

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### *The Education of Olga -1994*

Olga was in the boxing ring in the FSB training center, it was part of Viktor's training. Her sparring partner was a guy called Dimitri a military FSB agent, part of Russia's Special Forces. Viktor felt he was too old to train Olga properly and had to find an adequate sparring partner. It had to be a man, not a woman because that's where the danger came from for Olga. Dimitri had been chosen because he was not your usual Russian criminal. He had all the physical features of a thug but fought with fairness and demonstrated respect towards others, specifically women. Viktor had known him for a while and knew he would not let his testosterone levels overwhelm him. He could be trusted. Viktor loved Olga and would not see her hurt. She had an exquisite face, and he wanted to keep it that way. Olga had trained in kickboxing for the past three years and was quite good at it. She had all the physical attributes for boxing. Olga was tall, which allowed her to keep her opponents at a distance, with broad shoulders and a body made of all muscles - no fat. They had been punching and moving around the ring for the past ten minutes. Dimitri was impressed. The punches were packed with energy. He had rarely seen this in women. Viktor was pressing Dimitri to attack her and start the fight. Viktor's instructions had been clear; avoid hard blows to the face. No uppercuts to damage her teeth and no punches to her nose. Dimitri was about to deliver one of his signature moves; a full sweep to the ankles to make his opponent fall. He would fake a sweep with his right leg knowing his opponent would instinctively lift his/her leg to avoid the kick. Dimitri would then swing his left leg for a full sweep, which would knock down any opponent standing on his/her remaining leg. He went for it, but she read it immediately. Instead of lifting her leg, she pulled it back slightly and with her new stance delivered an impressive right hook to his head. He was stunned and grateful for his protective headgear. Working on her momentum, Olga backed off and followed with a kick blow above Dimitri's hip. At that level the punch caught Dimitri's ribs. It was a massive blow, which took the wind out of him for a few

seconds. He backed off with some splendid footwork as she kept coming at him. He struck back throwing a left-left-right-left series of punches, but she quickly dodged them. Dimitri was fascinated. Olga was still calm, composed and breathing easily. Dimitri had a colossal physique of 1.97 meters for 110 kilos. To say Dimitri, was all muscles, would have been an understatement. He was all steel. Most people would never dare fight him, and when they did, they were tense, clumsy, forgot to breathe and thus tired easily. He chose to retaliate with measure avoiding punches to her lovely face as instructed by Viktor. Dimitri delivered a waist-high kick to her stomach. Olga literally flew off the ground and into the ropes. She bounced off the ropes like a doll and flew back to him with a fierce one-two combination to his face. Dimitri was pissing blood from his nose, and Viktor entered the ring yelling "Stop-Stop Immediately." The fight was quickly escalating, and Viktor wanted to avoid any blood especially from Olga's side. Both boxers left for the changing rooms to take a hot shower and get dressed. Dimitri got all cleaned up and quickly went to see Viktor.

- "Wow," said Dimitri smiling "the girl's got stamina, better to entertain her over drinks than on a ring."
- "Woo-woo! Dimitri hold on to your horses." Objected Viktor vehemently. "Olga's not one of those Matryoshka nesting dolls you can add to your collection!"
- "Sorry Viktor, I didn't know she was spoken for. Congratulations on your new girlfriend. She's wonderful."
- "You misunderstand me, Dimitri, she's not my girlfriend. I'm merely acting as her foster father. She's been through some rough times in Chechnya. She needs to learn of a normal life before experiencing it."
- "Well if you or Olga need a sparring partner, I'd be happy to offer my services. Take care Viktor."

Dimitri left the boxing center. He enjoyed practicing as a sparring partner, not so much for the money, which came in handy given his ridiculous allowance in the military, but for the knowledge, he would gain. Very few guys would fight him given his reputation. So the only source of information he could obtain, as far as fighters attacking techniques, was from sparring.

- "Where's Dimitri?" asked Olga as she popped in next to Viktor.
- "He had to leave but sends his best," responded Viktor defensively
- "You did well in the ring, Olga, but remember to focus on the weak spots: crotch, neck, and knees."
- "I know, but I wanted a fair fight, not a street fight. Don't worry that advice is burned in my brain." Said Olga jokingly.

