

Still Here Study Guide

Still Here by Lara Vapnyar

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Plot Summary

NOTE: The following version of the novel was used to create this Study Guide: Vapnyar, Lara. Still Here. Hogarth, August 2, 2016.

Believing a person should have the right to take charge of his social media accounts, even after death, Sergey developed a plan to create a social app for this purpose in the novel Still Here by Lara Vapnyar. The app caused a good deal of controversy between his friends and those he told about his idea. Some thought the app was a good idea. Some did not understand it. Some did not even want to think about the idea of a dead person being able to talk posthumously on social media. The app and the idea of virtual immortality were only a few of the ideas that Sergey and his four friends, all immigrants from Russia, must face. Themes in the novel include the challenges of parenthood, the disillusionment of immigrants in America, and the falseness of one's social media presence.

Although considered a loser by some of his friends and his wife, Sergey emerges as the unlikely hero by the end of the novel. His idea for an app that allowed the dead to preprogram messages to be sent out on social media and allowed those facing death to take charge of their social media accounts was scorned by his friends when he first mentioned it. His friend Bob would not invest in it. His friend Vadik said it was stupid. Vica believed in the app but was frustrated with her husband because he could not keep a job that would support them financially. When she kicked him out of the house, Sergey devoted his life to developing the app. Just as he had given up on it, a person stepped forward to invest in it.

Because she and Sergey had been so poor since they had arrived in America, Vica was frustrated and unhappy. She fixated on the material things she could not buy, believing that was where happiness was found. After Vica realized that even the rich died, she began to miss the love she had known with Sergey. The two reunited and began to work on repairing their relationship. Vica also got to know Regina, the woman from whom she had stolen Sergey when they were in college. Vica realized although she was rich, Regina was neither snobby nor vindictive. The two struck up a friendship.

Regina, meanwhile, struggled to find meaning in her mother's death. For nearly two years she barely left the house and did little but eat and watch television. With the not so gentle prompting of her Aunt Masha, Regina and her husband Bob decided to adopt Nastya, a young Russian girl whose mother was killed in a car wreck. Regina struggled with her fear she would not be able to love the girl properly even though she knew she would be able to provide for all of her material needs.

Through his years in America, Vadik swore to his friends that he had met and lost the love of his life the first day he had been in that new country. Although his friends did not believe him, Vadik proved to himself that he and Rachel had been attracted to one another when he met up with her again. She was engaged so there was no hope for



them to initiate a relationship at that point but it was clear that they had each felt something special for the other.

The novel concludes with Vadik leaving America to start a new life for himself. He believed perhaps he was not meant to fit in anywhere but instead to keep moving around. As he tried to get more in touch with his real life and real self, Vadik deleted his social media accounts with the idea he would be able to live more fully in that way.



Chapter 1: “Virtual Grave”

Summary

Sergey and his wife, Vica, talked about Sergey’s plan to propose an app on which Sergey was working at a housewarming party for their friend Vadik that they would be attending. They hoped Bob, who designed apps for a living, would be interested in backing the app financially. Vica warned Sergey not to call the app, which would allow people to have interactions with their dead loved ones, Virtual Grave because she thought the name was too morbid.

Sergey, Vica, Vadik, and Regina were Russian immigrants who had been friends for many years. Before they had left Russia, Sergey and Regina had dated, but then Sergey left her for Vica. Shortly after they were married, Sergey was offered a full scholarship to attend an American graduate school for business. Sergey and Vica thought their dreams were coming true. In America, the plan had been for Vica to go to medical school after Sergey finished business school. However, once Sergey finished business school, he was unable to keep a job. Vica had grown more and more discontent as she realized she would never get to go to medical school. Then, Regina married Bob, who was rich. Regina helped Vadik get a job at her husband’s company and Vadik was making good money. Meanwhile, Vica and Sergey struggled in their modest Staten Island home to make ends meet. They also had a baby. Vica saw other people getting rich off apps and wondered why they could not do the same.

Sergey and Vica arrived up at Vadik’s new apartment. It was the sixth time he had moved in the eight years since he had been in America. Sergey and Vica believed it was because he had not yet decided on a suitable personality for himself in America. Vadik was dating Sejun, a girl who lived in California. Sergey believed the relationship would last three months but Vadik said they were talking about Sejun moving to live with Vadik. Meanwhile, even though no one took him seriously, Vadik claimed he had found, and lost, his true love on the day he had arrived in America.

As they toured Vadik’s apartment he explained his new interest in molecular cooking. He had bought an immersion cooker that communicated with him through an app that told him when his food was ready. A buzzer announced that Regina had arrived. Vica was critical of Regina whom she thought was unkempt and unattractive. Vica believed Regina should have plenty of time to take care of herself since she was married to a rich husband and did not have to work. Vica had always been fascinated with Regina. She had avoided her in Russia because she had always afraid Regina would retaliate because Sergey left Regina for Vica. When Regina had come to stay with Vica and Sergey after her mother died, Regina had been standoffish even though Vica tried her best to be comforting. Vica recalled that Regina had even met Bob with her help.

At the housewarming, Bob offered a toast to those who had come to Vadik’s party. He mentioned that all of the people there were at a pivotal time in their lives where they



were still allowed to do crazy stuff. Standing near Vadik, Vica remembered his scent from the time they had dated in college. They had spent two hours kissing on the couch in her house on Staten Island. When she reached for him at one point he had pulled away and the buckle of his belt had scratched her cheek. He claimed to have forgotten about the encounter.

During the party, Sejun called Vadik on Skype from California. They talked, and then began arguing. He took the iPad into the bathroom. At that moment Vadik's phone began ringing. Sergey announced it was a message from Vadik's app telling him that his food was ready. Vadik told them to take care of it so Vica went to the kitchen but could not figure how to work the immersion cooker. Bob came to help her. He made sexually charged comments about her while they were together. Vica was flattered because he called her delicate and special. In just a matter of minutes, she began to imagine Bob leaving Regina for her.

Because Vadik insisted that Sejun stay with them while they were eating, he propped the iPad up on the table. After a while, Sejun announced she was going to the library. Vadik seemed unhappy with her decision. Suddenly there was a spot in the conversation that seemed perfect for Sergey to talk about his app but Sergey did not pick up on Vica's hints. She began talking about the app and Sergey picked up but began talking about Fyodorov, the philosopher who had influenced his app. He explained that while Fyodorov did not know where to find the essence of a person, it was obvious that a person's essence could be found in his online presence.

Sergey went on to explain that the app would recreate a person's voice, allowing people to have contact with their dead loved ones. Regina laughed while Sejun, still on the iPad, sniffed. She said she thought it was a beautiful app. Bob said he loved the app but shared that he was concerned about one thing. He did not think the app would work in the North American market because of the Americans' attitude toward death. Vica began screaming at Sergey to tell Bob that his app was not about death but immortality. No one looked at her. Sergey suggested a good app would be one that would allow others in a room to turn down the volume of another person's voice. Vica left the room because the others began laughing at her.

Analysis

The lives of four friends who have all emigrated from Russia to America in search of fame and fortune are the focus of the novel *Still Here*. The story is told by an omniscient narrator but the character that is the point of focus is different in each of the twelve chapters. Three chapters are dedicated to Vica, the character from whose point of view Chapter 1 is told, three to Vadik, three to Regina, and three to Sergey.

Vica voices her frustration and disappointment with America. All of her hopes and dreams associated with the move have not been realized. She has not been able to go to medical school as she had hoped because her husband cannot find and keep a job. She watches as her friends seem to fall into riches and wealth while she and Sergey



struggle by in a house on Staten Island, a location that seems to embarrass her. To make matters worse, Vica works as a radiology technician in a cancer care center where she sees death every day.

Although these characters have not even entered their 40s yet, they are preoccupied with death. Vica's preoccupation is perhaps the most understandable because she works at a hospital where people are given death sentences in the form of cancer diagnoses on a regular basis. Other characters also show an unusual preoccupation with death. Sergey, for instance, is trying to design an app that will allow people to communicate with their loved ones even after they are dead. Bob, meanwhile, is trying to fight off death. Regina confides to Vica one day that Bob is terrified of death. She says that he is obsessed with any measures said to prevent death.

One of the differences between the immigrants and the North American culture to which they have moved is the perception of death. While the four Russian friends, as well as Sejun, who is Asian, believe Sergey's app is moving, Bob argues that it will not work if marketed in North America. He says that the North American viewpoint of death is different from other countries. "Americans deal with mortality either by enforcing their Christian beliefs or by ignoring it" (26).

Although their opinions of death may differ, it is clear these immigrants have completely embraced social media and the benefits of the virtual world and computer technology. As Bob says to Sergey at a party, "You immigrants think of apps as this new gold rush" (13). Sergey admits he does see the development of apps as a way to make money, especially since he has seen other people make money in that way. In addition to trying to make money off apps, the immigrants also use the apps. Vadik, for instance, has an app that works with his immersion cooker to let him know when his food is done. When he receives a Skype call from his girlfriend, he makes her part of the party by putting the iPad on the table so she can converse with them while they eat. When trying to pitch his app, Sergey argues that with modern technology, a person's essence could be pinpointed. He believes the essence of a person lives through his social media.

Along with the themes introduced in this first chapter, there is also a discussion of multiple interpersonal relationships between these four Russian friends. Sergey and Regina dated in college. Vica and Vadik also dated at some point. They had a more recent tryst on the couch in Vica's Staten Island home. Even though Vica is married to Sergey, she quickly decides that she would leave him for Bob, Regina's husband, if Bob were to fall in love with her. Despite the love affairs between the friends, they seem to have managed to remain friends. Only Vica seems concerned that Regina has held some sort of grudge against her for taking Sergey away from her. She had expected Regina to retaliate against her but she never did.

Vica's attitude is important to notice. She believes everyone else around her is happy while she is the only one displeased with her situation. She blames her displeasure solely on her lack of money. Even though Vadik is poor in the sense that he does not know who he is and keeps moving to try to find a space that defines him correctly, Vica believes he is more content than she. Vica is especially jealous of Regina who is



married to Bob, a man whom Vica describes as being “insanely rich” (4). Vica compares herself to Regina and believes she is more attractive. She wonders why she was not able to attract a rich husband. Vica believes Sergey has gotten what he wants out of life, and would continue to get what he wants out of life if he would just go about his projects in the way she suggested.

Significant objects in this section include Vadik’s immersion cooker, the app that Sergey hopes to design, and a scratch that is mentioned on Vica’s face. Vadik’s immersion cooker is symbolic of a phase through which Vadik is going in an attempt to define himself. The app that Sergey pitches to Bob represents his desire to give people a sort of life after death. The scratch on Vica’s face occurs after she and Vadik have their kissing marathon on Vica’s couch. His belt buckle scratches her face when she tries to reach for him but he pulls away. The scratch will be mentioned again in another section while Sergey’s app is of focus throughout the novel.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the app that Sergey is trying to develop. Do you think it would catch on? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why is it significant that the main characters are Russian immigrants?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Bob’s idea that people in North America do not want to think about death, but would rather think about ways to prevent it. Do you think he is right? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

angular, demise, platonic, unpretentious, banal, viable, perpetually, philanthropic, lucidity



Chapter 2: “Hello, Love!”

Summary

Vadik ticked off the nearly 30 lovers he has had since he moved to the United States. Most of them he met on dating apps. In this number he included Vica. He was embarrassed about their most recent encounter, in Vica and Sergey's Staten Island home, and felt guilt around Sergey. He additionally tried to forget that incident because it reminded him of Russia and who he had been there. He had come to America to find another personality for himself.

It was after Sergey had left Regina for Vica that Vadik and Regina had become friends. They talked on Skype two or three times a week. When Vadik discussed his dislike for dating, Regina suggested he just pick a girl and marry her. His friends had discussed his relationship with Sejun while they were in the same room with him. Sergey thought the two were good for each other but he also said that Sejun was out of Vadik's league.

As the others continued to argue about his love life, Vadik admitted to them that he was still in love with the girl he called Rachel I. He had met her his first day in America. When the plane descended to land at JFK airport, Vadik had felt a surge of excitement similar to the one he had felt when he first got his visa. He wanted to spend the day exploring even though Sergey was supposed to pick him up and take him to their house.

Vadik had brought with him a tweed jacket and hoped to sit in a bar where he planned to read a book and drink wine, as if he were a New York intellectual. Because Sergey said Vica had food ready and would be disappointed if they did not go to Staten Island, Vadik agreed. On the ride Sergey irritated Vadik by singing Leonard Cohen songs.

At that time Eric, Sergey and Vica's son, was four. He played video games and told Vadik he liked to kill. Vadik thought he looked like a younger, fatter version of Sergey. After Vica went upstairs to take care of Eric, Vadik begged to be taken to some mode of transportation so he could get to the city.

After walking and exploring the city for hours, Vadik stopped at a diner. When he looked up from reading his book, he noticed a girl in a checkered coat looking at him. He asked if he could join her and she agreed. Vadik learned that the girl's name was Rachel. They talked comfortably until Leonard Cohen's song I'm Your Man began playing. Vadik mentioned he loved the song but Rachel argued that Cohen was antifeminist, that he idolized women but did not respect them.

Hoping to change the subject, Vadik learned that Rachel was studying English romantics in graduate school. He recited to her “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” in Russian, and then offered to walk her home. As they walked, Rachel learned that Vadik was staying at Staten Island and offered to allow him to stay with her.



He remembered that night as being “the simplest, purest, and happiest sexual encounter he had ever had” (45). After their encounter, he had tried to find her again using Internet sources like Missed Connections and Craigslist. His friends asked him to forget about Rachel. He had allowed himself to think about Rachel and even say her name out loud before he attempted suicide.

The morning after he had sex with Rachel, Vadik had woken up before she did. He considered waiting for her to wake up but decided he did not want to face that moment because he knew he would have to leave. He finally wrote the words “You’re beautiful” (47) on a piece of paper and left it on Rachel’s kitchen table.

Analysis

The reader will recall here Vica’s mention in Chapter 1 of a girl whom Vadik believed was his soul mate. He had claimed to have found and lost this girl on his first day in America. Vica does not seem to think much of it; she mentions Vadik’s lost love in an offhanded manner. This section tells the story of that day and that girl from Vadik’s point of view. It appears Rachel really was important in Vadik’s life.

Vica is correct in her statement that Vadik does not have his personality set yet. He moves to America hoping to be something different from what he was in Russia. He seems to believe that there is something magical about America. For instance: “Every now and then he would open his passport and stroke the thin paper of the visa as if it were something alive” (33). He had been excited when he got a visa to work in America for three years. That excitement continued through his arrival in America and his first day there. An important symbol in Vadik’s arrival in America is the tweed jacket that he wore. He hoped to be able to sit in a bar where he believed he would look like a New York intellectual. It is indicated it was important in his mind to put forward this aura because that was how he wanted to see himself.

Vadik also tries to avoid all memories of what his life was like in Russia. While Vica believes that Vadik has forgotten about the two hours they spent kissing on the couch in her Staten Island home, Vadik actually struggles not to think about their encounter not only because he feels guilty when he is around Sergey, but also because it reminds him of his stint of dating Vica in Russia. “Vica had made him regress into his Russian past. He had come here to start his life anew, not to rehash his old romances” (30). In this quote it seems that Vadik is almost angry with Vica because she had made him think of who he was when he was in Russia.

Even though Vadik, along with the others, believed coming to America was the answer to their troubles, there are signs that it was not perhaps the miracle for which they were hoping. While Vica is giving Vadik the tour of the house in which she and Sergey live, Vica admits to Vadik that Sergey misses their life in Russia. There is also the imagery of the graveyard that is visible from Sergey and Vica’s house. She tells Vadik when they moved in they could not see the gravestones because the trees had leaves on them. They had bought the house because they could see the park. After time went by and the



leaves fell, they realized they could see the gravestones as well. It is as if the gravestones represent the flaws they have begun seeing in America since time has passed and removed the optimism that blocked their view.

Vadik's story is focused on his search for a soul mate. This is significant since all of these characters are looking to connect with each other in some meaningful way. Looking back, Vadik believes that he made meaningful contact with Rachel on his first day in America but that he let her slip through his hands. Notice it is his ego that keeps him from waiting until she wakes so they can trade contact information. He does not have a phone yet and does not want to give her his email address because he fears she will be offended by it.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think Vadik optimized his relationship with Rachel because it did happen on his first day in America when he was already in a positive mood? Give reasons to support your answer.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the way that Vadik wanted to present himself on his first day in America. What does this say about him?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the steps that Vadik takes to try to find Rachel, including sending messages on Missed Connections before he begins dating a new girl. Do you think he is using the memory of Rachel to justify his failure with other girls, like Sergey tells him? Support your answer with examples from the book.

