

VERA, or FAITH



*New York Times
bestselling author of
Our Country Friends*

GARY
SHTEYNGART

By Gary Shteyngart

VERA, OR FAITH

OUR COUNTRY FRIENDS

LAKE SUCCESS

LITTLE FAILURE

SUPER SAD TRUE LOVE STORY

ABSURDISTAN

THE RUSSIAN DEBUTANTE'S HANDBOOK

Vera, or Faith

A Novel

Gary
Shteyngart



Random House
New York

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In memory of Paul La Farge and Rebecca Godfrey

Part One



The First Day

I.

She Had to Hold the Family Together

School started and it was awful. “Predictably awful,” as Anne Mom would say. “A self-fulfilling prophecy” she might add of Vera’s disdain for school. Anne Mom was always predicting things in the near future. “I’m the Nostradamus of two weeks from now,” she told Vera over and over again and Vera knew the correct social response was to laugh because Anne Mom was trying to be as witty as Daddy, though when Vera became a teenager in three years she could roll her eyes, because she had seen it done on television and sometimes on the devices Anne Mom didn’t allow her.

She added “Nostradamus” to her *Things I Still Need to Know Diary*.

The hallways of the school were a faded red and pink and orange and there were motivational posters and funny sayings from the Peanuts gang and dusty green floors and mesh over the windows looking onto the rump of another sad uptown building. Daddy compared the color scheme to an “ice-cream shop in hell” and Anne Mom had yelled at him not to use that language (“You know she’s going to imitate you, she *worships* you!”) or to talk the school down. The school was a point of pride for Daddy because you had to take a test when you were only four years old to get in, and you needed to score “in the ninety-ninth percentile,” although Vera had overheard that Dylan had been admitted because they wanted to keep siblings together and she thought this contrast between their intelligence to be “exquisite” and “delectable,” two words Anne Mom wanted her to drop if she were to make any friends at her school.

“Both my kids go to a public school,” Daddy had once declared on television with what Anne Mom called a “raffish” smile while some other men in suits and ties were yelling at him about his “politics,” although he had failed to mention that it was a school for superbright kids, and that made her sad. There were a lot of “statuses” in the world and each year she was becoming aware of more of them. For example, it also made her sad when Daddy sat apart from them on planes because he always had a ticket in “Business Class” and just this summer when they had flown to Korea and Japan, where Daddy had to deliver some speeches, she had asked him “Why can’t you fly with us in Family Class?” and he said “Awwww, poor Doxie” (despite being short, she was shaped lean and tubular like a dachshund), then bent down and grizzled her forehead with his stubble and it hurt the whole ride back and she didn’t see “a lick” (Anne Mom phrasing) of him for fourteen hours straight—not that she saw that much of him at home.



So, yes, school was predictably awful and a lot of it was dumb. Vera looked through the mesh on the windows at the Black people across the block who patronized a fish store. Sometimes they would look back at her and sometimes they would smile, maybe remembering how boring fifth grade had been. There was a lot of “advanced” work, but Vera breezed through it; mostly it was ordering things in rows and columns and sometimes demonstrating “comprehension.” This year, because of the conventions, there was going to be a whole module on the Constitution and just how it might be amended.

All the students sat dutifully in their red checkered uniforms (the girls had to wear bow ties and skirts, the boys sweaters and ties) and raised their hands whether they knew an answer or not because participation was forty percent of their grade. There was only one troublemaker in the class, Stephen, one of the Moncler Twins (Anne Mom had named them thus

because of the expensive winter jackets they wore), and he probably thought he could get away with it because he was Five-Three, same as Dylan and Anne Mom, and both of the twins' parents were "super white" and could trace their heritage to the Revolutionary War. At least half the kids in her school were Asian or half Asian like Vera was, at least genetically because of her mom mom, who had been Daddy's girlfriend before he met Anne Mom. Mom Mom had abandoned her and Daddy, maybe because she didn't love Vera on account of that she had been a "tough baby" who couldn't go to sleep unless you drove her around the block in a car, and back then Daddy could barely afford the gas.



It was said by both her pediatrician and her psychologist that Vera, while presenting as a very bright ten-year-old, suffered from intense anxiety, in the same way the rest of her family did except for Dylan, whose blond curls were constantly in motion as he made short work of the school's jungle gym and wrestled on the hot tarmac with his little buddies. School made her anxious, especially because of what Anne Mom called the "social component," but she had been worried the entire summer as well.

Her parents fought every day on a variety of subjects, but especially about how she and Dylan were to be raised. Anne Mom wanted a lot of structure, but Daddy said childhood "should just happen," like it had happened to him, and that until you went to grad school "nothing really mattered," it was all just a "neoliberal frog-march of the damned." (Daddy supplied a lot of the words for her *Things I Still Need to Know Diary*.) Once, she even overheard him crying in "Daddy's Little Pool" as she used to call the hot tub at their summer house when she was much younger and more innocent, and she begged Anne Mom to please not fight with him anymore that day. But Anne Mom told her that Daddy was crying because someone important—the "Rhodesian Billionaire" who wanted to buy his magazine and

thus make them “more comfortable”—had been especially mean to him on social media and that he felt bullied. “If he’s being bullied he should talk to someone,” Vera told Anne Mom, but Daddy kept crying softly like one of the wounded wild animals in the forest behind the hot tub and nothing could be done about it until dinner and time for his first glass of what she used to call “Daddy’s mar-tiny,” or if he went straight to wine, “Daddy’s special juice.”

