



Still Here: A Novel

By Lara Vapnyar

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In her warm, absorbing and keenly observed new novel, Lara Vapnyar follows the intertwined lives of four immigrants in New York City as they grapple with love and tumult, the challenges of a new home, and the absurdities of the digital age.

Vica, Vadik, Sergey and Regina met in Russia in their school days, but remained in touch and now have very different American lives. Sergey cycles through jobs as an analyst, hoping his idea for an app will finally bring him success. His wife Vica, a medical technician struggling to keep her family afloat, hungers for a better life. Sergey's former girlfriend Regina, once a famous translator is married to a wealthy startup owner, spends her days at home grieving over a recent loss. Sergey's best friend Vadik, a programmer ever in search of perfection, keeps trying on different women and different neighborhoods, all while pining for the one who got away.

As Sergey develops his app—calling it "Virtual Grave," a program to preserve a person's online presence after death—a formidable debate begins in the group, spurring questions about the changing perception of death in the modern world and the future of our virtual selves. How do our online personas define us in our daily lives, and what will they say about us when we're gone?

— *New York Times Book Review*, 100 Notable Books of 2016

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *Still Here*:

"*Still Here* is flat-out wonderful, the work of a generous imagination that overflows with stories, some humorous, others heartbreaking, all resonant. The novel is timely in its trenchant dissection of technology and post-recession America, yet classic in its evocation of love and death, ambition and identity, families and friendships forged and broken. Lara Vapnyar's quartet of Russian strivers are so luminous on the page, they continued to glow in my mind well past the final sentence." -- **Anthony Marra, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Tsar of Love and Techno* and *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena***

"...minutely observed, razor funny and wholly wonderful." --***New York Times Book Review***

"A brisk and amusing reboot of the familiar immigrant tale...think 'Friends' with a heavy Russian accent." --***Wall Street Journal***

"[*Still Here*] provides a lively view of a group of friends navigating their early 40s, juggling mistakes of their past and trying to remain hopeful about the future. Once again, Vapnyar illustrates her incredible ability to create rich and entertaining narratives." --***Publishers Weekly* (starred review)**

"[A] piercing novel about the absurdities of the digital age, *Still Here* is also the finest kind of comedy of manners, as much a snapshot of how we live now as were the 19th-century novels of Anthony Trollope and George Eliot." --***BookPage***

Praise for Lara Vapnyar's Previous Works:

***The Scent of Pine*:**

"[With] a buoyant wit, a sharp-edged Russian melancholy, a fascination with outsiders who long to be insiders and a blunt reckoning with the costs of that transition for those who achieve it. This slender but provocative novel advances those concerns, skillfully questioning the notion that age brings wisdom, at least in matters of the heart." --***New York Times Book Review***

"Ms. Vapnyar has shown herself to be exquisitely sensitive to the shifting vagaries of emotion, particularly happiness...Enchanting." --***New York Times***

"Sharply observed, darkly humorous, and sexy, Vapnyar weaves her tale of mid-life crisis and coming-of-age like a modern-day, Russian Scheherazade." --**Tatjana Soli *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Lotus Eaters***

"[Vapnyar has] an impressive gift, not just of language, but of insight into the human condition." --***The Boston Globe***

"[Vapnyar's] wistful and waggish account of disappointments in friendship, sex, and love is closer in spirit to

Anton Chekhov, who, remaining in Russia, captured the universal melancholy of human mortality."

