

Introduction

There was no question that Veronika was an intelligent girl. She was also beautiful and she knew it all too well. Unfortunately though, to complete the trio, there was no doubt she was completely insane. We had known each other for only two weeks when she announced we had to get married. She was after all a twenty-four year old Ukrainian girl and if she wasn't married by the time she was twenty-five, then life wasn't worth living. A strange take on the subject of relationships, but that wasn't the insane part. The insane part was promising to send me her fingers as proof of her love when I refused to accept her proposal. That was definitely the insane part.

I suppose her unstable temperament should have been a lesson to me. The Ukraine, Russia, Georgia... these were countries not known for political or social stability and were home to some rather unpredictable characters to say the very least, or so I'd been told by the Western Media. With that in mind it might have been a good idea to stay away from that part of the world. Saying that, good ideas can also be sensible ones, and being sensible has never been my greatest attribute at the best of times! Russia was an 'All or Nothing' culture and Veronika had illustrated this to me quite clearly. This kind of culture didn't actually scare me, but rather had me intrigued and I had to find out more.

This is a story about how I, a naïve and obviously not too sensible Englishman decided to drop a life of stability in The UK and take the plunge into this unknown culture. The consequences of that plunge were dramatic to say the least, but a story I feel simply needs to be told.

Over the next 300 pages I want to talk you through this journey, one that saw me attempt to settle in Moscow, build a highly successful business, think I had found love and happiness on a number of occasions and then be brought back to down to earth with a resounding bump as a price for success. It is a story about cultural diversity, it is a tale of business success and failure. It is to an extent a recollection of some pretty amazing experiences that I had along the way. Most of all however, I hope it will be a journey you will enjoy reading about! It is certainly one I will never forget!

Chapter 1. Relationship Management

Looking back I can honestly say that Veronika Krasova was not being particularly rational when she asked me to get married to her after only knowing me for 2 weeks. After all, as she said.

'Matu, you know I am Ukrainian girl. I am twenty-four years old Ukrainian girl and my birthday next month. For Ukrainian girl she must marry before twenty-five or her life is without reason. So we need to marry fast.'

There was no doubt at all that Veronika was a great girl. She was beautiful, intelligent and very emotional. Too emotional really as normality was definitely not a idea she was familiar with. Something had to be either perfect or it wasn't worth having in the first place. As I was later to discover, rather typical of women from the former Soviet Union. It was also a pretty good reflection of the extremes evident in Russian culture generally according to Veronika. This was an environment where risks had to be taken even to survive, let alone be successful. But as is often the case, with these risks came the potential for massive rewards. In order to understand a little more about Veronika and how she came to make this statement, I think it's best to look back in time a couple of weeks first.

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We had been together only a few days when the first signs of this emotionality showed its face. I had invited her to my house for dinner and at that time rented out the spare room to one of my classmates from University, David. He was not only a tenant but a friend and I respected his opinion a great deal. He was able to

look at things practically and rationally, which were traits I was at times sadly lacking. I tended to get a bit carried away with the excitement of events, so it was the perfect opportunity to see what he thought of the wonderful Veronika.

David came home that evening and being a sociable and polite girl, she invited him to join us for coffee. This was the perfect opportunity for him to find out a bit more about her. Up until then, all he knew was that she was a lawyer, working for a law firm in London. He was intrigued as to how it was possible to be successful in such a cut-throat profession while at the same time retaining the air of femininity and elegance I'd told him she had. He was naturally suspicious of how this combination of traits could possibly exist in someone who was successful in that field. So within a few minutes of joining us, the questions started.

'So Veronika,' David said, 'I understand you work for a law firm in London. I work with a lot of lawyers and I must say it seems like a hard environment to work in.'

'Oh, you know lawyer?' Veronika said, 'This is wonderful. I like law but is difficult, yes? But I will be big in the law.'

Now I wasn't quite sure what being 'Big in the law' meant but could only assumed that Veronika wanted to become a law firm partner or something like that. This made me a little concerned because I knew exactly the kind of mentality needed to survive at that level of the profession. The words ruthless, aggressive and doggedly determined to succeed even if it meant treading on others, sprang to mind. Certainly the idea of such an innocent, sweet girl being able to survive the cut-throat journey to partnership was out of the question. Perhaps I had misheard or misunderstood what Veronika was saying. Or more likely she hadn't understood the question properly. After all, her level of English was good, but not that good. A misunderstanding of the question was the most likely reason for her response I thought. David was slightly more suspicious and obviously a little worried. He wanted to get to the bottom of this.

