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Out of the Overcoat

By Stephen Metcalf

THE NAMESAKE

By Jhumpa Lahiri.

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Houghton Mifflin Company. \$24.

"ON almost every page of his writing," the critic Edward Thomas once complained about Walter Pater, "words are to be seen sticking out, like the raisins that will get burned on an ill-made cake." Such is the state of literary prose these days: it is often so fine, so self-conscious, so unappeasably literary that it is awful, a cake baked almost exclusively from burned raisins. But an antidote for all these stinky, overpriced Big Fiction doorstops quietly appeared in 1999, the short-story collection "Interpreter of Maladies," by a young writer named Jhumpa Lahiri. Written in an elegant hush -- even upon rereading, there isn't a single burned raisin in the mix -- Lahiri's stories traced out the lives of various Bengali-Americans suffering through various stages of lovelorn distress.

Lahiri herself was born in London, raised in America and is of Indian descent. With a background similar in outline to that of Zadie Smith, she nonetheless arrived at an entirely different imaginative enterprise. She renounced the writerly flourish, never once played the exotic and -- perhaps most astonishing -- scaled her characters to actual human existence. (In a typical Lahiri story, we find ourselves milling in and around Harvard Square. Her eye is keenest for that pleasant, humdrum drift of academic life when one is not an eminence.) Self-effacing as it was, "Interpreter of Maladies" became a word-of-mouth phenomenon and eventually won a Pulitzer Prize. It was that rare success: remarkable for being so thoroughly deserved.

Just where did that melancholy poise come from? "Read all the Russians," Ashoke Ganguli's grandfather tells him in Lahiri's new novel, "The Namesake," "and then reread them. They will never fail you." On his way to visit his grandfather in Jamshedpur, Ashoke is dutifully rereading his favorite story, Nikolai Gogol's "Overcoat," when his train derails. Lying amid the wreckage, almost passed over for dead and clutching the surviving pages of his book, Ashoke manages to wave meekly. As a result, he is rescued. And as a result, he lives, he marries, he moves to America and has a son. Faced with hospital red tape -- the infant cannot be released without a proper birth certificate -- Ashoke is forced to name his child before he has received instructions from his grandmother, who must be consulted on this vital decision. At a loss for words, Ashoke mutters "Gogol."

How like Lahiri to have a name passed down along such a peculiar and delicate chain of accident. Significant as it is for the reader, "Gogol" only fills the young American Ganguli with feelings of dissonance and shame. Like Stephen Dedalus, who stared at his signature on the flyleaf of his geography book, most of us slip through childhood's first existential porthole and find our own names profoundly alien. But the feeling infiltrates young Gogol's entire life.

When a high school English teacher assigns "The Overcoat" as homework, our Gogol approaches the class with a "growing dread and a feeling of slight nausea." Upon discovering that his namesake was a severe depressive -- a "queer and sickly creature," as Turgenev once described him -- who slowly starved himself to death, Gogol feels freshly betrayed by his parents. If you suspect that all this involves more than its share of juvenile caprice, so does his father. As Lahiri tells us, Gogol's father "had a point; the only person who didn't take Gogol seriously, the only person who tormented him, the only person chronically aware of and afflicted by the embarrassment of his name, the only person who constantly questioned it and wished it were otherwise, was Gogol."

Like its hero, "The Namesake" is perhaps a little overawed by the power of names. As he enters adolescence, Gogol, along with his friends -- Colin and Jason and Marc -- like to "listen to records together, to Dylan and Clapton and the Who, and read Nietzsche in their spare time." Dylan, Clapton, the Who -- yep, right, check, dead on. But these, the staple names of American male puberty, color the episodes of Gogol's high school years more than Colin and Jason and Marc. (Oh, for one half-mumbled snotty aside or flurry of acid repartee that might bring them alive as actual teenagers.)

Later, as a New York architect, Gogol will fall in with a circle of friends headed up by a couple named Donald and Astrid.