--**Christian Science Monitor**

There Are Jews in My House:

"A remarkable collection...Eerie in its simplicity, stunning in its scope. Through her tender, insightful writing, Vapnyar's characters, battered by history and each other, emerge from the long Soviet night oddly radiant and whole." --**Gary Shteyngart**

"Lara Vapnyar is Jane Austen with a Russian soul. The blend of coolness and pathos in these perfect stories is uncanny." --**Louis Menand**

"Prepare yourself for radiance."--**New York Observer**

"These finely etched stories glow with the life-giving force of language newly acquired." --**Time Out New York**

"Shot through with coolly rendered details of exquisite beauty...Relish this small gem and hope for more." --**San Francisco Chronicle**

"Superbly written tales that continue the tradition of Russian realism.... One feels that a season is changing and the future has arrived." --**Washington Times**

"Vapnyar's ambition, purity of prose, and gift for concentrated emotion make this collection a standout--and the first move in what promises to be a long and interesting career." --**Hartford Courant**

"A feat of linguistic achievement. Not only is [Vapnyar's] prose stark and carved in its fresh foreignness, but her stories have the quality of memoir, which lends a naturalness to her subjects.... You must read these stories or have them read to you." --**Los Angeles Times**

"Beautifully wrought tales...Nuanced and deftly written...Superb." --**Baltimore Sun**

"*There Are Jews in My House* has an exciting flawlessness, like a perfectly cut stone.... This book should become one of those slender classics, beloved especially among those who thrill to find the old-fashioned short story made so richly and authentically new." --**O: The Oprah Magazine**

"Vapnyar draws an indelible portrait of the land she left behind. . . . [She] conjures a country that is both alluring and oppressive and induces longing and dismay in equal parts." --**The New York Times Book Review**

"Richly written...[Vapnyar's] gift is capturing zigzag lives, alternate realities, the messy imperfection of people as they struggle to find a path." --**Miami Herald**

"Vapnyar's sensitive descriptions of Russian life here and abroad make her a writer to watch." --**Dallas Morning News**

"Powerful . . . Vapnyar seems to be establishing her own more expansive freedom."—**The New York Times**

"Stealthily engrossing, graceful prose . . . This lovely collection very effectively captures the small moments

that tell what it is to be human.” —*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

"Reading the stories in *There Are Jews in My House* is a bit like what it might have been like to look over Tolstoy's shoulder while he examined a blade of grass, then another. In Vapnyar's fiction, details jut, simple and bright, until they pose a world." --*Chicago Tribune*

Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love:

"Poignant, piquant, and mischievously amusing." --*Wall Street Journal*

"Elegant...In these stories, food has the power to define characters, propel plots, cause riots, and even commit manslaughter." --*New York Times*

"The comedy of these amusing character studies would, perhaps, have delighted Chekhov.... With Vapnyar, we're seeing the weird and wonderful development of a sophisticated artist." --*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Charming...The stories come alive, inviting the reader to explore the kitchen tables and anxious stomachs of the characters." --*New York Observer*

Memoirs of a Muse:

"Beautifully observant and funny. . . . It's already easy to identify that Vapnyar touch, and to fall under its spell."—*Entertainment Weekly*

"So good, so consistently fresh, funny, and surprising, that every sentence is a pleasure." —*San Francisco Chronicle*

"[Vapnyar] is clearly a talented writer, possessed of an ample humor and insight and a humane sensibility."—*The New York Times Book Review*

"Hilarious . . . [Vapnyar's] eye for the absurd remains sharp . . . An immensely talented storyteller."—*Vogue*

About the Author

LARA VAPNYAR moved from Moscow to Brooklyn in 1994 and now lives in New York City with her family. *Still Here* is her third novel.

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Promise me you won't call it 'Virtual Grave,'" Vica said as they turned onto the West Side Highway.

"You were the one who hated 'The Voice from the Grave'!" Sergey said.

" 'The Voice from the Grave' is even worse. We can't afford a name that's a downer."

"Well, the entire idea is about death. And death happens to be a downer," Sergey said.

They had been discussing it the entire time in the car, all the way from their home on Staten Island to Vadik's new apartment in Morningside Heights, and Vica was getting tired.

"You're not getting it, are you?" she asked. "Death is a downer. But your app is about fighting death. That's why you should be talking about immortality, not death. And don't mention your Fyodorov either. Nobody's ever heard of him."

"He was the most original philosopher of the nineteenth century!"

