpulent man, required two whole bottles just to make himself drowsy, drowsy enough to consume a third, which deprived his physical entity of its involuntary functions, such as respiration and heartbeat, and his "spiritual" entity has been vacationing behind these mirrors ever since, sometimes clumsily causing scrapes and screeches and an occasional clank to echo between the glass and the wall.

"You hear what I'm saying?" Kenny wanted to know, his eyes big and his eyebrows high. "There *are* ghosts around."

You did not need to look the word up, it was so close to the Germanic *Geist*, even if far removed from your Svanetian *lanchal*. In Svanland you had known many a splendid *lanchal*. "I love ghost," you told Kenny.

He stared at you in disbelief, his stare slowly shading into one of tentative dislike, as if, smitten with you but reluctant to give you his heart wholly, he had had to search for a flaw, which he had found at last. He did not know what to say. At length he said, "Well, if you're not jacking me around, you'll sure be happy here, I guess. If you meet the ghost, just tell him to stay away from me, okay?"

You smiled and said, "I tell him," and then, suddenly, you were overpoweringly weary and wanting to sleep. How does one bid farewell best in the English? *Lishdobe, lishdobe*. You tried a bit of sign language: You touched your hands together as if in prayer and laid them beside your cheek as if in slumber. "I am needing rest," you said.

"Oh, yeah, sure!" he exclaimed, and made to leave. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Night, tomorrow," you promised, "we talk. We play game. I tell thee stories. Thou like story?"

"I'm kind of old for that," he said, thinking perhaps you had in mind the bedtime tales he hadn't heard since his old father stopped telling them seven years before. "But yeah, we could, like, play games. Do you know chess? Aren't all Russians real good at chess?"

"Am not Russian," you declared firmly. "*Mushwan*. Shvan. Can thou say 'Svan'?" He tried. It was not easy, and sounded more like *Swan* than *Svan*, which was all right. You told him, "But I play chess, ya. So we

play chess. Thou have . . . ?" Your fingers pantomimed the pieces: pawns, royalty, clergy, horsemen, crenelated mansions.

"No, but I know where I could snatch some," he declared, and turned again to go. "Well, good night, I guess." But he hesitated. "Could I—?" he tried. "Could I stay and watch you take off that scarf?"

You gave him your very best smile, and, dear Kat, even your middling-to-fair smiles are a wonder to behold, but you slowly shook your head. How did you tell him, Not yet? Or, It is too soon? Or, Comfort yourself with the thought that soon you'll see all of me, but not tonight. But you knew a word, *ugly*, without looking it up. "With no scarf," you said, "I am looking very ugly."

"You couldn't," he said. "You couldn't if you tried. You are the prettiest lady I ever saw."

You blushed, knowing that adjective too. You had learned from him a farewell: "Good night," you said.

"What color is your hair? I mean, what color *was* it?"

You touched your eyebrows, which were still all there, perhaps too much so, because you would never pluck them. "This color," you said.

"Sorta like mine," he said, and his hair was, in truth, very like yours had been: an ordinary brown, a common brown, the color of mice, or of nuts, or, according to your Chaucer at least, "broun as a berye," or, best of all, of the forest floor that nurtured the mushrooms that were your singular overriding interest in this life. "Good night," he said again, and reached out and took your hand and shook it. The handshake was the first time you had been touched since Bolshakov let go of you.

Before putting out your lights and climbing into the murphybed, you spent a good hour in the cozy, easy company of your paperback book, looking up *poison*, *bourbon*, *dope*, *billy goat*, *cheers*, *borrow*, *wrong*, etc., etc. Some of the words, e.g., *sucks* and *gross*, did not have the meaning that apparently had been intended, whereas other words, *slammer*, *snitch*, *nerd*, *barfy*, *jacking around*, could not be found at all.

And one simple word gave you the most difficulty. You were still thinking about its possible multiple meanings or usages when you drifted off to sleep: *like*.

SIX

The ghost of Lawren Carnegie would not make contact with you that night. If he made any sounds at all to indicate his stale and bumbling residue in the physical world, you did not hear them. You slept well, not even wakened when your next-door neighbor, Professor Ogden, had one of his fits of coughing. If your sleep was troubled at all, it was not by Carnegie or Ogden or Kenny Elmore but by the sinister Bolshakov in his trench coat, walking constantly toward you. But the only dream you'd remember when you woke did not feature Bolshakov at all; rather, it was your old familiar dream of climbing and descending an endless sequence of stone steps, concrete steps, iron steps, and wooden steps, staircases that led up or down to significant places whose significance always eluded you.

