

BLIND DATE
by Kristin Dimitrova

translated from the Bulgarian by Kristin Dimitrova

He had a thin, longish face, with a thoughtful expression, and his eyes shone like those of a forest animal caught in someone's headlights. They must be green. Or blue. Even yellow would be right for them. But unfortunately, the pictures of those bold enough to send one in at all were black and white. And so that it wouldn't be mistaken for the obituary page, the editors of the Sea Tango had framed the "Lonely Hearts" section with tiny little stylised hearts, their left auricles slightly hypertrophied compared with the right.

Man seeking girlfriend, up to 35, non-smoker, non-drinker. Should be understanding. Serious intentions. R.D.

There was a PO Box number in Targovishte.

Krassimira looked out of the window and saw two fat cats in the courtyard. They immediately looked up in the hope that someone might toss them an unfinished sandwich. Lost in thought, she opened a packet of cup cakes: they helped her think better. R.D. was obviously a bit of a clod but he seemed well-meaning. "Girlfriend" sounded good; "up to 35" didn't, especially if you were 38, and thinking of responding to the ad. She scratched her sweaty back with her ballpoint pen. His eyes were remarkable though, as if he'd had a phosphorescent eye transplant. Phosphorescent eyes with serious intentions.

Hoping she had another 15 minutes before everyone came back to the office from their lunch break, Krassimira started writing her answer behind the safe bank of potted magnolias that lined her desk.

Hello! My name is Krassimira and I work at the Varna Aquarium. I'm an ichthyologist, and even though I like my work, I'm lonely. I wanted to make a career for myself first and then think about a serious relationship. But at 34, I'm wondering whether it was the right decision. I enclose a photo. The dog belongs to friends of mine. I hope you will write back.

Krassimira

At that moment Stephana came in, the parting in her salt and pepper hair looking dramatically like a flash of lightning. She had almost reached her own desk when she suddenly veered towards Krassimira's.

"Well, well, what on earth are you writing on that purple paper?" her smoker's contralto boomed out.

Krassimira tried to hide the sheet of paper, but Stephana managed to get hold of it. They both clutched it hard and in the end Krassimira let go: she didn't want it to rip. Stephana began to read, distinctly triumphantly at first, and then with genuine interest. "Well, well, the Varna Aquarium! Darling, we're co-ordinators in a welfare department - in case you hadn't noticed. What's this business with the aquarium?"

"Well, big deal" You once pretended on the phone you were General Dashev!" Krassimira was furious.

"And anyway, I'd almost finished my thesis on the fish population of the Kamtchia and if the salary hadn't been so pathetic, I'd probably still be working at the aquarium."

"Yeah, feeding the scad."

"So? Here I fill in forms all day.... I don't know who I am anymore." Krassimira snatched the purple letter back, folded the photo inside it, and began to copy out the address. Stephana watched over her shoulder to make sure she got it right. When Krassimira finished Stephana shook her head and muttered "not a good idea".

"Oh come on, why won't you just let me live?" Krassimira protested, this time on the verge of real anger.

Stephana put on the look of someone unjustly accused of stealing. She went over to her desk but once again didn't sit down at it. Instead, she dragged her chair over to Krassimira's desk.

"So, you're writing to someone you don't even know, are you?"
"Well, what's the big deal? When you first meet someone, you're meeting someone you don't know, aren't you?"

Stephana's lips tightened. She shook her head again and then decided to put her disapproval into words: "What nonsense."

The firmness with which that pronouncement was made suddenly took away at least twenty degrees from the sweltering June heat. Stephana took a deep breath and launched into a lengthy explanation:

"My cousin had this neighbour. He was some sort of a food merchant, both retail and wholesale - of the half-breed that appeared after the fall of Communism - and often travelled on business. All the people in the neighbourhood thought of him as a quiet, kind man, always happy to help. If anyone ran out of sugar in the middle of the night, they'd go to him and he'd get some out of his own cellar. He gave them a good price on vegetable oil, cheese, even kangaroo meat - he was the main distributor of kangaroo meat in the region. Have you ever tasted kangaroo meat?"

"No."