Vocabulary

revulsion, obnoxious, intuition, pretentious, existential, plaintive, endearing, illicit, precoital, misogynist, nostalgic, conjure, palpable



Chapter 3: “Eat’n’Watch”

Summary

Regina woke in the morning to Bob’s alarm clock. She felt his hard penis, though there was nothing sexual about it for either of them. Even though she did not love Bob, she wanted to take care of him. She felt even though they had been married for only two years that they would stay together and enjoy each other the rest of their lives. She could not have children, which did not seem important since Bob had a daughter by a previous marriage.

Regina remembered how she had meet Bob the day that Vica had sent her to watch a musical. There was an extra ticket that Vica insisted that she sell. Bob had bought the ticket at the last minute. They had dinner after the musical and then continued to see each other through the rest of Regina’s stay in America. On the day she had left, he had told her that she was the sort of woman he had always hoped to meet.

Bob had some annoying habits. He flirted with other women when he was drunk. He was also jealous of Regina and would often check her phone and emails to make sure she was not having an affair. Bob also felt like he always had to do the right thing in every situation. He also had the American belief that he had to take charge of his life and wanted Regina to do the same thing with hers. He had pressured her to have genetic testing done even though she had avoided the idea.

Because she had nothing to do to fill her day, Regina lingered in bed past 10 a.m. She had dedicated herself to work in Russia but had to give up her job when her mother got sick. It was about three months after she arrived in America to marry Bob that Regina began missing her work. She had not wanted to continue even working from a distance because she had wanted to cut ties completely with Russia.

She had even stopped reading since she had moved to America. She challenged herself to read a book that day. While she made coffee, she checked her emails. She received confirmation she would be flying to Moscow. Aunt Masha was insisting that she come back to Russia for the two-year anniversary of her mother’s death. Aunt Masha was a source of frustration for Regina because she hounded her about adopting a child and asked nosey personal questions. Regina feared that when she visited Aunt Masha while she was in Russia, the older lady would have several children at her home as adoption options for Regina.

Regina next checked her Facebook page. She rarely commented on any posts or liked anything but she did like a photo of Eric posted by Vica so that Vica would not get mad. She had a message from Vadik asking her to help him understand why Sejun might have suddenly decided she wanted to try to find a job in New York. Regina admitted to herself that she had not really thought she would ever be friends with Sergey and Vica after Sergey dumped her for Vica but that Vadik, Sergey, and Vica seemed to come as a



package deal. She also felt she could not afford to turn friends down since she had so few in America.

Regina felt bad because Sergey and Vica had to struggle financially but she did not think it was her responsibility to help them. She was especially set against Sergey's app because after seeing her mother die, she believed there was nothing anyone could do to make death more beautiful or meaningful.

Her father had left Regina and her mother early in Regina's life. They lived in a one-bedroom flat. As a child, Regina had loved to look through the buttons in her mother's button tin. Her mother could tell her who each had belonged to. It was in that same apartment that her mother had nursed her through her heartbreak over Sergey.

When she had just turned 30, Regina got pregnant by a French writer she met at a writers retreat. Her mother wanted her to keep the baby with the three of them making up a family. Regina was afraid the baby would tie her to her mother. She also had an abortion because she did not think she would be a good mother. It was from complications from the abortion that made Regina unable to have children.

Regina and her mother had also argued when Regina was offered a teaching position at a university in Germany. Regina's mother had not wanted her to go and claimed a vague illness. Regina thought she was faking. Medical tests showed that illness was actually cancer. Her mother died three months later. After her mother's death Regina was angry, and then depressed—too depressed to manage the attention her friends and family tried to give her. Vadik had been in Russia at the time and had visited Regina, not knowing what had happened. When he found her weak and depressed, he stayed with her a week and then insisted that she come to New York to visit.

Back in her apartment, Regina pulled out the book *Infinite Jest* and tried to find the energy to start reading. She decided she needed breakfast but then thought better of it; she should just have more coffee and save food as a reward when she had read several pages. To fully enjoy her coffee, she decided she needed to watch television. She used to app *Eat'n'Watch* to find a show to go with her coffee. With the app she could type in what she was watching and the app would suggest a meal and show her which restaurant would deliver it.

She wound up watching two episodes of the show she had chosen because she still had food left when the first episode ended. She ordered a Cobb salad to take her through the rest of the second episode. She was so used to watching television and eating that the activities did not seem to work out right for her if they were separated. She went to sleep in season three of the show she was watching and did not wake until Bob called her to say he would be home in ten minutes. She was surrounded by trash from four different take out restaurants and had not read any of her book. Regina was sad, angry and disgusted with herself.



Analysis

Like the other characters, Regina seems to be searching for some sort of real connection. Even though she is married to Bob, she admits that she does not love him. She is devoted to him and wants to take care of him, but does not love him. Since the death of her mother she has fallen into a serious depression in which she does nothing but sleep, eat, and watch television.

The reader will remember Vica's criticism of Regina and her unkempt appearance. In this chapter it is learned that Regina is aware of her unattractiveness. It is noted she winces when she looks in the mirror at herself. She does not like to be seen naked. Although Vica is jealous of Regina because Bob makes a good deal of money, Regina's mental status is proof that money does not assure happiness. She is unhappy with herself and cannot even summon the energy to read—one of the activities she once loved. Instead, she fills her day eating, watching television, and sleeping.

Like Vadik, Regina had tried to cut all ties with Russia when she came to America. She had worked as a translator before she met and married Bob. Because of her depression associated with her mother's death and then her brusque refusal to continue working when she moved to America, her editor only responded hatefully when Regina did realize she missed her job and requested a new project. One of the reasons she was so quick to refuse to work after she moved to America was that her job as a translator reminded her of her life in Russia, a life from which she wanted to make a clean break.

While the other characters have some sympathetic response to Sergey's app, Sejun, for instance thinks it was beautiful while Regina snickers. Vica thinks badly of Regina's response but she does not know the full story of Regina's reaction. Vica believes Regina thinks she was superior to Vica and Sergey. In reality, Regina snickers because she believes there is no way to make death any more palatable. Two years after her mother's death, Regina has still not come to terms with it. She dreads the idea of returning to Russia to observe the second anniversary of her mother's death.

Regina does sense that Vica believes she and Bob have some responsibility to help Vica and Sergey because they are so well off financially. Although Sergey and Vica did help her after her mother's death, Regina does not feel the need to help them especially when it involves an app that Regina dislikes as much as she dislikes Sergey's idea for Virtual Grave. Even though it makes Regina angry when people try to manipulate Bob to get their apps developed, Regina has one app that was pitched to Bob in which he chose not to invest. The Eat'n'Watch app has become a sort of addiction for Regina. She has come to the point that she cannot eat or watch television unless she is doing both activities at the same time. Bob's response to the success of the app makes a statement about Regina and her favorite pastimes. "I've misjudged the American consumer," he liked to complain. "We are even lazier and more stupid than we think we are" (75). When he says this he does not realize how addicted his wife is to Eat'n'Watch.



Regina has a unique view of social media as described in this section. Vadik told Regina she was what was called a lurker on Facebook as she did not post much and rarely liked or commented on anything. On this particular day, Regina likes Vica's photo of Eric. She does so to keep Vica from being upset with her, not because she really likes the photo. This is a sad reality of social media. It gives people the opportunity to take on personalities they do not really have. Regina comments on Vadik's various social media affiliations. She notes how he has a different personality on each of his accounts. Bob thinks that Regina makes too big of a deal out of a person's ability to be fake on social media.

Regina admits that even though she is content with Bob, there are some habits of his that irritate her. One of these is his habit of flirting with other women when he gets drunk. This habit of Bob's explains his encounter with Vica in Vadik's kitchen. Bob was not attracted to Vica as much as he was just doing what he did when he got drunk. Regina is most frustrated with Bob's belief that he should be in charge of his life. Vadik explains to Regina that this is a belief held by Americans that is different from the beliefs of the Russians: "Vadik told her that the major difference between Russians and Americans was that Americans believed that they were in charge of their lives, that they could control them" (53).

Regina has had a good deal of experience with her own inability to control her life. The two things about which she and her mother argued turned out badly for Regina. Her mother encouraged Regina not to have an abortion. Regina did so and lost the ability to have children because of complications. Regina's mother also did not want Regina to go away to teach at a university. Regina thought the worst of her mother, that she was faking a disease, but it turned out that her mother had cancer. She died quickly. It seems that every time Regina tried to go against her mother's wishes and take charge of her own life, she was punished with painful results.

Significant objects in this section include the tin of buttons that Regina remembers playing with when she was a child. Each of these buttons belonged to a different relative. Regina's mother was able to tell her the history behind each of these buttons. The buttons will be important later in the novel.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Regina's reaction to the mother and baby who live next door. If she does not want children, why is she so bothered by the fact that there are so many children in the neighborhood?

Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast Vica and Regina's opinions of each other. In what aspects are the two women wrong about each other? Do they have any correct assumptions about each other?



Discussion Question 3

How has Regina's life been derailed by death? What is her opinion of Sergey's app as a result of her experience with death? Use examples from the novel to support your answer.

Vocabulary

procured, tumultuous, waned, resolute, mitigating, genomics, decrepit, futile, voraciously, teeming, cerebral, oeuvre, epistolary, mediocre, vehemently, adamant, encroachment, mottled, insatiable, algorithm, synchronize, clandestine, permeated



Chapter 4: “Still Here”

Summary

On the ferry on the way to his office, Sergey thought about how much he dreaded going to work. He had heard rumors of layoffs and knew he would probably be one of the people let go. He checked Facebook on his phone and saw how his Russian friends seemed to have exciting lives. Sergey wondered why he had been so sure that the move to America would be a good idea. He imagined the ferry crashing and him being killed, a fate he thought would be better than having to go home and tell Vica he had lost his job again.

Sergey remembered coming home after his father's funeral. He had been surprised to find a letter from his father in their mailbox. Instead of talking on the phone, his father had preferred to write letters. Often during their phone calls there would be long silences in which Sergey would think their call had been disconnected and would call his father's name. His father would reply that he was still there.

It was the letter that Sergey got from his father that made him begin to think about the app he liked to call Virtual Grave. His friends had mixed opinions on his idea. Vadik believed that dedicating a life to resurrecting the dead was a way to waste one's life. Vica was not sold on the idea at first but once Sergey suggested they could use the app to give people the ability to communicate with their loved ones, Vica had been more accepting.

Sergey had moved from job to job from the time he had finished business school in America. Each time he had managed to find a new job quickly until the national financial crisis hit. He lost his newest job quickly and was unable to find a new one. He began to plunge into depression. His reviews at work became more and more negative and his attitude became more and more negative. Meanwhile, Vica acted as if Sergey was bringing on and causing his work troubles. With the constant negative input, Sergey began to believe he was a failure as a person.

He thought about his background, that he had dated Regina but had not loved her. He did not know he did not love her until he met Vica. In America he was at first overwhelmed by the skyscrapers and tall buildings. After the World Trade Center was destroyed by terrorists on Sept. 11, Sergey realized how susceptible these buildings, as well as his dreams about success in America, were.

At work, Sergey noticed a strange silence, as well as a half-dead balloon below a co-worker's desk. Co-workers began disappearing through the morning. Then a woman came for Sergey. The next thing he knew he was being escorted out of the office with a stack of paperwork.



Sergey got on the ferry and arrived at the lot where his car was parked. Because he did not want to face Vica's displeasure, he chose not to go home yet. Instead he used the GPS to locate a neighborhood he has visited once before. He became obsessed with the sound of the Icelandic woman's voice on the GPS and found himself stopping in a parking lot to masturbate. He felt better after he had finished and recited his good qualities.

Analysis

In Chapter 1, Vica had told Vadik that Sergey was unhappy because he missed their way of life in Russia. It seems more proper to say that Sergey is just as disenchanted with America as Vica is and perhaps more so because of the pressure that Vica puts on him. He had thought they would be assured a better life in America. Instead, Sergey has struggled to find and keep jobs. The terrorist attacks on the country made Sergey's job prospects even sparser. He has realized that even America is not exempt from tumultuous times. Moving to America was not the cure all they had believed it would be.

With the prospect of losing another job in Sergey's mind, he is so depressed that he seems to wish he could die. He believes this lack of responsibility would be the only way he could find peace in his life at this point. Sergey thinks not about Vica when he considers the effect his death might have but of Eric. He does not want to leave his son without a father. The memory of his own father's death still stings.

It is a letter that Sergey received from his father that actually piqued Sergey's interest in some sort of app that would allow people to feel they could interact with deceased loved ones. Although Sergey often received letters from his father, who still lived in Russia, this one was particularly important because Sergey received it after his father had died. He searched the letter for some hidden advice from his father but found nothing. His wish that he could find some words of help and hope from his father made him think that other people must do the same for their own loved ones.

The title of the novel and its meaning emerge with the words that Sergey's father said to Sergey when they were on the phone. After the long silences that often punctuated their conversations, Sergey's father would say "still here" (82) to Sergey's questioning "Dad?" (82) when the pauses went on too long. In this context, Sergey's father was telling his son that he was still on the phone and that the connection had not been broken. In another context, all of the characters in the novel, despite their unhappiness with the way their lives have turned out, are still pursuing their lives and are "still here" in, meaning that they are still alive and are still struggling to make the most of their lives. In yet another context, in relation to the app that Sergey is trying to design, the words "still here" indicate that with the app, dead people can still be here with the living.

Sergey's relationship with social media highlights a fault in communicating with people only through this means. Sergey sees the points of the lives of his friends that they choose to share. He believes their lives are more exciting and fulfilling than his. The author describes it as being a masochistic activity through which Sergey got some sort



of pleasure by tormenting himself with what he perceives as the ideal lives of his friends. What Sergey does not take into consideration is that his friends choose to post only the parts of their lives they want to post. They do not include the boring, unhappy, and bad parts of their lives.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast the relationship between Regina and Bob with the relationship between Sergey and Vica. How are they similar? How are they different?

Discussion Question 2

What factors have led to Sergey's unhappiness with his life? How does social media exaggerate Sergey's unhappiness?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Sergey's idea for his Virtual Grave app. Does it make more sense now that you know about the letter that Sergey received after his father's death? Why or why not? Use information from the novel to support your answer.

Vocabulary

severance, vagabond, linguistic, prototype, masochistic, posthumous, proactive, patronizing, appease, affront, disheveled, fervent



Chapter 5: “#Knowthyself”

Summary

As Vadik checked out his groceries at the store, he thought of the way that none of the items he was buying were choices that he had made. Since Sejun had encouraged him to move to an apartment in Williamsburg, a place she believed she wanted to live with him, he felt that he did not belong there. Vadik thought her decision to move in with him was strange, especially since they seemed to be getting more distant before she made the announcement. She had begged him to come to California to see her. It was during that visit that she told him that she was going to find a job in New York. He had not thought there was anything suspicious about the announcement until he was on his way back home.

Sejun had not only chosen the two-bedroom apartment after she toured it on the iPad but he also bought all new furnishings for it. It was after Sejun saw the apartment with the furniture she had chosen as well as Vadik in it, that she did not seem as enthralled. Vadik reported to his friends that Sejun liked everything about the apartment except him in it. It was when Vadik called Sejun a week before she was supposed to start work and learned that she had not even bought a ticket yet that he realized she was not coming. Regina agreed with Vadik's assessment. Sejun broke up with Vadik through an email. In light of the breakup, Vadik posted half of a quote by Sartre on his Twitter account using the hashtag #knowthyself.

On his way home with the groceries, Vadik got a text from Sergey saying that he was hungry. Since Sergey lost his job and Vica threw him out, Sergey had been living with Vadik. Vica had told Sergey it was his fault he kept losing his job and that she was disgusted by him. Vadik thought about how he had been friends with Sergey since they were 16. They had really become close when they both moved to America.

To Vadik it appeared that Sergey had recovered from his break with Vica in only few days. Sergey decided to throw himself into his work on his app, Virtual Grave. He announced he was not a person who would be happy working a 9 to 5 job. Vadik was jealous because he had recently wished he did not have to work as much. He, unlike Sergey, had no other opportunity for income.