The next day, bright and sunny but cold enough to remind you of winters in frozen Svanetia—even the distant snow-clad hills that surrounded this city suggested the topography of the purlieus of Lisedi— was, you realized with a pang of nostalgia, appropriately December 10: International Human Rights Day, the day that the women in camp fasted in solidarity. So you did not need breakfast. You dressed, and re wrapped the black scarf around your head, and counted your money, and went out to explore the town. You walked the short distance, less than a *verst* (two-thirds of a mile), past other mansions; past the modern building

housing WQED, whose FM station was going to serenade you on many a sentient occasion; past the first of the three churches you came to, Saint Paul's, which was Irish Catholic and where you were tempted, despite being neither Catholic nor even Eastern Orthodox any longer, to go inside and cross yourself and say to Saint George a prayer of thanks for your deliverance; past an institution that even more than the church was unknown in Russia, a bank, Mellon's, where it was to be hoped you would one day have an account; past the second of the churches, the Heinz Memorial Chapel, with its enormous stained-glass windows, where on any Saturday afternoon three to five happy couples were joined in matrimony; past this to the third and grandest and tallest of the churches, a Gothic skyscraper really, with over forty stories, much taller than the central tower of Moscow University, which you had visited on several occasions without ever being a student or a teacher there. Its central shaft, if you squinted your eyes, could pass for a Svanetian tower, much magnified.

This building, you discovered upon entering it, was called the "Cathedral of Learning," and indeed this morning it was already crowded with students on their way to their eight o'clock classes, some of which were meeting in opulent classrooms off the central

high-vaulted nave, where there were not pews or altars but tables for study. The students hurrying past you did not stare at you or take any note of your appearance, your black kerchief shrouding a lovely face. Strange for a cathedral, there were two rows of elevators, and the students were rushing into the cars of these, and you followed and rode, because you did not know where to get off, all the way up to the forty-second floor, where you stood in a hallway and stared out a window at the city sprawling in every direction out and out and onward: the distant steel-and-glass skyscrapers of the downtown, crowded together, made a technological phantasmagoria of the towers of Svanetia, those battlemented columns that, poking up all over the landscape (but a mere six or seven stories tall), may have inspired, even subliminally, your initial interest in mushrooms.

This city spread out beneath you was less than half as populous as Tbilisi, where you had taught and worked, and not even one-eighth the

size of Leningrad, where you had studied for your advanced degrees, but somehow it seemed bigger and busier than both. For the nonce, it could suitably prompt you into recollections of Tbilisi: There were those two rivers, bigeminal tributaries like the Kura and the Vera of Tbilisi (these were called longer, more poetic, and more romantic names, Monongahela and Allegheny, words from languages that truly fascinated you, the Indians'). And in the distance, you could see the tallest of the surrounding hills (Mount Washington), which, even if its height was no match for Tbilisi's Mount Mtatsminda, miraculously had an important feature in common with the latter: a funicular railway running up its slope (in fact, it had *two* of them, but from your vantage you could see only one, the Duquesne Incline), and you decided to make the fun of that funicular your immediate objective, if you could learn how to get to it.

But you would not reach it on this day. Other things would divert you from your destination. Coming down from the top of the Cathedral of Learning, you spent some time exploring its International Rooms: There was no Georgian Room, but there were, among many others, each donated and decorated by people of that nationality living in this city, a Russian Room, a Greek Room, a Yugoslav Room, and a Polish Room, each containing objects familiar to you. But the room that most attracted you was the Scottish Room, an especially elegant result of careful planning in imitation of seventeenth-century Scottish workmanship: each of the students' tablet armchairs was elaborately carved of imported oak; there was an elegant fireplace (nonfunctional) surmounted by a portrait of Robert Burns, and carved thistles everywhere; each of the four large windows facing the avenue was emblazoned with the symbols and devices of the four great ancient Scottish universities, Glasgow, Saint Andrews, Aberdeen, and Edinburgh; and innumerable little details made me sorry my ghosthood wouldn't allow me to point them out to you, such as the rear window bearing the arms and emblems of the Clan Montrose, my ancestors.

