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Lost in Lovely Looks

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Любоваться: to look on with delight

As spring slides into Moscow and the parks will soon go from boring black-and-white to blazing Technicolor, it is a good time to look at how Russians look at things. When they look at things, they fall in love with them, they become fascinated, and they get so caught up in what they are looking at that they forget where they are.

This week, I fell in love with three Russian verbs that do not have easy equivalents in English: любоваться, заглядеться, and засмотреться, all of which mean to look at something or someone in a particular way.

Любоваться is usually translated as "to admire," but the unusual bit is that the admiration is visual. It means to look at something and admire it, experience aesthetic or other pleasure from it. The phrase "я любовался параолимпийским чемпионом" means "I looked at the Paralympic athlete with admiration." To say that I admire him in general, I would use another

verb, like восхищаться.

This can sometimes lead to difficulties in translation, and you have to be a bit creative. For example: Каждый раз, когда он приходил, я любовалась на его руки (Every time that he came over, I loved to look at his hands).

In other cases, admiration is clear, even when you do not spell it out. When little Sasha puts on his skates and takes off on the ice, he calls to his mother: Любуйся! This is obviously not going to be translated as "Admire me!" When little Mikey does the same thing, he would probably just call out, "Watch me!" It is clear that both Mom and мама are expected to clap their hands and coo over their progeny's skill on the ice.

For grammar lovers out there, любоваться uses the instrumental case: она любовалась им (she loved looking at him), but dictionaries note любоваться на plus the accusative case as a colloquial variation. Either way, when любоваться is applied to oneself, it usually registers as self-centered, if not outright self-obsessed. Она стояла перед зеркалом и любовалась собой (she stood in front of the mirror and admired herself) is OK only in small doses.

Заглядеться is another way of looking. It means to get carried away looking at something or someone, to get lost in visual contemplation. Один газету читал, другой в окно смотрел, а третий загляделся на луну и никак не мог прервать сеанс медитации (One of them read the newspaper, the other looked out the window, and the third gazed upon the moon and got lost in meditation).

Заглядеться can also mean to find someone attractive, to enjoy looking at someone. Женщина может любить мужа, а может и вовсе его не любить, но пусть только этот муж попробует заглядеться на другую женщину! (A woman might love her husband, or she might not love him at all, but just let him try to look at another woman!)

And then there is засмотреться, almost a synonym of заглядеться. It most often has the sense of getting lost in visual contemplation. This is the verb to use when you are so fascinated by what you are looking at that a brass band could march through your flat and you would not notice. И вот сидишь, смотришь и до того засмотришься, что утеряешь всякое представление о часах. (There you sit and look, and you get so caught up in what you are looking at that you lose any sense of time).

Lovely.

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