Sergey did not talk about Vica, but Vica called regularly to check on Sergey. She talked to Vadik who suspected she had an ulterior motive behind her phone calls. He wondered if she wanted to date him. He knew that he would have to turn her down because he did not want to date his friend's ex-wife. Vadik was frustrated because Regina would not talk to him about a possible relationship with Vica. He was also frustrated because Sergey was sloppy, left bite marks on food in the fridge, and wore Vadik's socks because he could not find his own. He also sang on the toilet and left dirty milk glasses beside his bed. Additionally, Sergey never offered to pay for anything or put any money toward rent or other expenses.



When Vadik did finally get a text from Vica he believed she was asking him out to a place called Hole in the Woods. It was not until he arrived that he realized she wanted to meet him at Whole Foods for the salad bar. She did not want to go out on a date with him but instead asked if Sergey was really okay. After that she asked him if he thought Virtual Grave was a good idea. She thought Sergey had given up on the app and Vadik did not correct her. He did not think the app had a chance anyway.

At home, Vadik was surprised Sergey was not there. He decided to enjoy his time and watched television until he heard noise at the door. He opened it to find Sergey and a girl kissing in the hallway. Ironically, the girl's name was Rachel. Sergey gave Vadik a bag of food he had brought him, a small offering of chewed on chicken and a pickle. Vadik realized at that point how deeply unhappy he was.

Analysis

It is ironic that Vadik uses the hashtag #knowthyself for his quote by Sartre when he so obviously does not know himself. He does not even use the entire quote by Sartre because he does not like the point that the quote makes in its entirety. What is sad it that Vadik recognizes that he allows himself to be overly manipulated by the people he knows. Instead of buying groceries that he likes, he buys things that other people have suggested to him. He continues to buy these things even though he tries them and finds he does not like them or that they are not necessary. For instance, he continues to buy broccoli even though he does not like it because it is good for him. He also buys ultra-strength toilet paper for Sergey even though Vadik does not understand why they need that type of paper.

Vadik also thinks that his friends do not respect his ability to be hurt by the relationships that have fallen apart for him. He remembers Regina making fun of him when he indicated he was eating soothing food when Sejun broke up with him because his heart was broken. He also believes his friends do not take seriously the strength of his feelings for Rachel, his first American love. It is because the girlfriend whom Sergey brings home with him is named Rachel that Vadik feels so unhappy about his own life. Sergey has found a girlfriend with little or no effort. Vadik, on the other hand, thought he would have to discourage Vica from dating him but it turns out that she wants to talk to him about Sergey's app.

Even though Vadik told himself he needed to turn Vica down if she made a move on him, Vadik seems to be building himself up to be flattered if Vica does ask him out. Probably because of spell check, the text that Vica sends him invites him to "Hole in the Woods" instead of her actual intention of inviting him to Whole Foods. This discovery is the first kick in the gut for Vadik. The next one comes when he realizes that Vica is not interested in dating him but in discussing Sergey's app.

One of Vadik's weaknesses is that he is willing to do whatever is necessary to please others. Even though he has doubts about Sejun's intentions, Vadik moves to an apartment she likes though he does not, and allows her to fill it with furniture that does



not fit his tastes. Vadik also allows Sergey to make demands on the grocery list even though Sergey does not make any financial contributions to the household.

Discussion Question 1

What does it say about Vadik that he is willing to move to an apartment he does not like with furniture he does not like in order to get Sejun to come to New York to live with him?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think that Vadik really wanted to date Vica or did he just want the ego boost that having her show interest in him would bring? Use examples from the novel to support your answer.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the ways social media and electronic communication are used, or misused, in this chapter of the novel.

Vocabulary

ghoulish, patronizing, virility, collage, pretentious, omnipotent, farce, proximity, nostalgic, venues, exuded



Chapter 6: “Bury Your Mother”

Summary

Regina got a text message from Bob the morning of her sixth day in Moscow. They texted each other in the morning and talked in the evenings on Skype. Bob had been telling her about a new app in which he hoped to invest. Dancing Drosophilae would allow people with similar genomes to find one another in any crowd. Regina did not understand his obsession with genetics.

Because she would be returning to America the following day, Regina knew that she had to visit her mother’s grave and see Aunt Masha that day. She started her day with breakfast and a walk. She found herself in Chistye Prudy, near the place where she had grown up. She could remember being there as a child but none of the memories evoked any emotional response. The only thing she could remember was her mother’s face and glazed eyes as she was dying. Her old building had been cleaned up and repainted. Regina felt she no longer belonged there.

It was not until Regina was on the bus on the way to the cemetery that she realized that she had brought no flowers with her. She asked if there was a flower seller near the cemetery. One person told her that she should have thought about that before she got on the bus. Another offered Regina some of the flowers that she had. At the gates of the cemetery, Regina was surprised to see an advertisement for an app that offered to do the grieving for a person’s loss.

When she found her mother’s grave, Regina was surprised how little she felt when she looked at the grave. Knowing that she was supposed to say something to her mother, Regina spoke a few words; it was not until she got into the taxi to go to Masha’s apartment that she realized she had said the same words to her dead mother as she had to her husband by text earlier that day.

When she reached Aunt Masha’s apartment, Regina was surprised how decrepit the building had become. Aunt Masha, the small, elderly lady who was actually no relation to Regina, looked decrepit as well. Masha took Regina into the kitchen where a young girl from the orphanage jumped off a stool and ran into another room. After they had toasted Olga, Regina’s mother, Masha began to ask Regina personal questions in a point-blank manner. She introduced Nastya, the orphan, who ran away before Regina could get a good look at her.

Masha asked about Sergey and Regina told her about their marital troubles. Masha had thought Vica was perfect for Sergey even though Olga had never seen it. Masha accused Olga of running Regina’s life. Regina really got angry when Masha called Regina’s father a “poor man” (132) when Regina knew that man had abandoned her and her mother. Meanwhile, Masha continued to insult Regina’s mother by saying that it was Regina’s father who had the real talent.



Nastya finally joined them in the dining room. Regina learned that Nastya was five. Even though Regina had planned to spend the next day with Masha, she knew she would not be able to stand being around the strange child who gave Regina a creepy feeling.

That night, Regina was thinking about all the things that Aunt Masha had said when she heard a knock on the wall. It was Aunt Masha. She apologized for being so hateful and hurting Regina's feelings. She told Regina how much she loved Olga and how much Olga had loved her as well even though she would never admit it. After Aunt Masha left, Regina went to the bathroom where she found a tranquilizer pill. She fell asleep immediately.

The next morning Regina opened her eyes to see Nastya sitting at the table reading a book. Nastya admitted she could not read yet and was only looking at the pictures. Regina invited the girl over and offered to read the book to her. When she opened it she saw an inscription to her in her mother's writing. Regina stated out loud in her surprise that the book was hers. Her statement upset Nastya who had been given the book by Aunt Masha.

At breakfast Aunt Masha asked Regina if she could watch Nastya for an hour while she went to see her doctor. Regina panicked for a minute, afraid Aunt Masha might never come back, but then agreed. Aunt Masha told Regina there was a suitcase with some of her mother's things in it under her bed and directed her to look through it.

Nastya was still angry with Regina over the book but came over to Regina when she pulled out her mother's fur hat, pressed her face into it and called to her mother. Nastya appeared beside her and told her that her mother was dead as well. Regina interested the girl in going through the suitcase with her. They found a tin box in the suitcase containing the buttons with which Regina had played as a child. Nastya sat cross legged on the floor to look through the buttons and Regina wondered if that was how she had looked to her mother when she played with the buttons. They were still looking through the buttons when Aunt Masha returned.

Aunt Masha suggested a walk. On the way to the park, Nastya grabbed onto Regina's leg when a dog growled at them. Aunt Masha ordered Regina to take the girl's hand. At the park Aunt Masha told Regina they needed to talk. She told Regina point-blank that she wanted her to adopt Nastya. Because Nastya had behaved so badly when she came to the orphanage a year ago after her mother's death, she had been nicknamed Mad Dog. She had warmed to Masha and eventually started living with her. Masha feared there would come a time when Nastya would have to go back to the orphanage. Even though she wished she could, she was not allowed to adopt Nastya because she was too old. Aunt Masha got angry when Regina said she could not take on the child. As an excuse, Regina pointed out that Americans were not allowed to adopt Russian children.

Regina looked at Nastya and realized the situation was possible but did not want to take the leap because she did not think that she would be able to love Nastya. Aunt Masha



tried to convince Regina that Nastya's future would be better being take care of and under-loved than being in an orphanage. Regina realized Aunt Masha was trying to trap her; she jumped up and yelled at Masha. They went back to the apartment and Regina gathered her things. She kissed Nastya on top of the head and left the button box with her.

Regina went straight to the airport to wait for her flight home. She called Bob who sensed how upset she was. She lied and told him she was just ready to be home.

Analysis

Regina's trip to Russia to visit her mother's grave is just as emotionally trying as she had thought it would be. Her Aunt Masha does not make Regina's life any easier. She berates Regina for allowing her mother to rule her life. She claims her mother's act of making Regina use a broom to straighten her spine was abuse. After Regina completely doubts what she knew about herself and her mother, Masha apologizes and suggests to Regina that she adopt the girl that is living with Masha temporarily. Aunt Masha had pressured Regina to adopt in the past and Regina had hoped that she had given up on that desire. Aunt Masha waits until just before Regina was supposed to get on her plane to bring up the idea of adoption. Regina leaves obviously upset.

Regina reasons that it is because she is afraid of not being able to love a child like other parents love their children that she would not be a good mother. She thinks that she would be able to do all of the practical things to take care of Nastya with the exception of loving her. "A parental love was the craziest, the most incomprehensible of human emotions for her" (144). Regina considers the people whom she knows who are not particularly good parents in her opinion, but who have this fierce love for their children which Regina does not think she can muster.

This trip to Russia, two years after her mother's death, is the first time that Regina has really been aware of a visit to her mother's grave. She was too emotionally distraught when her mother first died to comprehend what was happening. Still, Regina is not thinking clearly when she goes to the graveyard. She does not realize until she is on the bus to the graveyard that she has brought no flowers with her. One person criticizes her for not having thought about flowers before she got on the bus.

Although Regina expected some sense of sorrow or grief, when she first sees her mother's grave she is surprised because she feels nothing. As Regina looks at her mother's stone she thinks that if her mother's "spirit still existed in some form, it certainly wasn't there" (127). The strongest emotions that Regina feels is the shame and guilt that overwhelms her when she thinks that the words she spoke to her dead mother were the same ones she sent to her husband in a text.

When Regina gets to her Aunt Masha's house, they follow another tradition in saluting Regina's mother that Regina believes is "idiotic" (129). "To eat and drink in memory of the departed. There was something gross about it. As if they were taunting the dead



person. Hey, you're dead and gone, but life goes on, and look how well we're all eating" (129). It is noteworthy that Regina thinks the toasts to her mother that she and her Aunt Masha make are making fun of the dead. Instead of paying respects, Regina believes that the habit is one that belittles the dead person and points out the fact that he is no longer among the living.

Also notable in this chapter is the mobile app that is advertised by a flyer at the graveyard. The app, called GrieveForYou, offers to visit a loved one's grave. It claims it will take away the guilt a person might feel because he has not visited his loved one's grave as he feels he should. This app that allows others to help with the grieving process indicates that there is really no limit to the things that enterprising people can make money off of through apps.

There are several significant objects introduced in this section of the novel. One of these is the copy of the book *Buratino* that once belonged to Regina as a child. This book symbolizes the love that Regina and her mother had for reading and literature, even when Regina was still young. Another object of importance is the tin of buttons that Regina and Nastya find in Olga's suitcase. These buttons represent the beginning of a bond between Regina and Nastya as Nastya settles in the play with the buttons, just as Regina did when she was a child. When Regina leaves Russia, she gives the tin of buttons to Nastya. A final significant object introduced in this section is Olga's suitcase and the things stored inside. It is when Regina opens the suitcase and presses her mother's fur hat to her face that she seems to miss her mother for the first time. The suitcase also serves as a way for Nastya and Regina to connect.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think that Regina's reasons for not wanting to adopt Nastya are legitimate? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Regina appears to feel badly because she does not feel any sorrow when she visits her mother's grave. Do you think she should feel bad because of this? Are her feelings common?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss how Regina and Nastya bond over the items that once belonged to Regina's mother. Why is it significant that Regina gives the tin of buttons to Nastya?

Vocabulary

genomes, existential, goad, vied, prowess, obtuse, emaciated, pious, carnal, catharsis, corteges, decrepit, barrage, perverse, audible, futile, indecent



Chapter 7: “Gifted and Talented”

Summary

Even when Eric was a baby, Vica wondered how their lives might be different if she were able to buy the expensive baby things she saw advertised. She and Sergey were not even able to afford a changing table, so she changed Eric’s diaper with him lying on the couch. It was while changing his diaper one day that she slapped six-month-old Eric. She had to struggle to get wipes out of the canister. When she turned back to him he had feces on his hands and face. Eleven years later, she was still pained when she remembered that slap.

Vica stood in line at Sebastian Levy High School with preteen Eric waiting to take a test for admission to the school’s program for gifted and talented students. Even though Sergey had offered to take Eric to the test, Vica had taken a day off to take him because she was afraid that Sergey would not get Eric there on time or would not encourage the child to do well. Since Sergey had left, Vica had believed she was seeing Sergey everywhere. She wished she knew someone who could give her good advice about the separation. Vadik would not give her any concrete advice, she believed Regina was probably gloating about the split, and Vica’s mother had told her she was an idiot.

Vica wanted Eric to pass the test he was taking that day because it would mean he would get a free education that would lead the way to Ivy League colleges. She believed it would leave Eric set for life, unlike her who could not be part of the upper crust of society, where she thought she belonged. Eric pulled her from her memories of the times she had tried unsuccessfully to make friends with people from both the upper and lower classes by telling her that he was cold.

After he went in for the test, Vica had four hours free before she had to pick him up. She planned to have breakfast at Cafe Sabarsky and take photos of herself for Facebook looking relaxed and happy. At the restaurant she saw that a cup of coffee and bread basket would cost more than twenty dollars, a price that she could not allow herself to pay.

Instead, she got a bagel and cup of coffee from a street vendor, and opened her book *Mobile Apps for Dummies*. She hoped to create some sort of app that would allow a person to keep their presence on social media even after they were dead. She wanted people who were near death to be able to preprogram posts and tweets to send after they were dead. Even though Sergey had said he liked the idea, Vica had been offended when he had pitched only his original idea to Bob.

Vica logged onto Twitter and read others’ tweets until she came to one by Ethan Grail, an actor and her favorite patient. She liked the way he flaunted his coming death. He admitted that he wished his doctors spent more time preparing him for death and making it less scary.



Vica was interrupted by a man who had recognized her from the line at the school. She turned him down when he asked if she wanted to get something to eat with him because he was not the type of man she wanted. She wanted a lover. As she considered her background in love, Vica remembered how she had willed herself to love Vadik but had instead fallen in love with Sergey. Knowing that he studied at the Lenin Library, Vica went to that library and spent the whole day there hoping to run into him. She did this four days before she did finally run into him. After she had married Sergey and they had moved to America and life had gone so badly for them, Vica had wondered if she had made a mistake leaving Vadik, who was well off financially.

Vica's thoughts turned to Erica and the way he was deeply empathetic and kind. She thought he would fit in at Sebastian Levy High School. It was because of her desires for Eric that she slapped him for a second time outside that school. When she met him after the test he would not say much about it. She bought them both hot dogs. As they began to eat Vica asked where Eric's hat was. When he pulled it out of his back pocket, his pink admission slip fell out as well. She was shocked at first and then realized that Eric had not taken the test. He began to cry in response to her question, telling her that he did not want to go to that school. She slapped him and he dropped his hot dog. She gave him hers and he broke it in half, giving part back to her. She saw pity in his eyes. Vica reasoned that it was Eric's kindness that hurt more than anything.

Analysis

Just like the reader has learned the other side of a story in previous sections, it is learned in this chapter that it was no accident that Sergey met Vica in the Lenin Library back when they were students in Moscow. Vica had been hanging out in the library intentionally, hoping to find him there. She intentionally drew his attention away from Regina. It is no wonder she has so many hang ups about Regina. Vica stole Sergey away from Regina excusing herself by telling herself that Regina did not love him. Yet Vica considers going to Regina for advice about her marriage. She fears Regina would give her bad advice because Regina might be gloating over the break up. Vica does not know that gloating over the break up is the last thing on Regina's mind but it is probably also not in Regina's personality to be that hateful, even to Vica.