Leaving the Cathedral of Learning, you sought out the closest bookshop, where you might find a city map that would have transportation routes on it, so you could find out, without the embarrassment of stopping

someone on the street to ask, how to get to the funicular railway. The bookshop you entered happened to be the chief bookstore for the university, and you could not resist, while there, browsing. You spent two entire hours in that bookshop, enchanted, and only your sense of the need to protect what little cash you possessed kept you from going on a spree and buying volumes right and left. You even resisted an exceptionally attractive book, a Penguin paperback of a modern English "translation" of the Middle English Chaucer of which you already owned a fragment. But there was one book you did buy—or perhaps, as we shall see, it was Anangka who bought it for you: Roaming through the shelves of student textbooks, taking note that "Winter Term" books had already been arranged in neat heaps by academic department, and searching until you found the section on biological sciences, you discovered that there was only one course, apparently, in mycology, as such, and you snatched up its textbook, J. W. Deacon's *Introduction to Modern Mycology*, and you paid at the front desk a price that, like all textbook prices, was exorbitant.

You would carry the heavy book in its paper bag with you for the rest of the long day, but carrying things in bags was a way of life where you had come from.

You did not find a map with transportation routes on it, so, at the first bus stop you reached, you tried a combination of sign language and bad English on a waiting passenger, female, middle-aged, large, very dark complexion: "Where catching bus for ramp train?"

The woman said, "Sugar, where you from?"

"Georgia," you said.

"Shit," said the woman. "I'm from Alabama myself. You don't sound like no Georgia to me. And I don't study no 'ramp train' neither." She turned away from you.

You waited, watching several buses arrive and depart, reading their destinations on their crowns, finding no words that meant anything to you. Finally, you simply boarded one of them, paid the driver, and asked him, with inclined motions of your hand, "Ramp train? Slope rails?"

Without taking his eyes from the road, he tore off a slip of paper from a pad, a transfer, and said, "You want twenty-seven."

Seated, you attempted to read the transfer, but it offered no clue as to where you should make the switch. The bus took you down from the heights of the university and into the heart of the so-called "Golden Triangle," with its dazzle of commercial, financial, and

mercantile establishments. When most of the rest of the passengers got off, you went with them, and you found yourself face to face with an enormous department store, Kaufmann's, which would hold you captive for at least another hour. Noontime came, and Kaufmann's even had an appealing little cafe inside it, but you remembered it was Human Rights Day, and you ate no lunch. Kaufmann's let you go, reluctantly, but only to hand you over for the rest of the afternoon to Saks Fifth Avenue, to Home's, to more. You bought nothing, could afford nothing, but you wandered up and down the aisles, touching nothing, just looking, looking, looking.

In one of the stores, you finally touched something: There was an entire department devoted to artificial hairpieces, or rather, actual hair made into headdresses. In every conceivable color. Your fingers almost touched one adorning a simple mannequin head; it was a lustrous auburn, with a reddish cast you'd always wished you'd had. Your fingers could not resist touching one, not attached to a dummy, that was exactly the color your lost hair had been, Chaucer's berye. You picked it up, fondled it, lifted it as if to place it upon your head. You looked around to see if you were observed. You realized you'd have to remove your scarf for a moment in order to place the wig upon your head. You found a mirror nearby and, first setting down your book bag, attempted to summon the courage to remove your scarf. You summoned it.

A floorwalker accosted you, a nattily attired gentleman of very erect carriage who lifted his eyebrows at the sight of your bare head as if it were crawling with worms and said, "Perhaps madam would rather try another store." Quickly you re-covered your head with the scarf, blushing furiously, more than you had blushed when Dr. Bolshakov had forced you to remove your scarf. Indeed, this floorwalker (a word you didn't know, but you knew he was in charge of this store) reminded you in other ways of Bolshakov, although he was not wearing Bolshakov's trench coat: the same tightness of facial skin and pucker of lips and point of

widow's peak typical of the habitual onanist. He lifted the wig out of your hands, returned it to its place on the counter, and, when you made no move to depart, said to you, "Go." When that failed to provide the impetus he intended, he took you by the arm and said, "Take a hike, lady," and propelled you out of the hair department.

For his rudeness, I, who restrain myself whenever possible from intervention in the affairs of mortal, earthbound organisms, decided on the spot to punish him, and I hit him instantly with a maximum dose of *alopecia areata*, which would leave the son of a bitch scratching his scalp before nightfall and would have him pulling out tufts of hair in the next morning's shower, and would render him totally bald within a fortnight. Can your Anangka do things like that? I got carried away, I'm sorry, but nobody can treat my Kat in that fashion.