'That's interesting. I really respect people who have ambition and want to get to the top of their profession. So tell me, why do you want to be big in the law?'

This is where we get to find out that in fact Veronika did not aspire to be a capitalist law firm partner but simply had not explained herself properly.

‘That easy question David and I surprised you don’t know. I want be big in the law because I want to have blonde secretary with very big breasts. I want dress her in small skirts and low tops and she will sit opposite me. I keep on dropping things off my desk on the floor and she will pick them up. I get to see the lovely big breasts when she does and this is what being big in the law lets me do.’

No, I was clearly wrong with my assumption there then! Well you had to hand it to her, Veronika certainly seemed to have some interesting views as to what life as a partner in a law was really like. This was clearly a subject which could be discussed a lot more, but perhaps on another occasion. Part of me found it rather amusing. The other part however, found it a little worrying!

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A Short Term Proposal

I’m not going to blame David for the downfall of the relationship with Veronika but certainly after her rather graphic description at the dinner table, things between us had been slightly tense to say the least. Perhaps she sensed this and felt that there was not much time left before we split up. Whatever the motivation, she wanted to make the first move towards securing a long term relationship between us, before I decided that things were getting just a little too strange. It was possibly then that she decided to take the initiative and state that marriage would have to take place very quickly. As I say, on top of the dinner table confessions this was more than a bit of a shock to the system. I was still going to give her the benefit of the doubt though and thought that perhaps just a short cooling off period was in order.

Cooling off was not a notion that Veronika was familiar with. A couple of days after her marriage proposal something happened which made me realise it had not just been said in the heat of the moment. I came home from work to find a rather shocked yet amused David, standing in the living room near to the answering machine. He had got in from work, seen that a message had been left and decided to listen to it. This was according to him, the most incredible answer-phone message he had ever heard. This was something I had to hear. We both stood and listened as the message was replayed.

‘Matu, it’s Veronika Krasova.’ It really seemed strange that she referred to herself by her full name, especially as she felt we knew each other well enough to get married. Surely we could talk on a first name basis! ‘I want to tell you. You never find anyone who loves you the way I do. You never find anyone who cares the

way I do. We need get married and I want to prove I love you. I have thought and decided. I will prove my love by sending you my fingers. I cut off all my fingers and send them as proof of love. Then you see how much I love you. Goodbye.'

Jesus Christ! I could see what David meant when he said that it was like no other message he had ever heard. We looked at each other in stunned silence until he concluded:

'That woman is seriously insane!'

He was of course absolutely right. It didn't require a PhD in Psychology to determine that this was not your usual stable character we were dealing with here! However, regardless of the fact that threatening to send her fingers to me was a bit of a shock, my immediate thought was of a slightly more practical nature. I decided to share this with David.

'In cutting off all her fingers and sending them to me, she's at some stage going to get down to her last two. How is it then going to be possible to remove these final two if she can't hold anything to remove them with?'

According to him, although this was a perfectly rational and practical observation, now was not perhaps the best time to challenge her with this. She was probably not in a particularly good frame of mind to answer it. Yes, he had a point I suppose. After all, even though we had known each other for only two weeks, she was obviously devastated by the fact that I wouldn't marry her. So much so that she was contemplating taking rather extreme measures to say the least. I was going to say she was going to take matters into her own hands, but that would be an unfortunate choice of words on this occasion.

It was a relief then, that over the next couple of days I received no package containing fingers. This was good news but emotionally it was going to take a long time for Veronika to recover. Her life might never in fact be the same again. Or so I thought. Only two days later, I received another message. This one was slightly different.

'Matu, it's Veronika Krasova. You very stupid man. I phone to say I met James. James and I very happy and we get married. We go to America, have two children and three dogs. Goodbye.'

Wow! This was a woman who didn't waste any time. Just two days after declaring her undying love and threatening to send to me all her fingers as proof, she had not only met somebody new but already arranged to get married, move

to America and have two children. Oh, I almost forgot, and three dogs! Part of me actually felt upset that I was clearly so easily replaceable, yet really the feeling was of relief. This had been a rather lucky escape!

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Search & Selection

After the Veronika experience, life sort of returned to normal for a while. Or at least as normal as life can be, living in Romford. I don't know whether you've ever been there, but if you haven't then I would keep it that way. How is the best way to describe the place? After 7 in the evening I should imagine that Beirut would be quite a good comparison. Maybe that's a slight exaggeration but the point is this. If you manage to succeed in traversing the perilous slopes of the not so great River Rom in an endeavor to reach the safety of your home, without being hit by a flying bottle, then you've done pretty well. As I lived 15 minutes on foot from the station, there was almost cause for daily celebration if I'd managed to get home without sustaining injury.