A man approaches Vica in this section but she believes he is not well off enough for her tastes. She wants a man who will not only love her and but also romance her. She wonders if she made a mistake when she dumped Vadik, who is doing well financially, for Sergey.

This section highlights a focus is Vica's relationship with Eric. It centers on the two times when Vica hit her son. The first was when he was a baby. He had gotten feces on his hands and face when she was trying to change his diaper. The second was when she realizes he did not take the admission test to Sebastian Levy High School. Vica looks at the situation from the viewpoint of an adult who is frustrated with the way her life has turned out and wants something different for her son. Vica believes that if Eric gets into the gifted and talented program at the high school, his entire life will be set for him. Eric



is looking at the situation from the viewpoint of an eleven-year-old who does not want to go to a school with no windows and a bunch of geeky, weird kids. The scenario ends with Vica giving Eric her hot dog because he dropped his when she slapped him. He breaks it in half and gives half to her, a sign that even though they do not see things the same way, he still loves her.

Vica also shows distress in the way Eric has been raised. Like everything else, Vica somehow thinks that Eric's childhood might have been easier if she had just had enough money to buy the fancy, expensive baby things she saw advertised. She believes somehow they both lost out because they did not have even some of the basic baby furniture, like a changing table. Because Vica has to work, Sergey's mother, Mira, keeps Eric. Vica believes the two have a relationship that is inappropriate because Mira not only allows Eric to eat junk food, but she also praises him ceaselessly. Vica believes it is Mira's influence that has made Eric fat and soft. Another of Vica's concerns is that Eric has little interaction with her family. He cannot speak or understand Russian, and does not seem interested in trying. When Vica does try to get the boy to communicate with her mother through Skype, her mother complains that she cannot understand him and asks to speak to Vica.

Vica does introduce a fresh idea for Sergey's app. Her idea is a source of frustration because she shared it with Sergey and he said it was a good idea, yet he did not share it with Bob when he tried to pitch the app. Vica wants people who are aware they are dying to be able to program their social media to make what she refers to as "posthumous feedback" (162). She believes they could preprogram messages to be sent out through Facebook or Twitter after their death.

At the cancer hospital at which Vica works, she deals with death every day. There is one patient in particular who catches her interests with his ideas about his coming death. Ethan Grail is a young celebrity diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. Vica explains that the objective at the center is to encourage patients "to view death as if it were a mean but conquerable enemy, something they were expected to fight against rather than accept" (165). Ethan, however, is not able to accept this way of dealing with death. He knows his death is imminent and wishes that his doctors will do something to make him less fearful of what will happen. "It's funny, isn't it, how my docs devote so much effort to prolonging my life and none of it to preparing me for death. Which is coming no matter what! Couldn't they think of something to make dying just a little bit easier, a little bit less scary?" (167). In many ways, this is what Sergey and Vica hope to do with their app. Even though they have differing opinions of how it will work, they want to make a person's death and what will happen after something he can control.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Vica's anger when she discovered Eric had not taken the school's entrance test. Do you think she was justified? Is it right for a parent to force a child to comply with his own desires for them?



Discussion Question 2

What does it say about Vica that she intentionally met Sergey at the Lenin Library? What sort of personality does she have? What are her moral standards?

Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast the things that Regina and Vica think they need in order to raise a child. Regina has money but believes she cannot raise a child if she does not love it. Vica believes raising Eric would have been easier if she had money. Which woman is right? Are neither right? Use information from the book to build your argument.

Vocabulary

pensive, morose, verge, oblivion, retorted, botched, cordial, plausible, banal, defeatist, retrospective, ethereal



Chapter 8: “The Rest Is Silence?”

Summary

Even though Sergey had once believed the essence of a person could be found on social media, he thought maybe he was mistaken once he began reading and studying posts and pictures shared by his friends. He began to think the process was insincere but perhaps a person's essence was hidden in what he chose not to post. Although the app, for which he had even gone so far as to create a prototype, could copy the voice a person used on social media it still could not get at that person's true voice.

The final words of Hamlet “he has my dying voice” and “the rest is silence” (183) excited Sergey. Vadik had suggested that book after Sergey told him about the letter from his father and what it had meant to him. Sergey wondered if Vadik had been making fun of him. Sergey took a break and read his emails. He had one from Vica discussing a separation agreement, which he deleted. As he began to think about Hamlet's ghost again there was a phone call on Vadik's computer from Sejun.

Sergey picked up and explained Vadik was not there. He told Sejun he and Vica had separated, and he was staying with Vadik. As their small talk intensified, he told her that he was still working on his Virtual Grave app. He described the changes he had made in it. When he quoted Hamlet's words “the rest is silence” (186) she completed the quote with the words “but does it have to be?” (186). She suggested he could use it for his sales pitch. When they were finished, Sergey was surprised to see that they had talked for just more than two hours.

That night when Sergey tried to sit and watch television with Vadik, he sensed that his friend was irritated with him but could not determine why that might be. After watching television for only an hour, Vadik had gotten up and gone to bed. Sergey reasoned that he did not tell Vadik about Sejun's call because he had not been given a chance.

Sergey began calling Sejun under the guise of asking for input about his prototype. Sejun was moved when Sergey told her the story about the letter his father had sent him. She shared how her father had never really talked to her because Asian men believed women were below them and for that reason had a condescending attitude toward them. She added she did not like dating Western men because they expected her to be servile. After this, they began having sex virtually, in that they masturbated while talking to each other over Skype.

There came a time when Sejun stopped answering Sergey's Skype calls. She finally returned a text three days later in which she told him she wanted them to stop their affair because she was feeling it was not right. A week later, Vadik discovered his iPhone indicated he had talked to Sejun. Vadik supervised Sergey's progress on the salad he was making and continued to study his iPhone. He noticed that the call lasted more than two hours. Vadik's reply was angry and sarcastic when Sergey said they had



talked about his app. He told Sergey the idea behind the app was stupid and sick. Vadik argued that the only app that would be useful in the face of death was one that would erase a person's social presence. He continued to goad Sergey, telling him that he believed Sergey knew the app was useless and was hanging onto it only because it was his last chance not to be tagged a loser forever. When he mentioned how much Sejun loved Skype sex Vadik noticed a change in Sergey's face and realized what had happened. He told Sergey he was pathetic.

In response, Sergey packed his things and left. In the living room, Vadik's face showed the signs of hatred, remorse, and fear. He told Sergey he did not have to go and that neither one of them were saints. Sergey got the image of Vica with the strange scratch on her face and walked out of the door before Vadik could admit that he had sex with Vica in their Staten Island home.

Sergey went to a tea shop and pondered where he could go. He had just about decided he had no option but his mother's when he heard a man behind him talking about how desperate he was. He could not go on the trip he had planned unless he found someone who could care for his cat. Sergey approached the man and said he was good with cats. He explained he worked as a financial analyst at Langley Miles and that his wife had just thrown him out of their house. The man explained he needed someone who could look after the cat for six months, a period of time that Sergey said was perfect.

Analysis

Vadik's frustration with Sergey comes to a head when he learns that Sergey has been talking to Sejun about his app and that the two have been having cybersex on Skype. The conversation culminates when Vadik tells Sergey, apparently in an attempt to placate him, that neither of them are saints. Sergey had already suspected that Vica and Vadik had some sort of rendezvous since they had come to America but could not bear to hear Vadik tell him what had happened. Even though Sergey has suspected his friend had an affair with Vica years before, he had not used the relationship to cause problems. When Vadik learns that Sergey is virtually sleeping with his ex-girlfriend, Vadik not only attacks Sergey personally by telling him that if he is not able to make a success out of his Virtual Grave app, he will be a loser for life, but he also attacks Sergey's ideas by telling him the app is senseless and stupid.

Meanwhile, Sergey makes the email he received from Vica discussing their separation disappear. He notes as he deletes the message that: "It was that easy to return to the virtual past" (185). He sees his act of deleting the message as being a way of going back in time. He views deleting a message as a way to undo something, to make it as if it had never happened.

Electronic devices not only give the characters ways to pretend like things never happened, but they also allow them to check up on other people. For instance, it is when Vadik is searching through his caller ID on his cell phone that he notices a call



from Sejun. More investigation reveals he talked to Sejun for more than two hours. Vadik, of course, questions Sergey about the call. The questions are foreshadowed by the quote “Then, about a week after their virtual affair ended, the time for retribution came” (193). Before the reader ever knows that Vadik has gotten mad at Sergey about the relationship with Sejun, there is this quote that indicates a falling out is in the making.

Sejun is more sympathetic to Sergey when it comes to the letter he got from his father because she had always wished for a better relationship with her own father. Because she came from an Asian culture, Sejun’s father did not believe women should be treated as equals with men. Sejun had left her home country, at least partially, to get away from this idea that women are supposed to be servile. She has been disappointed with a good many of the men she has dated in America because they expect her to have a servant-like attitude toward them because she is Asian.

Without intending to do so, Vadik inspires Sergey to look to the Shakespeare play Hamlet for inspiration for his app. Vadik makes the suggestion because he believes that Hamlet was obsessed with his dead father in much the same way that Sergey is obsessed with his dead father. Sergey is unimpressed by the play but is inspired by the idea of one person having another person’s dying voice. Sejun also piques Sergey’s interest when she adds to the quote that everything that follows death is silence that it perhaps does not have to be that way. Perhaps there is something, like Sergey’s app, that could follow death and provide something other than just silence.

Two views of what can happen after death are given through the course of the novel. Vadik is angry enough in this section to finally share with Sergey his opinion that after death there is nothing and that people should not mess with that nothingness. “Nobody wants to hear from dead people, you hear me? Nobody! It’s creepy, it’s horrifying. It’s unbearably painful, for godsakes!” (195), Vadik says to Sergey. He is of the belief that hearing a dead person’s voice or receiving notifications from them after they are dead will only make their death more painful and more difficult for a bereaved person to realize they are really dead.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Vadik’s belief that no one wants to hear from their dead relatives with Sejun’s belief that death does not have to equal silence. With whom do you agree most? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Sergey’s references to Hamlet in the novel. How did Vadik’s sarcastic reference to this play backfire on him?



Discussion Question 3

When Vadik realizes how much he has angered Sergey and that Sergey plans to leave his apartment, Vadik reasons that neither of them are saints. Sergey suspects Vadik has had an affair with Vica to which he is referring but Vadik is only thinking about the time he and Vica kissed on the couch for two hours. Is having a romantic interlude, even though it did not include sex, any better or worse on the scale of betrayal than a person having virtual sex with his best friend's ex girlfriend? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

impenetrable, incredulous, impish, whimsical, condescending, servility, reverie, retribution, premonition, parody, diatribe, inevitable, logistics



Chapter 9: “Dancing Drosophilae”

Summary

Regina pulled herself together during the flight back to America. She even composed in her mind an email to send to her Aunt Masha. She planned to offer money to help cover the child's needs, but to explain again why she could not adopt her. When Bob arrived home that evening, she was too tired to talk so he talked to her about the app Dancing Drosophilae, about which he was very excited. She woke at 3 a.m. and noticed she had not yet gotten a response from Aunt Masha. Later that morning she still had no email.

After Bob left to visit his daughter, Regina got out her mother's suitcase and went through the items more thoroughly. There were pictures of her mother and Aunt Masha on a trip to Yalta; Regina wondered if they had been lovers. It was when she remembered having seen a picture of herself in Aunt Masha's house that she realized that Aunt Masha was suggesting the adoption because she believed it was what was best for Regina. Looking at Aunt Masha's actions from that angle, Regina felt terrible for offering only money to take care of Nastya.

As Regina looked at one of her mother's dresses, her favorite, she could remember how her mother looked when she was still young and healthy. This was what Regina believed people needed—a way to visualize their loved ones when they were young and healthy.

Regina was trying to decide whom she could call for advice about the adoption when she got a message from Vadik. They met for coffee. Just as she was just about to tell him about Nastya, he described to her how he had throw Sergey out. When Vadik told her that Sergey and Sejun were having Skype sex, Regina thought about how it was not the first time Sergey had taken Vadik's girlfriend. He had stolen Vica from him. Vadik admitted to Regina he thought he liked Vica but that Vica was not interested in him at all. Regina did not feel sorry for Vadik and was a little offended because he had not asked how she was so she stood up to leave. Before walking out, she asked Vadik if he thought she could take care of a child. He said that she could if it involved eating one. She believed he had confirmed her decision.

On the way back to her apartment, Regina thought about how she was working on claiming her life back and did not need a child to complicate matters. She had contacted her old editor and was surprised when she was given a book. The novel, Humdrum, was about a woman who was raising her three children after her husband died of cancer. Regina knew she had been given the book because no one else wanted it and because it contained two of the topics Regina hated most.

Regina was three weeks into working on the terribly boring book when she finally received a response from Aunt Masha. Aunt Masha said that she had found a family to adopt Nastya. Regina was relieved, but went to bed and cried. She was woken up by



her phone buzzing with a calendar alert. She was supposed to eat dinner with Bob's team that day. Even though he wanted her to attend these dinners, she felt more alienated from him than ever at these meetings.

At dinner, Bob appeared uncomfortable when Regina greeted Vadik loudly. She knew he felt left out when they were together. As the dinner continued, Regina could not enjoy the food with no television and did not understand the technical terms about which the men were talking. Because she had not taken the genome test, Regina could not even talk about her results with the other men. She felt she had to rationalize why she had not taken the test even though her mother had died of a disease that was possibly genetic. Bob glared at Regina during the dinner knowing that she was obviously bored. He seemed disappointed in her.

Regina realized she had drifted away when she heard the men talking about immortality in connection to Sergey's app. Bob reasoned that immortality had nothing to do with speaking from the grave but was connected to passing on one's genetic material. According to Bob's definition, Regina realized she would be the only one who would be denied immortality. As she thought about it she decided it was not the passing on of her genetic material she was worried about but instead passing on information about who she was.

On the way home, Bob criticized Regina for the way she had acted during dinner. He told her that he took her to those dinners because he wanted them to be closer, for her to understand what it was he did at work. He told her that he had concerns about the way she had wallowed in her mother's death for the past two years. He said it was time to bury her mother but then felt immediately guilty that he had hurt her.

It was later that night that Regina told him about Aunt Masha's act of pressuring Regina to adopt Nastya while she was in Russia. Bob suspected that Aunt Masha was bluffing when she told Regina that she had found a family to adopt Nastya. He told her they should get some sleep and talk about it the next morning.

Analysis

Immortality is one of the topics discussed in this chapter of the novel. Regina is disturbed when Bob says that it is only when a person passes on his genetic material to children that he achieves immortality. Regina not only realizes she is the only one at the table who does not have children but that therefore she is the only one who will not be allowed to achieve immortality.

As Regina thinks about what Bob has said, she realizes it is not the passing on of her genes that is important to her, but the passing on of information about her and her family. She wants someone to be able to talk to about the buttons. She wants to be able to share those stories with another person just like her mother shared them with her. Like Sergey has tried to get at the essence of a person using his mobile app, Regina wants to be able to pass her essence on to future generations.



Bob is upset with Regina because of the way she acts during his dinner. He accuses her of being a child when she not only is distracted by the idea of adoption but also holds a viewpoint different from the other men at the table. One of the reasons her viewpoint is different is because of the way she was raised. With a Russian background, she does not share the Americans' view that she is in charge of her life. Regina realizes that even as she is tested for genetic cancer and has procedures done to prevent that sort of cancer, she could be killed by another type of cancer. She is realistic enough to realize that everyone dies of something. No genetic testing can make a person immortal.

Along with his displeasure about the way Regina acted at dinner, Bob also expresses concern that Regina has not seemed to heal any at all since her mother's death. He sees that the only positive thing she has done to pull herself out of her depression is beginning work again. It is obvious he fears that her interest in work will not last. In reality, Regina has made progress in healing from her mother's death. Visiting the grave and talking with her Aunt Masha was not particularly productive, but when she was able to go through her mother's personal things, she was finally able to get a picture of her mother when she was healthy and happy. Regina decides that instead of being able to get Facebook feedback from a loved one, it would be more helpful for a bereaved person to be able to access mementos of their loved one that reminded them what that person was like when he was healthy. She believes this idea should be called Virtual Suitcase.

