

THE CHEKHOVIAN SMILE

LEE LADY

Sometimes your life seems measured in dark windy streets. You've trudged down so many, looking for an interesting bar, looking for someone you'll be able to talk to, looking for a girl who will smile at you. Looking for real life.

Almost thirty years old, one rotten marriage behind you, and you're afraid it's already too late for everything important.

On weekends you drive into St. Theresa and head for the Hamlet section, where among the crowds on Diophantine Street your loneliness is sharpened, purified, until it spreads through you in a warm bittersweetness.

Couples hurry past, laughing. Pairs of males look the crowd over, confident that what they're searching for is only a few blocks away. Middle-aged tourists stare with condescending curiosity, not fazed by the hostile stares they get in return. And occasional intense faces weave through the crowd impatiently, on their way to challenge the universe.

You go into the Apotheosis Bar & Grill, watch the chess players, maybe play a game or two yourself. Then on to the Wooden Nickel, where a girl in black tights plays a nylon string guitar and sings in a high clear voice about women who are more obliging than any you have ever known. After that, you step into a couple of galleries, trying to be more interested than you know how to be, not knowing how to come to terms with the fact that what you're searching for is not paintings but a share in the life they represent. Finally, as usual, you wind up in Black's Books, wondering why you even bothered with the rest. Bookstores are more your speed.

And in Black's Books last night, you saw the girl. Standing in one of the narrow aisles holding a volume of Rilke in her left hand, reading the German in a low mutter and counting out the meter with her right. As you came closer, you saw a smear of ink across the knuckles of this right hand.

You'd seen her a few times before, always wearing the exact same sandals, jeans, and man's white shirt, standing in a doorway watching the crowds or striding down the street looking a little crazy, with round wet eyes and puffy cheeks and stringy blond hair. She looked about seventeen years old and was not pretty or even what you'd normally consider interesting. But something about the way she stood there in her scruffy clothes, so completely absorbed, so completely comfortable in her world, made you want to abandon all the little scraps of respectability you'd spent your life accumulating.

On Sunday morning the Hamlet seems drab, signs looking faded in the bright sunlight, bars closed up with padlocks. But in the Pig and Whistle — a cafeteria off Brieskorn Square — business is brisk, there's an upbeat feeling. With last night's crowds gone, normal life is preparing its comeback.

You're sitting with an archetypical aging hippie name Dmitri. A heavy brass medallion hangs over the deep vee of his shirt, long gray hair shoots wildly up from his head. You're used to seeing him on the streets Saturday nights, quick to spout a bit of Nietzsche or Dylan Thomas, asking for a handout with no trace of embarrassment, bulging eyes full of the exaggerated openness of someone for whom the Summer of Love never really ended. He's the only person on Diophantine Street who always recognizes you, always has a smile and a good word.

But this is a Sunday morning Dmitri. He looks tired, older. The bright cafeteria lights are not kind to his face, showing up the lines and the uneven pigmentation. The shoulders seem bonier, the neck more leathery. The effusive friendliness, the line of patter are gone. You have the feeling that in buying him breakfast at ten in the morning you've violated some point of etiquette, intruded into a private part of his world where you're not really welcome.

You greeted him this morning with desperate eagerness. But he doesn't seem impressed by your urgency and at first it seems that he's going to ignore your question altogether.

At last he says "I haven't known a Stephanie in the Hamlet for a long time now."

You're dismayed. You'd always assumed that Dmitri knew everybody.

"Certainly I'd remember if I heard *that* name again," he goes on, talking down at the table. "I guess it's been five or six years now."

When he looks up, his eyes seem strangely troubled. "Funny, I'd almost conned myself into thinking I'd forgotten her." He stares off to one side, rubbing a knuckle over his chin, finally saying, "I should have known better. Once someone like that worms her way into your soul, you never get rid of her."

Then he gives you a big smile and says, "But somebody in the neighborhood *now* named Stephanie ... No, if there was a girl with that name I certainly would have noticed."