I had gone to school in Basildon, also in Essex, so should have been prepared for this kind of environment. However, I should add that I was at the age of nine, the only boy in my class who couldn't hot-wire a car. With this in mind, I was quite a way behind the locals and not adequately prepared for Romford. I certainly didn't feel comfortable there. It was definitely not the kind of place to which I wanted to invite a young lady for dinner. Veronika had been an exception as she didn't know what Romford was like, so it was possible to convince her to come there. It was not likely though, that I would find another girl who was quite so uninformed about the area. If I did find one who knew the town but was still willing to come to the house, then probably this was the kind of girl who at the age of nine would have beaten me in the hot-wiring exam. Not the kind of girl I would willingly want to introduce to my mother. Never the less the search for a suitable companion needed to start somewhere and although different in many ways, David and I did appear to share quite similar views when it came to girlfriend requirements. It wasn't that either of us was unreasonably fussy, but there were certain general requirements.

We were both working in London at that time and it was rather nice to have some company when traveling to work each day. It was also quite amusing for me because David had never been to Essex before moving to Romford and it was definitely proving to be a new experience for him. The post 7pm bottled dodging was not all that was new. The whole mentality of the Essex Man and Essex Girl

was going to take a bit of getting used to. He had after all, come from an educated family background where stimulating discussions about current affairs over the dinner table were common place. Imagine his surprise then, when he discovered that the general topics of conversation on the Liverpool Street line into London would usually focus on issues quite a long way from these conversations. On the part of The Essex Man, the talk was about white vans and 'birds with large boobs.' In the case of The Essex Girl, conversations were slightly more advanced but focused on, how good her boobs looked, whether her hair had been bleached enough and whether the right combination of the above had been reached in order to maximize the possibility of getting a closer look at the back of an Essex Man's van... from the inside. These were clearly not the kind of discussions David was having with his colleagues at the office judging by his reaction.

As it happens these conversations were pretty amusing to listen to but didn't give either of us much confidence in finding an appropriate partner. Certainly not whilst traveling into work each day anyway. Don't get me wrong, some of the girls on the train were very attractive. Some of them were even dressed in what could be seen as appropriate work attire. Almost all however seemed to be experts in the 3 choice conversational topics of Boob Size, Hair Colour and White Van Interiors. Not necessarily in that order I hasten to add.

It became more and more apparent that we were both looking for girls who were 'normal' and if they did exist in Essex, they certainly didn't speak on the train and never wanted anything to do with us.

Normality is of course a subjective concept but during our many discussions since he started renting the room, David and I both agreed that perhaps finding a girl who was not obsessed with hair colour, breast size and white vans, was not being unreasonably selective. The selection criteria were not particularly harsh.

- Pretty (absolutely gorgeous not essential)
- Presentable, primarily reflected by not going into work in an 8 inch miniskirt
- Able to have a conversation without saying 'Do you like my boobs?'
- The kind of girl you could leave alone with a member of your family without being worried that by the time you got back, the conversation would have taken a nasty turn towards one of the three choice topics

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Time For a Change

Although the experience with Veronika had been dramatic and had not ended well, I couldn't forget her and it very soon occurred to me that if she had been so beautiful, intelligent and passionate about life, then maybe, just maybe, other girls from her part of the world were similar. Hopefully some were even mentally stable and were pretty attached to their fingers, quite literally. Perhaps, just perhaps, I would find love and happiness in Russia. On top of this, Veronika had made it clear to me that there was a lot of money to be made out in Moscow, advising Russian companies on how to do business with The West. I had been thinking about this for some time and came to a conclusion. It may well be a big risk but I was still only twenty and some international experience wasn't going to do me any harm. Russia was without question not a country I would have ever thought of going to, had it not been for Veronika's recommendation. But how bad really could it be? Surely no more dangerous than Romford after 7 o'clock in the evening!

In my mind I had already decided, I was going to go out to Moscow. Here I would find money, success and the perfect woman who was beautiful, sophisticated, sweet and more importantly not ready to cut her fingers off!

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Within a week I had signed up to an English Language Teaching Course in Moscow as this was going to be a good way to spend some time there and get to know the place. During the course I could see whether there really was any need for Western business advice there as Veronika had claimed. My flight was booked, visa had been arranged by the language school and I was ready to go! Everything was set and I was going on an adventure.