These people haven't been named, we think, so much as branded -- he's supposed to sound like the son of a do-right corporate preppy, she the daughter of a wannabe Beatle girlfriend. Guggenheim-leeching artistes, they form -- together with their baby, Esme -- a little bobo ensemble we are plainly meant to detest, down to their Florentine sheets and their stainless steel stockpots. Lahiri, however, is not a wit, and her tonal commitment to that trademark hush never wavers. Absent proper kinship ties, she seems to be saying, this is how Americans feel most at home: among their things. Refined as it may be, consumerism has touched these characters to the core; they merit nothing better than such status descriptors.

As Gogol moves into young adulthood, he becomes that classic case: the charmingly spazzy, high-achieving mild depressive who doesn't yet comprehend how alluring he is to women. It is women -- of varying caliber, but pistols one and all -- who take him by the lapels, shake him awake to life's charms and inject the chronology of his life with some zest. We get Moushumi, who announces, at 13, "I detest American television," before returning to her "well-thumbed paperback copy of 'Pride and Prejudice' "; Kim, who, reeking of nicotine and college, first inspires Gogol to re-dub himself Nikhil; and the elegant and sly Maxine Ratliff, whose parents -- old-money culture snobs who have mastered the art of inconspicuous conspicuous consumption -- slowly take over Gogol's life. Here Lahiri's narrative, as it portrays the Ratliffs' stupefying commitment to the good life, takes on a dash of Edith Wharton. How they love their Antonioni double features at the Film Forum and, in New Hampshire, their Adirondack chairs and farmstand corn. They induce in the reader, and in Gogol himself, a pleasant trance, through which aversion heroically fights its way to the surface.

Tantalizing as life in the Ratliffs' townhouse is, Gogol is committed to wafting -- out of Maxine's life and into a marriage (with Moushumi, his Jane Austen-reading childhood friend), ending up finally as an oblivious cuckold. It is not a good sign that when Gogol exits his life story for the entire duration of his wife's love affair we hardly miss him. The reader has begun to suspect that, graceful and spare as Lahiri's prose is, the simply put does not always equal the deeply felt. How much steely equipoise, after all, can one novel stand? Lahiri is a supremely gifted writer, but at moments in "The Namesake" it feels as though we've descended from the great Russians to Nick Adams to the PowerPoint voice-over. "She orders a salad and a bouillabaisse and a bottle of Sancerre," goes the description of one of Gogol's dates. "He orders the cassoulet. She doesn't speak French to the waiter, who is French himself, but the way she pronounces the items on the menu makes it clear that she is fluent. It impresses him."

Its incorrigible mildness and its ungilded lilies aside, Lahiri's novel is unfailingly lovely in its treatment of Gogol's relationship with his father. This is the classic American parent-child bond -- snakebit, oblique, half-mumbled -- and in Lahiri's rendering, it touches on quiet perfection. As a young boy at the beach, Gogol wanders off with Ashoke one day in search of a lighthouse. (The echo back to Virginia Woolf is surely intentional.) They walk and walk, "past rusted boat frames, fish spines as thick as pipes attached to yellow skulls, a dead gull whose feathery white breast was freshly stained with blood." Finally they reach the lighthouse, only to discover that they have forgotten their camera. "Will you remember this day, Gogol?" his father asks. "How long do I have to remember it?" Gogol asks in return. "Try to remember it always," his father replies, leading him back across the breakwater. "Remember that you and I made this journey, that we went together to a place where there was nowhere left to go."

It's as if Lahiri were saying: in America, where so little is suitably customary or ceremonious, there might at least be this. Memory, unaided by even a photograph, lays a claim on us that is so much more exacting for being so perishable. This is my novel, such as it is, Lahiri is also saying: in a world of eroding kinship, the story of one modest, haphazard stay against oblivion, summed up best, of course, by the name Gogol.

Drawing (Drawing by Boris Kulikov)