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Gary Shteyngart

LITTLE FAILURE

A memoir

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In Gary Shteyngart's three novels to date, exploring the absurdities of the post-Cold War era, the author has cultivated a clownish persona that has helped his generation to laugh at its cultural icons. Shteyngart has continued to do this with his public presence and his journalism, blogging about Google Glass for the *New Yorker* and sharing a kiss with James Franco in a trailer for *Little Failure*. In this memoir, however, he deftly scrutinizes his own comedy without abandoning it.

Here the author confronts past demons thoughtfully, even lovingly. These include the emotional trauma of immigrating to America as a child, the intergenerational struggles that this entails, and the complicated role that humour played as Shteyngart found his voice, first as an American and then as a writer. Shteyngart found his calling early. He wrote his first novel, *Lenin and his Magical Goose*, at the age of five for his grandmother, a Communist, who paid him in pieces of cheese. "I am saying, *Grandmother: Please love me*. It's a message, both desperate and common, that I will extend to her and to my parents and, later, to a bunch of yeshiva schoolchildren in Queens and, still later, to my several readers around the world."

At the age of seven Igor Shteyngart is taken from Leningrad to New York and renamed Gary. The bourgeois Jewish kids at the Solomon Schechter School of Queens have little in common with this thickly-accented child who hasn't seen *Star Wars*. They ridicule him, calling him Commie and Stinky Russian Bear. As his parents work to join America's middle class, Gary

works to fit in. He eventually succeeds by learning to laugh at himself. He adopts the persona of “Gary Gnu”, a children’s puppet, and entertains his fellow Solomon Schechter students with his *Gnuish Gnorah*, a parody of the *Torah*. Though he sheds his accent at fourteen, he struggles at high school and makes friends with the stoners: “I am a kind of joke, but the question is: which kind?” To his fellow Oberlin College students he is Scary Gary, able to consume more pot than anyone else. There is sadness to this constant performance, the sadness, as Shteyngart writes of a fellow high school clown, “of being unable to communicate with others *sans* lamp shade”. Around the time Shteyngart lands his first book contract, with the help of an endorsement from the novelist Chang-Rae Lee, he begins to take himself seriously. He relegates his clownishness to his fiction, and enters psychoanalysis.

Gary is an only child (“Most Russians do not breed well in captivity”), and his parents, products of another time and place, believe in both corporal punishment and insults (it is Shteyngart’s mother who coins the term “Failurchka”). Nevertheless, the author’s love for them is intense, at times melodramatic. “If you won’t speak to me, *it is better not to live!*” the young Gary shouts at his mother when she gives him the silent treatment. The hero of Shteyngart’s most recent novel, *Super Sad True Love Story*, shares this desperate attachment: “When I was young, I loved my parents so much it could have qualified as child abuse”. Whereas in Shteyngart’s novels the protagonists’ parents remain on the periphery, his own parents are central to the autobiography, which reaches its conclusion when the family travels back to Russia together in search of the sites of their painful memories. At his father’s request, Gary says the mourner’s kaddish over the mass soldiers’ grave where his grandfather died in 1943. He trips over the words as his father, who cannot read Hebrew but has come to care about Jewish tradition, bows at the appropriate moments.

There is a heartbreaking gap between the Jewish organizations that embraced Soviet Jews as long lost cousins, helping them to adjust to America and to relearn the *shema*, and the

immigrants themselves, reared as rational atheists, who often feel more Russian than Jewish. Shteyngart writes of the American “grassroots movement to free Soviet Jews from their polyester captivity” and the resulting trade deal between Presidents Carter and Brezhnev: “Russia gets the grain it needs to run; America gets the Jews it needs to run”. Gary’s parents dutifully keep their child in Hebrew school despite their horror at the simple maths sets he brings home. They have him circumcized at the age of eight, providing years of fodder for his analyst. They obscure the Russian classics on their bookshelf with a prayer book “enclosed in a plastic case and coated with fake silver and fake emeralds. It is written in a language none of us understands, but it is so *holy* that it blocks out the Pushkin that my parents have all but committed to memory”.

Shteyngart’s lost Pushkin harkens back to those Russian Jews who, at the turn of the twentieth century, chose the classics over Jewish texts. The Russian Jewish poet Osip Mandelstam described his family bookcase in Tsarist Saint Petersburg. Pushkin had pride of place, well above “the hooked calligraphy of the illegible books of Genesis, cast into the dust on the bottom bookshelf, below Goethe and Schiller.” But in America, Gary is reading neither Pushkin nor the prayer books and is instead watching American sitcoms. The son of two classically trained musicians, he pretends to dislike classical music. “What happened here”, he writes of the Solomon Schechter School, “this was nobody’s fault. We Soviet Jews were simply invited to the wrong party. And then we were too frightened to leave. Because we didn’t know who we were. In this book, I’m trying to say who we were.”

The story Shteyngart is telling isn’t new. An immigrant arrives in the US, learns the language, loses the old country, and finds his voice. Shteyngart is one of several Soviet-born North American writers, most of them immigrants from the Brezhnev era, who have adapted the story of immigration for an era of globalization and hybridity. David Bezmozgis, in his novel, *The Free World* (2011), depicts a family awaiting their Canadian entrance visas in Rome,

increasingly torn between Soviet ideology, Jewish identity, and a desire for better prospects in North America. In Anya Ulinich's novel *Petropolis* (2008), a mail-order bride of mixed (African, Jewish, and Russian) parentage becomes a token Jewish refugee thanks to her dark hair and surname, Goldberg. The novelists from Shteyngart's generation of Soviet Jewish immigration are collectively reclaiming the narrative of a Cold War exodus, and helping to construct a North American literary culture that is also Russian and Jewish. Shteyngart, whose parents reared him in the Russian language even as they became Reagan Republicans, betrays debts not only to Chang-Rae Lee, Philip Roth, and Vladimir Nabokov, but also to Nikolai Gogol and Vladimir Sorokin.

Ironic as the title may be, the book isn't wholly a success story, and this is what makes *Little Failure* so enjoyable. Adjusting to the banality of American childhood in the 1980s was a messy business. In *Little Failure* Gary Shteyngart uses his immigrant experience, together with some of the wisdom of Russia's cultural past, to capture a generation of middle-class Americans – a generation raised with *Three's Company* and Reebok pumps – and give us a beautifully rendered world of orange coloured cheese puffs and Cold War menace.