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A Guide to Common Russian Insults

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On a lovely morning not long ago, I skipped across my courtyard to my car and discovered a note on the windshield. The note began Урод! (Freak!) and continued — with to my mind an excessive use of exclamation points and non-normative lexicon — to impart the writer's overall poor impression of my mental abilities and moral standards. My crime? I parked my car wrong. Since I parked it like everyone else, not blocking any cars or impeding traffic, I chalked this up to весеннее обострение (spring freak out), tossed the note and went on my merry way.

But later someone asked me: Why урод? Why not another derogatory term? And I realized that what the world really needs is a guide to common Russian insults, nasty names and slangy curses.

Well, that and a new world economic order.

But since I can't do much about the latter, at least I can come up with a good list of names

to call those @(*#&$(@#* who are flushing the world's economy down the toilet.

Урод is a fine word to start with. An offshoot of the verb родить (to give birth), its primary meaning is a person with some physical or mental deformity or impairment. You can hear this meaning in the expression в семье не без урода (there's a black sheep in every family). In literary language you may come across моральный урод — a moral moron, a person whose moral sense is deformed or nonexistent.

In colloquial Russian, урод can mean a very ugly person — unattractive to the point of deformity: К уродам относятся супермодели — люди, на которых без слёз совершенно невозможно смотреть. (Super models are a freak show — people you can't even look at without weeping.) Or it can mean someone who is a complete imbecile, a freak of nature. That's apparently what I was in my courtyard — a jerk too dumb to park her car right.

Moving right along, we come to ублюдок, a word connected with a different accident of birth. The first meaning, now archaic, is a mutt — a mixed-breed animal. У него была собака, кажется ублюдок из породы бульдогов. (He had a dog — I think it was a bulldog mix.) That led to a second, less proper meaning — an illegitimate child. In time that morphed to mean a real bastard — a base, cruel person with animal instincts.

This is the word to reach for when you see kids tormenting an animal or a gazillionaire CEO cutting worker benefits with one hand as he pockets an obscenely large bonus with the other. В чём разница между адвокатом и свиньей? Первое — это безмозглый, уродливый, гнусный ублюдок. А второе — всего лишь домашнее животное. (What's the difference between a lawyer and a pig? The former is a brainless, disgusting, obnoxious bastard. The latter is just a barnyard animal.)

If someone is truly a disgusting monster, you can call him a выродок — but, for your own safety, say it behind his back and very quietly. Выродок is a degenerate — the kind of creature a mother animal abandons because she knows he'll grow into something abnormal and monstrous. Они вели себя как волки в овчарне, эти выродки, отбросы общества. (They behaved like wolves in a sheep pen, those monsters — the dregs of society.)

Examples? Alas, just read the daily headlines anywhere in the world.

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