You never intended to speak to her last night. For all the intensity of the sexual hunger gnawing away at you, you were not *that* hard up. But as you squeezed past her in the narrow aisle and heard the atrocious German, you couldn't stop yourself from correcting her in an irritated self-righteous way.

But instead of being offended her face lit up in an enormous grateful smile and before you knew what was happening you were reading the Rilke aloud to her, basking in her rapt admiration as she tried to mimic your rather mediocre accent.

"Are you German?" she asked. You shook your head and couldn't keep from smiling back at her. There was something so defenseless about that smile, so completely artless, that it broke through all your usual wariness.

You bought her the book. And walked down the street with her to the Syzygy, where you sat at a sidewalk table and ordered her a Brandy Alexander and an Irish coffee for yourself. You were a little reassured when she dug down into her jeans pocket and brought out a driver's license to show the waiter. Maybe she wasn't as young as she seemed. But you still had the urge to look around nervously, feeling uncomfortably like a child molester.

"She was one of these little chicklets that blow into the city every summer," Dmitri says of that girl from the past while you half-listen politely, "from places called Ferndale and Hicksdale and Junction City or Lost Horizons. Their fathers work in new car showrooms or sell real estate or are vice-presidents in the local bank. Hers was a minister—sometimes they're the worst. She'd stolen some money and he gave her a lesson in Christian charity by beating her up. The usual crappy melodrama. So she jammed her treasures into a duffel bag and did a Jack Kerouac. When she got to St. Theresa she was picked up by a bunch of hoods who beat her up all over again and raped her just as an afterthought. She was afraid to go bawling to the police—not that it would have done her any good. A couple of the guys found her over on Coleridge Lane in the wee hours, semi-hysterical. Since nobody else wanted her, they brought her to me." Dmitri rolls his eyes and twists his mouth. "I let her crash on the couch. I mean I could hardly have made her share the bed, considering, even if she'd been better looking, which she wasn't. But I damn well wasn't about to take the couch myself. It's damned uncomfortable. Fact of it is, I wasn't feeling very generous about things. I'm approaching an age where I'm supposed to be an object of charity, not handing it out."

Dmitri turns his attention to his breakfast, attacking it with grim fierceness. At this point a skinny young guy wearing a denim jacket and dirty white tee shirt approaches and launches into an angry complaint about a complicated deal involving some stage lights. Although none of it has anything to do with Dmitri, he listens with what appears to be genuine interest, making quiet comments and counseling more patience, until gradually the skinny guy is doing more listening than talking. While this is going on, neither of the two is paying any attention to you, and the only thing that keeps you from getting up and walking off is your dread of driving back home to an empty suburban apartment.

At length the skinny guy leaves, still glum but less agitated. Dmitri grins at you disarmingly and without a pause goes on with his story.

"The next morning I found her in the kitchen, burning up my last two eggs in the frying pan." He waves his fork in a careless circle over his plate, as if to suggest a link between it and those eggs long ago. "She had on blue bikini panties and damn all else. Not quite what I'd expect from a girl who'd been raped the night before. But I didn't say anything, just scraped the eggs into the garbage and poured her some cold cereal. I figured the ball was in her court. Actually, I don't think she had the vaguest clue that I might feel like reaching out and grabbing her. In her book only nasties did things like that and she had me classified as not a nasty. Besides, kids like that, you know, they think that anybody over forty grew up before fucking was invented. All I wanted was a way to kick her ass back to Sticks Center or wherever. Although I'll admit the body looked good to me, despite being on the downside of ordinary."

Dmitri rubs a hand back and forth across his eyebrows. You can see there's something he doesn't feel very good about. Then his expression softens again. "The thing about her though, it wasn't the body. It was the smile. I don't know if you're familiar with Chekhov's play *Uncle Vanya*?" He looks at your face and before you have a chance to think about it shrugs and says "No, I don't suppose you would be. Well, anyway. Whatever. Her smile was right out of that damned play. As if she'd been stuck in it her whole screwed up life and now you'd showed up to rescue her. It was so goddamn grateful and trusting, you'd have thought that nobody who ever saw it could ever have wanted to hurt her."