When Vadik talks to Regina, he is very self centered and self servicing. First, he does not tell the story of the breakup with Sergey exactly as it happened. "I threw our precious genius out!" (206), Vadik brags to Regina. In reality, Sergey left. Vadik almost begged him not to leave but he left anyway. As Vadik complains about the things that Sergey did to him, Regina remembers the way that Sergey did the same things to her, including having sex with another woman while she thought they were still a couple. Of course, Vadik thinks that his experience with Sergey is worse than anything Regina went through and tells her so.

Before Regina leaves Vadik, she asks him if he thinks she could take care of a child. Knowing how self-servicing Vadik has been up to this point, Regina should know that he will not take this question seriously. As she must have expected, he gives her a sarcastic answer that she takes as the gospel truth. She uses his smart aleck answer to convince herself that her decision not to adopt Nastya was the right one.

Regina's easy acceptance of Vadik's sarcastic answer is one of the signs that she is having doubts about having turned down Aunt Masha's suggestion that she adopt Nastya. Regina had realized, after she sent Aunt Masha a text offering monetary support, that Aunt Masha was trying to do what was best for Regina. When Regina does finally receive an email from Aunt Masha saying that Nastya has been adopted, Regina is happy for the girl, but lays on her bed and cries, a sign that she is not happy with herself and her own decision.



There are two significant objects in this chapter. They are the novel Humdrum and Regina's mother's suitcase. The novel Humdrum is significant because it is the first one she has received since she quit work. Regina senses that her editor gives it to her as a sort of punishment because it contains both children and cancer, two of the topics that bother Regina the most at that time. The suitcase and items inside that once belonged to Regina's mother are significant because they represent who Regina's mother was before she got sick. It is when Regina looks through these things that she is finally able to remember her mother as anything other than an invalid.

Discussion Question 1

Do you understand why Regina did not want to do the genetic testing? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Vadik's attitude in this section of the novel. Why does he not tell the whole story about Sergey leaving his apartment?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Regina so obsessed with Aunt Masha's insistence that she adopt Nastya? Do you think her second guessing means that Nastya really does want a child? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

conjure, supplanting, alienated, affront, calibrate, sommelier, furtive, lineage, preemptive



Chapter 10: “Fight It! Beat It!”

Summary

On her ride to work, Vica worked on the app. She had finally stopped thinking about Sergey all of the time and was even doing some online dating. Her latest date was named Franc. They had slept together on their first date, an act that Vica only learned later was a mistake that made her look like a slut. Her mother had cried when Vica told her about Franc and how he had given her a La Perla slip for her birthday. To block that memory from her mind, Vica turned her attention to the app.

She had decided that people faced with death should work out what they wanted to do with their social profiles before they died. This way there would be no way for others to use their profiles. She wondered what Ethan would think of it and decided to ask him during his next appointment at the cancer center.

At work, Vica quickly poured herself a cup of coffee hoping that Eden would not notice her. Eden had asked her to interpret for a Russian couple who was having an appointment with a doctor. It was not until Vica was in the middle of the translation job that she realized she was translating for the appointment where the doctor would tell them that the wife had cancer. She felt an instant connection to the couple who called her “daughter.” Vica felt like she was there to protect and guide them until it came to the diagnosis of cancer. She could not bring herself to tell the couple the doctor’s diagnosis but they told her that they understood what had been said. It was only later that Vica realized the Russian couple had been the ones to protect her instead of the other way around.

When Vica went outside for her lunch break, she was surprised to see news vans crowded around the emergency room. A van driver she knew told her that a famous actor had died that morning. Vica was badly upset by the news that Ethan had died. She felt that Sergey would have understood her feelings about Ethan’s death but reminded herself that he was gone.

That evening she got a text from Eric asking permission to spend the night with a friend. After she gave permission she realized she had an evening to herself. She texted Franc for a date but he did not respond. She decided to treat herself to dinner out, perhaps to even post a picture of herself on Facebook.

As she waited for her food, Vica laughed at a woman holding a cat outside a pet shop. The cat was struggling and trying to escape. A man came out of the shop and secured it in his arms. She thought the man looked like Sergey and then was surprised when she realized it was Sergey. Vica jumped to conclusions and decided they were dating and had a cat together. She closed her eyes to steady herself. When she opened them, the couple was gone.



Vica got a text from Franc but did not want to see him. She decided instead to try to get in touch with Vadik. He agreed to allow her to spend the night. At Vadik's house she remembered that Ethan had died and began to cry. They watched television for a while before they went to bed. Vica woke in the middle of the night in a panic. She went into Vadik's room where they had sex. In the morning, Vica decided that she needed to get Sergey back.

Analysis

Notable in this section is the way that Vica compares modern online dating to television programs. She believes dating when she was a teen was more comparable to a novel. "Now the slow Victorian-novel part was out. If anything, dating resembled a TV series, the stupid kind that Regina liked to watch. The plot was fast-paced but predictable; there wasn't enough time to explore interesting situations or to properly develop the characters" (225). Vica even manages a job at Regina in her description of online dating when she describes that form of dating as being like the stupid television series that Regina likes to watch.

While Sergey is working on his version of Virtual Grave, Vica is working on her own version of that same app. She believes she has come up with a better idea for the app by allowing people to use it to control their online social media accounts so they will be protected after death. Vica believes this is a way for people to prepare for death and come to terms with it, just like Ethan had told Vica he wished his doctors would provide him with a way to come to terms with death.

Also in this section the author offers another way to look at death—the way in which most doctors encourage their patients to view it. Vica is greeted in the lobby by a group of cheerleaders encouraging the patients to fight cancer and beat it. While it may seem heroic to think of fighting cancer and successfully beating it, not all do so. As hard as a person may fight death, it is still inevitable that everyone will eventually die, no matter how hard he fights against it.

While Sergey had an online affair with Sejun, Vica has had at least one relationship through Hello, Love! in which she slept with the guy on the first date. By the end of this chapter, however, Vica has decided that she needs to get Sergey back. Perhaps what started this desire for Sergey was her realization that he would understand the grief she felt because of Ethan's death. It is right after Ethan dies and Vica is trying to cheer herself up that she sees Sergey with another woman. Vica immediately assumes the two are happily dating and that they even have a cat that they own together. This belief makes Vica feel even more alone so she turns to the only person she can think of for comfort, Vadik. The author makes a literary allusion to the book *Gone with the Wind* when it is noted that Vica has a Scarlett O'Hara moment.

A significant object in this section of the novel is the La Perla slip that Franc gives Vica. This piece of lingerie is one that Vica had been wanting for some time but it was too expensive for her to purchase or for Sergey to purchase for her. Franc obviously has the



financial means to buy Vica the types of things she believes she wants. When it comes down to the wire, however, instead of turning to the man who can provide her with the things that her heart desires, Vica decides she wants Sergey, the man she once called a loser, back.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Vica's mother cries when she learns from her daughter that Franc, the new boyfriend, bought her a La Perla slip? Are her tears happy or sad? Give reasons to support your answer.

Discussion Question 2

Why is it that Vica decides she wants Sergey back only after she sees him with another woman? What does this say about Vica?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Vica's distress when she learns that Ethan Grail has died. Do you think she is overreacting? Why does it hurt her so much more because she knew he was not ready to die?

Vocabulary

compote, incredulous, alleviate, touted, rampant, singular, nuanced, spontaneity, emanating, camaraderie, reprimanded



Chapter 11: “Bye Bye Love”

Summary

Vadik was not surprised when he woke and found that Vica was already gone. At work, he discovered that Bob and Regina had left the country to take care of some family business. Vadik could not get Regina to text him back and he worried something was wrong, especially since she had acted so strangely during the dinner.

He arranged to meet Vica for lunch. Instead of talking about their relationship, Vica talked to Vadik about her desire to get Sergey back and what she planned to do to make this reunion happen. He wondered if she was really that insensitive or if she was trying to get back at him for breaking off their tryst on the couch in her house.

At home, as Vadik studied the profile for Serena, a girl he met through Hello, Love! On her Facebook page, he discovered a picture of her with a girl named Rachel Meer. The girl looked like Vadik's Rachel. He found Rachel Meer's Facebook page and discovered that it was the girl whom he called Rachel I. On her page was an open invitation to attend a reading by one of the authors who wrote for the publishing company for which Rachel worked. Vadik decided to attend the reading in hopes of meeting Rachel.

He tried to make himself look as much like he had when he had met Rachel as he could by dressing like he had on the day they had met and having his beard trimmed. He was worried she would not recognize him. He thought his worst fears had been realized when she called him Vladimir. Later, she admitted she had decided that if they ever met again, she would call him by the wrong name as a joke.

Even though Rachel was engaged to be married, it was clear to Vadik that she remembered their night together as fondly as he had. After they parted, he realized that he had found what he was looking for in America and had lost it on his first day there. He decided that he needed to make a fresh start for himself in another country.

Analysis

Although his friends have belittled Vadik's claim that he met the love of this life on his first day in America, it appears that it is true. Rachel was apparently as attracted to Vadik as he was to her but because he left with no contact information, she went on with her life. Vadik decides it is time to go on with his life as well, but he does not believe he can do so in America.

The tweed jacket is revived in this section of the novel. Vadik had to get rid of his original tweed jacket because Sejun did not like it but he is able to find a similar one at a second-hand store. This time Vadik wears the tweed jacket because he wants to look as much like he did the first night that he and Rachel met. He wants to make every attempt to be sure that she will remember him.



Vadik still struggles to fit into American culture. He makes a comment about the fact that he feels he does not fit in when he looks at Serena's Facebook page. "You could pretend to fit in all you wanted, but you couldn't truly fit in unless you understood Halloween costumes" (249), Vadik thinks to himself, feeling secretly shamed that after his years in America he still cannot pick up on a good many cultural references. Vadik's inability to pick up on cultural references is not a problem only he has, but a problem suffered by many immigrants since they are not native to the American culture.

The author employs the phrase "rang a bell" (250) when Vadik recognizes Rachel in one of Serena's pictures on Facebook. Later in this same paragraph, the author defines this imaginary bell by describing its ring as being deafening. This description indicates to the reader how intense Vadik's realization was when looking at Rachel I.

Discussion Question 1

When Vica talks to Vadik about how she should go about getting Sergey back the day after she and Vadik slept together, Vadik refers to Vica as being emotionally obtuse. Consider the way Vadik treated Regina when he talked to her about Sergey's behavior around him. Is he not also emotionally obtuse? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Is this ending to Vadik's great love a happy ending or a sad one? It is a little of both? Use examples from the book to support your answer.

Discussion Question 3

Why it is not unusual for Vadik to have trouble with American cultural references?

Vocabulary

idioms, tryst, mirage, demeanor, headhunter



Chapter 12: “Cheat It! Screw It!”

Summary

Helen, the woman who lived on the same floor with Goebbel's owner, struck up a friendship with Sergey. Her teenage daughter, Teena made fun of Sergey's name and accent even though her mother scolded her about it. When Teena finally began talking to Sergey, she called him Sergio. Sergey loved the apartment that he shared with the cantankerous cat. Even though it was small and crowded, he had it to himself.

He continued to work on his app and decided to include Vica's suggestion that they make it where the user can program posthumous comments. Helen, as well as the teacher Sergey had for a class on how to submit his idea to investors, told Sergey he needed to work through his personal contacts to find an investor to whom he could pitch the idea. The only person whom he could think of that was still speaking to him was Alexey Kuzmin.

Sergey called Kuzmin and was careful to be vague about his idea because both Vica and Helen had warned him that someone might want to steal the idea from him. Even though Sergey did not believe him, Kuzmin said he would hear from him again. After a good deal of debate, Sergey also emailed Sejun who suggested James Kisco. Sergey set up a breakfast meeting with this man. He then practiced his pitch with Teena and Helen until they thought he had it down pat. They also discussed his app, with Teena thinking it was cool because it gave dead people the ability to talk but with Helen believing that dead people were not supposed to talk.

When he presented his idea to Kisco, Kisco gave Sergey pointers on how to make his presentation better. He also told a story about a friend he'd had who had been killed in a skiing accident. After the friend was dead, people began seeing on their Facebook posts where this dead friend Jeff Ufberg had responded that he liked the posts. When comments began to appear from this dead Jeff Ufberg it was obvious he was not the one writing them. It was eventually discovered that his girlfriend was posting on his account in order to “keep his memory alive” (270).

Even though Kisco did not agree to fund the app, Sergey still did not feel bad when he left his office. At home, Sergey got a call from Kuzmin. He claimed that Dima Kotov was the perfect investor to whom he could present his app. Kuzmin said that Kotov was interested in finding things that could make him live longer so the app would appeal to him.

During a morning meeting with Kotov, Kotov agreed to give Sergey one and a half million dollars to produce the app. As he walked back home that day, Sergey finally believed that he belonged in New York City. Even though Kuzmin had insisted to Sergey that Kotov would not go back on his promise, Sergey could not bring himself to tell



anyone his good news yet. He was glad he had not told anyone when Kuzmin called to tell him that Kotov was dead; he had been shot.

When Sergey went to Staten Island to pick up Eric for visitation, Eric fussed because he got killed in his video game when his father distracted him. Believing that his father was upset because he had caused him to be killed, Eric explained the ways in which his character could be brought back to life. After lunch, Sergey took Eric for a walk and talked to him not only about getting more exercise but also discouraged the video games.

Back at the house, Vica was already home so Sergey decided not to go inside with Eric. When Sergey was starting to back out of the driveway, he saw Vica running toward him. She asked him to get out of the car but did not say anything; she only stood there with a pleading look on her face. When he asked if she wanted him to come inside she nodded and began crying.

Analysis

A good deal is said about death in this section of the novel. One of the most startling statements is made when Kotov, the man who so desperately tried to outsmart death, dies. This proves that no amount of good living and healthy foods can keep a person safe from death. There is always a way that death will make its presence known. Just as Sergey tells Kotov that he will die, his words come hauntingly true.

This image of death is contrasted with the idea that Sergey's son has about death. Through his video games, his characters die, but can always be resuscitated. Because he thinks his father is interested in the process of reincarnation offered through his games, Eric describes the way he can respawn in some games and in others he can just restart the game. In these games, death is easy to overcome.

Sergey has just left his mother, whom he believes is becoming frailer every day, when he goes to Eric's room and learns about respawning. He gets this lecture not only with the idea that his mother is dying before his eyes but also that Kotov was killed at a young age, despite his attempts to live as long as possible.

This section is bittersweet as Sergey goes from his high of believing that his app has finally sold to his realization that he will have to go back into the world of banking. He had really believed that he was onto a good idea when he devised his app but is beginning to believe that the world thinks more like Helen does—that dead people are not supposed to talk—than his idea that dead people should take active control over their virtual presence so they will not have to worry about their online legacy once they are dead.

Even though James Kisco does not agree to fund Sergey's app, he does tell an unsettling story about a girlfriend who took over her dead boyfriend's social presence. In order to keep his memory alive, this girl had decided to reply to comments and like posts using her boyfriend's page. Kisco shares an interesting final observation to the



story: “The ironic thing is that Jeff had planned to dump her right after his trip to Alaska, and now she owns him forever. How about that, huh?” (270).

Sergey also proves not to be very keen on selling his app as a way to make money as opposed to selling it based on its value to users. Kisco tells Sergey that he needs to appeal to investors’ fear of missing out on money. While Sergey realizes this fear of missing out “did sound like a viable manipulation tool, but his app was so much more than that. He offered to conquer the ultimate fear — the fear of death — not the pathetic anxiety of somebody else making a profit” (272).

When Kisco’s assistant, Cleo, gives Sergey the way that she would sell the app, he admits that he is “finally sold on his own idea” (273). This indicates that Sergey even has misgivings about what he has been doing. He did not believe in it as strongly as he indicated to everyone else that he did. When Cleo tells Sergey he should be telling people that with his “knowledge of linguistic algorithms, I can build an application that would allow us to preserve and re-create the voice of any Internet user, rendering him or her virtually immortal” (272), Sergey feels that he is not as big a loser as he was beginning to believe that he was. Kisco and Cleo do Sergey more good by building him up than if they had agreed to invest in his app without demonstrating to him that his idea and his background were noteworthy.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss your opinion of Kisco’s therapist’s words “Death is not what it used to be” (270). What do you think he means?

Discussion Question 2

What is your opinion of Sergey’s app? Would you be interested in something that could help a person communicate after death? Give reasons to support your answer.

Discussion Question 3

Even though Sergey does not get any money to go forward with his app, how does he benefit from an emotional boost? How is his outlook on life changed by his experience?

