

A REDHEAD AT THE PUSHKIN

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PART 1 EKATERINA

Celebrities

Since Pat Kennedy's escapade in the Central American jungle, he had become a celebrity. The South China Morning Post, Hong Kong's leading newspaper, had run a sensational front page headline *Banker missing in jungle*. That, and his run-in with the unloved City & Colonial bank, transformed Pat into some kind of a local celebrity and hero.

After he was knighted, for services to the country, my billionaire banker friend became a regular in the Daily Mail, preferably photographed with Lili, his rich and glamorous Chinese wife.

I pulled his leg mercilessly after he, an Irishman, opted for dual citizenship and a British passport, which allowed him to be addressed as 'Sir' Patrick Kennedy after he was made a KBE — Knight of the British Empire by the Queen of England.

In a way I suppose Sir Pat's fame rubbed off on me. I was already a writer with a number of successful books, economics and history, to my name as well as being a contributor to the Guardian on economic questions, all very staid stuff.

That changed after I was invited to participate in a couple of BBC TV productions on the story of the 2008 Financial Crisis. I became better known and a minor celebrity in a rather narrow circle of armchair experts.

However, it was when I was photographed holding Ekaterina's hand, next to Pat Kennedy, at the inauguration of her gallery, the Daily Mail got really interested, they loved it, comparing me to other ageing celebrities with much younger women as partners.

They described me as a world famous economist, race horse owner and friend of the late City banker, Michael Fitzwilliams, and the Russian oligarch, Sergei Alekseyevich Tarasov. Which was true, though a bit blown out of proportion.

Then, from time to time, we spotted paparazzi hanging about outside of our place, in the hope of grabbing an exclusive shot, especially when we had an evening at home with well-known friends.

It worked wonders for the Francistown Stud and Golf Club, with articles in the Irish press, and requests for interviews, which I accepted as a plug for Ekaterina's gallery. I suppose Ireland was short of heroes, what with the bad image projected by Ryanair's tight, penny pinching, Michael O'Leary.

A Big House

This is my story. Me, John Francis. I'm not the Pope, though if you believe the media some people might think I am. Francis is my family name. I'm not as young as I was, but in good shape, very good shape, and have reason to believe I still have a long life ahead of me. My father passed away at ninety eight and his father at ninety four, so I have every intention of getting the best out of the years ahead of me.

The reason? Well as the French say *Cherchez la femme!*

Who?

Ekaterina, but I'll come to that later.

But first I'll tell you about myself.

I'm a Professor Emeritus at Trinity College in Dublin, where I held the chair in economics for a good many years. So naturally I lectured on economics and the history of

economics. I'm an academic and I live in an ivory tower. At least I used to.

For many years I've taught and written books on those subjects. Serious books, and also those that appeal to the public at large. Perhaps readers like you. The kind of people interested in what makes the world move. My books provide me with a steady flow of royalties and have earned me a place on the international conference circuit.

I am also head of a think tank and from time to time write for the financial press.

As a consequence of this background or life, call it what you will, I will deviate from time to time in my story to comment on the events around us, *les maux du monde*, and its leaders, and many other things. You can of course skip these monologues, but perhaps it's worth spending a moment to pause and consider my observations and comments on events that may change your world.

From what I've said here you have guessed I have the means to choose what I want to do in life. Though between you and me my aforementioned activities are extras. Why? Because I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth, as they say.

An economic rule, one commonly known to even the inebriate, is money breeds money, and in my case it's been true.

About ten years ago I was introduced to the banker husband of Alice Fitzwilliams—one of my friends from the Irish horse breeding and racing world. It seems he was impressed by my academic pedigree, not only in economics but also my knowledge of modern Russian history.

Well, without going into detail, when the financial crisis of 2007-2008 broke, Michael Fitzwilliams asked me to head a think tank to advise his bank. The idea was to analyse world events, breaking crises, and anticipate the effects on markets. Model the effects so as to minimise the consequences and if possible profit from changing situations.

It was the start of my rise as the *eminence grise*, if you like, of the City bankers, Michael Fitzwilliams and Pat Kennedy, and confidant of the powerful Russian oligarch, Sergei Tarasov, their partner.

