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REVIEW: SHORT STORIES

A sardonic eye on life and love

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN

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>>> The Reasons I Won't Be Coming

Elliot Perlman

Riverhead / 288 pages

"People seldom generally have a clear understanding of probate."

It's not the most graceful sentence ever to launch a narrative, but, as the first line of the title story of novelist Elliot Perlman's short story collection *The Reasons I Won't Be Coming*, it's emblematic of the voice in which the author specializes.

Perlman - who authored last year's much-lauded *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and an earlier novel, *Three Dollars* - likes his narrators to be specialists, if only on the subject of themselves - letting the reader fill in the gaps, unknowns and misprisions until the sheer accumulation of facts reveals the story and renders his narrators reliable, like it or not.

Like many writers, Perlman chooses the short form as a vehicle for mordant observations about life and love rather than a frame upon which to hang the scaffolding of an intricate plot. At its best, this gives the author the opportunity to riff very cleverly on the hard truths of love.

The narrator of "Good Morning, Again," in bed with one woman while dreaming about another, drops this depressing pearl about the rules of first-time coitus: "You have to feign at least a little surprise at being in this position with someone who you've never known this way before. On the other hand, you have to behave as if you're under the

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influence of the other person's body as though this person was the apotheosis of everyone you had ever lusted after."

In "Your Niece's Speech Night," a man ends a veritable ode to the mysteries of his girlfriend's smile with his own elusive bugbear, one far less dreamy but equally plaintive: "These days I don't even know if I'm meant to be in sales or marketing."

But at its worst, Perlman's restraint leaves us in a kind of limbo. "Your Niece's Speech Night" nearly turns down the dark road of black-hearted mystery, but skids to a stop before driving the narrator firmly off the cliff. "Manslaughter," a longer Rashomon-like exercise about - surprise! - a murder, teases the reader with a cornucopia of rich characters, but, after endless dropping of clues, never lets us know who held the fatal gun.

Were these elisions deliberate, we might simply feel that the author was a skillful trickster. Instead, Perlman becomes the stranger carrying on the fascinating conversation two rows ahead on the train, one who infuriatingly debarks at an earlier stop than ours.

At these times Perlman often attempts to save himself with a poetical flourish. The widow in "Manslaughter" lies down among dusty salad leaves in a supermarket after the jury renders a not-guilty verdict, her "life marked down, drastically reduced." In "The Hong Kong Fir Doctrine," the narrator, a lawyer, intones that the "terms of the contract" with his ex-love were "partly oral, partly implied and partly imagined. It has been breached in a way that makes its further performance impossible. I am entitled to treat it as an end, but I am unable. There is damage."

Both artful conclusions would work wonderfully well onstage in a dramatic monologue. But away from the bright spotlight, they seem only a bit overly made-up.

But "A Tale of Two Cities," the novella that closes the collection, is so stunning as to render what precedes it juvenilia. (Were the earlier stories written at another time, does Perlman work better in the long form - or was his genius just taking a breather?) Rose Gamarkin, accidental emigre and a Russian Jew in Australia, must gather the remnants of her fractured family together with the aid of an unlikely hero, second-generation Australian and first-time PI Bernard Liebowitz.

The story, by turns hilarious and heartbreaking, draws the sepia photographs of the Holocaust out into Polaroidal light of the present to tell the story of the global dispersion of Jews, then pulls off the neat trick of arranging the diaspora around a kitchen table. This brilliant story, like Perlman's others, also contains an intriguing first line: "Where we came from, you woke up early to bribe the current day to be kind to you." But by the end, this time, we know exactly why.

Lizzie Skurnick, a Baltimore writer, is the editor of Old Hag, a literary blog at www.theoldhag.com.

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