



Gyrsuf’s streets were mediievally narrow, scarcely more than alleys really, pocked and dusty, with the occasional kitty cat sitting in the shade, licking its paw. As Tatyana and I wended our way along them, she delighted in demonstrating the way women from Moscow walked down the cobblestones of this rustic Tatar village in Crimea with their arms flung out wide in order to touch at the same exact moment the houses on both sides of the street with their nail salon fingertips.

“French manicures,” Tatyana said. “Polished and lacquered nails. Buffed and gelled.” She stretched both arms out as far as possible.

Emanating from these Muscovite women was a condescending air, to hear Tatyana tell it, an urban superiority. After they flew back to Moscow, these women flooded their Instagram accounts with pictures that juxtaposed their stiletto tips and Vinylux manis with Gyrsuf’s rough-hewn stucco walls.

It was a fetish: score that cellphone souvenir keepsake in order to post on social media the posh sophistication of a city look juxtaposed right up against those uncouth bumpkins and their tin-roof huts.

“They act like they’re visiting a zoo when they come here,” Tatyana fumed—and she added, *sotto voce*, “Look at how the provincials live.” She said the reverse was true when she went to Moscow. Then *she* was the visitor to an exotic enclave, a game reserve stocked with—to her mind—hybrid humans who had had *a little work done*: mommy makeovers, Brazilian butt-lifts and thigh-gap women.

Moscow was, in Tatyana’s eyes, a cosmetic surgery zoo.

“The artificiality!” she snorted.

She was a proud daughter of Crimea—“Born in the U.S.S.R.”—and she laced her stories about the peninsula with bemused observations concerning human nature, spiced up a bit with local color and larded with geopolitical intrigue. Any story about Crimea came drenched in the geopolitical, the more volatile, the better. At no point since the Greeks first settled here in the 6th Century B.C. had the peninsula ever been independent but always attached administratively to some other ruling entity, whether the Scythians or the Mongol Horde or Byzantium or the Ottoman Empire. Conquering nations acquired Crimea only to lose Crimea, or traded it back and forth, bestowed it as a gift on another country—and then reacquired it again only to lose it again. Everyone wanted Crimea badly, but no one held on for long. Notably, it had factored into global wars and controversies for millennia—to an outsized degree, in fact: punching above its weight.

Ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Russians had intermarried and intermingled on this peninsula since before Vladimir brought Christianity to the Kievan Rus’ in 980 A.D. Tatyana’s own parents had followed this trend: her mother, ethnically Ukrainian—her father, ethnically Russian. In a familial way, a genetic way, she could view herself across many dozens of generations through the ancestral prism of brotherly nations.

Tatyana and I snacked on some fresh strawberries, as we walked through Gyrsuf, and she finished up her rant about Muscovite women, their cosmetic surgery—the implants, uptucks, the boob-jobs and injections, the Botox. What did I think of this?

Just before coming to Crimea I had spent a long weekend in Moscow. If I were to name 100 things that I had noticed, cosmetic surgery would not be anywhere on the list.

But I caught Tatyana’s drift.

Women from the nation’s capital had always been visiting Crimea, all through the decades that the peninsula was still a sovereign part of Ukraine, so the presence of

Muscovite women in these resort towns right now was not a new phenomenon, Vinylux manis or not. In the eyes of the world, Crimea was still a sovereign part of Ukraine—but not in Russia’s eyes. Russia had repatriated the peninsula in a territorial dispute back in 2014. Before that, the Muscovite women who came here had been from a different country, a country that was not Ukraine. They were foreigners. But now they were fellow citizens.

Practically sisters.

All these women were Russian women now. I got the impression that a rivalry was shaping up.

On our drive this morning from Yalta to Gyrsuf, Tatyana had steered us past a 3-story mansion under construction, nestled into its own private vineyard, row upon row of young plants just beginning to leaf out. “An oligarch’s dacha,” she said, gesturing at the mansion, and then added, “So-called.”