Being an academic has many advantages, it offers great freedom, respect and—perpetual youth. Yes, perpetual youth, it comes from being surrounded by young people with young ideas and forever optimist. Young people who seem to appreciate the knowledge, experience, I can hopefully impart to them and who enjoy the tales I spin.

Living in the Peter Pan world of Trinity College, Dublin, where the towers may not be in ivory, but are certainly

covered in ivy and steeped in the traditions of bygone ages, breeds a certain kind of laid-back approach when observing the world beyond our walls.

I'm one of a disappearing race, not the Irish in general, there's no risk there. I mean the Anglo-Irish. Protestant on my father's side, Dublin Protestants, nothing to do with the hard men of Ulster. On my mother's they were Catholics from Wexford. Myself I'm an Irish Republican, through and through, that said I've always steered well clear of politicians, politics and religion.

I grew up in a 'big house' outside of Dublin. A 'big house' that's the very large country homes owned by the Anglo-Irish landed classes. Ours, Francistown House, was built in 1764, near Newbridge, County Kildare, a fine example of Georgian architecture, set in one thousand four hundred acres of park, pasture and farmland overlooking the Liffey.

We never considered ourselves to be anything other than Irish, though my ancestors came over with Cromwell, not a good reference—best not spoken about, and our family name, Francis, that dates back to the Norman conquest of England.

We were lucky our house had not been burnt down like so many others during the revolt, or the civil war of 1922-23, perhaps because the family had been well considered, we'd brought work and prosperity to Newbridge.

The house and its dependencies are surrounded by rich limestone based farmland and to one side bordered by the river with good salmon and trout fishing in a green and pleasant part of the county.

The estate, of which I am now the owner, is partly a stud farm, Francistown Stud, and partly a golf club, Francistown Golf. I still use part of the house as a weekend home, the rest is given to the golf club with accommodation for paying guests and a restaurant, beyond the golf course the land is rented to local farmers.

It was my father who carried out the transformation, before he retired and moved to our house in Northside in the centre of Dublin.

I, with no dynastic ambitions, have no regrets.

County Kildare has been the heart of Ireland's thoroughbred bloodstock tradition for generations, and my grandfather, Colonel William Francis, was one of the most successful horse breeders of his times. One of his triumphs included a grandsire of King Edward VII's Derby winner, Minoru, at the beginning of the last century.

Those days are long gone. Regretfully the family successfully bred horses, but not sons. I am the sole surviving member of the long line of Francistown Anglo-Irish gentry.

One hundred years ago buyers came from Argentina and Russia, today they are from the Middle East, even my neighbours come from those lands, the Aga Khan and Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum of Dubai. The Sheik, whom I've never met, or even seen, owns a stud at Kildangan, on the other side of Kildare, about twenty miles from Francistown.

Francistown is just twenty five miles from Dublin, but I rarely go to my country home these days, except to grace the club with my presence on special occasions, for a round of golf or a gallop on one of my horses.

My fixed home, if that's what you can call it, is in Northside, and there's a weekend place in Dún Laoghaire, a nice 18th century house overlooking the sea. My other home is in Galle in Sri Lanka, where I have spent the summer for as many years as I can remember.

I've always been discreet about what I own, especially in the presence of students, whose disliking for old wealth, inherited property and the upper classes is inherent with their age.

My parents sent me to boarding school in England. It was a family tradition and not any old boarding school, but Westminster School, where contrary to belief, family tradition really does count, fathers, sons and their sons, like in many such schools.

From there I went to Trinity, also a family tradition, after all we were Anglo-Irish and a long list of my ancestors studied at the venerable institution.

Why economics? Well the landed gentry didn't go into business, at least in the past, many of us went into the Army, others into government service, and a few like myself became academics.

I grew up with horses, but after school in London and then Trinity, the idea of spending the rest of my life in Francistown was furthest from my mind. Life at uni in those days was more exciting than horses. I'd grown up surrounded by the estate, the running of which was a business, and international at that, as we sold livestock all over the world with buyers regularly staying at the house. But there must have been an ingrained streak of economics in my soul, so I drifted into my profession by default, doing what I liked rather than by making any other painstaking choice.

