

Beneficiaries
by Barbara Haas
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The Black Sea wasn't tidal, so its waters exhibited a predictable wave action throughout the day—measured, smoothly level, quiescent—not subject to diurnal cycles or oscillating highs and lows, not governed by the pull of heavenly bodies, the transiting of the sun or the moon. Only when offshore storms raged did the wind whip the sea into frothy white caps that shattered against the rockbound coast with concussive force and sent ships into harbor.

Today the wind was calm. A cross hatch of sunlight sometimes flashed turquoise on the water's surface, sometimes aluminum like the way color flares on a sheet of annealed metal. I watched, mesmerized, as longshore combers rolled toward a lone fishing boat on the horizon, lifting its hull and then undulating forward beneath it only to set the boat back down again in a moment. This gentle rhythm caught the

cadence of a waltz, and I felt my breath match its hypnotic slowness. The air, pungent with brine, filled my lungs. This was a low wave-energy day.

Tatyana and I had picked our way down a boulder-strewn path beneath Chekhov's house to a private bay whose notch-cut cliffs sheltered the peaceful inlet from the north. The famed author had written some of his most iconic work while living on Crimea's southern coast, and this place had been of particular solace during his bouts of recuperation from tuberculosis. The house was now a museum, and we had toured it before coming down here to wade in the cool shallows.

The water was glassy and sediment free, making it possible to step from submerged cobble to submerged cobble without touching the pebbly seabed. One of the rocks I stood on had shoebox-like dimensions. I moved from it to a boulder crenellated with feathery moss. Balancing there required the kind of Pilates-style maneuvers I did not possess. I gripped the mossy tendrils between my toes. Even so, my bare feet began to slide. This happened in slow motion, as if the slippery sea carpet were thwarting gravity somehow. Fortunately the water was only calf deep. I stepped gingerly across bits of chipped rock before clamoring up on another sea stone.

Gesturing toward the fishing boat, I turned to Tatyana. "What's the catch of the day out there?"

She swept her hair back and fastened it with a scrunchy. "Shads, sprats and smelt," she said.

The fishing boat bobbed and rocked. Seagulls gyred above it, wings flapping, a flurry of constant motion. Like a gif animation projected onto the blue screen of sky the whirling birds described a nest-like shape centered right above the boat that kept assembling and then disassembling and then reassembling itself again. This far away I could not hear the cries of the gulls, but I could imagine those stark piercing sounds mixing in with the low hum of the fishing boat's engine as it trawled along.

A few gulls perched on a rocky promontory near where Tatyana and I waded. They seemed to keep an eye on us and also an eye on the fishing boat offshore. "Can you see the inspiration Chekhov found here?" Tatyana flung her arms wide, as if to embrace the bay.

I nodded my head. "Definitely." A slight offshore breeze riffled the feathers of one of the gulls perched nearby, revealing a dove gray underside to its plumage. The gull pointed its beak straight up and emitted a throaty call. One of Chekhov's most

celebrated plays—“The Seagulls”—relied dramatically on his rendering of Crimea’s rugged coast. The place lacked nothing for inspiration.

I stepped onto a chunk of limestone whose softened edges suggested the shape of a rabbit hunkered down in the grass and used it as part of my path for getting back to shore, jumping from it to others. A flat rock lay in a patch of sun near where we’d left our socks and shoes, and I stood on it to dry my feet, alternately clenching my toes around the rock’s curves and then flexing them.

Little had changed since Chekhov lived here. The schools of shads, sprats and smelt the fishermen scooped into their nets today were legacy descendants of those which fishermen had no doubt scooped up during Chekhov’s era. The many times he must have stood right here and found a faithful companion in the sea’s shifting presence had translated into the theatrical works ultimately that still graced American stages. High school drama departments and community theatre troupes all over the U.S. favored Chekhov’s plays.

Because drama did not pay well during the late 19th Century, and because Chekhov supported a large extended family that included adult siblings, he needed to supplement his income. Short stories provided ready cash, and he wrote nearly 600 of them over the course of his career. He got so good at it that someone could suggest a prompt on Tuesday—an object, say, perhaps a cup—and he would hand that person a well-crafted story on Wednesday, full of insights into human nature and bearing the title “A Cup.”

That was Chekhov, keeping body and soul together. Writers everywhere knew the importance of doing that. Raymond Carver’s final short story, published in *The New Yorker* in 1987, had honored Chekhov’s knack. In it, Carver focused on the deathbed scene, Chekhov dying. He won an O. Henry Award for “Errand.”

