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# Knocking on Wood and People

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*Стучать: knock, hit, bang, pound*

Now that Awful August has begun, you're likely to see a lot of people surreptitiously spitting over their left shoulder or knocking on wood to ward off the evil that tends to befall Russia this month. Being a good wood-knocker myself, I got interested in the word стучать (knock, pound, bang). With a few prefixes, you can give someone a good and varied pounding.

The unadorned стучать is what you use for superstitious rituals: стучать по дереву (knock on or touch wood). Or what you do on a door, figuratively or literally: Я знаю, что если стучать во все возможные двери, тебе где-то откроют и помогут (I know that if you knock on every possible door, somewhere someone will open it and help you). It's also what rain does: Дождь стучит в окно (Rain pounds against the window). Or what your heart and blood do when you are tense or upset: Кровь стучала в висках (Blood pounded in his temple). ⊠

Стучать is also what wheels and heels do. Где-то очень далеко стучали колёса

электрички (The wheels of a train clanked far in the distance). Он ходил со мной по Москве, стуча по тротуарам новыми ботинками (He walked around Moscow with me, the heels of his new boots clicking along the sidewalks). Now that Moscow's sidewalks have been set with paving stones, clicking heels will be followed by curses as stilettos sink into mortar.

Стучать can also be used to indicate that someone is a snitch (стукач — literally "knocker"). The acting of denouncing someone is настучать: Ты давай кончай с этой враждебной пропагандой, а то я на тебя в органы настучу (Come on — shut up with the enemy propaganda, or I'll rat on you to the authorities).

Застукать (stress on the second syllable) can mean to begin to knock, but it's common to hear it in the sense of catching someone in an illicit or illegal act. Застукать свою невесту с другим и разорвать помолвку — это ужасно (Catching your fiancée with someone else and breaking off your engagement is a terrible thing). The deceived lover might застукать рюмочку (throw back a shot) — a rare expression yet a common instinct. ⊠

Пристукивать is the verb used for rapping an object against something or clicking one's heels. Партнёром он был завидным: плясал легко, пристукивал каблучками и никому не наступал на ноги (He was an enviable partner: He danced lightly, clicked his heels and didn't step on anyone's toes).

The adjective пристукнутый can be used to refer to anything that has been pounded to death or almost to death, like пристукнутый палец or таракан (smashed finger or cockroach). But in reference to people, пристукнутый and стукнутый mean weird or a little nuts. Третий день хожу как пристукнутый. Моя жена беременна! (For three days I've been walking around in a daze. My wife is pregnant!)

If someone is really strange, you can say he is пыльным мешком из-за угла стукнутый (literally, "banged over the head with a dusty sack from around the corner"). The origin of this expression is odd. Since flour was once believed to have healing powers, a healer would put a dusty flour sack over an ill person's head and rap on it to chase out evil spirits. Someone truly nutty endured this healing ritual with no apparent effect.

I wonder if we could find a flour sack big enough to cover Russia.

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*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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