My father was a young officer in the Indian Army when WWI broke out. He saw service in the Middle East and his elder brother died in the Somme Offensive in 1916. Returning home in early 1922, he joined the Republican Army after the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1922.

In 1930 he married, but I did not appear until 1940,

apparently unexpectedly, he was forty five at the time, fifteen years older than my mother.

I had a happy childhood in Francistown, with my parents and surrounded by our estate and horses. That changed when I started boarding school in Dublin, returning home, to our town house in Dublin, or to Francistown, at weekends and for holidays.

Going to school in Dublin seemed normal, but when my father took me to London to attend Westminster School, things really changed and though I was only eleven I felt very grown up.

John Maynard Keynes said, ‘The study of economics does not seem to require any specialized gifts of an unusually high order.’ But I have to say I was good at maths and liked history, so economics seemed a logical choice.

The great man added, ‘Is it not, intellectually regarded, a very easy subject compared with the higher branches of philosophy or pure science? Though on the positive side he conceded, ‘An easy subject at which few excel!’

Now I’m not saying I excel, but when Keynes described an economist as the combination of ‘mathematician, historian, statesman, philosopher—in some degree’ it was an idea that appealed to me, suited my temperament down to the ground, that is to say *un-touche-à-tout!*

Perhaps it was that which attracted Michael Fitzwilliams. A vision of the world, which combined with Tom Barton’s feeling for events made for the success of the think tank at INI, the London bank headed by Michael.

That all said, I’m not a Keynesian. I have my own ideas and as they say every idea to its epoch.

Looking to the future, my vision is that of a Cornucopian society. A world of plenitude, without work, where the fulfilment of the individual and his role in society is the ideal. A futuristic vision perhaps, but within our reach, even in the post-truth era of nationalistic politics, where each day Cornucopia relentlessly gathers force, where the production of our every need is made by machines, in agriculture, the transformation and distribution of food, in health services, in homes, for consumer goods and even entertainment.

Utopian? Yes.

Of course there will always be jobs, starting with the governance of Cornucopia and its leadership.

The only problem will be the finding the wise men needed. Men wise enough to dedicate their lives to their fellow creatures *épanouissement*.

In spite of man's failings, I believe in his capacity to mould the future to suit his material needs and hope for the kind of providential leaders needed to oversee a golden age. A future where the well-being of all is more important than that of its leaders.

You may smile, but in my time the advances in technology and well-being have been staggering. Even the teeming millions of the Indian sub-continent and China can look forward to a material life of comfort compared to that of their fathers and even Africa is on the move.

After all, Keynes said in his essay *Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren*, that by 2030, thanks to technological advances, the working week would be reduced to fifteen hours as workers were replaced by machines.

Enough said, my story is not one of economics.

One Hundred Years

As I left London for Moscow that balmy June day, the last thing I had in mind was a woman. My destiny had already been fixed and I would die an old bachelor, alone in Dublin. There would be an obituary in *The Irish Times* and a few words by the Dean of Trinity and that would be that.

What was uppermost in my mind, as I boarded the BA flight, was an article I had been asked to prepare on the events that led up to WWI in 1914 and the economic standing of the belligerents on the eve of that terrible and tragic war.

That war was foreseeable, though the scope and consequences weren't.

A century ago, Europeans had stood on the brink of a planetary war, that ranged from Western Europe to the Bismarck Archipelago in the South Pacific. The First World War not only wreaked a terrible carnage, but announced a devastatingly new kind of armed conflict.

The result of that war brought about changes unimagined by the kaisers, czars, emperors and kings of Europe, even in their worst nightmares.

Empires disappeared, kings lost their thrones and the czar overthrown by revolutionaries. The war signalled the end of modern empires and the start of three quarters of a century of Communism in Russia. The French and British saw their empires bled white by the sacrifice of their youth, as the sun set on the last days of their fading imperial glory.

The Treaty of Versailles fixed reparations, redistributed the cards and divided the spoils and above all other things opened

the way to a renewal of hostilities two decades later, which resulted in a world dominated by two new superpowers, the US and the USSR.