"Nobody thinks so except for you!"

Sergey groaned and squeezed the steering wheel tighter.

He'd been steadily losing his looks for the last year or two. He used to be the handsomest guy in their circle. He had looked like a French movie star, like what's-his-name—the guy from the Truffaut films. Now his angular features had become unsteady and incomplete, as if worn down by constant discontent, and even his wiry frame had become kind of unwired and clouded with fat. Vica had been watching the demise of his former splendor with mixed feelings. There were times when she felt sorry for him. There were times when she gloated. But mostly she felt cheated.

"How about calling it 'No to Death' or 'No, Death, No'?" she asked.

"No, death, what?" Sergey started to laugh. His laugh was throaty and coarse and sounded a lot like a cough, a very bad cough. And it seemed to sputter resigned disapproval, as if he were trying to say that he found her disgusting and stupid, but that he was used to her and almost okay with it.

Vica hated his laugh so much that she wanted to kick him, but instead she turned away from him and fell silent.

She wished Vadik's place weren't so far away. But then everything was far from Staten Island. Regina lived in the most beautiful part of Tribeca. It would take her twenty minutes by taxi to get to Vadik's. Vica wondered if Regina was already there.

They had all been friends in Russia. All four of them: Sergey and Vadik, then Regina, then Vica. Sergey and Vadik had met when they were sixteen and had had a hotly competitive friendship ever since. Vica didn't quite understand their relationship but felt envious just the same, because she had never had anything like that with anybody. Regina had been Sergey's girlfriend all through college and graduate school. Then Sergey left her for Vica, but Regina didn't disappear from their group, because she had developed an intimate, completely unnatural friendship with Vadik. How can you have a platonic relationship with a man, Vica often wondered—especially a man like Vadik?

They'd all wanted to leave the country. Vadik, Sergey, and Regina had applied to several graduate schools in the United States. They were all smart—with Vadik the most flexible, Regina the most reflective, and Vica the most diligent, but Sergey was probably the smartest. He had gotten his Ph.D. in linguistics when he was twenty-four. And Sergey was the only one who had gotten accepted to an American graduate school, New York School of Business. This wasn't exactly what he wanted, because he had been hoping to continue to study linguistics. But it was the only graduate program that offered him a free ride, and everybody said that NYSB was a great school. He and Vica had just gotten married, and they were going to America! Such amazing luck!

"Doesn't it feel like we're entering the afterlife?" Sergey had asked Vica on the plane to New York. "We're

leaving our lives behind and plunging into the unknown.”

Vica had had two years of her Moscow medical school left at the time, but they couldn't stay and wait until she graduated. The idea had been that Vica would support them while Sergey was in school, and then after he found a good job, she would go to an American medical school to finish her studies. It was an American education that mattered anyway. For a while it was working out as planned. Vica received her license as an ultrasound technician, found a job at Bing Ruskin Cancer Center, which was the number one cancer center in the United States, and whatever was number one in the United States was clearly number one in the entire world as well. Sergey studied hard, got high grades, graduated with honors. Even the surprise pregnancy didn't derail things. Vica had the baby, just as Sergey entered the job market. But who would have thought that he'd turn out to be such a loser at finding, and especially keeping, jobs? He had the mind of a scholar, not of a businessman. It was genetic. Both his parents and three of his grandparents were college professors. Five years ago, Sergey asked Vica if he could possibly go back to school to get his American Ph.D. so he could pursue an academic career. She'd been supporting him all those years, and now he wanted to spend more time studying? She wanted to smack him on the head, but all she said was “Excuse me?” And he said, “Forget it.” Now she kind of regretted it. He could have been more successful as an academic.

