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In Russian, Blame the Cat

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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These cats may look sweet, but beware... **Pixabay**

Драная кошка: a skinny, dirty cat/woman

Last week I looked at коты (tomcats) and their characteristics in Russian folklore and the modern Russian imagination. Коты are fairly positive creatures.

The same cannot be said for their female feline friends. Кошка (female cat) doesn't appear in folklore much, except as the bearer of bad luck. When a woman is described as кошка, it means she's independent, cat-like in some way (like sexually), or is a survivor. In Russian, she is живучая как кошка (a survivor) — what English speakers call "having nine lives."

In general, the Russian figurative кошка is a less appealing creature than her hubby кот. Драная кошка (literally, a raggedy cat) is not something a woman would like to be called. It means a skinny, dirty, torn-up and worn-out woman. Sometimes she is just wet and filthy: Шёл мокрый снег, я походила не на невесту, а скорее, на драную кошку (Wet snow was falling and I didn't look like a bride — I looked more like a tattered, scraggy alley cat.)

But it also a pejorative term for a sexually promiscuous woman: Эта драная кошка уже со всеми мужчинами в офисе переспала (That slut has slept with all the men in the office.)

Another kind of cat is угорелая кошка (literally, a burned cat). This figurative kitty has two meanings. One is person running as fast as her feet will carry her. In English, this is often expressed with a comparison to another creature: Она бросилась бежать, как угорелая кошка (She took off like a bat out of hell.)

Or the image is of a singed cat, dashing this way and that in a frenzy. In English, the comparison is usually with a hen: В кризисной ситуации правительство беспокоится, мечется, как угорелая кошка — принимает бесполезные законы один за другим (In a crisis the government gets worried and runs around like a chicken with its head cut off, and then passes useless laws, one after the other.)

Кошки have bad habits. Играет как кошка с мышкой (literally, plays like a cat with a mouse) is a description of a person toying with someone in an unpleasant way. Живут как кошка с собакой (literally, they live like cat and dog) refers to people — usually family

members — who constantly fight. Or as one writer explained: Смысл фразы “Живут как кошка с собакой” знают все ⊠ плохо живут, лаются-кусаются-царапаются, одним словом ⊠ скандалят (Everyone knows the meaning of the phrase “they live like a cat and dog” — they have a terrible life together, they bark-bite-scratch... in a word, they are troublemakers.)

How bad are girl cats? Well, even Kipling’s “The Cat Who Walked By Himself” was turned into кошка, которая гуляет сама по себе (the cat who walked by herself). This phrase is almost always slightly — or not so slightly — pejorative. Calling a woman this implies that she is selfish or immoral in some way. Развелась, живёт одна, делает то, что хочет — короче, кошка, которая гуляет сама по себе (She got divorced, lives by herself, does whatever she wants — in short, a cat who goes her own way.)

When кошки скребут на душе or на сердце (cats claw at your soul or heart) it means you have a bad feeling. Как-то неспокойно, кошки скребут на душе (I couldn’t calm down, something was gnawing at my heart.) Most of the time these cat paws scratching up your insides indicate a general sense of unease, but often they are a sign of foreboding: На сердце кошки скребут: не будет мой сынок счастлив (I had a terrible sense of foreboding: my son would not find happiness.)

Worst of all is when чёрная кошка пробежала между нами (literally, a black cat ran between us). Here we’re in the realm of superstition, where black cats in particular but all cats in general are associated with the devil. So when a cat runs between you and your best friend, you have a fight or falling out.

Actually, it’s an apt way of describing that strange situation when you have a fight with someone you care about. Afterwards you can’t figure out how it happened, or what made you bring up a touchy subject, or why she didn’t just stop talking. It usually isn’t a big deal: Да они и не ссорились ⊠ так, кошка пробежала. (Oh, they didn’t have a knock-down, drag-out. It was just a little spat.) But sometimes it is very serious indeed: Раньше они были союзниками, а теперь какая-то чёрная кошка пробежала между ними, и они поклялись погубить один другого (Before they were allies, but now they’ve had a falling out, and they’ve vowed to destroy each other.)

But always, it remains a mystery: Просто не знаю, какая кошка пробежала между нами (I just don’t know what got into us and why we had a fight.)

Conclusion: Consider getting a dog.

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