Then he shrugs and says "Anyway, after a week or so she moved in with a sculptor for a while. He was gay, so she was safe there."

"Even before I came to St. Theresa, I was always interested in poetry," she said, sipping her second brandy Alexander and telling you about leaving home. Her shirt showed the outline of tiny breasts. Her skin, in the middle of July, was amazingly pale—she must never come out in the daytime, you thought. "Ezra Pound, e e cummings, Lawrence Ferlingetti, those are a lot of my favorites. And I'd just started writing a whole lot of poetry myself. Mostly it wasn't very good, but I didn't know that then. One of my teachers encouraged me a lot but he didn't really know anything. So what happened was, I met this guy." She looked at you with bright eyes. "Did you ever hear of Leonard Cohen?"

Of course you had. "Suzanne," and so on. *And you touched her perfect body with your mind*, you remembered, looking at the rather scrawny body across the table from you.

"You met Leonard Cohn?"

"No, no, not him. Of course not. It was just this guy, he said he wanted to make a recording of my poetry that would be like that. Like Leonard Cohn." Her face shone with pleasure. "Except I'd be more talking than singing, with music in the background. Poetry and jazz, it's called. It's what the beatniks used to do. Back when there were beatniks. He wanted five hundred dollars, like for expenses, you know."

You wondered if she'd asked her parents for the money.

She shook her head with an almost wistful bitterness. "If I ever even showed my father any of my poetry he would have ripped it up. He'd say it couldn't be good because it wasn't about God, not morally uplifting. He would have called it pornographic. But it wasn't. Not really." She gave a little shrug. "The money belonged to a friend of my father's and was hardly even hidden, almost like he wanted it to be taken. Or, the way I thought then, it was like God wanted me to have that money so people could hear my poetry. I know that sounds really stupid. I can't believe how stupid I used to be. I've learned a lot since I came here."

You suggested going somewhere else and she agreed. As you got up, you let your hand brush hers, as much by accident as not, and she pulled away as if burnt.

Once again you wondered what you were doing with such a total loser. It occurred to you that you must be a pretty hopeless case yourself to be reduced to this.

You'd intended to take her to another bar but now you decided to just wander the streets. She didn't seem to mind and pointed out places where various things had happened to her, talked about the guys she'd lived with in some of these places. You envied her experience with a dull ache that gradually started to feel like anger. It wasn't fair that this dumb kid could be so much a part of everything. Women have it easy, you thought. A man could never get away with being that kind of camp follower.

Seeming to sense your resentment, she took your hand and laced her fingers through yours and pressed herself against your side. You accepted the gesture without much enthusiasm, not knowing how to reconcile it with her earlier skittishness, and later she fell back into a morose silence which gradually turned to blank apathy. Eventually you were walking down the street several feet apart, like strangers who happened to be going in the same direction.

Then, on a run-down block of Mandala Street she stopped in front of a dingy doorway. A sign projecting out over the sidewalk identified the building as the Swann Hotel, and a dimly lit lobby showed through streaked plate glass.

You stopped uncertainly. And, with one hand on the door, she turned toward you and stood unmoving in the indistinct light for a moment, her pale face seeming to peer somewhere far behind you. Then she smiled uncertainly and asked, "Do you want to come up?"

So you followed her into the deserted lobby, past a scarred registration desk, up a dark staircase that smelled of disinfectant, up to a room on the fourth floor. The door was spotted with something like water stains and one of the numbers was hanging loosely. From a room down the corridor came the sounds of a loud television, running water, an angry male voice and a woman's barely audible answer.

The room was faded and disorganized. The double bed was covered with a rumpled brown spread. The open closet showed a sparse collection of masculine clothing and a pile of undershorts in the corner. A man's electric razor and a man's wallet were among the clutter on the dresser. There was nothing feminine in the room and you wondered who it belonged to.