“Chekhov gave American writers permission to focus on the short story and not feel overly concerned about the novel,” I said to Tatyana. Feet resting on the dry rock, I curled my toes, then uncurled them. The scent of the sea swirled around. “Chekhov legitimized short fiction as an art.”

Stepping from a series of cobbles, Tatyana left soft splashing sounds in her wake. “Which Americans benefited the most?”

I mentioned authors like Flannery O’Connor, Eudora Welty and Katherine Anne Porter. “A short story renaissance began to build throughout the 20th Century. Some

writers were more prized for their stories than for their novels even." I named Carver, of course, Ann Beattie and Donald Barthelme too. Chekhov's influence had rippled through American *belles lettres* and fused there with unique domestic qualities.

"But the story renaissance ended?" Tatyana picked a rocky path to shore and sat down on a nearby boulder to begin drying her feet in the sun.

"Nothing in literature goes on for very long without needing a kind of recharge or rejuvenation," I told her. "Eventually a literary art has to collide with an element that ushers in a new look. Otherwise it goes stale."

"You're describing a reset," she said.

I squinted out at the sea. "Just when we needed Chekhov we no longer really had Chekhov. Or maybe we'd never had enough Chekhov to begin with." Smiling, I kept my gaze trained out there. "I know it sounds strange to say."

The fishing boat had shifted further from shore, perhaps following the schools of shads, sprats and smelt as they migrated in the depths. The gyre of gulls had stayed with the boat, still circling above. An aluminum sheen persisted on the water's surface, flashing here and there with turquoise glints that made me think of bluing on metal. Gunsmiths often applied such a finish to reduce glare for the eyes of shooters when sighting down a rifle's barrel and also to protect the steel.

Before Tatyana and I picked our way along the boulder-strewn path to wade here in the shallows, we had toured Chekhov's house. Those unpretentious rooms were homey and dim, furnished with original possessions: the hat rack standing in the corner, the burgundy wallpaper richly patterned with *fleur de lis* silhouettes, a glass case of playbills from 19th Century productions of Chekhov's work and also first edition volumes of his stories, including a couple of Constance Garnett's original translations.

The prolific Brit had singlehandedly bestowed upon the English-speaking world the resplendent gift of Chekhov's fiction, beginning in 1904. I studied the volumes, bound in green leather, their corners a little cracked with age. Nobody had translated Chekhov into English before Garnett. It was odd to think of a gap period—two decades long—when Anton Pavlovich belonged only to Russia.

Tatyana had lingered before a photo montage on the dining table, and I joined her there. The many frames lined up reminded me of similar assemblages in friends' homes—the parents, grandparents, kids, nieces, nephews, in-laws. The photos on Chekhov's table had an intimate and endearing quality like that. It looked as if the

occupants might return home later today to enjoy these cherished keepsakes before sitting down to a bowl of soup.

Tatyana identified Chekhov's brother Mikhail in one of the pictures, his sister Masha in another. A familial resemblance was very strong—the narrow face, the slight downward slope on the outer edges of the eyelids, a sallow melancholy air. The siblings could have been triplets—Masha, Mikhail and Antushka. They favored each other so keenly I could imagine villagers lumping them all together when they were growing up in the neighborhood—you know, someone might have said, *one of those Chekhov kids*. Another brother had died of tuberculosis as a young man. Clearly Chekhov was no stranger to the disease.

A collage of small portraits hung on the wall space above the dining table, solos of Chekhov himself. Photography was a new medium at that time, so having a portrait made like that would still be something of a formal occasion, perhaps both a novelty and a nuisance. "His face changed so much over the years," Tatyana observed.

The ravages of his illness were apparent—the sunken cheeks, the weariness, the wasting. She peered from picture to picture, scrutinizing the differences.

Those physical markers kept pace with the constant presence of stereotypically Chekhovian items in the photos—the pince-nez glasses, the bowtie, the trim goatee. A fade-out kind of halo framed the headshot of Chekhov in one of the portraits, surrounding him in a wispy Gaussian blur gradient in the style of images back then. He seemed to be a man disappearing before he ever really did in fact disappear, dying young at age 44, predictably of TB. These portraits documented a man in the act of slipping away, as if a nuanced mood from one of his short stories had latched onto his physical attributes and begun to dissolve them, to disperse them. He was becoming vague, sketchy, like the clip-art Chekhov long before such a thing even existed. Ultimately, a caricaturist could with only a few pencil strokes suggest a cameo profile of the famous author that people would immediately recognize. The barest suggestion of Chekhov could suffice.

"Remove everything that has no relevance to the story," he had said. "If you place a pistol on the mantle in Chapter 1 it must fire in Chapter 2 or 3." This became a hard and fast dictum known as Chekhov's gun.

