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The Moscow Times
ARTS & IDEAS

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Halfway Houses

Life in a Russian section of Pittsburgh is claustrophobic and liberating in Ellen Litman's short-story collection.

By Irina Reyn

Published: September 14, 2007

In Ellen Litman's touching debut story collection, "The Last Chicken in America," bewildered Russian-Jewish immigrants in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, feel their way around brand-new lives in an unfamiliar culture. Permanently severed from a country that thwarted a sense of Jewish belonging, they are now forced to navigate a new outsider position as immigrants. In bringing their stories to life, Litman tenderly balances pathos and humor, and the result is a deeply sympathetic look at a community struggling to understand its hyphenated identity.

Each story is told from the viewpoint of a different Russian immigrant, with a few characters making repeat appearances. Masha, the recent arrival at the center of the title story, does not feel entirely in tune with her parents, who argue over the price of frozen chicken; with her fellow female classmates in English-language class, who compete for available boys; or in the arms of a gangly Russian immigrant named Alick, who may or may not have a girlfriend in another city. Litman, who emigrated from Moscow in 1992, beautifully captures the numb disorientation of that pocket of time after immigration when survival may simply mean that "it's better to say nothing. It's better to be invisible." Masha's little family eventually rallies together, but one senses that the fissure between the generations will only deepen with time.

In the book's most ambitious story, "About Kamyshinskiy," Litman weaves between the lives of several households. We meet the widower Alyosha Kamyshinskiy, who lies to his daughters about the reason behind his frequent trips to Chicago; Kostya Kogan, who reluctantly leaves his wife for a belly-dancer from a Russian restaurant; and Seryozha Rodkin, who is struggling with his wife's cancer diagnosis. Seryozha can't help but internalize the unsettled lives of his two friends, Alyosha and Kostya, and wonder if America is to blame for their fates or if "it's not America. It's them. America just gave them space."



W. W. Norton Co.

The Last Chicken in America
By Ellen Litman
W.W. Norton & Co.
224 pages. \$23.95



Sating a Hungry Public

By John Freedman
With most of the city's theaters still

getting into the swing after the long summer break, two festivals offer a tantalizing program of new drama.

columns



Image

By Alastair Gee
Artworks by 350 contemporary Japanese artists go on display,

display,



Wanted

By Kevin O'Flynn
If you need a satellite dish, ask Oleg. Just don't ring Sky.



Salon

By Victor Sonkin
A new book by Svetozar Chernov describes every aspect in life in Sherlock Holmes' London.

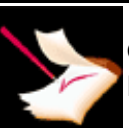


In the Spotlight

By Anna Malpas
The head of the Communist Party was found to have been

watching porn at a Ukrainian sanatorium.

in brief



Calendar of Events

Concerts Opera Dance Theater Gigs Exhibits

"They were tall, good-looking and careless," begins "Dancers," a story about a pair of ballet dancers who crash at the apartment of newlyweds Tanya and Petya. The dancers' glamorous presence only highlights the lack of excitement in Tanya's life, and their sexual passion reminds her that marrying sensible, unimaginative Petya (his nickname for her is starushka, or "old lady") was little more than an attempt to ward off solitude. Tanya begins to wonder if life with the male dancer would have been more vibrant. While the loveless marriage is well-trod literary territory, Litman manages to surprise us with the story's conclusion. Can immigrants afford to fantasize about excitement when the pleasures of routine were so hard-won?

Another story, "What Do You Dream Of, Cruiser Aurora?," highlights the challenges elderly immigrants face. Liberman is convinced to leave St. Petersburg for Pittsburgh to be near his daughter and grandson. What he finds is hardly the easy life -- the elderly line up for free lunches at the Jewish Community Center, go for checkups to the one Russian doctor in town, and eventually die slowly in a foreign country where their sole personal connections are harried children and recent acquaintances. As the formerly healthy Liberman grows weaker, it's hard not to wonder if it is his illness or the impossibility of assimilation that is killing him.



Ian Fraser

Litman, who left Russia in 1992, looks to writers such as Lyudmila Petrushevskaya for influence.

Litman's Russian immigrants are befuddled and meek, depressed but quietly rebellious. They take solace in the small American treats that feel overwhelmingly precious: Klondike bars, Chinese food, trips to the Monroeville Mall. Their various emotional and physical hungers are overwhelming and insatiable. But they are also pursued by the sensation of incompleteness, of living ghostly, alternate lives. "This is what's wrong with immigration," Masha thinks. "Those who could be your friends at home here become cautious competitors. Parents envy their children. Sisters become dangerous -- all that private information they can unleash at a strategically chosen moment. It's about surviving. Immigration distorts people.

We walk around distorted."

If no one character bursts vividly from the page, it is the city of Pittsburgh, and particularly the bustling neighborhood of Squirrel Hill, that takes center stage in the collection. This is where the small daily dramas of Russian immigration unfold: at the Jewish Community Center, the Giant Eagle supermarket, the Three Bears store. Litman's characters wander up and down Squirrel Hill's two major streets -- Murray and Forbes -- and rely on the bus for trips downtown to go to the theater or to classes and jobs at the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University. As a landscape, Pittsburgh is both claustrophobic and liberating -- a small town where one can easily bump into one's own parents on the street, but also a city that affords avenues to larger worlds: intellectual, cultural and, most of all, American.

While Litman points out the foibles of recent immigrants, her treatment of characters is affectionate and clear-eyed. Even Masha, the closest we get to a protagonist in this collection, is not let off the hook. When she returns home from her graduate program in Slavic literature and passes judgment on the community ("I know enough to avoid the Russians"), her father retorts: "Sure, you just study them in college." This little exchange speaks volumes about the complexity of Litman's undertaking -- hailing from Pittsburgh's Russian-Jewish community and now on the faculty of the University of Connecticut, Litman is careful to bring her former world to life in a knowing but empathetic way.

The pleasure in this collection lies in its pointillist moments of emotional observation. While Litman doesn't offer daring insights on the immigration theme and probably could have taken greater risks with characterization (too many of these characters showcase similarly diffident

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natures), her snapshots manage to capture feelings that are moving and true. In the final story, "Home," we leave all our characters at the wedding of two Russian immigrants, and if the couple's first dance is a metaphor for the future of this community, then the future looks ungainly -- tentative, lumbering, but ultimately resilient, flush with hope that a fractured identity will one day be whole.

Irina Reyn teaches fiction at the University of Pittsburgh. Her first novel, "What Happened to Anna K.," will be published next summer.

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