Those two conflicts brought five centuries of conquest and expansion by imperial powers to an end in a fratricidal conflict of never before seen proportions, the consequences of which continued to be felt across the planet as new forces jockeyed for power.

The Pushkin

The object of my trip was to join Sergei Tarasov, Pat Kennedy and Tom Barton for the inauguration of an exhibition of mid-Twentieth Century Contemporary Art, at the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, sponsored by INI Moscow and the London auction house Christie's.

It was late Friday afternoon and we'd been talking in the car about the latest turn of events in the Ukraine, where an Ilyushin-76 transport jet had been shot down by a missile as it approached Lugansk airport in the east of the country. The heavy transport jet was carrying forty nine Ukrainian troops, all of whom died. Petro Poroshenko, the newly elected Ukrainian president denounced the attack by pro-Russian insurgents as an act of terror.

It was the bloodiest incident since February and the violent demonstrations in March.

Once in the Museum we turned our attention to art and the exhibition, which was part of Christie's programme of events to sponsor its business activities in Moscow in the field of fine arts. The two hundred and fifty year old London auction house had been present in Moscow for twenty years and was soon to open its new office and showroom space in the Mokhovaya business centre, on the historic street of the same name opposite the Kremlin.

A couple of hours later, after the Champagne and speeches, the reception slowly wound down. I found myself in a deep discussion on the subject of Francis Bacon with Ekaterina Tuomanova, an expert on contemporary art at the auction house, and had not seen the time pass by.

'Its late,' I said looking at my watch, 'I'm afraid I'm keeping you.'

'Not at all.'

'Well I'd better be going, if I can find the hotel,' I joked.

'Which one?' she asked.

‘The National’

‘Oh. It’s not too far. I can show you the way if you like?’

A quick check told me Kennedy and Barton had already disappeared, no doubt as Tarasov’s guests at the Metropol.

‘Why not,’ I replied.

I wasn’t feeling up to yet another late vodka fuelled evening, drinking and clubbing with the crowd from InterBank. It was the expected thing for visitors, bars, clubs, hotels and restaurants, often surrounded by strikingly beautiful, barely dressed girls, some of whom were professionals, others just out for a good time, but all knocking back vodka shots under strobe lights or snorting cocaine in the restrooms.

I was getting too old and gladly accepted Ekaterina’s offer. As well as being able to show me the way home, she, in addition to being attractive and intelligent, would be pleasant company.

It was one of those deliciously warm early summer evenings and there was no sense of hurry as we walked in the direction of the Kremlin, then following its massive red walls towards Manezhnaya ploshchad.

Ekaterina told me of her home near Kaluga, a couple of hours drive to the south of the capital, and her student days at Moscow State University where she had studied in fine arts.

She showed me a photo of her six year old daughter, Alena. After her husband, an army officer, had been killed by a road side bomb near Grozny, she had decided to pursue her career in the world of art, returning to university and then the V. Surikov Moscow State Academy, before joining Christie’s at their Moscow branch.

In Red Square she pointed out the finer details of St Basils before we turned into the vast 19th century GUM shopping mall, then towards Okhotny Ryad where we stopped at Starbucks for a late coffee. Ekaterina was in no hurry and as we lingered over our coffees I couldn’t help noticing she still wore a wedding ring, on her right hand in the Russian tradition.

By the time we walked to the taxi stand it was almost one in the morning. As the taxi pulled away she waved goodbye, and to my surprise, I felt a sudden pang. It would be a long puzzling day before we met again, as she promised we would, for a concert at the Tchaikovsky Theatre the next evening.

Tchaikovsky

The day following evening, Ekaterina arrived in the lobby of my hotel precisely on the hour. To my great surprise she kissed me lightly on the cheek and took my arm.

‘Are you ready John?’

‘Yes, no problem. I’m ready.’

‘So let’s go, we can walk. It’s about ten minutes, on the corner of Tverskaya and Sadovaya.’

‘Let’s go.’

‘Tonight we have the Tchaikovsky Symphony Orchestra with Vladimir Fedoseyev conducting. The programme includes Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev and Bernstein.’

‘Wonderful.’

‘I hope you’ll like it?’

‘I’m sure I will.’

