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Russian Hell Hath No Fury

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Чёрт знает что: the damnedest thing

The way things are going these days, I need to up my game in Russian expressions of outrage. How many times can you utter Ты что?! (You're kidding!) without getting bored with your own lame indignation? Come on, let's get furious! Let's be filled with rage! Let's bounce off the walls and hit the ceiling and blow a gasket.

In other words, let's read the morning newspaper.

So how do you feel when you read the headlines? Вне себя (beside myself, literally, out of myself) is a good start, although you need to clarify in Russian if you're beside yourself out of joy, rage, grief or another emotion. If you need an example to follow, look at royalty — royals are good at rage: Царь был вне себя от гнева и приказал казнить предателя (The tsar was beside himself with fury and ordered that the traitor be executed.)

If you are befuddled — often a precursor to outrage — you might use the verb растеряться (to be at a loss). Он говорил такие глупости, что я просто растерялась (He said such stupid things that I was completely at a loss.)

But if your bewilderment turns into understanding and then such fury that you fly off the handle, you use a version of the same verb: потерять себя (to lose control of yourself, literally to lose yourself). This is perhaps a bit dated now: Она совсем потеряла себя и начала орать на соседей (She completely lost control and started to scream at her neighbors.)

What happens to you when you are furious? Oh, it's nasty — a lot of blood and out-of-body experiences. Его высказывание вывело меня из себя (What he said made me nuts, literally took me out of myself.) Or you might get so hot under the collar that you glow: Лёнечка мог даже ангела довести своим поведением до белого каления (Lyonya's bad behavior could make even an angel explode.) Or your face, neck, or eyes might turn a dangerous shade of red: Когда ребята стали его дразнить, глаза у него налились кровью (When the kids started to tease him, his eyes blazed red with fury.)

If you are really furious, in Russian you climb the walls: Перестань обсуждать эту тему с мужем, а то вы полезете на стенку, и дело может даже дойти до драки (Stop talking about that subject with your husband — either you'll both go through the roof or it will turn into a knock-down, drag-out fight.)

What do you say to express your anger? Oh, lots of things, many of which cannot be reproduced here because of very strict laws on obscenity in the mass media.

But even without the naughty words, there is plenty you can roar.

For instance, you can go all Old Testament and shout: Будь ты проклят! (Damn you to hell, literally, may you be cursed.) If you are really mad, you can add an intensifier: Будь ты трижды проклят! (Damn you thrice!) I guess three times will do the trick for eternity.

Another good one along the same lines is пропади ты пропадом, which is literally something like "fall the fall" — that is, fall straight into hell or at least out of sight. Все эти идиоты политики — пропади пропадом! (All those idiot politicians — damn them all to hell.)

Then there is the classic чёрт знает что or чёрт-те что: the damnedest thing, literally what the devil knows. Sometimes this expression goes up instead of down: Бог знает что (God only knows). You use these phrases to describe something terrible that deeply offends you: Атмосфера у нас в доме всегда оставляла желать лучшего, но тем летом началось вообще чёрт знает что (The atmosphere at home always could have been better, but this summer it became hell on earth.)

Along those lines is the indignant как земля носит (how does the earth bear it). Читал последнее заявление президента. Не пойму, как только земля его носит (I read the last thing the president said. Why the ground doesn't open up and swallow him is a mystery.)

When I'm outraged I personally start sputtering and stuttering and can't even formulate a cogent response. Слов нет! (I'm speechless!) Нечего сказать (What can I say?) Дальше некуда (It can't get any worse.)

But as a friend always responds: Нет, мы еще не дошли до дна (No, we haven't hit bottom yet.)

And another adds: Когда думали, что опустились до дна, снизу постучали (Just when you think you've hit bottom, you hear someone knocking under you.)

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