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Figuring Out Russian Riddles

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Отгада́ть зага́дки: to solve riddles

A couple of weeks ago I stumbled across a newspaper article that led, eventually, to an astonishing discovery. It was like finding out that the Russian alphabet had a letter I'd never heard of.

It turns out that Russian has a whole tradition of household and barnyard riddles. I knew about riddles: they're called загадки and solving them is the very linguistically pleasing отгадать загадки. But I didn't know how many of them there were, or how complicated, or how witty.

Or how impossible to figure out. Of course, it might help if I lived in a house in the country with a barn full of animals and fields and woods packed with creatures that burrow, hop, run, fly and gallop. But still, the notion that 4th graders can solve these and I can't is very humbling indeed.

So I thought I'd share the humble pie. I'll translate the words, you figure out what it is. Answers are at the bottom of the page.

Here's one to show you how they work: Четыре четырки, две растопырки, седьмой вертун. That's four "fours" or things that come in four; two things that splay out — растопырить пальцы is to spread your fingers wide; and the seventh something is a fan, or a whirlpool, or something that spins.

Got it? Ideas? Images? It's either a dog or a cow: four legs, two ears sticking out and a tail that twirls.

Good luck!

1. Четыре четырки, две растопырки, один вертун да два яхонта. Four fours, two things sticking out, one twirling thing and two sapphires.

2. Четыре сестрицы в одну лунку плюют. Four sisters spit (плевать) into one basin.

3. По горам, горам ходит шуба да кафтан. In the mountains, in the mountains walks a fur coat and dress.

4. Ничего не болит, а всё стонет. Nothing hurts, but it keeps moaning.

5. Четверо стелют, двое светят, один лежит, никого не пустит. Four make a bed, two shine, one lies, and no one gets by.

6. Не князь по породе, а ходит в короне. Not a prince by birth, but wears a crown.

7. В одной стеклянке болтается, а никак не смешается. It shakes around in one glass but never mixes together.

8. Пойду в баню чёрным, из бани выйду красным. I go into the bath black and come out red.

9. Есть крылья — не летают; ног нет, а не догонишь. They have wings but don't fly; they don't have legs, but you can't catch them.

10. В тесной избушке ткут холсты старушки. In an overcrowded cottage old ladies weave canvases.

11. На одной ноге стоит, рожком воду пьёт. Stands on one leg and drinks water with a horn.

12. Самого чуть видно, а песню слышно. You barely see him but can hear his song.

Humble pie anyone?

1. Cat. 2. Milking a cow. 3. Sheep. 4. Pig. 5. Dog. 6. Rooster. 7. Egg. 8. Crayfish. 9. Fish. 10. Bees. 11. Goose. 12. Mosquito.

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