"Good. So one night people heard a woman's screams coming from his house. They called the police. When the police came, they rang the bell, and then banged on the door for some 15 minutes before he let them in. Finally, when he opened the door, they saw he was wearing clean clothes, but there was blood in his hair. They discovered a woman in the cellar, unconscious, hanging from a hook in the ceiling and six heads buried in the ground - just heads, no bodies."

"You're kidding!"

"No kidding. And you know the worst? He was no food merchant. He owned property, that's where his money came from. And when he pretended he was away on business, he was actually in the cellar, with his latest victim. He bought the stuff wholesale, just to fool the neighbours."

"And the kangaroo meat?"

Stephana pressed her lips again.

"Kangaroo meat my foot. And when I think I visited my cousin and we had these cutlets...."

The sweet scent of the magnolias wafted over through the heat like the sound of a children's church choir. A tiny white petal dropped onto the desk and rolled down beside Krassimira's bright red nails.

"And what has that got to do with my letter?" she finally asked.

"Well, that's what I'm trying to tell you. He got to meet his victims through internet chat rooms."

"Ah well, I found my R.D. in the newspaper," Krassimira said and began to get her stuff ready to go. Suddenly the phone rang. Stephana answered it. On her way out Krassimira said,

"That's a daft story."

"No, no, no," Stephana was saying into the phone, "we don't deal with schools - only the disabled, and kindergartens."

That "no" was so emphatic, though, that it left little doubt it applied to a lot more than kindergartens or the disabled, and Stephana's look, fixed on Krassimira, spoke volumes.

Krassimira's first job was to pass by the post office to mail the letter, just in case Stephana's story made her change her mind. Then she went to see a film - alone. When she came out of the cinema, the sun was on its way down, dragging the summer heat away with it somewhere far to the west. Krassimira headed home but suddenly decided to go through the Marine Gardens, something she hadn't done since her senior year in high school. She sat down on a bench, peeled the foil off a chocolate and watched the sea for a while. It advanced and retreated like someone who, despite his huge weight, cannot make up his mind. It had darkened and only from time to time did some limp seaweed, snatched from the quiet depths of the bay, adrift on the current, float upon the dirty foam of its surface. Then the wave rolled over and the weed disappeared, never to be seen again. Or perhaps it just turned unrecognisable.

Like most people who live by the sea, Krassimira hardly ever noticed it. Tonight, however, she studied it carefully, imagining it was her own agitated soul trying to get a foretaste of the hope and excitement of meeting her mysterious and handsome stranger. Instead, in spite of the heat, she felt a chill go through her. She could almost feel a dark hand stretching out all the way from Targovishte and grabbing her by the throat.

"Don't be daft," she said again, this time to herself, startling a young couple necking on the next bench. But since even the waves' evening breath was unable to quell her growing doubts, she decided to go home and soak her feet in hot water and sea salt.

As she sat with her feet soaking in the basin, however, she was struck by the most terrible thought. She couldn't possibly break that date. She'd written her address on the envelope, and there was the picture, too. True, it was a rather old picture, 10 years old, in fact, but it was still a perfect likeness. So the guy could catch the first train over and slit her throat in a matter of a couple of hours, except, of course, if he first went to the aquarium. She should write him another letter. But what should she say? That she had thought it over and changed her mind? No, no - that would only arouse his suspicion. She got a pencil and something to write on and, leaving wet marks across the linoleum, came back to her basin. She wrote:

Dear Mr R.D.,

I don't know whether you're "Mr" or "comrade" R.D. - that's up to you to decide. I happened to go into Krassimira's office and I saw she had circled your ad in the newspaper, and that she was hiding behind her potted plants, writing something. I surmised she might be writing to you so I decided to warn you: better not have anything to do with her. She's a real pain. I'm telling you this as one man to another, you've got to believe me. I'm a colleague of hers, and an engineer and I really know our Krassi well. She smokes like a chimney, and besides, I've seen her at socialist party rallies

Krassimira paused for a moment and tried to remember who had been voted into office in the last municipal elections in Targovishte. She crossed out "the socialist party" and wrote "the Union of Democratic Forces" instead. Then she crossed that out, too and wrote:

I've seen her at political rallies, and also with foreigners, in front of the Black Sea Hotel

She thought for a second and then, spitefully, added,

Together with her friend Stephana, if she was any good, she'd be married by now.