The American author Joyce Carol Oates had instinctively understood this and extended the concept into her Detroit stories from the turbulent 1960's. She herself was

the literary heir of Flannery O'Connor, and Flannery O'Connor had been a big time beneficiary of Chekhov, first generation even. She was among that group of writers who would have immediately scarfed up Constance Garnett's English translations. In the most graphic way possible Flannery O'Connor brought Chekhov's literary principle to bear in her Southern Gothic fiction. She literally carried his gun.

The Black Sea lapped against the rocks, a transparent sound serving up its turquoise aluminum sheen as the non-tidal waves whispered toward shore. Free of heavenly bodies, free of the sun's gravitational pull and the moon's transiting shift or any kind of tidal constraint, the sea was an autonomous force, answerable only to wind. Anything could merge with its luster—schools of fish, men in boats, distinguished authors. When Tatyana and I first began wading, I bent down and dipped my fingers in the shallows and then touched a drop of water to my tongue. The mild saltiness carried with it a clean mineral flavor, redolent of micro-inclusions, as if porous elements of the stony coast had leached into the water. The Black Sea's saline level was palpably less than that of the Atlantic Ocean's. It had been a freshwater lake about the size of Superior before the last ice age, but the weight of glaciers during that geological event dented the earth's crust here and caused a lowering of the sea basin, which then brought the Mediterranean surging in.

My feet were dry now after wading, and I began to pull my socks back on.

Wanting to trace the ancestral link from Flannery O'Connor directly back to Chekhov, I summarized for Tatyana *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, O'Connor's most famous short story. I paraphrased the money-line at the end about The Grandmother character: "She would have been a good woman if someone had been there to shoot her every minute of her life."

Reflexively, I made my left hand into a pistol, not aiming it of course at Tatyana but just pointing off to the side as if targeting a patch of sunlight out on the sea.

Tatyana noted the gesture, and her brow creased. The calculations going on behind her eyes were obvious. Clearly she was sincere in deciphering the insights I was trying to share. One of her socks lay nearby, and she reached for it.

I said, "The Grandmother needed someone to hold a gun on her every moment of every day." I jerked my left hand as if the imaginary pistol had recoiled after firing. "Merely living, merely going about her ordinary human life and being a good person at the same time?" I pursed my lips and shook my head. "These things were not

compatible with The Grandmother.” I made it seem as though honest-to-God authenticity for a character like The Grandmother only came about in that exact instant before The Misfit shot her.

Which maybe was a way of saying that death was the best option for a woman like The Grandmother.

I was on a roll now. I was hard core. I kept sharing insights, kept making my point. I blinked at Tatyana.

She had removed the scrunchy from her ponytail and slipped it onto her wrist like a bracelet. In the slight breeze a few loose strands of hair drifted down over her forehead. She brushed the strands away. “Such violence, Barbara.”

All at once I recognized the absurdity of summarizing Flannery O’Connor. It was hard enough for those who actually read the entire short story, start to finish, to see anything beyond the dark and the twisted in her work. The dark and the twisted made it harder and harder to find familiar notes of Chekhov at all. His moods of introspection and frustration, his light aesthetic touch, manifested on our American shores in the click of a trigger cocked under the pressure of a twitching finger.

Photos on a table in a museum devoted to a beloved author’s memory made it easy to see a similarity among family members, of course. Once writers like O’Connor had torqued Chekhov, unchecked, through American *belles lettres* it was hard to see any resemblance. Not even 23&Me could render proof.

We had so thoroughly inhaled Chekhov and so minutely churned through his influence at a molecular level that the most prominently Chekhovian element was a gun.

Maybe Constance Garnett was to blame. Vladimir Nabokov had railed against her translations, calling them in effect a hack job by a Victorian prude. Garnett had handed the English-speaking world Chekhov so definitively that all translators since then had relied on her work to form structural templates by which they would double check their own efforts.

First? Yes, she was. Worst? Nabokov thought so.

He assailed her for delivering a facsimile Chekhov, hollow of essence, lacking in soul.

Standing on the shore beneath Chekhov’s house I felt as if I had entrusted my weight to something deceptively slippery, sea rocks carpeted with slimy moss perhaps,

and I was sliding backward, falling, smoothly sliding, unable to stop myself and with nothing to grab onto.

Poor Chekhov--!

He had no doubt known such a feeling.

I mean, the guy had lived here.

He had probably tried to stand in this very place.

Chekhov Bay in Gyrsuf, Crimea—photo by Barbara Haas