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That's a Russian Laugh and a Half

By Michele A. Berdy

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Ржу: What a⊠hoot!

A funny⊠thing happened on the way to work this morning... How many conversations begin⊠like that? The capacity to be amused — and amusing — is universal, even if what⊠people find funny depends on countless factors, from age to nationality,⊠religion, gender, and even the era they live in. Here in Russia, something is⊠bound to tickle your funny bone every day — the metro at rush hour is⊠hilarious, right? It's nice to know how to share your laugh.

The gold standard⊠for being amused is the simple смешно (it's funny). This can be something comical: Её одежда выглядела скорее смешно, чем сказочно (Her⊠clothing looked more comical than magical.) Or it can be funny — or not funny, as⊠in this typical phrase: Может быть, тебе и смешно. Но мне не смешно ни⊠капельки (Maybe you find it funny.⊠I don't find it the least bit⊠funny.)

Then there is my favorite phrase: уже смешно (it's funny already). I don't know why, but this always cracks me up — when someone starts a story and one of people listening chimes in with уже смешно, like here, playing off a national stereotype: Болтливый скандинав — уже смешно, не правда ли? (A talkative Scandinavian — that's funny already, isn't it?)

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Something that is lightly amusing or entertaining can be забавно (fun), like when an actor talks about his roles: Забавно рисковать, играть разных персонажей (It's fun to take a risk and play a variety of roles.) But there are distinctions in kinds of amusement: Правда, смешно? Забавно, но не смешно ("It's funny, isn't it?" "It's entertaining, but not funny.")

The second guy is definitely a stick in the mud.

Прикольно is funny in a weird, prankish, jokey and very adolescent sort of way. This is what your teenager says about everything, from your new washing machine to her best friend's psychedelic cell phone cover. В поезде всем вагоном пели грузинские песни, так прикольно (The whole train car sang Georgian songs. It was super cool.) Приколы are all those jokes, memes, photoshopped images of presidents that get passed around at the office when you are supposed to be writing your quarterly report: Смешные приколы с камеры наблюдений! (The funniest gags from surveillance cameras!)

If something is funny, you can call it a joke, even if it isn't. If you know what I mean: Мы три раза договаривались о встрече и три раза не встречались. Анекдот. (We made arrangements to meet three times and three times we didn't meet. It's like a joke.) If something is funny in a wild, unbridled way, it's a circus: Она бегает на кухню доделывать торт, он ещё одевается, и их собачка кусает всех гостей. Цирк! (She's running into the kitchen to finish the cake, he's still getting dressed, and their dog is biting all the guests. It's a three-ring circus!)

Or you can call it what it inspires — that is, a hoot, a giggle, a laugh. You can borrow a sound from horses and say: Ржу, не могу! (I can't stop laughing, literally "I'm neighing"). This is a good word to use when you are not amused: Что ты ржёшь? Совсем не смешно (What are you laughing about? It's not at all funny.) Or you can хохотать (guffaw): — Как ты думаешь? Он придёт во время? — Хохочу. Какая ты глупая! ("What do you think — will he be on time?" "Don't make me laugh. You are such an idiot.") Or you can fall over: Начальник рассказывает о повышение зарплаты в последнем квартале, а я валяюсь. (My boss is telling me about a raise in the last quarter and I'm just rolling on the floor laughing.") Or you can just die: Умираю! (You're killing me, literally "I'm dying!")

If you're writing — and espcially if you're not old enough to drink or drive a car — you type гыгыгыгыгыгы. That's LOL or HA HA HA HA HA HA.

Or to make it really easy: just laugh.

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