

A Bee in My Bonnet

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Пчела: florilegium

Ah, nature ... the last halcyon — er, cold and stormy — days of summer, when nature is still at its peak — er, starting to fade — and you can enjoy a carefree afternoon tramping across a field with your dog.

Until you stumble on a hive of bees, that is, and they get really angry about their home invasion and attack you and your dog. Your face blows up like a balloon, and your dog won't leave the house because it's finally dawned on her that it's a jungle out there.

A batch of beestings isn't fun, but it does have a linguistic silver lining. It's been an excellent opportunity to brush up my sting vocabulary.

There are three main nasties that sting out here in the Moscow boondocks: oca (wasp),

шершень (hornet) and пчела (bee). What they do is жалить (to sting), and what they sting with is жало (stinger). But for some reason, their sting is called укус (a bite). Если вас ужалила пчела или оса, нужно тщательно промыть место укуса и аккуратно вытащить жало (If you are stung by a bee or wasp, you need to thoroughly wash the bite and carefully pull out the stinger).

This, in my experience, is very hard to do when you are stung in the face and jumping around like a lunatic. Later you will be urged to use various folk remedies, like паста из пищевой соды и воды (a paste of baking soda and water) or зубная паста (toothpaste) to stop the pain.

It's nice to know that Russian speakers and English speakers share many of the same images and expressions for these stinging creatures. You might point out that a shapely neighbor has осинья талия (wasp waist). The other neighbor — the mean one — can simply be called оса (a wasp).

The proverbial hornet's nest in Russian is осиное гнездо (wasp's nest), although the metaphor is the same. Не надо тревожить осиное гнездо! (Don't disturb a hornet's nest!)

Пчела, even though it packs a nasty sting, is really not in the same metaphorical category as оса and шершень. In the Russian world view, пчела is a wonderful creature — in fact, called Божья угодница (saint, beloved by God) because it produces the wax used for church candles. On the earthy plane, they pollinate crops and produce honey, a staple in the Russian diet.

Пчела, or the diminutive пчёлка, is what you call a hard-working person. This is less snarky than the English busy bee. В моё отсутствие пчёлки покрасили весь дом (While I was gone, the worker bees painted the whole house).

Пчела can also be used to describe someone who works in a highly regimented organization. Революционеры — как пчёлки, которым нужно сбиваться в рой и жить по правилам (Revolutionaries are like bees that need to gather in a swarm and live by rules).

And then there's an odd meaning of пчела. A century or so ago, learned Europeans put together what they called in Latin florilegium (a "gathering of flowers") that was a compilation of edifying texts. Russians followed the custom but changed the name to пчела, which carried the more culturally apt image of bees gathering up the nectar. This may be the derivation of the name of the famous 19th-century literary journal Северная пчела (usually translated as Northern Bee), which always struck me as a whimsical name for a serious journal.

And as soon as I can open my eye, I'll check it out.

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