By the time Vadik made it to the United States (via an invitation to work as a computer programmer for a prestigious company in New Jersey), Sergey had been fired from yet another job at a bank and Vica had just realized that there was no chance that she would ever go back to school. Especially since they now had a child to support. Two children. “I have two children,” Vica loved to say, meaning both her son and her husband. And then two years ago Regina married the insanely rich Bob and moved to the United States as if to rub her newfound wealth in their faces. Bob had developed a super successful startup designing new mobile apps. It seemed like all around them people were developing Internet startups, building new applications, creating successful businesses out of thin air, getting rich overnight, just like that. Their Facebook pages were crowded with photos taken in the Alps, at Mexican all-inclusives, on African safaris, at their brand-new country houses. “Why not just post a pic of your bank account?” Vica complained to Sergey.

Bob's company was called DigiSly. He'd already made millions. He'd been clever enough to find a unique niche and create apps designed to serve middle-aged people's needs. One of the most popular DigiSly apps was called LoveDirect and it was designed to help grandmothers deal with their electronic picture frames. With Love-Direct, children and grandchildren sent photos from their phones directly to their grandmothers' frames, the new images popping up automatically. All of Bob's ideas were like that—unpretentious, practical, banal.

Regina had helped Vadik get a job at Bob's company, and now he too made some serious bucks. Other people were getting rich off apps too. People they knew. Ordinary people like them, immigrants like them. Angela, Vica's friend from medical school, had just launched a very successful app that allowed people to compare the side effects of various medications so that they could choose the least harmful one to take. Sergey's old classmate Marik had created an app that would randomly insert smiley faces into your e-mails and texts, making you appear to be a warmer, more upbeat person.

Stupid, right? But guess what? The app became super popular. All of Vadik's IT friends were bursting with different app ideas. So why couldn't it happen for her and Sergey? Well, they didn't work in the IT business, but they were surrounded by people who did. You didn't have to be a computer programmer to come up with a viable idea. You just had to be smart. And Sergey wasn't just smart, he had a spectacular mind. Wasn't he repeatedly called a genius by their friends—and not always with irony? Didn't they joke at the university that for Sergey brilliant ideas came as easily as farts?

The problem was that Sergey was incapable of coming up with a simple idea, and the most obvious apps

were the ones that were really taking off. Sergey's mind was perpetually mired in existential shit.

"What about an online game that helps you find your soul-mate?" he offered once. "Players are offered pairs to choose from: Godard or Truffaut, Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, Chicken or Steak, Pro-Life or Pro-Choice. Hundreds of pairs. And after you're done, you get to know the person with the matching results. Could be location based. You're riding a bus and you can find out who else prefers Tolstoy to Dostoevsky on that same bus." Or his other idea, also location based, called "Touch me!" It was an app that would provide immediate physical contact to people who needed it. You could press a button and find somebody in the vicinity who wouldn't mind holding your hand or patting you on the shoulder.

"No, Sergey, no! Nobody needs that shit!" Vica would tell him again and again.

She did like his Virtual Grave idea though. It was existential too, even kind of morbid, but it was also practical. She believed in it. If only they could persuade Bob to take on the idea along with Sergey, who would be essential to developing it. Bob's middle-aged clientele had to be interested in death. All they needed was a clever pitching strategy.

Vica turned to Sergey, who was still squeezing the steering wheel as if his life depended on it.

"Make sure it doesn't sound like a pitch, okay?" she said. "Because if Bob catches even a whiff of a pitch he will shut you down. You have to be subtle and stealthy. We're coming to see Vadik's apartment, and we'll talk about his apartment, and then when Bob is happy and drunk, you'll just mention it, okay? Not to Bob, but to everybody. And don't wait until Bob gets so drunk that he misses it. Okay?"

"Why don't I just shout 'No death no'! Would that be subtle enough?" Sergey asked and then burst out laughing.

This time Vica did hit him.

They parked too close to the curb. The right front tire was up on the pavement, but Sergey shot Vica such a look that she decided to keep silent. It was a shock to come out of the air-conditioned car into the fierce July heat. It was past seven, but it was still unbearably stuffy. Staten Island was just as hot, but at least there an occasional ocean breeze made it possible to breathe.