Olga's schooling had been interrupted by the war. Viktor felt that home schooling was better for her. She would work at the Center while he kept an

eye on her. The Russian educational system had deteriorated with the fall of Communism. Drugs, alcohol, and sex were ravaging high school students. Viktor was well educated and could pass on all of his extensive readings and life-long lessons. Olga was an eager student, filled with an insatiable appetite and curiosity for literature, arts, science, and history. She would show up every evening after dinner with a list of questions on her readings whether Viktor was tired or not. She had a passion for learning and would never let the Internet interfere her studies. She also showed character by tidying the house, preparing meals recognizing she had to pull her weight with the chores. She demonstrated equanimity in her behavior. Her disposition and moods were always positive and sincere. If at the beginning Viktor felt she might prove a burden in his personal life, he was quickly converted by her personality. Viktor no longer had a personal life; she was his personal life and he had never been happier in his life. There was a measure of stability now in his existence, and he was grateful for that.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### *Meet Bill*

My first encounter with Bill, who was to become my best friend, was in Dusseldorf. To picture the fellow just imagine a young Jack Nicholson, physically and mentally! Yes, he was one flight short of a Cuckoo's Nest. We bumped into each other at a nearby office Italian café. My obvious shortcomings in German or Italian tipped him off, and he introduced himself and proceeded in ranting about our German colleagues. How they understood nothing about investments, brokerage, banking, currencies, rates... life in one word. Of course, as he was describing his differences with the indigenous Teutonic population, his voice grew stronger and started carrying beyond the café's perimeter. Most of the patrons and staff were beginning to wonder what was this quarrel between us was all about.

Unfortunately for Bill, my order was a single shot of espresso, and with meetings scheduled with the same Germans he was ditching, I felt introductions were made and that we could pursue this heated discussion later in the day or hopefully never. So after a "Gotta-Go, see you back in London" I exited the coffee shop to be greeted by the cold, dry weather I had missed so much since moving to London. I had important matters to discuss with my German colleagues. In fact, I was about to close a sweet deal, whereby their network would raise money for a fund I was customizing to suit the German public taste. A guaranteed capital fund, which of course would be indexed to the Dax index, denominated in Deutsche Mark (DM) and offering a minimum coupon of 2% p.a. For those of you with only an academic knowledge of the DM, I can confirm it was the only decent currency in Europe. All other currencies kept devaluating and adding zeros as time went on. It

wasn't that difficult to be a millionaire in France or a billionaire in Italy, but as soon as you exchanged your exotic money for the real deal, you were quite happy your employer was picking up your travel tab as everything seemed so expensive.

The deal originated four months earlier, as I was in the habit of touring Asia in August to raise money from a region, where people were working hard six days a week while Europe was enjoying five weeks of vacation. Asia, very much like Germany, had always been kind to me; rewarding my marketing and sales effort with huge commissions, as most of these funds were retail by nature. Asia was the ground where I nearly reached \$100 million of assets under management with a 2% commission and a 3% upfront fee. Somehow the capital guarantee made it magical and not only to the end investors but also to the sales people... The strongest argument after a long sales pitch was; What have you got to lose? Nothing, the bank is guaranteeing your capital! Of course, upfront fees were not included and time value of money or opportunity cost was a notion often forgotten by all. Individuals do want desperately to invest and feel dumb letting money lie on their current accounts. Although the ocean is beautiful, everyone wants to hang around the pool where depths and temperatures are known, and a lifeguard is always on duty. No waves, no salt, no sharks roaming the water. In fact, most people felt happy and smart to convey they had found an excellent way to invest, no arguments with the Misses. You were not gambling the money away; instead, you were a very responsible person, who just cut short all conversations on the matter of money. Not many people dwell on the psyche of the ultimate investor. Whether institutional or retail, the person you are selling to is unlikely to be the "ultimate" investor. We all report to someone, a boss, a wife, a father or a grannie. So your sales pitch is passed-on by someone else who is too happy to relay the argument: What have (you/we) got to lose?

These achievements had brought me to London against my will. I was offered to head product development for the European Consumer Bank, a job-based in London. I was told that they had been searching for a candidate on the outside for some time and felt why bother since they had me on the inside as the perfect candidate. Reflecting on the emergence of the Euro, I could see the writing on the wall. All Continental European investment hubs would be centralized in London with the arrival of the single currency. I decided to hedge my bets and negotiate to keep both jobs three days in London, two in Paris. That incredibly stupid idea destroyed my personal life. I'm proud to say I was the agent of my own destruction.