Her tone carried a whiff of judgement. Dachas—those weekend getaway homes that every Russian adored—often were little more than tar paper shacks in an untrammled countryside surrounded by patchwork garden plots. I regarded the palatial stone-clad estate as we drove past it.

“Oligarchs build compounds like these which include their own personal Orthodox cathedrals and their own personal hobby wineries. It’s a vanity thing. Dollar billionaires.” A work team was rolling asphalt for the mansion’s some-day helipad. Heat waves rose from the black molten mat, and double-drum compactors groomed its surface, operating in echelon.

Luxe lifestyles and ostentatious wealth were nothing new for Crimea. The place attracted heavy expensive objects. That had been a constant for the peninsula since the tsars of the Romanov Dynasty first built their grand estates and hunting lodges here, and elites since then had followed suit. Catherine the Great had lavished an empire’s worth of treasure on Crimea in 1783 after acquiring the territory through a war treaty with the Ottoman Caliphate, and she cultivated her Greek Plan, with designs on Constantinople. Her goal was to replace the crescent on the dome of Hagia Sophia with a Christian cross. She even named one of her grandsons Constantine with the thought that he would become the first emperor of a restored Byzantium there. This had a speak-it-into-existence quality about it. It was a boss move. When you name your

grandchildren in accordance with your political ambitions you're a Major Player. Catherine the Great was a Major Player.

Tatyana and I sped past the oligarch's half-built mansion but not before I noted the plump gold dome of a trim chapel winking in the sun above the orderly vineyard in back. "Dollar billionaires are different from ruble billionaires, eh?" The scene was pastoral and sophisticated, and I could imagine the oligarch himself relishing the view as he landed his helicopter, winemaker for the weekend.

Tatyana didn't take her eyes off the road before us. "At 60 rubles to the dollar, Barbara, you do the math."

The women who whomp-whomped down onto Crimea's helipads brought a standard of beauty driven by cash and excess and hard-charging cosmetic procedures. These citified sisters were throwing down some sort of gauntlet before their supposedly backwards and backwoods and barefoot counterparts here in the sticks. The gauntlet they threw down was dripping with disdain and Muscovite tastes.

So I totally understood where Tatyana was coming from.

At 40, she was faced with the cultural messages that faced all women of a certain age. When she saw the enhancements of Moscow, the liposuction of Moscow, Moscow's surgical over-response to cultural messages about women's beauty, about women's looks, women's aging bodies, she found herself facing a decision—a decision that might literally affect her face: do you go under the knife, do you make that sacrifice?

When Dostoevsky said, "Beauty will save the world," he did not mean snips and sutures, scars and stitches. He did not mean beauty at the point of a surgeon's scalpel or anything reductive and frivolous or partaking of idle expenditures. This was *Beauty* Dostoevsky was talking about. This was *Saving the World*. This was *Dostoevsky*. The beauty that could save the world had to possess a certain gravitas. It had to exude care and craft and love. World-saving beauty was so far beyond paltry physical attributes.

Undoubtedly a Major Player himself, Dostoevsky could never ever be a dollar billionaire—even if he quite literally had a billion dollars.

Just as rules and regulations governing every material facet of life had changed for Crimea when it split from Ukraine and rejoined Russia, rules and regulations governing feminine beauty had changed perceptibly too—obscure rules, unwritten rules. This wasn't a matter of filling out a form and checking all the right boxes before

paying some sort of administrative fee in a bureaucratic office where a functionary stamps your papers and then suddenly all at once you can now license your car in Russia. The more unspoken the regulation of feminine beauty the more pernicious. Tatyana had run smack up against a nip and tuck truther kind of truth about Russian aesthetics. Tatyana was having a bad brush with the Moscow Karens.

“I favor a natural look,” I told her. “I mean, aging has a special charm. It’s okay for a 60 year old woman to look 60.”