Vadik's street was a narrow one, with crooked five-story buildings clinging to one another, flimsy trees with listless branches looking parched, and piles of garbage bags exuding all kinds of rotting smells, fruit and fish and diapers all together. Unlike the other buildings on the street, Vadik's looked empty and new, seemingly out of place, as if it had been put there by mistake.

"It has a terrace! I love it!" Vadik had told them.

"I'll give him two months to start hating it," Sergey whispered to Vica.

Vadik had moved to New York eight years ago, but this was his sixth housewarming party.

The problem wasn't that Vadik couldn't find a suitable place to live, but that he couldn't figure out what kind of place would be suitable for him. For most people, the choice of apartment was determined by their financial situation, social status, and personality. But for immigrants it was more challenging. They couldn't figure out what their social status was, their financial future was murky, and relying on one's personality seemed too frivolous. Most immigrants just picked a ready-made "house in the suburbs/ski trip every year" lifestyle. That was what Vica and Sergey had done by moving all the way out to Staten Island, where there

was space for a family and a little more room in the budget.

Not Vadik though. He decided to let his personality guide him, which turned out to be problematic. “Vadik shed his old personality when he left Russia, and the new one hasn’t grown in yet,” Sergey said after Vadik’s fourth housewarming. “What he has now is a set of borrowed personalities that he changes on a whim.”

“You’re just jealous,” she replied.

But that wasn’t true. It was Vica who was jealous of Vadik. Jealous of Regina too. Jealous of their money, of their freedom, but most of all of the boundless opportunities the future still held for them.

“You’re here! You’re here! You’re here! The boy-genius and our perpetually angry little lynx!”

Vadik squeezed both of them in a hug. Sergey was just a little bit taller than Vica, but Vadik was much taller. He was wearing an apron over skinny jeans and a new expensive cologne. A lot of people found Vadik handsome. He had the straw-colored hair, prominent cheekbones, large mouth, and typical Russian nose that started unimpressively but gained in heft and complexity at the tip. Vica wasn’t sure if that qualified as handsome to her. One thing was clear though, Vadik shouldn’t have shaved his clumpy beard. He had that beard on and off. When he had it, Vica would pull on it and complain about how ugly it looked. But when he shaved it off, she found herself missing it. She thought if he still had the beard, that “angry little lynx” comment would have sounded nicer and funnier. Another thing was that Vadik was too tall and burly for an apron, and too Russian-looking for skinny jeans. The jeans must have been Sejun’s idea. Vadik and Sejun had recently met through the Hello, Love! dating app. According to Vadik, Sejun was “exciting and complex.”

“I’ll give it two more months, three at the most. Then he’ll dump her,” Vica said to Sergey.

“I think she’ll dump him,” Sergey replied. “Where’s Sejun?” Vica asked Vadik.

“She’s back in Palo Alto. I don’t want to jinx anything . . . but there’s been talk about her moving here. I’m keeping my fingers crossed.”

“We all are,” Sergey said, and Vica kicked him a little. They all secretly joked about the fact that Vadik couldn’t keep a girlfriend for more than three months. He claimed that he had found and lost the love of his life on his first day in New York. They didn’t really believe him. What was more likely was that his love problems had to do with his quest to find his own personality. He couldn’t possibly know what kind of a woman he needed before he decided what kind of a man he wanted to be.

That was another thing that made Vica jealous of Vadik. He was free to make bad choices. He could do something and then immediately undo it. She was stuck with what she had. Forever. She had been so eager to jump into that “forever” when Sergey asked her to marry him. Now the word made her head spin with horror.

“How’s Eric?” Vadik asked.

“Good, fine,” Vica answered. “He’s in the Poconos with Sergey’s mom.”

She was always surprised when Vadik asked about their son. Most of the time he seemed to forget about Eric’s existence. Regina was the same way. Vadik had a biological child in Russia. He had donated his sperm to a couple who had had trouble conceiving, and he knew that the wife had gotten pregnant, but he never even bothered to ask if they had a boy or a girl.

