

painting which — except for Tanya — nobody had been allowed to see. The painting had been guarded like a grave, its frame covered in a large sheet and propped up against a wall; it looked both imposing and heavy, and in the small room its size portended a masterpiece.

Tanya, unlike the redhead, was female and fiery, pretty but fiercely passionate. The painting, she told me, had been commissioned by a soon-to-be-opened bank that needed thematic portraits for its lobby. The bank would be called East-West Bank and had promised to pay the redhead a handsome sum upon completion.

My friends had been married for six years when I met them. They lived on the fourth floor of a twelve-story building and although their apartment was small, their marriage seemed to be steadier than most.

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#170. My Russian is still weak and people speak faster than I can listen; with difficulty I can follow a conversation meant for me, but when Russians speak to Russians I understand nothing. To express my ideas, I convert English phrases word for word into Russian that is not really Russian. My friends listen patiently, and when I am finished they shake their heads and tell me that my problem is I know Russian from A to Z. For practice I begin reading Daniil Kharms in the original.



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One day Tanya invited me to dinner. It would be a *special occasion!* she had hinted by telephone, and so I brought an extra bottle of vodka. When I entered the apartment I noticed immediately: the painting had been hung, still covered in the sheet, on the entire breadth of one wall.

It was finished!

Tanya had sent her husband out to buy something, and while we waited for him she addressed me seriously:

As you can see, she said, my husband finished his painting.

That's great.

He wants to show it to you.

Okay

Yeah, but there's a problem. You see he wants you to see his painting but he doesn't want you to know that he wants you to see his painting.