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Tender portrayal of immigrants' uneasy existence

The Boston Globe



Ellen Litman grew up in Moscow and came to the United States in 1992. (IAN FRASER)

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December 23, 2007

The Last Chicken in America: A Novel in Stories

By Ellen Litman

Norton, 236 pp., \$23.95

In Ellen Litman's quietly assured debut story collection, the Russians have landed, but it could hardly be said that they feel at home. All the Russian-Jewish immigrants in the 12 linked stories live in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh, a community that is poignantly uninviting, both from within and without. As a result, families fracture; marriages crumble; capable, educated people slip into a torpor of disappointment. These are familiar themes in immigrant literature - generational divides, cultural clashes, the broken promise of assimilation. Litman, however, renders her characters' travails with a refreshing lack of sentimentality, coupled at times with wry humor.

Half the stories in "The Last Chicken in America" revolve around a young woman, Masha, and her father and mother, Tolik and Lina, and their narratives accrue with touching emotional impact. In the opening title story, Masha, who is just out of high school, and her parents are initially hopeful about their new lives, energized by the "delirious, noble dream" of America, its brightness and plentitude. They wander the aisles of the Giant Eagle, stunned by the "earnest pinks and yellows and blues in the packaging."

In Moscow, Tolik was an engineer, Lina a literature teacher. Like the other characters in the book, they were a part of the intelligentsia. By no means, though, do they miss Russia, which they remember as "a cheerless place, punctured and cheated. The metro trains at rush hour, the lines in front of empty stores, the mobs of tired people, their faces like stone and loam." On top of economic hardships, they had faced discrimination; being Jewish in Russia had "meant classmates calling you names. It meant a line in your passport, schools that would never accept you, jobs

you couldn't have. It meant leaflets and threats and a general on TV promising pogroms in May. It meant immigration."

Gamely they try to adjust to living in Pittsburgh. They take ESL classes and attend career-development workshops. They go to Burger King and figure out how to eat a sandwich: "You hold it with both hands, like this." Yet, despite their efforts, they languish in a state of underemployment. Masha's father never rises beyond a job as a laborer in a steelmaking facility, her mother as a nurse's aide in a retirement home. In between menial positions, they subsist on welfare and food stamps, battling bureaucratic Catch-22s. The best anyone in Squirrel Hill can hope for, it seems, is to study computers to secure a job at Mellon Bank.

This seems to be the fate that awaits Masha, who enrolls in the University of Pittsburgh as a computer programming major. She's a timid, sensitive woman with a fondness for literature. She knows she lacks Americans' "boldness and fluency, their flippant resistance to gloom," and in large part Litman fashions Masha's tales into coming-of-age stories as she tries to forge an identity and navigate through some difficult, disillusioning lessons.

Love, of course, factors in, as it does in several other stories. For these émigrés, passion and romance are elusive and, Litman suggests, perhaps a luxury when simply trying to survive. Natasha, in the story "In the Man-Free Zone," recalls her marriage being reduced to "driving to Sam's Club to buy paper towels in bulk and having nothing to say to each other." Tanya, in a loveless arranged union in "Dancers," chooses to remain on the course laid out for her, "all its stages charted in advance by a committee of relatives." Misha, in "The Trajectory of Frying Pans," finds fault with every woman he blind-dates, telling Nadya, his co-worker, who married an American in exchange for a green card, that you really have to be in love "before committing to the near-suicidal act of sharing your life."

Masha's own parents present far from a model relationship. They argue and bicker,

taking out their frustrations on their daughter. "Immigration distorts people," Masha concludes. She cannot rid herself of an "unsettling longing," a sense of dislocation shared by her mother, who begins to weep incessantly and is forced to go on antidepressants, and her father, who suffers from a persistent, gnawing fear, everything "dull and tasteless" to him.

Litman, who emigrated from Moscow in 1992, displays skillful restraint in portraying her characters' slow erasure. Helplessly they feel they are shrinking, becoming virtually invisible. The only avenue of escape seems to be to leave Pittsburgh, as Masha eventually does. In the collection's final story, she returns home for a visit. She lives in Boston now, a graduate student at Harvard, studying Slavic languages and literature, her first love. Her career and romantic prospects are decidedly dim, but she is happier than she has ever been, and although not much has changed in Squirrel Hill, her parents appear more whole, too. As is their custom, they wordlessly eat dinner in front of the TV, plates on their laps, "feeling warm and fortunate," like "a family should be." In this insightful first book, Litman tenderly conveys that, fleeting and illusory as it may be, these immigrants must accept the smallest consolation.

Don Lee teaches creative writing at Macalester College. His new novel, "Wrack and Ruin," will appear in April. ■

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