I moved to the windy European city, and at first, I was miserable. They gave me the corner office looking over a rundown administrative brick-building. In the winter the sunset at 4 p.m. and rose at around 9 am, which meant I would

never see the sun being in the office all day. After work I would head for the hotel to watch the CNN 24-hour loop, go to bed and start the agonizing process all over the next day.

Bill was part of the office scene and like me a foreigner stranded in London but by choice as far as he was concerned. Bill was an adopted kid who never felt he fit in Main Street USA. His goal was to live abroad. The disillusionment struck soon after his arrival. He was lonely and still disenfranchised. The unity of language was the only common denominator between Brits and Americans. The culture divide was the Grand Canyon. Bill did have a friend I didn't share: the bottle. He was a social drunk, so he invited me to his hangout. The bar was located on Walton Street and went by the name of the Eclipse. Bill would later rebrand it to "Headquarters." It would come to be the center of our social life. It was what they called in London a Euro-trash bar. Lot's of continental Europeans, almost no Brits, cocktails were served, no beer pints. Unlike the City's pubs, the last call was later than 11:00 pm, it served drinks until midnight, which meant we could still head home early enough to make it to the office the next morning at 9:00 am. It wasn't really Headquarters but rather home away from home for all the disenfranchised foreign bankers in London.

Our sorties to the Eclipse were tame to start with, killing time, talking shop. The bar was ideally placed in walking or crawling distance from my apartment on 57 Pont Street. The bar was filled with "golden boys" and "gold diggers." The place went crescendo from Sunday to Friday. For the most part, I had fun just hanging around and joking with Bill. I drank red Martini-Rosso; he drank vodka and lots of it. The evenings started off mildly. We would enjoy the banter and fend off the surrounding girls by reassuring them of our attention when we were finished.

Bill's combination of cocaine and alcohol would trigger the most outrageous while funny conduct as the evening progressed. He once got into a pissing contest with a couple for showing up late at dinner at a restaurant where Bill's girlfriend (Jenny) and I were to attend. Jenny split fed-up with the wait causing fury with Bill. Arriving at the restaurant the guest couple was unapologetic. The woman found all the possible reasons for her tardiness, but no sincere excuses followed. In retaliation, her boyfriend was splashed with a glass of vodka and Bill slapped her at the back of her head. The yellow belly boyfriend complained to me that Bill was mistreating his girlfriend to which I responded that it was his prerogative to set things right not mine. We all got kicked out but not before Bill managed to get his hand on the boyfriend's cell phone. He never got it back. Bill answered all his calls with the invariable response, that yes, it was Mario, the gay coward who would be delighted to take it up the ass.

Bill would never back away from a fight. The Eclipse crowd loved him especially the staff because of the large tips he would drop. Bill would never leave before the last call. In fact, on some occasions, he slept at the bar, an exception the owner allowed for his best customer. One night he was so drunk, he literally shit himself. I was told this was not uncommon with alcoholics. Bill wasn't fazed out and more importantly; he was not going to back away from the bar. He just discreetly scooped the turd out of his pants with his hand and went straight to the toilet, pushing the door open only to witness another type of addict doing a line of cocaine on the toilet's sink. Undisturbed Bill volleyed over the guy for a perfect two-point hoop. The cokehead's only response was "Well there's a first!" Bill resumed his evening at the bar with the sense of a mission well accomplished.

Bill had had not only a difficult childhood but a testing love life as well. He had started off his professional life marrying an executive at the New York Times. Bill had done, what he thought, were all to right things: good job at the bank, white picket fenced house in Connecticut and a golden retriever to match. Unfortunately, he came home early one day to find his wife in bed with his best friend. I once asked him how he got over it and he told me "sex, a lot of sex." His prescription for the following years laid in hookers, loose women, and the occasional New York peep show, he would once fall asleep in. He was a charming, funny and social guy when limited to a buzz.