Vocabulary

artisanal, homophobic, pensive, cryonics, stamina, euphoria, demise, respawn



Chapter 13: “The Last Chapter”

Summary

This chapter opens with a series of texts as the four friends exchanged information about a going away party that night for Vadik. Sergey was happy he and Vadik had begun talking again and thought it was perhaps for the best that Vadik would be going to Singapore for two years. Sergey and Vica were repairing their relationship, although the apartment where he stayed with the cat had been a source of solace for Sergey. His life was also improving because Cleo, Kisco’s assistant, had contacted him about investing in the app and moving forward with it. Sergey had at first hoped that Vica would encourage him just to drop the idea of the app but she was so excited it had sold that he decided to move forward.

Sergey stopped and fed Goebbels. He often brought Eric with him because Eric liked the cat. Eric had admitted to his father that he wanted to be a veterinarian. Sergey thought that idea was unambitious but stopped himself right before saying that to Eric. Eric had also struck up a friendship with Teena. They played video games together.

Sergey got a text from Regina who was waiting for Vica at IKEA. Regina was waiting at the furniture store for Vica who was supposed to be helping her pick out furniture for Nastya. Regina had an apartment in Moscow where she could spend time with Nastya without her Aunt Masha being there. Regina was busy there with the adoption process and caring for Nastya. In America, Regina had more time to doubt her decision and have panic attacks, like the one she was having in IKEA.

Bob had stayed with her for three weeks in Moscow. During that time he had charmed Aunt Masha and had fun with Nastya. Regina was worried because the relationship seemed to come so easily for Bob. She wished he was a little bit more uncertain of the decision. The only thing in which she found solace was the novel Humdrum that described the busyness of a mother’s life without talking about how much a mother should love her children. Back in the States, Regina was also bombarded with advice on how to raise a child, most of which she did not want. She most often heard that she should follow her heart even though that advice did not help her much when it came to practical matters.

Meanwhile Vica was riding the ferry, headed for the store. She thought of how her relationship was good with Sergey. She had told him that she had slept with Vadik and even though he had not forgiven her, he was still with her. She felt as if by telling him she had somehow tested his love and found it was worthy.

She helped Regina pick out some things for Nastya. Although Vica did not have the money for similar things for Eric, she and Sergey were hopeful that their app would earn them some extra money. When they sat in IKEA’s cafeteria after they had finished shopping, Regina admitted to Vica that she missed Nastya. Vica grew tense when



Regina asked how things were going with Sergey but decided to answer truthfully. As Vica talked about her hopes she could go to business or marketing school, she noticed that Regina was thoughtful about her statements. Vica realized how lost and insecure Regina really was. Vica remembered how Vadik had always told him that Regina knew how to listen. Vica admitted to Regina she and Sergey were struggling because she had slept with Vadik and told Sergey about it. To her surprise, Regina laughed hysterically and asked for the whole story. They decided to share later over drinks.

Vica texted Vadik letting him know they were on their way. Vadik thought that when he was gone it was Regina he would miss the most. He was still angry with himself for the way he had answered her when she asked if he thought she could raise a child.

At the apartment, Bob was the first to arrive. Both Vadik and Bob were sharing the fear of missing out since they had not invested in Sergey's app or even recognized its promise. Vadik asked Bob how the adoption process was coming. Bob told Vadik that Nastya might get to come to America as quickly as a few months but that he was terrified of their decision. Vadik realized there was a side to Bob that he did not know and that they could have been closer if he had known it.

Vica and Regina were next to arrive. They entertained themselves by going through a plastic container of Vadik's things that he did not want. Sergey arrived as they were still sifting through the things. As his friends began to share their best memories of Vadik, Sergey realized the party had begun to sound like a memorial service.

After his friends left, Vadik set about deleting all of his social media accounts. He discovered it was more difficult than he had thought it would be. Once he had all the bits of himself that were scattered about social media gathered up, however, he believed he was ready to start living.

Analysis

The focus in this final section of the novel is on none of the characters in particular. Rather, it switches between characters. This switch in focus between characters is usually carried out as a text message is sent from one character to another. The focus changes from the sending character to the receiving character. Additionally, the beginning of this chapter features a series of text messages sent back and forth between the main characters.

Fortunes have changed for all of the characters, which they often do in narrative fiction. Sergey, who was not given much credit for anything in the beginning of the novel has made a success of himself and his idea. Bob and Vadik are suffering from fear of missing out because they did not jump on the opportunity to buy in on the app when they had the chance. Vadik, meanwhile, is leaving the United States to work in Singapore for two years. He has decided perhaps he is meant to travel around and not to fit into any particular place.



Vica and Sergey are back together and celebrating the potential success of the app. Sergey was surprised when Vica supported him in going ahead with the app even though he had secured a job at Bank of America.

Most surprising are the new realizations that the friends are making about one another. Even though they have been friends for years, they have been blind to some of the personality traits the others had. Vadik, for instance believes that he will miss Regina the most of all his friends. While Sergey and Vica involved him in their marital problems, Regina has always been a source of support. Vica and Regina also initiate a surprising friendship. Perhaps because Vica puts away her jealousy, she is able to see Regina as a good listener and a person who is just as lost as she is. When Bob tells Vadik how afraid he is about their choice to adopt, Vadik realizes there is a vulnerability to Bob he never saw. He thinks he would perhaps have liked his boss more if he had been aware of this side of him earlier.

Regina believes she is the only one nervous about the adoption. Bob has not shared with her his own concerns. Again the novel Humdrum is an important symbol because Regina finds comfort in the idea that as a mother she will be kept so busy with the day-to-day responsibilities of taking care of Nastya that she will not have time to wonder if she loves the child enough.

Finally, the reader will notice how Vadik's going away party is compared to a memorial service. His friends tell their favorite memories of him and then they take a few things of his that are special to them, or that they just like. After they leave, Vadik kills off his virtual self. It is as if believes without all the influences from social media he will be able to live a fuller, more complete life.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the ending of the novel. What does it mean when Vadik gets rid of all his social media accounts? How will he be able to live more completely with his virtual self in the grave?

Discussion Question 2

How has Sergey shown up those who did not think he could be successful with his app? What does it mean that he did not give up?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways do Bob and Regina handle their fears about adopting Nastya? What does it mean when Regina admits to Vica that she misses the child?

Vocabulary

turbulent, reconciliation, fervor, agoraphobia, solace, pummel, diversion, pillaging, denuded, hypothetical



Characters

Reginochka “Regina” Mandel

Regina is the wife of Bob and the eventual mother of Nastya, a Russian girl whom she and Bob adopt. Regina is one of the four Russian immigrants from whose point of view this novel is told.

In Russia, Regina was well known for her position as a writer who translated books from English into Russian. She dedicated her life to her work after Vica stole Sergey from her. Regina lived with her mother, who also worked as a translator. It was only while she was away from Russia on writing retreats that she ever attracted any men. One of these affairs resulted in a pregnancy. Although Regina’s mother encouraged her to keep the baby, Regina decided to have an abortion. The procedure went badly and Regina was unable to have any more children because of it.

Regina met Bob when she was in America staying with Vica and Sergey after her mother’s death. He owned a company that designed mobile apps called DigiSly and was rich. Even with her newfound wealth, Regina was unhappy because she could not come to terms with her mother’s death. She was haunted by images of her mother when she was sick, she could not remember what she had looked like when she was young and happy.

During a trip to Moscow to honor the two-year-anniversary of her mother’s death, Regina begins to come to terms with her mother’s death. Her Aunt Masha gives her a suitcase of her mother’s things. It is while looking through these things that Regina is able to imagine her mother as she had been while she was healthy and young.

Aunt Masha also helps Regina by pushing her to make a decision about which she is uncomfortable. Even though Regina seems to not be interested in having children, she later admits to herself that she feels she will be missing out if she does not have someone to whom she can pass on who she is. Just like Sergey wants to be able to allow people to be able to pass on the essence of themselves through an app, Regina wants to be able pass on who she is to another person as well.

Aunt Masha introduces Regina to an orphan named Nastya. Nastya and Regina connect with one another over the tin of buttons that belonged to Regina’s mother. Regina had played with these buttons as a child. She is moved when she sees Nastya playing with these buttons just as she did.

It is after Regina returns home that she realizes that Aunt Masha was trying to do what was best not only for Nastya but also for Regina by giving her someone for whom she can care. Regina agrees to adopt the child even though the idea of caring for Nastya scares her. Regina is not so much afraid of the practical aspects of taking care of Nastya but is instead afraid she will not be able to love the child properly.



Sergey Levin

Sergey Levin is one of the four Russian immigrants from whose viewpoint this story is told. He is Vica's husband and Eric's father. After receiving a letter from his father after his father had died, Sergey became obsessed with the idea of an app that could let a dead person communicate with loved ones through social media.

Sergey is very intelligent and has a PhD in linguistics. He got a visa to go to America to attend a business school. After he graduated the business school, Sergey got job right away. Two years later he was offered a better job with a better salary but his boss did not like Sergey. Sergey finally quit because he was being treated so badly. From that point on, employment became harder. Sergey found a new job but was quickly laid off after the 2011 terrorist attacks. Sergey's opinion of himself and his self esteem were wrecked after a series of bad reviews and Vica's continued negative attitude toward him.

In Russia, Sergey had originally dated Regina. When he met Vica, he realized he had never really loved Regina. It took Sergey several days to break off his relationship with Regina. Sergey and Vica both believed that their lives would get nothing but better once they arrived in America. Instead, Vica is increasingly unhappy with Sergey because he is unable to keep a job and she is unable to go to medical school as they had planned for her to do. Sergey is kicked out of the house after he loses his job at Langley Miles. One day when Sergey comes to the house to drop off Eric, Vica runs out to his car. He understands that she misses him and wants the two of them to get back together.

After Vica threw him out of the house, Sergey stayed for a while with Vadik until Vadik learned that Sergey had been having a Skype relationship with Vadik's ex girlfriend, Sejun. Sergey was lucky to stumble upon a man who needed a cat sitter and would allow Sergey to stay at his apartment while he watched the cat. During this time, Sergey dedicated his time to working on his app.

No one, besides Vica, really believed in Sergey's app. Vadik told Sergey he thought the app was stupid and morbid. Bob had advised Sergey it was a great idea but that it would not catch on in America. Sergey pitches the app to one man who loves it and even promises to invest money in it. Before the deal is finished, the man is shot and killed. At this point Sergey is so tired of trying to promote his app that he does not want to try with it any more. To his surprise, he is called by the secretary of one of the men to whom he had pitched the app. She wants to invest in it. To everyone's surprise, Sergey's app is a success.

Vicusha "Vica" Morozova

Vica is Sergey's wife and Eric's mother. She is one of the Russian immigrants from whose point of view the novel is told. She traveled to America with her husband when he got a visa to study business in America. After Sergey finished business school, Vica



was supposed to go to medical school. Because Sergey could never get a job that would support the family, Vica was never able to go to medical school.

Vica is very materialistic. She believes her life would be better if she lived some place other than Staten Island, if she had the finer things of life, and if she were married to a rich man. Even though she stole Sergey from Regina, Vica is jealous of Regina because Regina wound up marrying a rich American. Vica believes Regina is not worthy of having a rich husband because Regina is overweight and unattractive.

Vica puts pressure on Sergey to promote his app not only because she thinks it can be their ticket to a better income but also because she really believes in it. She works as a radiology technician at a cancer hospital where she interacts with people who are dying of cancer on a daily basis. One patient in particular tells her that he wishes doctors would do something to help him be less afraid of death. Vica believes Sergey's app could do this and even visualizes offering their services at the hospital where she works.

After Sergey loses his job with Langley Miles, Vica throws him out of the house believing that she is better off without a man. She thinks that he simply does not work hard enough at his jobs and that he has been losing them intentionally. It is after Ethan Grail, one of the patients at the cancer hospital, dies, that Vica realizes that Sergey is the only one who would really understand what she is feeling.

Later that day while trying to treat herself at a restaurant in the East Village, Vica sees Sergey with a woman and the cat he is sitting. She assumes the two are dating and have a cat together. Not wanting to spend the night alone, Vica asks Vadik if she can stay at his apartment. He agrees. Vica slips into his bedroom at some point in the night and has sex with him. The following morning, she decides she needs to get Sergey back.

Although the two had never been good friends, Vica becomes a source of support for Regina when she and Bob decide to adopt Nastya. In the final scenes of the novel, Vica is helping Regina pick up practical furniture for the girl.

Vadim “Vadik” Kalugin

Vadik is a best friend to both Sergey and Regina. He dated Vica but was dumped by her when Vica decided that Sergey was a better catch. He is one of the four Russian immigrants from whose point of view this novel is told.

Because he was able to get a job working with Bob's company, Vadik is well off financially. He lacks, however, a significant other and a well defined personality. Vadik tells his friends that he found and lost the love of his life on the day he first arrived in America. None of his friends believe him, but Vadik meets up with the girl, Rachel, who appears to have really wished she and Vadik has spent more time together as well. By the time he locates her again, Rachel is engaged.



In an attempt to find a match, Vadik is willing to do whatever it takes to attract and keep a girl. Even though he has his doubts about his current girlfriend, Sejun, Vadik moves to an apartment he does not like and furnishes it with furniture he does not like and does not fit his style hoping that she is sincere in her plans to move in with him. Sejun, however, breaks up with him before she even moves to New York from California.

Vadik sees social media as a way to try on different personalities. Each of his profiles on different dating sites and social media sites offers a different view of himself. His friends make fun of him behind his back for not having a stable personality. They credit his lack of personality to the series of different apartments in which he has lived since he moved to America. It is believed this is an attempt to find where he actually fits into the world.

At the end of the novel, Vadik realizes he has lost Rachel for good. He decides he needs to start off with a clean slate in a different country. Before he leaves America, he deletes all of his social media and dating profiles. He thinks that once he has gotten rid of these sites that have allowed him to have false versions of himself, he will be able to create a real personality and real life.

Olga Zhilinskaya

Olga is Regina's mother. Regina lived with her mother up until the time of her mother's death. Olga had a good deal of influence on her daughter and seemed to rule a good deal of her life.

Both times that Regina disagreed with her mother these disagreements had devastating results for Regina. The first disagreement between the two came when Regina got pregnant during a writer's conference. Olga encouraged Regina not to have an abortion but Regina did so anyway. The procedure had complications and caused Regina to lose the ability to have children. Regina and her mother again disagreed when Regina was given an opportunity to work in Germany. Olga did not want her daughter to go away and began complaining of sickness. When the results of the medical tests were returned, it was discovered that Olga had cancer. Regina watched her mother become quickly sick and die.

After spending time with her Aunt Masha two years after her mother's death, Regina comes to the conclusion that her mother was homosexual. Regina believes that Aunt Masha, who was actually no relation to them, might have been her mother's lover.

Bob

Bob is Regina's husband. He later becomes the adoptive father of Nastya. Bob also has a daughter from his first marriage. Bob is extremely wealthy. He is well kept and in good physical shape as compared to Regina, who is overweight and unkempt.



Bob owns the company DigiSly, which designs mobile apps. As a result, he is considered one of the country's "one percent," or the one percent of American people who are the richest people in the country.

It is after Regina finally tells Bob about Nastya that she stops stressing about Nastya and they begin the process of adopting the child. Because Bob seems to take easily to Nastya, Regina assumes that he has no reservations about the adoption. Bob admits to Vadik how afraid he is about the adoption.

Sejun Ku

Sejun Ku is the woman whom Vadik is dating at the opening of the novel. Vadik encourages her to move to New York to live with him. She finally agrees but says that he needs to get a different apartment and allow her to furnish it. After he does so, she breaks up with him before she ever moves to New York.

Later in the novel, Sergey talks to Sejun on Vadik's iPhone. He begins calling her for advice about his app. Their small talk turns into a virtual affair on Skype. Sejun breaks up with Sergey just as quickly as she did with Vadik. It is because Vadik learns about Sergey and Sejun that Vadik and Sergey's friendship is threatened.

Aunt Masha

Aunt Masha is not Regina's biological aunt. Her mother, Olga, insisted that Regina refer to the woman as her aunt. When Regina looks through her mother's things after her death, Regina senses that her mother and Aunt Masha might have been lovers.

For years, Aunt Masha has pressured Regina to adopt a child. When Regina visits Aunt Masha during a trip to Russia to pay her respects on the second anniversary of her mother's death, Aunt Masha has a girl living with her who she hopes Regina will adopt.