Sincerely,

Ivan Aslandzhiev

That was her boss's name. For once, he was of some use. She read the letter through again and decided that the person described in it would be repulsive even to a serial killer. What's more, that person resembled her rather strikingly. Relieved and light-hearted, like a patient who has

unburdened herself of all her secrets to her doctor, she fell asleep and in the morning, on her way to work, she mailed the letter.

The first thing she noticed when she walked into the office was that the paper with R.D.'s address was on Stephana's desk. Stephana herself was typing away at her computer with the speed of a loom, a cigarette stuck in the corner of her mouth. When she saw Krassimira, she made a few vague gestures for no apparent reason and in the process managed to move some typed sheets over the newspaper.

"Well, well, what's my paper with the serial killers' addresses doing on your desk?"

"I was just browsing through it, that's all. Found some really interesting stuff in it," Stephana answered without lifting her head.

"About Targovishte, no doubt!"

"Oh, get off it. You and your guy from Targovishte; I hate blue-eyed men." Krassimira took her paper back, eyeing her colleague with suspicion. Stephana seemed buried in work. Krassimira sat down at her desk feeling betrayed. During her afternoon coffee break she rushed to the post office and wrote:

My dear R.D.,

I have so many enemies in the office. Today, when I came in to work I discovered the paper with your address had disappeared. I spent all night dreaming about how we'd meet by the sea and tell each other our life stories until the sun went down. But now I'm afraid something, or someone, will come between us. In the corridor just outside my room I ran into Ivan Aslandzhiev, a real swine - he can never appreciate a woman's intelligence; all he's interested in is her physical appearance. He laughed in my face and said: "Someone seems to be up to something but let's just wait and see what happens." I'm frightened. I'm worried about our relationship before it has even begun. I can't wait to hear from you!!!

Yours,

Krassimira

She put the letter in an envelope, sealed it and posted it. Stephana was a bitch, so devious. She always tried to confuse you first and then get what she wanted. But the letter would set things

right. All afternoon Krassimira hummed "Delilah" in a loud voice, while Stephana kept casting worried looks at her. At the end of the day she buttoned up her jacket and said: "Look, I don't have to tell you this, but you might as well know. I, too, wrote a little love letter." "Stephana! How could you!" Krassimira's face went all red and she was completely lost for words.

"Well, what's the big deal? A newspaper is public property. You're so petty sometimes." She waited for Krassimira at the door so she could lock up the office. Krassimira passed her by without saying goodbye and slammed the front door. She went to see another film and then went back to the office. There was no one in sight on the whole floor. The corridor seemed to be exhaling the air that had been used up during the working day, through the gills of all the folders piled along the walls. She unlocked the door with her own key and sat down at her colleague's computer. The room was full of shadows now and since the window was closed, there still lingered in the air a trace of the sharp smell of Stephana's perfume, mingled with a faint trace of the odour of sweat. Most of Stephana's files required a password, so Krassimira opened a new one and wrote:

Dearest,

Please, when you write, send your letter care of my friend Krassimira, since yesterday my husband has suddenly started rummaging through my stuff and he might get suspicious.

Kissing the tip of your nose,

Stephana

That last phrase really did belong to Stephana. Krassimira had heard her say it to their boss when she was giving him the birthday present they had all bought for him. Stephana's thick voice and their boss's thick nose, you don't forget such a phrase easily. She posted the letter and went home and, since she felt there was more to say, wrote another letter.

On the following day Krassimira didn't say a word all morning, even though Stephana was constantly trying to start a conversation. In the end she said: "So I too wrote to someone I didn't know, what's the big deal? To tell you the truth, it was seeing you do it gave me courage."

"Courage, eh? So, what did you think then? Krassimira is fat anyway, so he will definitely prefer my skinny behind"

Stunned, Stephana looked up from her folders: "What? I didn't write to your guy! I told you I hate blue-eyed men. How could you even think that?"
The situation required yet another letter.