She tried to “dialogue” with Dylan about their family situation, but he would just go on playing with his robot dinos on the porch while their summer house shuddered with their parents’ elegant and vicious turns of phrase. “Don’t you care if they get divorced?” she would whisper to Dylan, even though no one was in earshot, because the words felt so sad and shameful to her. Her love for Anne Mom was measured, but to have two moms leave her (surely, she would take Dylan with her in the split) would mean she was beyond loving, beyond Family Class. “I dunn ah”—Dylan would shrug and then punch her in the elbow where it hurt the most. “Fine, but don’t come to me when we’re homeless,” Vera told him.

Becoming homeless worried Vera. She read the billboards at the bus shelters very earnestly. One told her that sixty-three percent of the occupants of homeless shelters in the city were members of families, probably failed families like her own would become if she were unable to hold her parents together, or if her daddy didn’t manage to sell the troubled magazine he edited to the Rhodesian Billionaire who would make them comfortable and unafraid. She had once quizzed her dad on the subject of their finances, and he had said, “Well, we’re not poor, but we’re not superrich like half the jerks in this city.”

“Then what are we exactly?” Vera had asked. She liked to be exact.

“We’re what’s called merely rich,” Daddy explained, “but our position is very precarious especially with how much I’ve staked on this goddamn magazine. We could lose everything, and your mother’s trust just pays for the incidentals. Unless we moved to a small metro in the sticks. And then I’d like to see your mom eat a plate of General Tso’s chicken or whatever.”

So, it was true, she thought. They were all going to end up in a homeless shelter. Especially if Daddy's magazine remained unsold "and/or" Daddy and Anne Mom got divorced.

"Ergo," another diary word, she had to hold them together.

Ergo, the Lists.



She composed the first List during math, which was such an easy subject she could do it seemingly with just her eyes and hands, her brain concentrating on more important tasks. She had lost so many points over the years for not showing her work, which made Anne Mom sigh, because the "means are every bit as important as the ends" or something "Protestant" like that, as Daddy would say. The only math that truly stimulated her was the module on imaginary numbers last year, because she found the concept so beautiful. Here and not here, like the feathery touch of Daddy's hand when he petted her and not Dylan, to whose pallor he gravitated more and more as her brother's raffish personality filled out. Miss Campari, the math teacher, had what Anne Mom would call a "pendulous bosom," something she said with enough laughter to shake her own smaller one. "Mommy's humor is still stranded somewhere in the twentieth century," Daddy would say over a pendulous glass of his "special juice." She couldn't help but stare at it as it moved around the room, past all those bow-tied girls and boys, so focused and obedient and bored, except Moncler Stephen, who would yawn dramatically and make everyone else laugh and shrug off his reprimand with a shake of his beautiful hair.

The first List would be addressed to Anne Mom, so she had to write it in her best handwriting, which was usually clustered and unreadable like a boy's. "The only way you and Dylan are at all alike," Anne had said of her scribbles, which made her treasure her "crappy" (bad word) penmanship and want to improve it all at once.

*Ten Great Things About Daddy and Why You Should Stay Together
with Him*

1. He's an intellectual.
2. Is on TV sometimes.
3. Has been long-listed for many prizes in the United Kingdom (aka England after Scotland and the rest of them left).
4. Edits a magazine for smarties.
5. Is funny most of the time.
6. Looks raffish in his tuxedo when he has to go to a benefit.
7. Lets us tag along on many delectable fascinating trips.
8. Survived his parents and immigration, so can survive anything.
9. Speaks two languages.
10. His long struggle for full recognition is about to be over.

She looked over the List. It was pretty good and it mostly used Anne Mom's nicest words about Daddy. Anne Mom had often said that instead of talking to girls her age using her own thoughts she should listen to them and try to repeat the things that most excited them. The technique was called "mirroring" and even spies used it! Yes, it was a great List and it really captured the "point of Daddy."

Now she had to embark upon a far-greater challenge.

Ten Great Things About Mom and Why You Should Stay with Her

1. Maintains her beauty.
2. Has a "non-waist."
3. Has a "little trust."
4. Went to Brown for graduate school.
5. Makes a lot of delectable "WASP lunches" for all of us.
6. Is Five-Three which will keep us safe.

That was all she could think of, so she crossed out the “Ten” in “Ten Great Things About Mom” and made it “Six.” Six was enough and an even number. According to Anne Mom, there was no point in being odd “all the time.”

She felt Miss Campari’s bosom approach her from behind and sucked in her breath, preparing to be smart so she could “advance in the world.” Often when she felt like she couldn’t breathe, her hand found the center of the clip-on bow tie and she pulled on it as if it were the string of a windup toy.