Bill had many pals, friends of all backgrounds. He had one close friend from back in New York. They had shared loads of personal adventures. Bill had told me that "Sam" was going through a painful divorce and was basically penniless, so Sam was going to be Bill's guest in London for a while. Sam had married a gorgeous Venezuelan beauty. All his friends, including Bill, had told him he was making a mistake. Sam was a tall, fat Jewish tax attorney with a steady job, but not really what the ladies call a catch. Folks couldn't understand the association between the hot Latina chick and fat boy. Sam was a bit paranoid regarding the Government and taxes. His job was, after all, to advise big corporations on how to "optimize," code-word for tax avoidance. He devised a plan to put all his assets under his lovely wife's name. Poor judgment, considering he didn't fully trust her. She was not very attentive, but he used to that. He was boring, not attractive and had never been the center of attention when it came to the babes. Sam still felt it was more than that. She just didn't want to be around him. So one day to clear his head he decided to take a day off and follow her. Staying invisible in New York City was not very difficult given the street crowd. He saw her going into a hotel, then another one and another one. He was starting to get the picture of the infidelity but still was intrigued by the multitude of hotels, so he mustered all his courage and knocked on the fourth hotel room. When the guest opened

the door to his room, he saw an ordinary businessman in his boxer and his wife peeking in the background. That was all the explanation he needed. She was a call girl! In short, he was married to a hooker. Sam and Bill would commiserate for many years until Bill left for London.

One afternoon we were all three at the terrace of the Enterprise, a nearby restaurant to the Eclipse. Bill had introduced me to Sam and given me the heads-up before Sam had even landed at Heathrow. It was not out of gossip but rather out of respect to avoid me touching on a delicate subject. Sam headed for the restrooms as we were sharing beers at the terrace. Bill and I were deep in a portfolio management discussion when Sam came back. Sam was not in the investment management business, so we naturally interrupted our debate, as he returned to the table. Sam had a quizzical look then stared at Bill with fury saying, "You told him my wife was a hooker!" This provoked a huge laughter from Bill: "No, but YOU just told him!" I had to listen to a second rendition of the events by Sam this time. That version was not as comical. Sam's path would cross mine many years later after he had immigrated to Israel while still working for the US State Department.

### ***Middle Eastern Affairs – 1994-1997***

*1994 to 1997 were also volatile years but of a different nature in the Middle East. December 1994 saw perhaps, after the 1993 WTC bombing, the most premonitory episode for events that would come about in New York in 2001.*

*The Armed Islamic Group (GIA), a terrorist group, seeking to establish an Islamic State in Algeria, hijacked an Air France (AF) Airbus 300 in Algiers. The plane was bound for Paris. The hijacking had started on Christmas Eve, and the Algerian security had quickly understood that the pilot's takeoff had been delayed by the presence of terrorists pretending to be Algerian security forces on the aircraft. The plane was immediately surrounded by Algerian Special Forces to prevent the aircraft from taxiing to the runway. Negotiations between the Algerian authorities and the GIA did not go well. The GIA executed two passengers, an Algerian policeman, and a Vietnamese diplomat, to drive the point that they were serious about their warning and that they would continue to execute passengers if their demands were not met. Discussions between the Algerians and French authorities were not going any better. The Algerians refused to let the plane take off as the French Prime Minister had demanded. The French were rightfully concerned about the French citizens on board and wanted to defuse the situation. They also believed they were better prepared to handle such acts of terrorism. On Christmas day the hijackers executed, this time, a French national; the*

*French Embassy Chef. The French Prime Minister, this time, held Algerian authorities responsible for the killing of three passengers. The AF flight finally took off 39 hours after the initial hijacking. The original destination had been changed to Marseilles instead of Paris. The reason disclosed to the terrorists was that the plane had consumed too much kerosene during its 39 hours on the Algiers airport tarmac. Unofficially the French authorities knew, from a mole in the GIA, that the real objective of the terrorists was to crash the plane into the Eiffel Tower. After landing in Marseilles, it was evident to the French authorities that this plane would never be allowed to take off again. It took 13 hours for the French Special Forces to organize an assault. They were able to free all 206 remaining hostages and crew of 12 on the plane. The French Special Forces killed all four terrorists. The Airbus had been damaged during the assault and was written-off. The victory against the Islamic terrorists was a bittersweet one. In retaliation, the GIA killed four Catholic priests back in Algeria.*

*The incident had agitated Bob who had been glued to the TV monitors as the hijacking was unfolding. What had alarmed him was not the Islamic nature of the hijacking, there had been many over the years, but by the ultimate use of the plane as a weapon of destruction aimed at a national symbol.*

