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Taking It Slow, Russian-Style

By Michele A. Berdy

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Still from a cartoon "Ice Age."

Плестись: to wend

You'd think I'd be used to Moscow winters by now. And although I love the snow, by mid-February I start running out of energy. I'm like a big balloon with a slow leak, deflating and falling behind in everything.

In this state, creativity comes slowly. So I have languidly taken my time looking into how to be late in Russian.

These are important words, since being late is a Moscow thing. There's traffic, or a metro so packed you have to wait for three trains before you can squeeze on, or — let's be real — an alarm clock you slept through because it's still pitch black at 8 a.m.

If you're late, a good word to use is задержаться (to be detained), which is nicely unspecific. After all, at

their airport when they announce “
Самолёт
задерживается на три
часа” (The plane will be three hours late) you don’t know if it’s because they are waiting for a spare part or because the pilot is sitting in traffic.

Sometimes задерживаться is to stay for a while — Поехали на
неделю, задержались на
лето (We went for a week and stayed for the summer). But sometimes people or things don’t stick around for as long as you’d like.
Ваня наш нигде подолгу не задерживался (Our
Vanya never stayed in any place for long.)
Деньги никогда не задерживались у моего
бывшего мужа (With my ex – money never stuck around for long.)

Another all-purpose word is
запаздывать (to be late). Запаздывает зарплата — уже три
месяца без денег! (Our salaries are being held up — we haven’t been paid in three months.)
Язык всегда запаздывает — сначала явление, потом его название (Language always lags behind — first a phenomenon appears, then the name for it.)

If you don’t like those words, there’s
отставать, which describes all kinds of ways of
getting behind, such as taking your time when you shouldn’t. Moms and Dads are always shouting to their kids:
Ребята, не отставать, нас ждут люди! (Come on, kids, don’t
dawdle! People are waiting for us!) Inanimate objects can also run late:
Часы на
кухне отстают на
десять минут (The clock in the kitchen is slow by ten minutes.) As can musicians:
Скрипач
отставал от оркестра (The violinist got behind the orchestra.) Or countries: Мы всё
больше отстаём от
развитых стран по
продолжительности жизни (We are lagging further and further behind the developed countries in longevity.) Sometimes you can just be behind in everything:
Вот видите, как
вы отстали от
жизни! (Look how behind the times you are!)

But my new favorite word for lingering and lagging is
плестись. When the word is used with
a person, it means to take your time going somewhere, often due to impediments:
В один
вечер, когда снег уже подтаял и
на дорогах была жидкая, грязная кашица, я
плелась к дому (I wended my way home one evening when the snow had melted and

the roads were covered with thin, filthy, porridge-like slush.) Or fatigue:
Я позади всех
плёлся, потому что
измотался за день (I trudged behind everyone because I was worn out for the day.)

You can also lag behind everyone —
плестись
в хвосте: Жизнь — это скоростная трасса, если можешь — обгоняй, не можешь — плетись в
хвосте (Life is a superhighway. Pass if you can. But if you can't —you bring up the rear.)

In February I'm definitely bringing up the rear.

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