“Don’t just stand there—come in, explore!” Vadik said, and prodded Vica in the back.

The living room was pretty unimpressive: large and dark. Very little furniture. No dining table, no chairs. Just a coffee table next to a skinny leather couch and a large flat-screen clipped to a bare wall.

“Nice! It has a futuristic-lab vibe,” Sergey said.

“Two bedrooms?” Vica asked.

“One,” Vadik said, “but enormous. With a terrace! And there are two bathrooms—one right off the kitchen. The kitchen is quite something here! Let me show you.”

“Whoa!” Sergey said.

The kitchen was narrow and frightening, lined with gray floor- to-ceiling cabinets and chrome equipment. There was a huge marble counter with the stove in the middle of it that jutted right at them.

“What’s this about?” Sergey asked, tugging on Vadik’s apron and pointing at the gleaming collection of pots and pans.

“Exploring molecular cuisine,” Vadik said. “Uh-huh,” Sergey said.

“I bought an immersion cooker and this amazing new app to go with it. It’s called KitchenDude. It tells me what to do. After I put the food in the cooker, I get texts that inform me about its progress. Like right now I have osso buco in there, and I’ll get a text when it’s ready.”

Vica sighed. Another maddeningly banal app. “What did you call it? Bossa nova?” Sergey asked.

“Osso buco!” Vica corrected him. “I can’t believe you don’t know about this dish. It’s mentioned in every American TV series.”

Something buzzed with an alarming intensity. “The bossa nova ringing you?” Sergey asked. “Osso buco!” Vica hissed.

“No, our friends are ringing me,” Vadik said and rushed to open the door.

Regina raised both her arms to hug Vadik, a frosted bottle of champagne in each hand. Back in Russia, Regina had been a famous translator of North American literature. She’d even won a bunch of important prizes, as had her mother, who was even more famous. Both Sergey and Vadik mentioned the two women’s “magical touch.” Vica wasn’t persuaded. She had picked up Regina’s translation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and wasn’t impressed at all. She then read *Howard’s End* in translation by Regina’s mother and didn’t love it either. The books were boring, but to be fair, perhaps that was Atwood’s and Forster’s fault, not Regina’s or her mother’s.

When Regina was younger, people had often commented that she was a dead ringer for Julia Roberts. Vica always found that ridiculous. Regina did have a long nose and a big mouth, that was true, but she had never been pretty. She had always been clumsy and unkempt, and not very hygienic. Now that she was a rich man’s wife, she had managed to clean up a bit, but she seemed to wear her newfound wealth like a thin layer over her former subpar self. Her monstrously crooked toes showed through her Manolo sandals and her long Nicole Miller dress clung to her deeply flawed body. Bad posture, pouches of fat. With all that money and free time, Vica thought, Regina had an obligation to take better care of her body.

Bob was different. Bob was so neatly packed into his clothes that they appeared to have been drawn on him. He had the solid frame of a former football player and a shaved head that gleamed under Vadik's fluorescent lights. His face was impenetrable, like a marble egg. He was ten years older than Regina. Which would make him what? Fifty? Regina said that Bob wasn't "really" rich. Not at all. What he had was moderate success, and he would never become a billionaire. He was too old—the field belonged to the young guys. In fact, Bob would have laughed if he knew that Vica considered him rich. Yeah, yeah, yeah, Vica thought.

Still, Regina fascinated Vica. She often wished that they could be closer. Back in Moscow, it was Vica who thwarted all of Regina's attempts at friendship. Ever since Sergey had dumped Regina to be with Vica, Vica had been suspicious of her, had expected Regina to get back at her, to harm her in some way. If Vica was in her place, she wouldn't have accepted defeat with such calm. "But she is not like you," Sergey would tell her, "Regina is not like you at all." Then when Regina came to stay with them after her mother died, Vica felt so sorry for her that she offered Regina all the warmth she could summon. But Regina appeared to be thoroughly indifferent.