My dear R.D.,

A colleague of mine asked a friend of hers to write to her care of me but by mistake she seems to have addressed her letter to

No, that's nonsense. Why on earth would that colleague address her letter to R.D.? Krassimira realised that even if she somehow managed to explain the confusion of addresses, it would still leave a suspicion that she was trying to fix up a date for someone else. She took another sheet of paper and wrote:

Dear R.D.,

This is Aslandzhiev again. A couple of days ago I tried to warn you about something which has far deeper roots than you can imagine. In fact, today I found out that even I didn't know just how deep they are. Stephana, Krassimira's friend, is actually my wife. I wish I could say "my better half" but, alas, I don't think I can. I've been suspicious for a long time now that she's up to something but couldn't figure out what. But yesterday I roughed her up a bit and she told me everything. Turns out it was her that circled your address in the newspaper. And then she rushed out and I guess she must be at Krassimira's place now. Where else would she dare go, with that black eye? So I'm warning you: STAY AWAY FROM STEPHANA! Or else... blood might be spilled.

Then she wrote another letter, on purple paper.

Darling R.D.,

We haven't even met, yet I feel you so close. My friend is here with me. She's desperate. That swine, her husband, gave her a black eye. A few days ago she wrote to a childhood friend of hers, a lawyer, to make arrangements for a divorce hearing. Her husband became suspicious and started ransacking the house. She was scared stiff. She had never told him she needed a lawyer and that she wanted out of their wretched marriage.

pushed a cupboard in front of it but it was beginning to splinter from whatever he was using - perhaps a hammer, or a club of some sort. For all I know, he may have had that axe with him! I called the police but by the time they arrived he'd gone. I just don't know what to do any more.

Darling, if I'm going to die, I want to make sure I tell you that you've been the only light in my dark nights, those long dark nights when all I could do was wait for the dawn. I just want you to know I've always loved you.

I wish you every happiness - and don't forget me!

Your Krassi

Krassimira spent all day Sunday in her darkened room and on Monday she only managed to drag herself to work around lunchtime. Her face was all puffy.

Stephana was taken aback.

"Sweetie, what's happened to you? Aslandzhiev's been looking for you all over. I told him you'd gone to check things at this kindergarten.... My goodness, just look at you! Go splash some cold water on your face."

"Please, just let me be," Krassimira said and sank behind the magnolias.

The following Friday evening, just as she was getting ready to go out, the doorbell rang. "Coming," she shouted through some hairpins she had in her mouth. She opened the front door. There was an anxious looking, greying man standing on her doorstep. He cast a suspicious look around and asked in a loud whisper:

"Is everything all right?"

"Is what all right?"

"Just ... everything."

"Are you here for the water meter?"

The man, looking slightly uncomfortable in his tight grey jacket in the summer heat, looked baffled.

"I'm looking for Krassimira," he said. "I'm Radush Dinkov."
"I'm Krassimira," she said without thinking. And then it dawned on her who it was standing at her door.

"Krassimira, is everything okay? I would have been here sooner but first I went to the aquarium and they told me this lie that you left years ago. Clearly, not knowing who I was, they were trying to protect you. But I could tell they were lying. May I come in?"
He looked around cautiously again, as if to make sure he'd be prepared if anything happened.

Krassimira stepped back a bit, but not too far. The man had close-set eyes and his hair was combed to one side in an effort to hide the fact he was going bald.

"You don't look like that picture at all," Krassimira said.

"Ah, well, that wasn't me, actually," he laughed. "What would people in Targovishte think if they saw me in the paper? They'd only laugh at me."

"Who's in the picture, then?"

"The young Peter O'Toole, I think; I'm not sure. I cut it out of a magazine. But what does it matter? Appearances don't matter, it's what's inside. And you can't put that in a picture. I mean, you can't give them an x-ray, can you? Anyway, we've finally found each other."
R.D. said and paused for a second to take a better look at Krassimira's rather heavy frame. Clearly he too was taken aback, but he seemed ready to accept that blow.

Krassimira gave him a dejected look. At least he was tall and well built.

"You know, Radush, it feels like I know you really well. But I'm a new person now. I found it in me to crawl out of the abyss. I survived. And now I think it's all over between us."
"What?" Radush asked, trying to sit down on the little shoe cupboard in the hallway. Krassimira caught him under the armpits and pushed him back towards the door.
"I know I must be late but... It took the letters longer than... And you and I..."
"Oh no! No way!" Krassimira said and pushed him out. She was already late. She was meeting Stephana at the bar of the Black Sea Hotel: Stephana had a new boyfriend and they had so much to talk about.