"Everything about sex was a nightmare for her," Dmitri says. "Which was not so very astonishing after all, considering. But I think it must have been that way for her even before she was raped. In any case, it scared her to death. But she couldn't let it alone. The moth and the flame and all that. The thing was, she was all wrapped up in this fantasy-daydream, this romantic notion of bohemian artistic life—Paris or Greenwich Village in the Twenties. Drinking absinthe and going to bullfights and writing novels in dark smokey bars. All that worn out romantic crap. And she kept wanting to find it in the Hamlet despite the obvious reality all around her. And sex, you know, that was part of the whole myth.

“She learned to talk a good game, which confused the hell out of men who didn’t know her. And she modeled a lot—never minded taking off her clothes. And she’d move in with guys. The same thing, over and over again. This was going to be it, this was for real. I had to listen to the details afterwards, you see, most of the time from both sides. And what always happened, when it came to the moment of truth, when you’re all alone in that bed with another lost soul and nothing to wrap yourself up in except your own insecurity—she’d panic. Just freeze up. I have to give her credit, in her own way she had a knack. I mean you can imagine, word got around, and considering her lack of any obvious sex appeal, she had amazing success in finding guys who’d give it a try for a few weeks. There was that damn smile of hers. She always had that going for her. And then guys always wanted to believe that they had the magic where everybody else had failed. The lure of the ice maiden, all that romantic crap.”

Dmitri looks a question at you, shrugs, gives you an almost sheepish grin. “To be really honest, I thought she might like to try moving back in with me. I mean hell,” he holds up creased palms helplessly, “I’ve got no illusions. I see my crooked face in the mirror every morning. But I thought, at least I could offer her a little patience. I mean,” he twists his mouth down at the side, “I’m not saying that I’m past it or anything like that, you understand. But I’m old enough to know that it doesn’t always have to be that urgent.”

An awkward silence follows. Before you can figure out what it is you ought to say, Dmitri goes on. “Face it, I knew better, but I let myself believe. We had a long talk late one night and she told me I was the only man she’d ever been able to trust. ‘Just don’t rush me,’ she said. So naturally I waited. The old playing-it-cool crap. And then . . . ”

Dmitri hesitates for a moment and then his eyes blaze fierce into yours, making you almost cringe. “Christ, man, you’d think I’d know better after all these years. Letting myself be set up again like that. If it had been anybody but myself I’d have seen it coming a mile away. The same old damn thing all over again, one more man, one more try. This time was going to be different. And how many times have I heard that one! Yeah, well, he was different all right. A kid not much older than she was and definitely at least as crazy. Living in the old Swann Hotel that used to be over on Mandala Street.”

“It’s still there,” you say, vividly remembering last night.

“Not the Swann. Not for a couple of years now. They tore it down and put up the Meritex Building.”

You start to argue but Dmitri won’t listen. “This guy, whose name I can’t even remember, God damn his soul to hell, was living up there on the fourth floor and when it came to problems with sex he could have given Stephanie lessons. Not because he was like her, but . . . ” Dmitri leans back, makes a vague gesture and says “I guess if I wanted to play psychiatry I could explain that that’s what it really came down to. Christ, you couldn’t believe anyone could scare women away the way he did. I’d see him with a new one and I’d just know that this time there was no way in the world he could blow it, and then, next thing you’d know, Disaster City again. And he was supposedly going to straighten Stephanie out! In some ways, now that I think of it, you remind me of him a little.” Dmitri gives you a measured look that makes you feel almost defensive.

But mostly you're trying to figure something out, understanding it and knowing it's impossible.

"Not that I'm saying you're a real hardship case like him," Dmitri says with a wave of the hand. "Just that you seem to be going through a bit of the same thing. You even look just the tiniest bit like him. Damn, it bugs me that I can't remember the bastard's name!"

"Julian," you say. Very quietly, but Dmitri hears and looks at you in astonishment.

"It's cool," she assured you. "This place belongs to a guy I know. He won't be here tonight. Believe me, he won't." For a moment, she seemed almost sly. Then, more serious, she said, "Julian's just someone I'm being friendly with right now. We're not making it together or anything. He won't mind."