‘Not everybody likes Prokofiev.’

‘It depends on which piece.’

‘The theme is Romeo and Juliet,’ she said shyly.

‘Oh.’

‘Tchaikovsky’s Fantasy Overture, Prokofiev’s Romeo and Juliet suite and excerpts from Bernstein’s West Side Story.’

I glanced at her shoes as we stepped out onto Tverskaya, they were elegant black wedge sandals in patent leather. No problem for walking. She wore a red half off-the-shoulder tulle dress. She was extremely beautiful.

Myself I wore a dark jacket, a slim-fit white shirt with a high open collar, black narrow cut designer trousers and fashionable black shoes. You should know I’m no slouch when it comes to fashion.

I’m sure we made a fine couple, more than one passer-by gave us an admiring glance, me, tall with my swept-back pepper grey hair, she with her long red hair bobbing on her bare shoulders.

The evening was warm, the continental summer climate had settled in, it was still early and in any case the night would be short, very short.

Tverskaya was the smartest avenue in Moscow and crowds of strollers, some chic, some much less so, were out to enjoy the evening. It took us just ten minutes to reach the concert hall.

I have to say I was surprised by the elegance of the concert goers gathered in the foyer. Ekaterina looked around as if she was searching for somebody. We were pointed towards the

orchestra and an usherette showed us to our seats almost in the middle of the third row.

‘It’s always full,’ said Ekaterina looking around. She waved to a friend she spotted a couple of rows back to the left.

‘It’s Anna, she’s from Christie’s too, with her friend, Sasha.’

‘We always have tickets for our customers and guests.’

‘I hope I didn’t take anybody’s place.’

‘Of course not.’

‘Do you take many people out like this?’

‘It depends,’ she said teasingly.

‘On what?’ I insisted.

‘Whether I like them or not.’

‘Oh!’ I said lost for words.

A round of applause interrupted our conversation as the conductor appeared. The evening commenced with the Fantasy Overture.

At the interval she took my hand and led me to the orchestra bar where we were served a glass of Champagne with smoked salmon and caviar canapés just as Ekaterina’s friend appeared with her escort and introductions were made.

After another glass of Champagne, Anna announced they were going to the Cafe Pushkin after the concert and invited us to join them.

Ekaterina looked at me. I nodded in approval and she squeezed my hand evidently pleased by my acceptance.

The second part of the concert started with Bernstein’s Maria. As Ekaterina put her hand on mine I unexpectedly felt my heart tighten. I glanced at her, almost questioningly, but she looked ahead barely acknowledging me with her eyes as the pressure on my hand increased.

After the concert she bubbled with enthusiasm as we walked towards the Cafe Pushkin a couple of blocks away from the concert hall. The evening was warm and it was not yet ten when we arrived at the restaurant.

She told me how the French singer Gilbert Bécaud, after a concert he given in Moscow, had written ‘Natalie’ when he returned to Paris. He dedicated it to his Russian guide.

Ekaterina whispered the words, *‘We are walking around Moscow, visiting Red Square, and you are telling me learned things about Lenin and the Revolution, but I’m thinking, “I wish we were at Cafe Pushkin, looking at the snow outside the windows. We’d drink hot chocolate, and talk about something*

completely different... ”’

‘There’s no snow now,’ I said.

Ekaterina laughed, ‘If there was I could keep you warm.’

Café Pushkin, named after Aleksandr Pushkin, Russia’s greatest poet and novelist, was situated in a Baroque mansion on Tverskoy Boulevard, which with the streets around it played an important role in Pushkin’s life. He was born into a noble family that went back to the time of Peter the Great. Tragically he died young, killed in a duel with his brother-in-law, Georges-Charles de Heeckeren d’Anthès, a French officer, who had attempted to seduce his wife.

The Pushkin with its salmon pink-hued façade, open twenty four hours a day, was housed in a magnificently restored 18th century mansion, originally built by a Petersburg nobleman, who had served in the court of Catherine II, then in the middle of the 19th century it passed into the hands of a German aristocrat.