And when she married Bob and came to live in the United States, she was cold and standoffish to Vica. Vica started to suspect that Regina felt that being friends with Vica was beneath her. She must have felt that way. Vica worked as an ultrasound technician and struggled to keep her family afloat, while Regina had a Ph.D. and knew all those languages and lived in Tribeca.

Vica watched how Bob inched past them and planted himself on the couch. She couldn't read his expression. Vica had lived in this country for many years now, but she still didn't understand Americans. Especially American men. She had a vague understanding of women, because she'd watched every season of *Sex and the City* three times over. But a man like Bob—what made him tick?

"Young people," Regina told her once. "He hates that they're running the tech business."

"What else?"

"What else? Death. Death makes him tick. He's scared of death."

"Isn't that true of everybody?" Vica asked.

"No. When I think of death, I just get depressed. But Bob's been gearing up to fight it."

"How?" Vica asked.

"Well, for one thing, he's obsessed with preventive measures." Vica had made a mental note to remember that.

"Vica!" Regina cooed, reluctantly making an attempt to hug Vica but not quite doing it. Regina's eyes had recently developed a strange glazed look as if she had trouble focusing. People thought she was perpetually stoned, but Vica knew that the glaze came from watching TV shows for eight to twelve hours a day. Regina didn't have children and she didn't have to work for a living. She would wake up in her enormous Tribeca loft, make herself a pot of coffee, and spend the day on the couch watching *Frasier*, *Seinfeld*, and *Cheers* reruns plus all the new shows that popped up on the screen. Their apartment had one of the best views in the city, but Regina preferred to keep the blinds closed to avoid the glare on her TV screen.

"When I think about what it does to my brain," Regina once said to Vica, "I imagine a melting ice cream cone, all gooey and dripping. It's terrifying. The other night I struggled to read a Lydia Davis story. She used to be my favorite writer. There were just one hundred and sixteen words in the story. I spent two hours

reading it and I couldn't finish it!"

Vica often wondered if Regina remembered that she owed her good fortune to her. Regina met Bob two years ago when she came to spend a week with Vica and Sergey. Vica had designed a very tight cultural program for them to follow, but then one evening, when she and Regina were going to see a Broadway show, both Sergey and Eric came down with the flu, so Vica had to stay at home. She made Regina go alone. "Make sure you sell the extra ticket!" she told her again and again. Regina sold the extra ticket to Bob. Six months later he asked her to marry him. Asked Regina! Regina, with her crooked toes and her ill-fitting bras. Some people were just lucky like that.

Sergey sat down next to Bob.

"So, Bob," he said. "How's business?" "Can't complain. What about you?"

"Funny you should ask. I've been working on something really amazing."

Vica tensed and frowned at Sergey. Now was not the time! He had no idea how to be subtle. Last year at Regina's birthday, Sergey had cornered Bob in the kitchen and started whispering in his shaky drunken English, spitting into Bob's ear and into the bowl of Regina's homemade gazpacho that Bob was holding in his hands. "Bob, listen. Listen, Bob. Bob! We need an app that would provide immediate physical contact to people who need it. Like a touch or a hug. Real touch. The opposite of virtual! Like when you're feeling lonely and you're, let's say, in Starbucks or at the mall, and you press a button and find somebody in the immediate vicinity—in the same Starbucks or in the same stupid Macys—who wouldn't mind holding your hand or patting you on the shoulder. Do you get it, Bob?"

Bob?" And Bob had winced, then shrugged and tried to squeeze past Sergey or at least to move the bowl away from Sergey's face.

Finally he had shaken his head and said, "You immigrants think of apps as this new gold rush."

"Yes, we do," Sergey had said. "What is so wrong about that?"

"Oh, my poor friend." Bob had smirked.

The mere memory made Vica shudder. Now she grabbed Sergey by his sleeve and dragged him away.

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