She pulled you by the hand over to a beat-up old chair with wide wooden arms. "You sit here," she said, then started wandering around the room, as if taking inventory. She stopped in front of the dresser, ancient looking and painted a dull black, with curved legs and twisted metal drawer pulls. A sheet of glass incongruously covered the top and from the clutter spread out over it she picked up a red lacquered wooden stick about eight inches long, which she pulled into two parts, revealing it to be a knife with a long slender blade.

It was if she'd forgotten you were here, and finally you said "You seem to know a lot of people in the Hamlet."

She turned and studied you with expressionless eyes. Then she moved to the bed and sat on it with one leg tucked under her. She started scraping the knife blade down her forearm in an absent-minded way, as if shaving with it. Then, as if she'd just realized what she'd been doing, she smiled self-consciously, stood up and held the knife out to you. "It's just gift shop shit, but I like it."

It was Chinese, with an elongated dragon running up it. Souvenir shop junk, as she'd said, but the long blade looked wickedly sharp. You handed it back.

She sat on the bed again and looked at you with childish wide eyes. "Have you made it with a lot of women?"

You gave a little shrug which was intended to be nonchalant. "A few."

"You're nice," she said.

"Being nice never gets me anywhere."

"Being a man is so much easier." She tossed the knife onto the bed beside her. "Men just reach out for whatever looks good and then throw it away when they're finished and everyone tells them how wonderful they are."

For a moment you looked at her in amazement. Remembering all your grievances against women, you felt like yelling at her. Then you looked up and saw the worried little frown on her face.

"You don't know what it's *like*," you said. You made an effort to be calm and reasonable. "You've never had to walk up to a stranger at a bar and be subjected to an absolutely . . . contemptuous appraisal while you try and convince her that

you're a . . . worthwhile person. Not some creep that just crawled out of the sewer. All *you* have to do is just sit there and some guy will come up and buy you a drink."

"Yeah, well, of course you're nice. Actually," she frowned harder and chewed on a thumbnail, "I think maybe bars are not very good places to meet people. Unless the people you like to meet are drunks." She attempted a laugh, but it didn't come off very well. "Anyway, the men who approach me don't seem very scared usually. It's more like, you know, what you were saying, the contempt, the once-over to see if I'm worth wasting their time on. And they make it pretty obvious that, you know, they're not very thrilled with what they see, but since there isn't anything better on the menu, they'll like buy me a drink, since that's the going price, but they sure as hell resent it, spending that much money on me, and I'd goddamn better be ready to . . ." She shrugged and gave a forced smile that only served to reveal the emotion she was trying to hide. "I guess a lot of the time what I really think is that really men are all just sons of bitches."

You stared at her hopelessly, wishing that once, just once, you could make a woman understand. "All I want is to be given a *chance*."

"Sure, and if we do, then what?" She glared. "Then we get called tramps and sluts. Whores." Her bony little shoulders tensed. "I never heard of a man getting pregnant. Or getting raped, either."

"I'm tired of getting stomped on by women and then being given this Can't-we-still-be friends routine. I'm tired of being considered a bad sport if I show that rejection matters. Of women at parties saying 'I'll be right back' and then disappearing forever."

And then, even while you registered her look of shock at the undeserved flood of anger you were directing at her, you poured out all the bitterness within you, all the hurt you had suffered.

About the wife who had belittled you and called you a sex maniac even while she was having an affair with another man.

About the high school English teacher with whom you had a deep soulful relationship, so pure and so chaste. Until you discovered that she was having a much more direct and physical relationship with your best friend. And what made it worse was that she tried to be so *kind* about it.

About going to a first date with a girl, driving the family car, even having bought flowers at your mother's insistence, feeling embarrassed but also proud. And getting to her house to find the lights all out, with nobody answering the door.

You even told her about the girl in fourth grade, the first girl you ever fell in love with, who wouldn't have anything to do with you once she found out how you felt.

And you found yourself sobbing, humiliated by the tears but your angry attempts to stop them only put you more out of control. And then Stephanie was kneeling by your chair, hesitantly covering one of your hands with hers.

