



kate's corner

kate gilderdale

Power in fashion for first ladies

The collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the failure of Communism have been attributed to many factors, but the obvious one is consistently overlooked.

Can anyone seriously doubt, after reading their daily paper, that the current waves of Glasnost and Perestroika can be directly attributed to the wardrobes and lady-like behavior of Mesdames Mulroney, Bush and Gorbachev, gushing reports of whose tete-a-tetes have been surfacing in the press during the latest North American summit?

How could Russia continue the Cold War with the West when, on an outing in Ottawa, "her gold shoes twinkling, (Mila) stayed discreetly behind as Raisa pressed the flesh and tousled the hair of youngsters?"

Leaving their dour old husbands to talk about boring stuff like not blowing up the world as we know it, Mila and Raisa "glasnosted". (The Toronto Star's declaration) through two museums, with Mila resplendent in "a daffodil yellow outfit by Serge et Real of Montreal and Raisa in coral pink by the All-Union Fashion House of Moscow."

We're not to'd, alas, to whom Brian and Mikhail owe their current fashion allegiance. Clues to the thawing of east-west relationships can, however, be found in headlines like "First ladies renew friendship during cozy White House tea" which were unheard of in the days when that uppity Nancy Reagan bared her fangs in a smile which could have turned Vesuvius to ice.

Now we can all sleep soundly in the knowledge that the Bushes' pet dog Millie sat, apparently unperturbed, at the Soviet first lady's feet while Raisa and Barbara "chatted and took tea." Hard-hitting journalism, eh?

Of course, there's more than a hint of sexism in such coy prose, especially when you consider another famous Western leader, Britain's Iron Lady. When she drops into Sussex Drive, the press is not known for waxing lyrical about Denis Thatcher's virgin wool Harris tweed jacket or Marks and Spencer pin-stripe shirt.

We don't get treated to vital information on whether Mila and Denis clasped hands in a gesture of solidarity, nor are we permitted to enjoy comparisons of Denis's ties with Barbara Bush's "trademark triple strand of fake pearls." In fact, lucky old Denis is usually granted a very low profile by the media.

Perhaps he doesn't even attend the charming get-togethers enjoyed by the other presidential and prime ministerial spouses, but if that's the case it's interesting that nobody comments on it.

Imagine the field day the press would have if Mila ducked out of a momentous tea party with another first wifey because she booked a round of golf.

Wives of high-profile politicians have a tough job, and are usually deeply involved in charities and other worthwhile causes, as well as in their own outside interests. Some, like Mrs. Gorbachev, have spent years as independent career women.

Don't they deserve more than the outpouring of mindless trivia which inevitably greets them whenever they accompany their husbands on a state visit?



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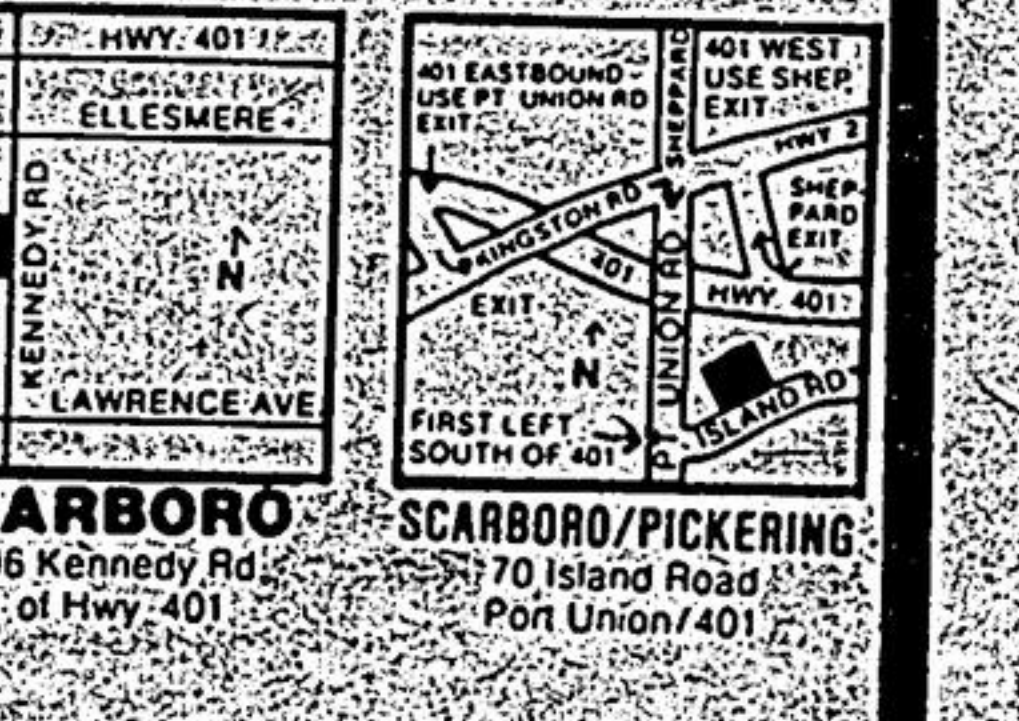
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