It is only after Regina returns to America that she realizes that Aunt Masha is not only trying to do what is best for Nastya, but also for Regina.

Helen

Helen is the woman who lives on the same floor of the apartment building as Goebbels' owner. Sergey strikes up a friendship with her because she loves Goebbels and can give Sergey advice about the cat.

Helen makes it clear that she would like to date Sergey. Although he resists her, Sergey comes close to sleeping with Helen just before Vica indicates to him that she wants to resurrect their relationship.



It is assumed that when Vica sees Sergey outside a pet shop with a woman who is holding a cat that it is Helen she is seeing.

Rachel Meer (Rachel I)

Rachel Meer is the girl whom Vadik met his first night in America. They met in a diner and Rachel invited Vadik to her apartment when she learned that he was staying on Staten Island. They had a one night stand. Vadik left the apartment the following morning before Rachel woke and did not leave any contact information.

Years later Vadik finally locates Rachel and attends a reading by one of her authors. She insinuates to Vadik she had wishes the relationship had developed further. At the point they finally meet again, Rachel is engaged.

Eric

Eric is the son of Sergey and Vica. Eric is overweight and loves to play video games.

Vica dreams of getting Eric into a school for gifted and talented students but is angry when she learns that Eric did not actually take the entrance exam for one of the schools but instead hid in the bathroom.

Even though Eric is not intelligent and does not have big dreams for himself, Vica is surprised by how empathetic and kind her son is.

Cleo Triantafyllides

Cleo Triantafyllides is the woman who works as the assistant for James Kisco. She hears Sergey pitch his app to her boss and likes it better than her boss does.

Later, after Sergey has been disappointed because Kotov promised to invest in the app and then was killed, Cleo calls him to tell him that she would be interested in investing. She has started her own app company and believes his idea is viable.

Nastya

Nastya is the girl whom Aunt Masha tries to get Regina to adopt while she is visiting in Russia on the two-year anniversary of her mother's death.

Regina leaves Russia angry that Aunt Masha tried to push the girl onto her. After she tells Bob about what happened, they return to Russia and adopt Nastya even though Regina is fearful about her performance as a mother and her believed inability to love a child.



Ethan Grail

Ethan Grail is a movie star and one of Vica's favorite patients at the cancer center. Ethan is 32 years old and has been diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. He once told her that he wished someone would find a way to make death less scary.

Vica is devastated when Ethan Grail dies of his cancer long before the doctors said that he would.

Franc

Franc is the man whom Vica dates during her separation from Sergey. Vica sleeps with Franc after their first date.

Franc is so against spontaneity in their relationship that Vica wonders if he is not dating another woman along with her.

Mira

Mira is Sergey's mother. She helps take care of Eric when Vica is at work.

Both Sergey and Vica get frustrated with Mira because she feeds Eric junk food and praises him too lavishly but they feel they have no choice but to let her watch him.

Alexey Kuzmin

Alexey Kuzmin is the man to whom Sergey turns to try to find an investor for his app even though he thinks that Sergey is sketchy. Kuzmin suggests Kotov as an investor. Kotov agrees to invest in the app but is killed a few days later.

Goebbels

Goebbels is the elderly, arthritic cat that Sergey agrees to watch for six months in exchange for a place to stay after he leaves Vadik's apartment.

Teena

Teena is Helen's daughter. She makes fun of Sergey's accent and intentionally mispronounces his name. Surprising to Sergey, Teena and Eric strike up a friendship.



Dima Kotov

Dima Kotov is the man who promises to invest \$1.5 million in Sergey's app. Before the deal goes through, however, Kotov is shot and killed.

James Kisco

James Kisco is the man who listens to Sergey's pitch on his Virtual Grave app. He suggests ways to make it better and then refuses to help fund it.

Becky

Becky is Bob's daughter by his first marriage. It is because Bob has this daughter that Regina does not feel terribly guilty because she is unable to have children.



Symbols and Symbolism

Strange Scratch

The strange scratch that Sergey notices on Vica's face is a symbol of the kissing marathon that she and Vadik had on the couch in Vica and Sergey's Staten Island home. Vica got the scratch when she reached for Vadik but he pulled away from her. His belt buckle scratched her cheek. Sergey had seen this scratch on his wife's cheek and has always suspected something happened between her and Vadik but has not wanted to know for sure.

Tweed Jacket

Vadik's tweed jacket is a symbol of the New York intellectual that Vadik imagines himself to be. He is wearing this jacket when he first meets Rachel I. He buys a similar jacket from a second hand shop to wear when he decides to attend a reading being presented by one of Rachel's writers.

Half-Dead Helium Balloon

The half-dead helium balloon that is under to desk of one of Sergey's co-workers symbolizes Sergey's self-esteem on the day that he is fired from his job at Langley Miles. He goes to work believing that he will be fired that day and leaves afraid to tell Vica what has happened because he knows she will be angry with him.

Letter from Sergey's Father

It is this letter from Sergey's father that symbolizes the beginning of the Virtual Grave app. Sergey received this letter in the mail after his father died. It was special to him because he had gotten an unexpected word from his deceased father.

Book Buratino

This book, the Russian version of Pinocchio, represents Regina's childhood and the love of her mother. She is shocked when she sees the inscription from her mother when she offers to read the book to Nastya. The two have a disagreement because Nastya had been given the book by Aunt Masha, yet Regina says that it was hers.



Olga's Suitcase

Olga's suitcase symbolizes the essence of Regina's mother. It is when Regina feels the softness of her mother's fur hat on her face that she calls out to her for the first time. The suitcase and the items inside also provide a way for Nastya and Regina to bond.

Buttons

These buttons and Nastya's reaction to the buttons represent the beginnings of Regina's desire to have someone with whom she can share who she is. Regina recognizes that Nastya's obsession with the buttons is similar to her own.

Admission Slip

When Vica sees this admission slip in Eric's pocket, she knows that he did not take the test to be admitted to Sebastian Levy High School. It is a symbol of the differences in Vica's desires for her son's life and his desires for his life.

La Perla Slip

The La Perla Slip symbolizes Vica's materialism. She brags to her mother that Franc, her new boyfriend, gave her this expensive slip as a birthday present. Vica had wanted one of these slips for years but had never been able to afford it on Sergey's salary.

Humdrum

This novel symbolizes to Regina the vast majority of child rearing that will be predictable and boring. It helps to calm her when she thinks of the reality of adopting Nastya and the scope of the project she is taking on.



Settings

Vica and Sergey's Home on Staten Island

The house that Vica and Sergey bought on Staten Island is a setting for many of the scenes in the novel. It is in their home that Vica and Vadik have a tryst on the couch. It is also to this home that Vadik comes on the day he first arrives in America.

Vadik's New Apartment in Morningside Heights

Sergey first pitches his app, Virtual Grave, to Bob during a housewarming party at Vadik's new apartment in Morningside Heights.

Lenin's Library

It is at Lenin's Library that Sergey runs into Vica after having first met her at Regina's apartment. It is in this library that their relationship starts. Although Sergey believes they just happened to meet at the library, Vica had actually been hanging out at the library hoping to meet up with Sergey.

Vadik's Apartment in Williamsburg

Even though he did not like this apartment, Vadik broke his contract with his landlord in Morningside Heights and rented this apartment because Sejun said that she liked it and would live with him there.

Instead of moving to New York as she had promised, Sejun breaks up with Vadik. Sergey winds up moving into the apartment with Vadik after Vica throws him out of their house.

Whole Foods

When Vica calls Vadik to meet her for lunch, he believes that she tells him the name of the restaurant is Hole in the Woods, a place he imagines is romantic. He believes she might be trying to start a relationship with him. It winds up she was inviting him to the salad bar at Whole Foods so she could ask him if he thinks she should take over trying to find an investor for Sergey's app.



KGB Bar

The KGB bar is the place where Rachel's book company holds its reading. Vadik attends the reading with hopes of reuniting with Rachel. Although it appears that she did really like him, she is engaged to another man.

Chistye Prudy

Chistye Prudy is the area of Russia where Regina and her mother lived. Regina avoids this area of Russia during her visit for the two-year anniversary of her mother's death until the very last minute.

IKEA

IKEA is the place where Regina and Vica meet to pick out furniture for Nastya's bedroom at Regina and Bob's apartment. The two actually begin reacting to each other as true friends in this setting, sharing their fears and hopes.



Themes and Motifs

The Reality of Death

Death is a major theme in this novel as a good deal of the action revolves around the app that Sergey is trying to design. As the characters consider Sergey's app and also think about their own encounters with death, they try to find some way to deal with their losses. Most important in this theme are the stories of Regina, Sergey and Vica. Each of these characters works through his own grief through the course of the novel.

It is when Sergey receives a letter from his father after his father's death that he begins considering an app that would allow communication with the dead. Because this letter from his father means so much to him, Sergey believes it would help others who are bereaved to receive messages from their dead loved ones. His belief is that people could use their social media accounts to send out these messages.

Sergey's idea is met with a variety of responses. Sejun, for example, thinks the app is a beautiful idea. Bob likes it but believes that it will not catch on in the American culture. Vadik thinks that the idea is stupid and that no one wants to hear from a dead person. Kisco tells Sergey about an instance where a girlfriend once accessed her dead boyfriend's Facebook page to send out messages from him. Everyone who received the messages thought they were creepy. Helen, a woman who helps Sergey prepare his sales pitch, believes that the dead are not supposed to talk. Vica, who works with dying people and knows they want some way to prepare themselves for death, believes the app would fit their needs perfectly.

Two years after her mother's death, Regina is still stuck in her grief. When she hears about Sergey app, she does not like the idea. In fact, she laughs at the idea. After Regina travels overseas to visit her mother's grave and is given a suitcase full of her mother's things, Regina realizes there is a way for people to connect to the dead. She thinks this can be done through the memorabilia that remind the bereaved of what a person was like when he was still alive and healthy. Regina gets more peace from being able to remember her mother as she was as a younger person than she believes she would have if she has gotten a message from her mother through some form of social media.

Because they grew up in a different culture, these Russian friends have a different view of death than Americans have. While the Americans are doing everything they can to avoid death, as if it were something that could be avoided, the Russians realize that death will eventually come for everyone. Regina, for instance, is a perfect example of this. She refuses to have genetic testing done to find out to which diseases she might be susceptible. She reasons that she does not see the sense in fighting so hard to avoid death when it would take a person in one way or another anyway. Vica understands Regina's point of view. She does not understand why the doctors and nurses at the cancer hospital where she works encourage their patients to fight so hard against death



as if were something that could be overcome. Instead, Vica agrees with the actor who wishes his doctors would do more to prepare him for death.

Dedication to Relationships

The complicated and intertwining relationships of these four Russian immigrants are integral to the novel. They date one another, break up with one another, and cheat on one another, but still seem to remain friends. There are several reasons why they manage to remain friends despite the way they sometimes treat one another.

First, these immigrants feel alone in America. Because they were not born in America, they do not understand a good deal about the country's culture or social network. Vadik is one of the main characters who is most troubled about how out of place he feels he is in America. He is especially upset by the way he does not understand a good deal of the cultural references made by Americans. Vica also feels alone in America. She tries to make friends with her coworkers but winds up only feeling embarrassed. Her attempt to befriend one of the doctors fails and she realizes it is because the doctor considers herself too good for a friendship with Vica. Other coworkers in the radiology department, however, see Vica as being better than they are because she is married while many of them are single mothers.

When Regina breaks up with Sergey, she notes that she had not intended to remain friends with Sergey, Vica, and Vadik but that they came as a package deal. This is especially so after the four of them move to America. Although their ties for friendship may not be as strong as those between other people, these four friends stick close together because they do understand each other.

Although it is hard to see sometimes, these four friends do care about each other. Vadik is willing to take Sergey in after Vica threw him out of the house. Vadik also welcomes Vica at his house after she has a bad day at work. Before he leaves for Singapore, Vadik realizes the only one who has been a true friend to him is Regina, yet he still contacts Sergey and lets him know that he is leaving. Although they have been estranged, Vadik does not want to completely throw away his friendship with Sergey. Even though Vica stole Sergey from her, Regina still is willing to give Vica a chance to be a friend. She believes perhaps Vica will be the best to advise her on childrearing.

So even though these friends have hurt each other, betrayed each other, and judged each other, they remain friends. Their status as Russian immigrants as well as the length of their relationships leads to a comfortable understanding of one another. They also realize as they live their lives that it does not matter how well one thinks he knows another person, there are always honorable things left to learn.

The Challenges of Parenting

Vica, Sergey and Regina all share a similar struggle as they try to be good parents. Vica believes materialistic things can provide a child with an ideal childhood while Regina



fears she would not be able to love a child enough. Sergey, meanwhile, learns to pay attention to and be a mentor to his son.

Through her course of being a parent, Vica has believed that it is the material things that will make a parent a good parent and the child a successful adult. When Eric is a baby she mourns that she is not able to afford all of the fancy baby things that she sees advertised. She and Sergey, in fact, do not even have a changing table for their baby. Even as Eric grows up, Vica still has her eye on material things as she imagines a good future for him. Even though she does not ask him what he wants for himself, she assumes that he will want to go to a good school and get a good education. She believes this good education will keep him from being as unhappy as she has been. Vica does not learn until after her son was to have taken a test for gifted and talented children that Eric was not interested at all in going to that school. In fact, he hid in the bathroom and did not even take the test.

Sergey takes a different view of parenthood. He tries not to judge his son as others have judged him but instead to try to guide Eric into doing the right thing. Because he cannot get the boy to eat in a healthier manner, he suggests that they start exercising during their time together. When Eric admits to his father that he wants to be a veterinarian, Sergey stops himself from telling Eric his job choice is not very ambitious. He chooses not to discourage the boy's passion as other have tried to discourage his passion for his app.

Regina's storyline also includes parenthood. Because she is barren, Regina believes she will be happy spending the rest of her life with just her and her husband. Her mother's friend, Aunt Masha, tries to convince Regina otherwise. Regina is violently against the idea of adopting a child at first, but comes to realize that Nastya could be a person to whom she could pass on her identity and her family history. Even after Regina convinces herself that she has the material funds needed to care for a child, she fears that she will not be able to love Nastya properly. Her situation is opposite from Vica's. She believes her child would be materialistically wealthy and emotionally poor. Regina comforts herself with the idea that she will be so busy caring for Nastya that she will have no time to worry about how much or how little she is loving the child.

Falseness of One's Social Media Presence

While social media is presented as a great way to communicate with others, even beyond the grave, this novel points out how one's social media presence permits a good deal of falsehood. Vadik is the character in particular who relies on social media to present his latest remake of himself but the other characters are guilty of this fakeness as well. Even as he studies texts and tweets in preparation for his Virtual Grave app, Sergey notices how smooth and prepared most people's posts appear to be.

For Vadik, who came to the United States with the idea that he wanted to appear his first day as a New York intellectual and could not wait to play the part, social media is a great way for him to try out his different personalities. It is Regina who thinks to herself



as she reads the different posts Vadik sends out that he is “witty on Twitter, charming on Facebook, philosophical on his Tumblr” (61). Vadik also had a profile on Hello, Love! that he tweaked constantly as he tried to perfect his image. In the end, Vadik decides to permanently log off all social media believing that he will be able to live a fuller life that way.

Vica is another person who tries to present a different image of herself on social media. She does not necessarily try out different personalities, but she does make her life seem more exciting and happier than it is in reality. Even though she is missing Sergey and seeing him everywhere, Vica tries to pretend her life is going well as she poses for selfies while drinking wine and eating in expensive restaurants.

Sergey not only sees how false some social media posts can be he is also deeply affected by these posts. As he looks at the posts that his friends from Russia put up he wonders if he did the right thing by moving his family to America. All of his friends in Russia seem to be living exciting, fulfilling lives while he is struggling to make ends meet. Sergey realizes, however, that a good deal of these posts are not completely honest when he begins researching tweets and posts for his app. He comes to realize these updates are written to show a person and his family and/or situation in the best possible light and not necessarily to tell the truth about that situation.

Disappointments for Immigrants to America

Though the four Russian friends thought that their lives would vastly improve when they moved to America, they are disappointed by the reality of their lives as Americans. They have survived tumultuous times in Russia only to arrive in America to witness the terrorist attacks and downfall of the financial market. Regardless of their disappointment in their new county, Sergey shows them that the American Dream is possible if one chooses to work hard enough for it.