You shook your head, forced a smile. “I must be tired.” Then, trying to make normal conversation again, said “I wonder whether the guy whose room this is is really happy being ‘just friends’ with you.”

“Julian’s a rapist,” Stephanie said in a flat voice.

You looked at her in astonishment. She stood up and went back over to the dresser, leaned on it and stared into the mirror as if seeing something deep within it. At length she turned away and said, “I didn’t mean that, what I said about Julian. He was nice, like you. It’s just that . . . ” She retrieved the knife from the bed, slipped it back into its wooden sheath and returned it to the dresser top. Then, digging down into her jeans pocket, she brought out a wad of paper which she carefully unfolded, smoothing out the sheets with the edge of her hand. “I thought maybe you’d be interested in these.”

You held the pages awkwardly. She sat down on top of the bed, crosslegged.

The poems were written on lined notebook paper with a felt-tip pen. Mostly they seemed pretty ordinary. The trouble was, poetry had never been your strong suit and you were afraid that stupid praise would be as bad as criticism.

Finally she mentioned a line here and a rhyme there that she was still not very happy about, and then you quoted a couple of things you thought were nice.

“Yeah, I’m really proud of that line.”

“I liked this,” you said, referring to a poem only nine lines long.

You were afraid it might have been the wrong choice but she looked at you with a radiant smile and said, “I’m glad. It was very important for you to like that one.” And the tone of voice, the light in her eyes, said something else: *I like you a lot. You’re special to me.*

And sitting there in that shabby hotel room, in that beat-up armchair, you felt a tired, comfortable warmth rise within you. The childish naiveté, the scrawny body, had become unimportant. Despite everything, you and she were the same kind of person, lost in a world of strangers.

So you waited quietly, not wanting to hurry things, not wanting to screw things up, until finally she moved to your chair and said, “Look,” laying a hand against your cheek in a surprisingly practiced way, “you can stay the night if you want. The only thing is, I mean, right now I’m, you know, awfully tired. So what I’d like to do, if you don’t mind too much, I mean, is just go to sleep. Then tomorrow we’ll both be like more in the mood.”

You nodded. It was as if you were watching yourself from outside, surprised and pleased at yourself for not feeling any resentment.

Even when she started taking off her clothes, you felt a hazy detachment. The body was straight up and down, like a boy’s except for the small breasts. She seemed utterly unselfconscious.

You got undressed too, and you both used the bathroom. In bed, she had you snuggle against her back and moved your hand up to cup her breast, and for a

moment you wondered whether she'd changed her mind after all. But before you could decide what to do, you realized that she was asleep.

For you, it took longer. You lay there quietly with your arm around her, trying to sort out your feelings. You felt that something had finally gone right for you, and wondered if you'd still feel the same way in the morning. You wondered how you could ever fit her into your life, but knew that somehow you would. You would be very understanding. You didn't want to put constraints on her, try to force her to be something she didn't want to be. Whatever happened the next morning would be all right. You wouldn't mind.

But the next morning she was gone.

It took you a few minutes to realize it. Bright sunlight came in around the torn windowshade. Last night's traffic hum had been replaced by an occasional passing car. There was a loud conversation on the sidewalk below. A church was playing Sunday morning chimes.

Then you became aware that the bed next to you was not only empty but half destroyed. The sheets had been torn into long strips, the pillow was completely shredded, and even the mattress had deep rips in it. Looking around the room, you saw that the meager stuffing had been ripped from the armchair you'd been sitting in last night. The drawers of the dresser had been dumped on the floor and the clutter on top had been swept off and lay scattered around them. You found your clothes, strangely enough, piled neatly in the bathroom sink, quite dry. And the red lacquered knife was pinning a sheet of notebook paper to the closet door: "I didn't expect you to be so nice."

"It always worries me when I find myself arguing with crazies," Dmitri says. "Makes me afraid I'm losing my sense of finesse. Julian thought he had the magic formula for getting through to her and didn't want to be told any different. So eventually I shut up. What the hell else could I have done, for Chrissake? When they elected God I didn't even make it into the primaries. I finally decided that they were both so crazy that they might just wind up curing each other. It was a pretty idea. Trouble is, in real life things don't work that way."