Oblivious to my thunderbolt, you left the store and wandered northward through the Golden Triangle to an area where the triangle was no longer gold but brass, or just brass plated: there were several movie theaters whose marquees each contained the letter *X* in triplicate. In Georgian, as in Svanetian, the *X* is pronounced "kh," almost the way some of us, privileged few, begin the sound of your nickname, Kat. The meaning of the triple *X* eluded you but piqued your curiosity, and you realized that perhaps the best way to practice your English skills would be to listen to the spoken word in the cinema. These particular films, however, had you sat through one of them, would have disappointed you with their paucity of actual spoken words; at the same time they would have totally captivated you with their bold images. You read the various titles, *Hot Prom Girls*, *Wild West Wild Women*, *Peek-a-Boo Pals*, and *The World According to Gwyn*, and, on impulse, picked the last. You approached the ticket booth, saw that the price was affordable, and tendered a five to the ticket seller, a middle-aged, morose, pinched woman who reminded you of some of the hardworking peasant women of Svanetia who become old before they're thirty.

She would not take your money. She studied your face long enough to see it and to perceive that even though you'd attempted to hood it with that black kerchief you had a surpassingly gorgeous combination of sparkling, innocent eyes, a perfect nose, delicate cheeks, silken skin,

and the sweetest mouth this side of the celestial cherubim. "Hon," she said, "you don't wanna go in there by yourself. Come back with your boyfriend."

Twice today you were turned away! But this woman was not being rude, like that bastard floorwalker, and I felt kindly toward her, even grateful, because the time wasn't ripe, yet, for you to be watching pornography all alone.

SEVEN

"Well, where have you *been*?" exclaimed Loretta Elmore when you used your key to let yourself into the mansion's foyer.

"To main city. Shopping," you told her, and began to count the places on your fingers, "Kaufmann's, Saks, Horne's . . ."

"In *that* coat?" Loretta said, and reached out to finger your threadbare *shinel*. "It's a wonder they didn't throw you out."

"They did," you said.

"Huh?" she said. "We didn't know where you were, and we're holding supper for you. Kenny fixed it himself. He got off his paper route early so he could come home and fix supper for you." You were abashed, even more so because you would have to find some

way to explain, in this difficult language, that you were fasting (a word you didn't know in English) because it was International Human Rights Day. "Of course we're not going to feed you every day," Loretta went on, "and I expect you'll find the supermarket pretty soon, but Kenny wanted to fix you a little something just for tonight."

"I talk to him," you declared. "I tell him why no thank thee." You followed Loretta into her apartment, into her kitchen, where Kenny was stirring something in a pot. His face went wild at the sight of you. "Mayest thou be victorious," you said to him, and then you touched him lightly on the arm (your second touch) and said, "I am much sorry.

But today I not eat. Today being Human Rights. Thou understand?"

He looked at first crestfallen, dismayed, but then stoic and even moved. "You're not hungry?" he asked.

"Much hungry," you said, and patted your stomach, then you thrust your nose over the pot he was stirring, a sauce for something. "Smell good. Look good," you complimented the sauce. "But today . . . everywhere ... all over Russia, all over Georgia . . . many people not eat. People go hungry to say, 'We know how it feels for prisoners to go hungry.' "

Kenny seemed to understand, and he quit stirring. "I hear you," he said. "Rats, it's only gravy for the mashed potatoes."

"After thou eat," you told him, "thou come up. We talk, tell story, play game, something."

"Sure," he said.

As you were leaving, Loretta said, "Hey, next time you go out, you better let me give you a decent coat to wear. And some jewelry."

In place of supper, you had a pleasant hour at your desk with your new book and your dictionary, looking up *decent* along with *mashed potatoes*, *boyfriend*, and *hike*. You attempted to look up simply *X* but only found, among many other things, that it was a symbol for Christ or *Christian*, and you wondered if those movies were restricted to religious people accompanied by their sweethearts. But why three *X*'s?

When the knock came at your door, you assumed it was Kenny, and you called out, "Coming in!" But he did not come in. "Door is open!" you called. Actually the door was closed, but you had not locked it, something you hadn't yet learned the absolute necessity of doing. A man entered. A stranger. It could have been Bolshakov wearing a disguise of beard and mustache, even though the beard and mustache were grayed, and the man was shorter and fatter than bony Bolshakov and not wearing a trench coat or any coat at all but a cardigan sweater with elbow patches, and he looked old and stooped compared with