Vica's disappointment comes quickly once she and Sergey reach America. It had always been their agreement that once Sergey finished business school and got a job, she would be able to go to medical school. However, Sergey has trouble keeping a job. The upset in the job market after the terrorist attacks do not make his prospects any better. Vica wants the expensive lifestyle of the other women she sees and resents their meager things and house on Staten Island.

Regina's disappointment in America comes not so much from the situation in which she finds herself but her inability to get over her depression following her mother's death. She has lost the ability to concentrate on any reading and refused to continue her job as a translator after she left Russia. To fill her time she watches television and eats even though these activities make her feel even worse about herself. Regina begins to find meaning in her life when her friend Aunt Masha pressures her into adopting a Russian girl whose mother died in a car wreck.



When Sergey envisioned his life in America, he did not imagine that he would have to struggle as much as he has to do to get or keep a job. Once in America, Sergey sees how other people are getting rich off mobile apps and wonders why he is unable to do the same. The one app that he envisions, his Virtual Grave app, is not readily accepted. Sergey continues to work on his app and tweak it until he has almost given up hope that anyone will be interested in it. It is when he has given up the idea that his app will ever be successful that he finally finds a buyer for it.

Vadik believes that he threw away his chance for happiness in America on the same day that he arrived there. He met a girl named Rachel in a diner with whom he had a one night stand. He is convinced Rachel was the love of his life but his friends do not take his belief seriously. Vadik goes through years of tweaking his personality in an attempt to find another girl who will love him. Despite the fact he is well off financially, his attempts at a relationship do not work out for him. Vadik is the one who is so disgruntled with his life in America that he decides to move to Singapore and hope for better life there.



Styles

Point of View

This story is told by an omniscient narrator with the focus on four different major characters. The story is told from the focal points of Sergey, Vica, Regina, and Vadik, the four Russian friends who immigrate to America. Each chapter is focused on the viewpoint of a different character. Three of the thirteen chapters are focuses on each of the main characters. The final chapter is narrated by an omniscient narrator from no particular character's point of view.

Because each of the main characters has chapters dedicated to his point of view, the reader is able to get to know the personality and outlook of each of the characters. The reader can also see how stories told by each of the characters take on a different meaning through the eyes of different friends.

Language and Meaning

There is nothing particularly outstanding about the language in this contemporary novel. The characters have Russian names because they are from Russia, but no other Russian words or phrases are included in the novel. Although there are several mentions about the characters not speaking English well, the author writes their dialogue in perfect English. This good English makes the reader forget that the characters are immigrants who have not grown up in America. In the dialogue assigned to them, their English is just as good as native American speakers. The author might have decided not to write dialogue in broken English because it would have disrupted the reader's attention from the storyline.

Structure

Because the story is told from the viewpoints of four different main characters there are four different climaxes in the story depending on their own circumstances. Regina's story climaxes when she is asked by Aunt Masha to adopt Nastya. Vica's story climaxes when she realizes that she wants Sergey back. Vadik's narrative climaxes when he finds Rachel I and meets up with her. Sergey's story climaxes when he finally sells his app.

The denouement comes in the final chapter of the novel which is not told from any particular character's point of view. It is in this chapter that the characters' lives are put back together after their crises have pulled them apart. Regina and Bob are in the process of adopting Nastya. Sergey has sold his app. He and Vica have gotten back together and Vica has told him about her one-night stand with Vadik. Vadik is leaving America. He deletes his social media accounts before he leaves America. He hopes

that by collecting the pieces of himself that he had scattered through his social media, he can unite himself in one personality and finally begin to live.



Quotes

Bob had developed a supersuccessful start-up designing new mobile apps. It seemed like all around them people were developing Internet start-ups, building new applications, creating successful businesses out of thin air, getting rich overnight, just like that.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 1)

Importance: Vica is jealous of how rich Bob has gotten in the business of designing mobile apps. She also sees other people who have earned a good deal of money with a successful app. She wonders why she and Sergey cannot have as much success with the app Sergey is trying to promote.

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.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 1)

Importance: This quote describes one of the problems that immigrants to America face. It is hard for them to decide where they should live since they do not completely understand the social and economic landscape of the country. This different for Vadik because he has moved several times, trying to find a place that fits the personality he hopes to present.

Everything would seem to be fine on the outside and yet on the screen there would be a jagged dark spot, or a white speck, or a luminous stain. And then she would see a bunch of printouts on the desk. Like a bunch of postcards from Death.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 1)

Importance: The author uses personification to describe how the marks indicating cancer seen on x-ray screens were like postcards from Death. As a technician in a cancer hospital, Vica has seen a good deal of the postcards in her career. She indicates that though the patient may show not signs of sickness, there is still a deadly mass growing inside them.

Our online presence is where the essence of a person is nowadays.”

-- Sergey (Chapter 1)

Importance: Sergey reasons that the essence of a person, the part of a person that previous philosophers could not pinpoint, can be found in a person's online presence.

That's precisely my point. He idolizes women, but he doesn't view them as equals. They're these sacred sexual objects for him. Something to idolize and discard, or, better yet, discard first and idolize later.”

-- Rachel (Chapter 2)



Importance: Rachel explains to Vadik in this quote why she thinks that Leonard Cohen was antifeminist. She argues that although Cohen seems to be singing his praises of women, he does not believe women are equal to men.

Sometimes Regina wondered if it would feel any different if she actually loved Bob. She doubted that it would.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 3)

Importance: Although she admits to herself that she does not love her husband, Regina doubts that emotion would make a good deal of difference in their relationship. She believes that she and Bob are comfortable and content with one another regardless of the strength of her love.

Vadik told her that the major difference between Russians and Americans was that Americans believed that they were in charge of their lives, that they could control them. Not just that but that it was their responsibility to control their lives as much as they could. They would try to fight to the very end against all sense, because they considered letting go irresponsible.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 3)

Importance: Regina takes Vadik’s opinions of Americans into consideration when she thinks about the way that Bob thinks. Vadik explains to Regina that Americans believe they should be in charge of their lives. They thought it was irresponsible to not fight as hard as possible to keep their lives under their control.

But the worst thing about Vica and Sergey was that they constantly tried to push yet another of their stupid app ideas on Bob. They tried to exploit him, and she felt exploited as well.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 3)

Importance: Although Regina feels badly for Vica and Sergey because they are so financially unstable, she feels that they exploit Bob by the way they are always trying to push him to develop their apps.

Sergey dreaded going to the office. The rumors of huge layoffs at Langley Miles had been circulating for a while, but yesterday they actually announced that a large group of employees would be ‘let go’ this week. He had good reason to worry that he would be fired today. His position as a business analyst was insignificant enough, and he had been hired not that long ago. He knew that the newest employees were usually the first to get cut.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 4)

Importance: Even before he goes to work, Sergey senses that he will be fired. He knows the way that businesses work. Since he is one of the most recently hired employees, Sergey knows he will be among the first to be let go.



He imagined himself flattened against the ferry's inner wall. Dead. Free of responsibilities. Free of judgment. Free to relax. He imagined Vica's grief with some satisfaction — they were barely talking after he had 'brutally humiliated' her at Vadik's housewarming."

-- Narrator (Chapter 4)

Importance: Sergey imagines that dying in a ferry accident would be a relief because he would finally be free of his problems and the disappointment that he causes for other people. He thinks perhaps it might be the only thing that could happen to him at that point that would cause Vica to think kindly of him.

They had lived through the tumult of the 1990s in Russia and arrived here, in the land of stability and permanence and well-being, where if you played by the rules, a bright future was basically guaranteed. And here they were, with stability blown up just like that."

-- Narrator (Chapter 4)

Importance: Many Russian immigrants to America are disenchanted with the country because they had high hopes that life in America would be better than their lives in Russia. They had lived through Russia's troubles in the 90s and believed life would be better in America. Instead, they arrived in America and the country was attacked by terrorists soon afterward. The attacks destroyed the stability of the American economy as well as the day to day life in that country.

It seems like she likes everything about our apartment except for me in it,' Vadik complained to his friends."

-- Vadik (Chapter 5)

Importance: When Sejun tells Vadik that she plans to move to New York, she asks him to move to an apartment of her choosing in Williamsburg and furnishes the apartment to her tastes. When Sejun asks to tour the apartment with her iPad once it is furnished, she realizes how out of place Vadik looks beside her dainty furniture. Vadik comments that Sejun seems to love the apartment and furniture, but does not like the way the apartment looks with him in it.

It was probably Sergey's enthusiasm that annoyed Vadik the most. His ability to enjoy the same things that depressed Vadik proved that there was nothing wrong with Vadik's surroundings, but that, instead, there was something wrong with Vadik himself."

-- Narrator (Chapter 5)

Importance: Although Sergey would probably not describe himself as an optimistic person, Vadik indicates that it is the enthusiasm with which Sergey lives his life that irritates him. Because Vadik is not able to muster the same enthusiasm for life, he believes there must be something wrong with him.

Bob turned us down, because the idea was too morbid,' Vica said, 'just as I'd predicted. I'd always wanted to make it more optimistic and upbeat. I actually had some great



ideas. It was Sergey who wouldn't budge. So I'm going to try to rework it. It doesn't even need to be an actual app, just a service for people concerned with their online legacy. I was thinking of writing a business proposal and then maybe approaching some people at work. But it has to be more palatable. No more Fyodorov! What do you think?"

-- Vica (Chapter 5)

Importance: Vadik is shocked when he meets Vica at the salad bar at Whole Foods and realizes that she wants to talk to him about Sergey's app. He had thought that she wanted to beg him to date her again.

The cemetery, Nicolo-Arkhangelskoye, was situated in one of the newer developments at the far end of Moscow. It was Aunt Masha's choice, because Regina had refused to have anything to do with the funeral arrangements. She had been drugged out of her mind during the funeral — she could barely remember the ceremony or the place — so this would be like visiting her mother's grave for the very first time."

-- Narrator (Chapter 6)

Importance: Because Regina had been so impaired by her grief at the time of her mother's death, she was not part of planning the arrangements and did not remember anything about the funeral or burial. For this reason she felt like she was visiting her mother's grave for this first time when she visited there on the second anniversary of her mother's death.

She could imagine taking care of Nastya and even doing it well, but she couldn't imagine loving her."

-- Narrator (Chapter 6)

Importance: Regina believes she is incapable of adopting Nastya because she does not think that she will love the child like she deserves to be loved.

Sometimes, as she stared at yet another Victorian-lace layette or at an amazingly high-tech baby swing that had seven different modes of rocking, sang songs, did animal voices, and had shimmering lights, she couldn't help but think how different the whole experience of motherhood must be for women who could afford everything that they wanted for their children."

-- Narrator (Chapter 7)

Importance: Even when Eric was a baby, Vica was distressed about their lack of money. She wonders if parents who are more financially stable than she and Sergey are better parents. Vica's thoughts about parenthood is completely different from Regina's. Regina believes love is the most important thing in raising a child while Vica thinks the tangible things are important for raising children well.

It's funny, isn't it, how my docs devote so much effort to prolonging my life and none of it to preparing me for death. Which is coming no matter what! Couldn't they think of something to make dying just a little bit easier, a little bit less scary?"

-- Ethan Grail (Chapter 7)



Importance: The actor Ethan Grail says to Vica one day that he wishes that someone would come up with a way to make death less scary. This is ironic since Vica's husband is trying to develop an app that will allow people who are facing death find a way to communicate with their loved ones after they are gone.

A school like that opened the whole world for you. If you were bound to be miserable, you could have a whole variety of options, you could choose your own misery, not have one forced on you."

-- Narrator (Chapter 7)

Importance: Again with her belief that money is the answer to everything, Vica believes that getting Eric into a school for gifted and talented students will be the answer to all of his future problems. She believes that if he attends that type of school he will not suffer the struggles that she and Sergey suffer. Vica is very upset when she learns that Eric tricked her and did not even take the entrance exam.

The only app that could possibly make sense in the face of death would be one that would cancel your entire online presence. Cancel it! Erase all your messages, delete all your posts, get rid of every trace of you. Make sure nobody could revive you, or speak in your voice, or do any other shit. Now that's the app we need. Because that's the idea of death. Death brings an absolute end. And we all should just respect that."

-- Vadik (Chapter 8)

Importance: In an angry outburst against Sergey when he learns that Sergey has had an online affair with Sejun, Vadik tells Sergey exactly what he thinks about the app that Sergey is trying to develop.

This could be interpreted either as yet another unfortunate complication in his already terribly confusing life or as divine intervention — a cat savior, a redeemer cat, a knight cat on a white horse."

-- Narrator (Chapter 8)

Importance: When Sergey thinks that he has no choice but to go back to his ex-wife, he happens to overhear a man who needs a sitter for his elderly cat. For this reason the cat is like a savior for Sergey because it affords him a place to stay for an additional six months after he had to leave Vadik's apartment.

This was what people who had lost someone needed instead of stupid cemeteries. Virtual Suitcase. A little nook on the Web where you could store precious memorabilia: letters, photographs, videos, playlists, maps. Where you could visit and imagine the departed at their best."

-- Narrator (Chapter 9)

Importance: Instead of Virtual Grave, Regina thinks that a person missing a dead relative or friend should have a virtual suitcase where they can visit a person's favorite things and remember that person at his best.



Bob had told Regina that he liked to hire immigrants because they were both brave enough and naive enough to tackle impossible tasks.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 9)

Importance: Bob’s comment about his reasons for hiring immigrants is disrespectful to Regina, especially since she is an immigrant. He indicates immigrants are easy to manipulate into doing unsavory tasks at work because they are both brave and naive.

It wasn’t her inability to pass on her genetic material that was devastating; it was her inability to pass on who she was. Then Regina thought of Nastya playing with the buttons and felt a sharp-edged lump in her throat.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 9)

Importance: Regina realizes that it is not necessarily her genes she wants to pass on to another generation, but instead the knowledge of the things that she has done and experienced that she wants to pass onto the next generation. When Regina thinks of the way that Nastya played with the buttons, just like Regina did as a child, Regina realizes that Nastya is a person to whom she could pass information about herself.

He had come to this city in pursuit of happiness, and the city had in fact offered him happiness on his very first day here, but he had been too stupid and too blind to recognize it.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 11)

Importance: When Vadik meets up with Rachel at her company’s book reading, he realizes that she had loved him as well. He knows for sure at this point that he should have been less fearful and more willing to pursue their relationship.

But, Mom, Sergio’s app lets dead people talk!’ Teena said. / ‘I don’t think dead people are supposed to talk, honey,’ Helen replied.”

-- Teena/Helen (Chapter 12)

Importance: Teena and Helen’s conversation about Sergey’s app has the unintentional humor of a conversation between a teen and a parent. Helen points out to her daughter that the dead are not supposed to speak, indicating that she is a believer in the school of thought that once a person is dead, they are gone. Notice Teena’s reference to Sergey as Sergio, a sarcastic comment about by Teena concerning her difficulty in understanding Sergey’s Russian accent.

Our generation is the first one that has two lives: real and virtual. So far nobody knows what to do about our digital legacy after we die. Do we erase it? Do we allow it to remain active? Do we protect it from being overtaken? We know one thing: We can’t just let it fend for itself!”

-- James Kisco (Chapter 12)

Importance: After Sergey presents his Virtual Grave idea to James Kisco, Kisco shows Sergey how he could make his proposal better. His statement brings up an important



consideration for people in the age of social media. Because people have an online presence, they should be able to determine how to close their social presence once they die instead of just leaving that presence open for misuse by others.

You've got to hand it to Death though, he thought. Just as he and Kotov were planning to screw it, it went ahead and screwed them."

-- Narrator (Chapter 12)

Importance: Although Kotov had promised Sergey money to fund his app, Kotov is killed before the money is transferred. Sergey believes it is death's way of keeping Sergey from making his app live. Again, notice the way that death is personified in this quote.

Vadik thought that it was Regina he would miss the most. She was the only one who ever offered him true friendship. Vica and Sergey hadn't. They were so eager to pull him into that vile complicated mess of their marriage only to spew him back out when he wasn't needed anymore."

-- Narrator (The Last Chapter)

Importance: When Vadik thinks about the fact that he is leaving America and his friends, he believes he will miss Regina the most. She was supportive of him and never attempted to manipulate him, unlike Vica and Sergey.

Now that his virtual self was in the virtual grave, he was ready to go on living."

-- Narrator (The Last Chapter)

Importance: Vadik realizes that his social media presence allows him too much opportunity to experiment with his personality. He decides that he should collect himself into one, real personality and give up his virtual presence.