The aristocratic mansion had been transformed into separate dining rooms on different floors, accessed by an authentic looking 19th century caged lift, each with its own original décor and atmosphere. There was the Pharmacy Hall—added by the German, the Library, the grand Fireplace Hall, where diners ate under an ornate ceiling depicting the Nike—the Winged Goddess of Victory, and the Summer Terrace, where Anna had reserved a table, from which we could see Moscow’s golden domes.

It was magic, night had fallen and the lights of Moscow twinkled. Ekaterina translated the menu and we ordered blinchiki with black caviar, borscht and pelmeni, followed by the famous Czar’s Sturgeon, accompanied by vodka.

It was obviously not the first time Ekaterina and Anna had dined at the Pushkin, which did not explain why Ekaterina seemed as excited as a young girl. Then when she excused herself for the ladies room, Anna spoke to Sasha in Russian, he excused himself and left to admire the view over the city.

Anna then quietly explained to it was the first time she had seen Ekaterina looking so happy since the loss of her husband four years earlier.

‘Be kind to her,’ Anna whispered. ‘She’s such a nice person, it’s so sad she suffered so much.’

I nodded politely, in agreement, though I was more than a little perplexed, I barely knew Ekaterina, but it was if Anna was pushing a relationship fast forward that scarcely existed. Nevertheless, I somehow felt flattered and in a sense responsible.

Sasha returned as the vodka arrived, a carafe set in a block of

solid ice. The waiter poured four glasses just in time for Ekaterina, who looking more radiant than ever took her seat beside me at the table.

‘Ha здоробе,’ said Ekaterina raising her glass, looking directly into my eyes.

‘Sláinte mhaith,’ I replied, ‘that’s Gaelic,’ as I clinked my glass against hers.

We all laughed.

We talked about the exhibition and Ekaterina enthused about Pushkin’s poems and novels.

It was late when I walked Ekaterina back to her place, a renovated 19th century apartment building, off Tverskaya on ulitsa Yuliusa Fuchika.

We lingered at the entrance. She kissed me, took my face in her hands, kissed me on the lips. I was very surprised. Perhaps it was like kissing a dear friend, as Russians do. I hesitated unsure of myself. I responded, not very expertly, briefly wondering if I wasn’t a little drunk after the vodka.

‘I like you John. Tomorrow I’ll show you Moscow. Meet me here at ten for coffee then we’ll decide where to start,’ she said, then adding, ‘Apartment 44, Tuomanova.’

I remembered behind that cold façade Russians could be very emotional and very direct.

As I walked back to Tverskaya, I turned, she was still standing at the doorway, she waved and I waved back.

As an economist and historian in the public eye, I had always been careful with my personal relationships, steering clear of starry-eyed students and young women attracted by academics of my kind. Men of my age and profession who strayed always seemed to end up in some kind of scandal, which inevitably turned up on the pages of the Daily Mail, or some other tabloid.

That I’d stuck to the less exotic kind of women that were often found in my own somewhat cloistered world was not surprising.

Of course as a fairly well-known figure in the field of economic history I travelled extensively, lectures, conferences and that kind of stuff, and from time to time had encounters with women, when I felt sufficiently far from home to avoid snooping eyes.

That was before I met Ekaterina.

My family came from Kildare in Ireland, close to Newbridge, which had once been a centre for the British Army, and where a large cavalry barracks had been built in 1819. The men of the family had a long tradition as cavalry officers, serving mostly in the British Indian Army. One of my grandfathers served under Lord Kitchener at the Battle of Omdurman in 1898. But that's going back quite a way.

One of my ancestors had bought land near Newbridge in those early days to raise cavalry horses and farm. He called the house Francistown and it has remained in the family ever since.

When WWI broke out my father was a young officer in Bengal, where my grandfather had been a Lieutenant Colonel in the 7th Haryana Bengal Lancers. He saw service in the Sudan and Middle East, his elder brother who served in the 4th Cavalry, died in France in 1916. When my father returned home in early 1922, he joined the newly formed Republican Army after the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1922.

Newbridge barracks was then transferred to the Republican Army. It was closed and demolished soon after—it bore too many unhappy memories after being used as an internment camp during the Troubles.

He married in 1930, and I did not appear until much later, apparently unexpectedly, he was forty five at the time, fifteen years older than my mother.

