

as well: for the first time since spring he began to leave his apartment regularly; now he had a reason to look after himself; he drank less; his state of mind improved; eventually, a friend of his found him a modest job at the history institute where he had once been a student, and every morning he would go to his unglamorous job by metro and return in the evening. He still lived with his mother in the apartment downstairs from mine; but now he spent less time with me — during the day he worked, during the evenings he stayed with Olga...

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...and I am absolutely glad for him.

In fact, if you don't know about his enormous debts, you would say that Vadim is living a normal life. His salary is modest, but paid more or less regularly. He stays busy. It even seems that he has managed to put the letter Z out of his mind.

For now our conversations have become as rare as a rose, and somewhat less philosophical. But I know that this is exactly what he needs.

And besides, I still have my students; I have my vodka; I have all twelve chairs and one story of America...

Or is it one chair and twelve stories...?

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But according to Russian tradition it's a sin to leave an unfinished bottle of vodka. And so before moving on, Vadim and I walk dutifully back into the kitchen to finish it off.

In the other room, within my view, Landlady is trying to mend a disposable plastic sack whose handle has been ripped off by too many trips with potatoes. The bag is in full color and shows a barechested Russian woman with a flag wrapped around her shoulders. The flag, of course, is American, but does not cover her nipples, both of which stick out proudly — pink and red, respectively. As Landlady holds the bag, her wrinkled fingers course over the woman's breasts, bending, then folding them. Seeing this, I am reminded of a discussion that we started several weeks ago, but never finished:

Fate, I say to Vadim, does not exist.

What do you mean it doesn't exist?

It doesn't exist.