Tatyana popped a strawberry into her mouth and gazed out at Gyrsuf’s mediievally narrow streets, pointedly not glancing over at me, pointedly not double checking this specimen of aged beauty walking an elbow’s length away. She said, “And here, people believe if you’re 40, that’s it. You’re done. It’s over. The end. You’re washed.”

I shook my head. “Aging is unavoidable. When society tells women they can’t age, that’s ridiculous. It’s a double bind. I’m suspicious of that.” Catherine the Great wasn’t the only speak-it-into-existence person who had walked this earth.

“Tell me it’s not over, Barbara. Tell me it’s not the end.”

I described that famous photo of Georgia O’Keefe in her dungarees on the back of a motorcycle when she was 57—her impish smile making obvious how capable she was of disappointing a world that could not believe in, did not believe in women riding noisily away from the limitations that others tried to place on them. The photo was all about denim, defiance and machines that roar—the throatier the sound the better. An unbounded desert expanse beckoned to Georgia, an open road visible just over her shoulder, the arid landscape she had already conquered artistically on the canvas so many times before.

I totally would hit the open road with Georgia.

Tatyana and I polished off the rest of the strawberries, and as we walked along I resisted the urge to fling my own arms out wide so as to touch at the same exact moment the houses on either side of the street because I did not want to betray any vapid Muscovite tendencies.

An iron manhole cover caught my eye instead, set level into the surface of the cobble-paved street. I stopped to focus my camera’s lens.

Drop-forged in a foundry and sand-cast in a mold, the manhole cover was more a work of metal art than a perfunctory and straightforward humble kind of

maintenance item for taking care of sewage and sanitation, though it certainly was that too. The town's name in Cyrillic—Гырəyф—was in the center of the iron plate. The pattern of the metal made the font seem dynamic and dimensional, as if springing up from a background of slender petal shaped sun-like rays that were worked into the iron. Artistic in a graphic design modality and machined to perfection, the manhole cover spoke to civic pride and identity. It was a distinctive way of presenting Гырəyф to passersby, branding the essence of the tidy village.

This was *The Logo* of Гырəyф, the city's very own Nike *swoosh*.

I snapped a couple pictures.

Tatyana tapped the iron disc with her toe. "What do you call these in English?"

I told her and pointed out the pick hole ingeniously wrought into the design.

"The maintenance guy lifts the plate here, and then he climbs down into the manhole. There's a ladder bolted inside. That way, he can work on the drain beneath the street. It's a manhole cover--for covering the manhole."

I had to smile. Few English words were so straightforward and frank.

A couple blocks later along a similarly cobble-paved stretch of street Tatyana gestured toward another iron plate. Obviously manhole covers were shaping up as our theme of the day. She identified this one immediately as an older model, however, different in tangible ways from the one we had just admired. It lacked any decorative flair or visual uniqueness or artisanal elements whatsoever but possessed instead a smoothly blank surface, a 4-digit number stamped into the metal. This one looked mass-produced in-bulk on a punch press, serviceable to be sure for sewers and drains, a no-frills infrastructure item.

"From the post-S.S.R. era," Tatyana said, naming the period right after Ukraine left the Soviet Union and became an independent nation. The manhole cover was not elegant or aesthetically pleasing or arresting by any means in any way, but it didn't have to be either. The purpose of a manhole cover, after all, was simply to cover a hole, as the no-nonsense English term made clear.

The ornate one, though, *The Logo* of Гырəyф, seemed closer to its elemental and foundational self, closer to its time in the crucible, the dross and coke and flux, closer to the blast furnace, to the hammer and tong. It spoke to care and craft and love. Dostoevsky was not talking about manhole covers when he said, "Beauty will save the world," but *The Logo* of Гырəyф was beautiful in the way Dostoevsky meant.

Someone needs to celebrate that, I thought.

Muscovite women probably stepped right over it without even noticing.