It's been only a couple of hours now since you left the Swann Hotel, not knowing whether to be hurt or angry or afraid, and hunted the mostly deserted Hamlet streets, hoping irrationally for some trace of Stephanie, staring wildly at the occasional people you passed, until finally you came across Dmitri near the Pig & Whistle.

Now you've been sitting under bright cafeteria lights, surrounded by the clatter of people eating, listening to a story that makes you realize that either you've gone crazy or the world has. A few tables away, a large group of people have come in and are talking loudly and laughing. And while he tells you his story, Dmitri has been giving you looks that are more and more uneasy, almost apprehensive.

"Julian raped her?" you ask.

Dmitri pushes the question away. “They found him up there in his room with his throat cut, covered in his own blood. Eventually they started looking for Stephanie, but by then she’d drunk a whole bottle of Lysol. The medical exam on her showed traces of intercourse. Semen, obviously, and probably other sorts of evidence from which I’m sure they drew various sorts of conclusions. I really didn’t care about their fucking conclusions. She was dead and he was dead, that’s really the alpha and the omega.”

Dmitri picks up his crumpled paper napkin, smooths it out and, starting with one corner, begins methodically tearing it into little bits which he lets flutter down onto his plate. “The thing is, I saw her that morning before they found him. She was smiling. Later people said that she had specks of blood on her clothes, but I didn’t even notice that. Just the damn smile. It wasn’t the sad-sweet Uncle Vanya smile but it wasn’t the great big radiant one either, the one that almost hurt because you wanted so bad to believe it was going to last. This smile was a quiet little one I’d never seen on her before. Like she was at peace. I looked at it and I thought to myself: Well, that’s the ball game for me, she’s finally found what she was looking for. I wanted to be happy for her. But I also wanted it to have been me that made her smile like that. And then, it couldn’t have been more than half an hour later, she drank the bottle of Lysol. So you figure it out.

“They said it looked like she’d slipped up behind him and cut his throat before he knew what was happening. Do you suppose you could get us some more coffee?”

When you come back with the coffee, Dmitri is calmer. “I don’t know who you are and why you seem to know more about this than you’re pretending. But I’ll tell you one more little thing. I’m not sure I ever told anybody else but it sure got to me at the time. What she sliced him up with was a paper knife of mine. That was one of her bad little habits, picking up other people’s property. It was the sort of crap you can get in Chinatown for a few bucks, but it had sentimental value at one time. Well, she’s beyond criticism now. Probably still trying to get it on, up there in Heaven.”

“Red lacquered,” you say. “A red lacquered paper knife.”

Dmitri gives you a long look. “Just who the hell are you, anyway? Just what do you know that I don’t?”

Your hand in your pocket feels the knife and the note in childish handwriting, but you don’t bring them out. “It’s too complicated,” you say finally. “I don’t know anything.” You make your excuses, get up, walk off.

But as you reach the door, a hand grips your forearm. Dmitri’s face is distraught, almost pleading.

“I have a right.”

Two people coming through the door make their way around you, one giving you an unnecessary shove.

You gently remove Dmitri’s hand from your forearm. “It wouldn’t help,” you say, looking into the tired hurt eyes. “It really wouldn’t.”

And you go find your car, having just alienated the closest thing to a friend you ever had in the Hamlet.

After that, for quite a while you'll lose interest in driving into St. Theresa on weekends, especially after you find a woman back in that suburban world, a woman who is not perfect but is real.

But eventually that relationship will go sour too and you'll find yourself drifting back to the Hamlet, wandering down Mandala Street, pretending to watch the fountain in front of the Meritex Building and feeling a little foolish, as if people might know you were looking for a building torn down years ago, looking for a ghost that you'll be better off not finding.

And then you'll return to the crowds on Diophantine Street, watching from behind lonely eyes.

Sometimes you think the real ghost is you.