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Beware the Russian Furies of March

By Michele A. Berdy

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Гадюка: viper

In the▣trough of calm between February 23 —
День защитника Отечества (Defender of the
Homeland▣Day, aka Men's Day) — and March 8 —
Международный Женский День
(International▣Women's Day, aka Spend-All-Your-Salary-On-Flowers Day), it's a good idea to▣bone up on complimentary phrases for the ladies. This isn't hard. Pick an adjective▣— like добрая (kind) —▣prefix it with an intensifier —
самая (the most) — and you're golden.

But what▣about the women in your life who are not kind, pretty, brilliant, warm, and▣loving? What do you call them? Oh, Russian's got you covered.

Let's devote▣ourselves to a couple of zingers, beginning on a high note with a word

from Greek antiquity which, thanks to that fine Russian educational system over the centuries, is still in use today: мегера. In Russian this is lowercase noun, in English it's the upper case name Megaera, one of the three Furies of Greek mythology.

I first noticed this word in regard to a certain presidential candidate:
Люди рассказывали,
какая она злая мегера (People told me what a nasty shrew she was.) But the word can just as easily apply to those nasty, obstructive women at the bottom of the employment ladder:
Выписать квитанцию мегера-кассирша с воплями отказывается (The Gorgon on the cash register shrieks that she won't write me a receipt.)

Let's move on to pity this poor guy:
Почти бывшую жену он считал стервой, тёщу
мегерой. (He called his soon-to-be ex-wife a nasty piece of work and his mother-in-law a shrew.) I guess he never learned the old expression: яблоко от яблони недалеко падает (the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, or: like mother, like daughter). Or maybe he just brings out the worst in them.

In any case,
стерва is a mean-spirited woman, a tough broad, a backbiter, a battle ax. Woe to their co-workers: Она оказалась настоящей стервой. Доложила начальнику о шашнях его жены с шофёром (She turned out to be a real bitch. She told her boss that his wife was fooling around with the driver.)

One writer considers it an exclusively female thing:
Слово "стерва" это годится только
для
женщины, мужчин-стерв не бывает (This word only applies to women — there aren't any male bitches.) Some people might disagree, but in any case, the word does have a masculine form, стервец, which is used to describe nasty men:
Пока я сидел дома и болел,
этот стервец писал мне беспрерывно о
том, как ему
хорошо жилось с
девушками (When I was stuck at home sick, that bastard wrote me constantly about the great time he was having with the girls.)

Someone else insists that
стерва "это чисто русская характеристика женщины, ее
не перевести, не объяснить" (it's a purely Russian characteristic of women; you can't translate or explain it). But here's the opposite point of view:
Западные романы
нравились больше, там мне нравились стервы, красивые стервы, из-за которых мужчины стрелялись (I liked Western novels better — I liked those nasty women, those beautiful bitches that men dueled over.)

And let's finish with three female creepy crawlers: гадина (reptile), гадюка and гадючка (viper). You don't want to work with them, either:

Мороженое стоило
пятнадцать рублей, а наша бухгалтерша выписала мне всего двадцать пять суточных, гадюка (Ice cream cost 15 rubles, but that snake of an
accountant gave me just 25 rubles
per diem.)

But no matter how awful they are, you still have to buy them all flowers next week.
Вот
стервы!

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