The bell rang.

2.

She Had to Survive Recess

She always looked forward to recess until it started. She just wanted to move her body. She went into a bathroom stall and shook out her hands. Over and over, she shook them out, until they were a complete blur and her mind went elsewhere, to the much-maligned Korean province of Jeolla where Mom Mom was from and which they didn't visit on their trip to Korea; to the place where "warm liquid flows into your body from the top of your head until it fills you up," as Anne Mom's meditation app had taught her; to the slurred nonabsence of Daddy after a few mar-tinys as his hand magically found its way around Ann Mom's non-waist and it seemed like the marriage would hold through the week and maybe they would all be okay. Shaking out her hands was the thing Anne Mom hated the most and even Daddy raised one of his oversize eyebrows when she did it. "Stop flapping," Anne Mom would say. "You're annoying everyone." "I'm not *flapping*, I'm not a seal," Vera would say. "I'm shaking out my excess energy." But she couldn't shake it out forever and after a few minutes her shoulders hurt so she went out onto the playground with her book.

The sunlight was brutal and the hairs on her tired arms—"your daddy's genetic gift"—were soon coated with a shimmer of liquid. It was, as Daddy liked to say, "perfect nine-eleven weather," but she didn't think it perfect at all. There were only three benches and the girls usually took all of them while the boys ran around in mad circles colliding with one another and screaming in pain, which sometimes led to laughter. One of the nice girls, Yumi from Japan, always saved a tiny space on the edge of a bench for Vera

to sit with her book, but then she would turn her back to her to talk to the Populars. They were talking loudly about their summers and all the different camps they had been sent to, algebra camp, violin camp, Cantonese camp. Sometimes they'd watch the boys, especially Moncler Stephen and her brother, Dylan, who were taking turns slapping each other by the jungle gym, even though they were two grades apart. "They're so stupid," the girls would say, but then for some reason keep staring at Stephen. Maybe Vera knew the reason, because even though she hated Stephen, hated the disorder he brought to class (she just wanted to get through the work and go home), she stared at him, too.

She thought of putting down her book on chess strategies and talking to the girls about her own summer, which, frankly, had been so much more interesting than violin camp. But what could she say? How to start the conversation? Anne Mom had always prodded her to make a friend of Yumi, whose parents were diplomats from Japan and according to Daddy "super cultured." Now that she had been to Japan, maybe she could say something. *We were on the Shinkansen, which is the bullet train, and I got super scared because the screen said there was a typhoon that was going to hit Okinawa and we were headed in that direction, to Kyoto to see the five temples.* But she could already hear Anne Mom's critique. *You don't have to tell her the Shinkansen is the bullet train. She's from Japan. She knows. Think of your audience. And why start with how you were scared. Mention something incredible you saw or a fabulous meal you had.*

Think of your audience. That was something Daddy did the best and he had so many friends around the world and now he was running an old magazine people had completely forgotten about until Daddy took it over (although it was very hard to get them to pay to read it), and now the Rhodesian Billionaire was "angling" to buy it. When he got the job, they had to throw out all the tote bags with the names of other magazines especially the one for the "magazine of record" as Daddy dismissed it, the one she saw all over town.

Shinkansen, five temples, “Damn [bad word], this soba is freaking [probably bad word] amazing,” no typhoon, no typhoon. But she couldn’t say anything; sweet Yumi started laughing hard about something, and now it was too late to “butt in.” She could feel the warmth of Yumi’s shuddering back against her shoulder, against the tiny hairs of her arm. How lucky Yumi’s little sister was to have someone like her to look up to. “Someone will love you in college,” Anne Mom had once told her. “You’ll have friends and maybe even a boyfriend or a girlfriend.” Yes, Vera had said, but what about now? Not the boyfriend or girlfriend part, but a friend.

She took *The Chess Player’s Bible* and walked around the jungle gym to witness the simplicity of her brother. Why did she have to talk to girls instead of running after them or trying to tackle them to the ground? She could play with Dylan—he would always let her into his throbbing social life if only to get a chance to pinch or slap her—but then she would be playing with her younger brother, which would probably be “pathetic,” a word Daddy used, according to Anne Mom, with “particular relish,” which made Vera think of the delicious hot dog they had eaten in Tokyo made out of fried potatoes and soy skins. Maybe that’s how she could have started a conversation with Yumi! *Think of your audience.*

But it was too late, as she was behind the jungle gym fence separating the school from the neighborhood in which it found itself, and her arms were shaking, shaking, shaking, not flapping, nothing like a seal, she just wanted to let the energy out, she just wanted the day to be over, and to see the two friends she really had, Aunt Cecile, who was not really her aunt but who would be over for dinner—which meant her parents would have to be on their best behavior—and Kaspie the Chess Computer with whom she shared her room. She saw some Black church ladies with their tall lavender hats standing on the corner beyond the fence passing out their “literature,” though Daddy had a thick opinion of what constituted the same. When they went to someone’s house she and Dylan made a game of seeing if they had a copy of an enormous book called *The Power Broker* and whether or not its