

Excerpted from THE FREE WORLD by David Bezmozgis. Copyright © 2011 by Nada Films Inc. Excerpted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers Ltd. All Rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.

International Acclaim for *Natasha and Other Stories*

WINNER

Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book
(Canada and Caribbean region)
The Martin and Beatrice Fischer Fiction Award, Jewish Book Awards
Reform Judaism Prize for Jewish Fiction
City of Toronto Book Award

FINALIST

Governor General's Award for Fiction
Los Angeles Times Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction
Guardian First Book Award
Borders Original Voices Award

A *New York Times* Notable Book
One of the 25 Best Books of the Year, *Los Angeles Times*

"Dazzling, hilarious, and hugely compassionate narratives [written with] freshness and precision. . . . Readers will find themselves laughing out loud, then gasping as Bezmozgis brings these fictions to the searing, startling, and perfectly pitched conclusions that remind us that, as Babel said, 'no iron can stab the heart so powerfully as a period put in exactly the right place.'" —Francine Prose, *People*

"[Possesses] an authority one usually finds only in more seasoned writers."
—*The New York Times Book Review*

"Exquisitely crafted stories. A first collection that reads like the work of a past master." —T. C. Boyle

"Bezmozgis's spare, confrontational tales take many unexpected turns, but their humanity and poignancy strike the deepest notes. . . . Irresistibly original." —*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

"Bezmozgis captures the insecurity and loneliness of recent immigrants while suggesting a child's guilty psychology with utter believability. These complex, evocative stories herald the arrival of a significant new voice." —*Publishers Weekly*

"A stunning first collection, characterized by a painful honesty and clarity of vision. . . . Like Gogol, Bezmozgis is acutely aware of his characters' shortcomings; [he] writes with compassion, quietly reminding us of the hidden beauty within human imperfection."
—Julie Orringer, *The Believer*

"Deft . . . humane but unblinkingly unsentimental. . . . Fine stories [that are] thick with memorable characters." —*Chicago Tribune*

"While the immigrant experience in the United States has been much explored, Bezmozgis's less familiar shores are refreshing. . . . The voice in *Natasha* is assured, inviting, and warm." —*The Economist*

"Here in Europe the talk this year has been all about the new writing coming out of Russia. David Bezmozgis shows that this energy extends to the Russian diaspora as well. In *Natasha*, Bezmozgis renders something of the clear-sighted melancholy associated with Chekhov or Babel into English prose and a North American context. With a maturity and control far beyond his years, Mr. Bezmozgis has produced a captivating and impressive debut. The title story itself is one I will never forget."
—Jeffrey Eugenides, author of *The Virgin Suicides* and *Middlesex*

"[Bezmozgis's] highly resonant and original stories assume the shape of Russian classics but are drawn from his life growing up as a very young Latvian immigrant in Toronto." —*The Mirror* (Montreal)

"The stories are idiosyncratic, emotionally rich, and, for all their ethnic flavour, accessible." —*The Atlantic*

"All of these spare, expertly crafted, memorably moving tales . . . contain truths of which it is exhilarating to be reminded." —*ELLE*

"Passionately full of life. . . . Ebullient and warmly comic."
—*London Review of Books*

“Bezmozgis . . . is a skillful storyteller, packing his brief tales with plot twists, quick revelations, amusing characters, all rendered in near-flawless prose. . . . The collection has several moments of intuitive brilliance, particularly at the stories’ traditional epiphany-style endings. Through the music of language and the language of symbol, Bezmozgis drives home the mystery and complexity of the most mundane-seeming events.” —*Quill & Quire*

“[The] dynamic between American Jews and their greenhorn Russian counterparts is portrayed in a creepy and painfully funny way by David Bezmozgis in ‘Roman Berman, Massage Therapist,’ one of the best pieces in *Natasha and Other Stories*. . . . In a wonderfully dry, understated, well-paced manner that evokes the style of the late New York Russian-language fiction writer Sergei Dovlatov, Bezmozgis captures [in this story] what is, believe it or not, a type-scene of the Soviet Jewish immigrant experience. Simple detail and precise timing let such scenes resonate.” —*Boston Review*

“A 30-year-old Canadian writer makes a commanding debut with an openhearted book that combines melancholy and hope. Its seven stories offer a portrait of a family of Latvian Jews just after they emigrate to Toronto in 1979. Told from the perspective of the Bermans’ only child, Mark, this is a piercingly honest account of what that family gains and loses through assimilation. The title story, in which 16-year-old Mark is obliged to supervise his troubled Russian step-cousin, is a knockout.” —*The Baltimore Sun*

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DAVID BEZMOZGIS



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to Hannah

*and in memory of
Mendel Bezmozgis (1935–2006)
Jakov Milner (1915–2006)*

*Now the Lord said unto Abram: "Get thee out
of thy country, and from thy kindred,
and from thy father's house, unto the land that
I will show thee." —Genesis 12:1*

