

BLACK MARTENITSI

Svetla Damyanovska

She held the *martenitsa*¹ with two fingers – a small red and white tassel, tied with black thread, here and there smudged with something red. The accompanying message, made up of letters cut and pasted from newspaper headlines, read: “Unless you pay \$1 million, your wife and daughter will not only need a good hairdresser, but a very good makeup artist to make them look decent in their coffins. Wait for instructions.”

The secretary Mimi screamed and threw down the *martenitsa* the second she realized it was made from locks of hair. After managing to control her shaking hands, she picked up the phone – first she called the police, then she called her boss, whose mail she had been opening and getting ready for his arrival at 10 o'clock. Her boss, the prominent construction magnate Mr. G.B. Nedyalkov, became hysterical when he found out the order of her actions, but it was already too late.

Laboratory analyses showed that the *martenitsa* received with the letter on the morning of March 1 was really made of human hair – the white blond lock was from his six-year-old daughter and the red (in fact, it was Londa Color's trademark “Burgundy” hue) from his second wife! They had compared strands of hair collected from his wife's brush left on the dresser in the bedroom of their house in Boyana, as well as a few strands caught in one of the colorful elastic bands used to tie back the child's long hair. The blood on the thread undoubtedly belonged to Mrs. Nedyalkova – this was established with the help of a used maxi-pad found in the bathroom wastebasket.

Bonnie Nedyalkova and little Ellen (a child from his first marriage) had left the previous afternoon to visit Mrs. Nedyalkova's sister in Plovdiv. But they never arrived. Mr. Nedyalkov only now found this out – last night he had been working late with Mimi on an urgent project and when it finally crossed his mind to call it was already past one in the morning, so he decided to put off phoning until the next day.

Wracked by chest pains Nedyalkov lay on the couch in his office, and Mimi cried huge crystal tears as she made coffee for the police and the paramedics. All efforts to trace the Nedyalkovi women had thus far proved unsuccessful.

A second letter arrived the following day. A baby tooth and a woman's eye tooth with bloody roots were pierced and tied on a red-and-black braid. The ominous *martenitsa* was still dangling in front of G.B. Nedyalkov's eyes from the forceps the police used to remove it from the envelope as, fighting the urge to vomit, he opened the letter and read: “The police have gotten involved – so the price has jumped to \$2 million. Guess what you'll get next time...”

Nedyalkov had no desire whatsoever to guess or even imagine what might arrive in tomorrow morning's mail, yet under the letters the horrifyingly bright dactyloscopic prints of his wife and child's whole hands glowed scarlet. On the back of the letter there was a postscript: “If you don't want to receive a third *martenitsa* – wire the money.” This was followed by a bank account number, which turned out to be in the Cayman Islands. Nedyalkov managed to arrange for the payment shortly before having a heart attack.

No letter arrived on the third day; however, a cop patrolling Rakovski Street was handed a crying six-year-old girl named Ellen who had been abandoned in the Luciano patisserie. She said that she had gone with Bonnie to visit some friend of hers in a beautiful villa with a high stone wall, a pool and two big dogs. When she woke up that morning, Bonnie wasn't there, but the lady told her that they would go to meet her stepmother, who had gone out shopping. The lady was

¹ On March 1, Bulgarians celebrate the *Baba Marta* or Grandmother March holiday by exchanging *martenitsi* (sg. *martenitsa*), small red and white bracelets or tassels usually made of yarn.

angry. She put Ellen into a shiny red car and slammed the doors. When they arrived in Sofia they went to drink coffee and wait for Bonnie. The girl ate a piece of cake and drank apricot juice. The lady said she was going to the bathroom and never came back.

Ellen Nedyalkova had no visible injuries, but she was missing one of her front teeth and her hair was about 10 cm shorter (according to Mimi). The child said that it hadn't hurt very much to lose the tooth, and the lady had given both her and Bonnie new hairdos. Overall, they had had a very good time. She had even been allowed to play with the dogs. Overall, Ellen was fine.

They could discover nothing more about Mrs. Nedyalkova, however. They found her car, which had fallen 15 m into the bed of the swollen Iskar River after a sharp turn in the gorge. The windshield was broken. The murky fast-flowing water had most likely carried her body far away. In any case, they never found it.

Nedyalkov mourned his wife for a long time. A very long time. Until March 1 of the following year, when he received a big beautiful postcard from Paris, covered in Bonnie's unmistakable tiny handwriting: "Thank you, darling! You provided the startup capital for my new life together with my beloved dentist. We are extremely happy. We've gotten settled and his business has taken off. We're on vacation at the moment and have hopped over to Europe.

Congratulations to you and Mimi as well! Tell her that every subsequent Mrs. Nedyalkova should remember that there will be yet another secretary who will take her place. Give my love to Ellen!

P.S. By the way, her tooth had already fallen out on its own, and she really needed a haircut. As for the eye tooth, it wasn't mine. And of course, there is a time of the month during which every woman can secure a sufficient quantity of blood to earn \$2 million absolutely painlessly.

Happy Grandmother March! I wish you health and happiness."

Translated by Angela Rodel