I had a happy early childhood in Francistown, with my parents and surrounded by our horses. That changed when I started pre-prep weekly boarding school in Dublin at the age of seven. Until then I'd gone to the small St Patrick's Church of Ireland school in Francistown.

At boarding school I returned to our house in Dublin, or Francistown, at weekends and for holidays.

It was near home and I got used to it quickly. But cosy proximity to home changed when my father took me to London when I was eleven to attend Westminster School, in what was a strange and very different new world, one where in a way I felt grown up.

At Westminster I excelled in maths and history. Before, Irish history had been deathly boring, but it was impossible to avoid it in Dublin, then under the shadow of Éamon de Valera, a life long example of economic error. The proximity of Westminster School next to the Abbey, Parliament, Whitehall and Trafalgar Square, aroused an interest in history and after visiting the Victoria and Albert Museum I became enthralled by Britain's imperial exploits in which my family had directly

participated as officers in the Indian Army.

After leaving Westminster School, I took a long mind-broadening break travelling in Europe before heading for Trinity, where I spent three years reading modern history and economic science.

The next three years were the best, my return to Swinging London, where apart from enjoying myself, I spent three years at the London School of Economics, studying the dismal science, which I discovered was anything but dismal.

Kolomenskoye

I walked from my hotel to ulitsa Yuliusa Fuchika. It was Saturday morning and I dressed relaxed, black denims, a white shirt and pullover draped over my shoulders just in case the temperature dropped, which was not on cards according to the TV weather forecast.

Pausing at a kiosk on Tverskaya I bought a bouquet of different coloured roses. Then a few minutes later I arrived at Ekaterina's apartment building, it was strange I did not recognise the entrance I had seen the evening before in the twilight.

Peering through the glass street door, I could see into an inner lobby, there was a metal wall panel with buttons and names.

I pulled the door, then pushed, to no avail. There was a plaque with a code. Perplexed I stood on the steps wondering what to do next. I looked at my watch it was past ten thirty. I turned my eyes to the garden square across the road, hoping to see someone who could perhaps help me. There was no one, just the trees swaying slightly in their spring finery, and birds hopping amongst the freshly bloomed flowers on the borders.

Suddenly the door opened as a woman and a child walked out of the building. I nodded, grabbed the door and went in. In the lobby I checked the name panel and stopped at 'Apartment 44 Tuomanova', and pressed the button.

'Fourth floor John.'

There was a click and I pulled on the second door, entered and took the lift.

A few moments later I stepped out on the fourth floor. It was dark. I took off my sun glasses. At the end of the hallway daylight light streamed in through the open door of an apartment, then Ekaterina appeared.

'John,' she exclaimed planting a soft kiss on my cheek and ushering into the apartment.

I offered her the flowers and she kissed me again. I wished I'd bought a few more.

She looked ravishingly fresh.

A little girl appeared.

'Say hello to John.'

'Hello John,' she said with an almost perfect accent.

'What's your name?'

'My name is Alena.'

'Nice to meet you Alena. How old are you?'

'Six.'

'You're a big girl.'

She smiled shyly.

'Would you like some coffee John?'

'That would be nice.'

I sat down and admired the little girl. She resembled her mother, but her hair was blond.

'Where do you go to school Alena?'

She pointed and Ekaterina told me the school was a couple of blocks away.

As she prepared the coffee in the kitchen my eyes wandered around the apartment. I was seated at a table in the living room. There were three doors, bedrooms no doubt and a bathroom. Outside I could see the garden and the building on the opposite side of the square.

It was modern with stylish furniture, decorated with paintings and a couple of bronze table sculptures. A bookcase was lined with works on art and on the coffee table stood a vase in which Ekaterina had placed the roses.

She reappeared with a tray with a coffee pot, Russian style glass cups and a plate of biscuits.

In the clear daylight I could not help remarking she was a real redhead, the kind you see in Ireland. It was unusual in Russia where many women were blonde and quite a few of them coloured their hair various shades of red, from a metallic wine to reddish-brown, just like women at home colour their hair blonde.

'Have you had your breakfast John?'

'Yes, at the hotel.'

'How was it?'

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