JULY

1

Alec Krasnansky stood on the platform of Vienna's Western Terminal while, all around him, the representatives of Soviet Jewry—from Tallinn to Tashkent—roiled, snarled, and elbowed to deposit their belongings onto the waiting train. His own family roiled among them: his parents, his wife, his nephews, his sister-in-law, and particularly his brother, Karl, worked furiously with the suitcases and duffel bags. He should have been helping them but his attention was drawn farther down the platform by two pretty tourists. One was a brunette, Mediterranean and voluptuous; the other petite and blond—in combination they attested, as though by design, to the scope of the world's beauty and plenitude. Both girls were barefoot, their leather sandals arranged in tidy pairs beside them. Alec traced a line of smooth, tanned skin from heel to calf to thigh, interrupted ultimately by the frayed edge of cutoff blue jeans. Above the cutoff jeans the girls wore thin sleeveless shirts. They sat on their backpacks and leaned casually against each other. Their faces were lovely and vacant. They seemed beyond train schedules and obligations. People sped past them, the Russian circus performed its ludicrous act several meters away, but they paid no attention. Alec assumed they were Americans. He guessed they were in

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their early twenties. He was twenty-six, but he could pass for younger. In school and university he had run track and had retained a trim runner's build. He also had his father's dark, wavy hair. From the time Alec was a boy he had been aware of his effect on women. In his presence, they often became exaggerated versions of themselves. The maternal ones became more maternal, the crude ones became cruder, the shy ones shyer. They wanted only that he not make them feel foolish and were grateful when he did not. In his experience, much of what was good in life could be traced to a woman's gratitude.

Looking at the two girls, Alec had to resist the urge to approach them. It could be the simplest thing in the world. He had studied English. He needed only to walk over and say, Hello, are you Americans? And they needed only to respond, Yes.

—Where in America do you live?

—Chicago. And where are you from?

—Riga, Latvia. The Soviet Union.

—How interesting. We have never met anyone from the Soviet Union before. Where are you traveling to?

—Chicago.

—No. Is this true?

—Yes, it is true. I am traveling to Chicago.

—Will this be your first time in Chicago?

—Yes, it will be my first time in Chicago. Can you tell me about Chicago?

—Yes, we can tell you about it. Please sit down with us. We will tell you everything about Chicago.

—Thank you.

—You are welcome.

Alec felt Karl's hand on his shoulder.

—What's the matter with you?

—Nothing.

—We have seven minutes to finish loading everything onto the train.

He followed Karl back to where their parents were arranging the

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suitcases so that Karl and Alec could continue forcing them through the window of the compartment. Near them, an elderly couple sat dejectedly on their bags. Others worked around them, avoiding not only helping them but also looking them in the face. Old people sitting piteously on luggage had become a familiar spectacle.

—I see them, Karl said. Move your ass and if there's time we'll help them.

Alec bent into the remaining pile of suitcases and duffel bags on the platform. Each seemed heavier than the last. For six adults they had twenty articles of luggage crammed with goods destined for the bazaars of Rome: linens, toys, samovars, ballet shoes, nesting dolls, leather Latvian handicrafts, nylon stockings, lacquer boxes, pocket-knives, camera equipment, picture books, and opera glasses. One particularly heavy suitcase held Alec's big commercial investment, dozens of symphonic records.

First hefting the bags onto his shoulder and then sliding them along the outside of the train, Alec managed to pass them up to the compartment and into the arms of Polina and Rosa, his and Karl's wives.

Karl turned to the old couple.

—All right, citizens, can we offer you a hand?

The old man rose from his suitcase, stood erect, and answered with the formality of a Party official or university lecturer.

—We would be very obliged to you. If you will allow, my wife has with her a box of chocolates.

—It's not necessary.

—Not even a little something for the children?

Karl's two boys had poked their heads out the compartment window.

—Do as you like. But they're like animals at the zoo. I suggest you mind your fingers.

Alec and Karl shouldered the old people's suitcases and passed them into their compartment. Alec noticed the way the old man looked at Polina.

—This is your wife?

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—Yes.

—A true Russian beauty.

—I appreciate the compliment. Though she might disagree. Emigration is not exactly cosmetic.

—Absolutely false. The Russian woman blossoms under toil. The Russian man can drink and fight, but our former country was built on the back of the Russian woman.

—What country wasn't?

—That may be so, but I don't know about other countries. I was a Soviet citizen. To my generation this meant something. We sacrificed our youth, our most productive years, our faith. And in the end they robbed us of everything. This is why it does my heart proud to see your wife. Every Jew should have taken with him a Russian bride. If only to deny them to the alcoholics. I'm an old man, but if the law had allowed, I would have taken ten wives myself. Real Russian women. Because that country couldn't survive five minutes without them.

The old man's wife, the incontrovertible product of shtetl breeding, listened to her husband's speech with spousal indifference. There was nothing, her expression declared, that she hadn't heard him say a hundred times.

—To women, Alec said. When we get to Rome we should drink to it.

Alec helped the old couple onto the car and scrambled up as it began to edge forward. He squeezed past people in the narrow passageway and found his family crammed in with their belongings. Perched on a pile of duffel bags, his father frowned in Alec's direction.

—What were you talking about with that old rooster?

—The greatness of the Russian woman.

—Your favorite subject. You almost missed the train.

Samuil Krasnansky turned his head and considered their circumstances.

—The compartments are half the size.

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This was true, Alec thought. Say what you want about the Soviet Union, but the sleeping compartments were bigger.

—You want to go back because of the bigger compartments? Karl asked.

—What do you care about what I want? Samuil said.

Samuil Krasnansky said nothing else between Vienna and Rome. He sat in silence beside his wife and eventually fell asleep.