

A Spiteful Thanksgiving

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Назлю: in spite

Decades ago in the really tough years when inflation in the country was in the triple — if not quadruple — digits, a Russian friend did some work for a foreign businessman.

The businessman seemed to think that archivists, like taxi drivers, would be happy to work for a pack of Marlboros. When he refused to pay more than a pittance for several weeks of work, my friend — so insulted she could barely speak — told him that \$200 was unacceptable, so instead she'd donate it to Фонд Мира (Peace Fund). And although she desperately needed even that pittance, she handed it over to the боръба за мир (the struggle for peace).

I thought she was crazy, but I was very impressed.

What she did — cutting off her nose to spite her face — can be expressed in many hilarious ways in Russian, most of which include the word назлю (to spite). One of the most common

expressions should be familiar to anyone who remembers being a cool teenager with carefully tended hair: Назло бабушке (or маме) отморожу уши. (To spite my grandma [or mom] I'll freeze my ears off.) Or there is the elaborate and prideful назло кондуктору возьму билет и пешком пойду в другую сторону (to spite the conductor I'll buy a ticket and then go on foot in the opposite direction).

This kind of showy self-destructiveness can also be conveyed in an expression that sounds like a television mini-series: Выколю себе глаз — пусть у моей тёщи будет зять кривой. (I'll poke out my eye so my mother-in-law will have a one-eyed son-in-law.) Dynasty on the Neva.

Of course, you can do things to spite other people that don't involve bodily harm to yourself. Похоже было, что она делала это нарочно, назло ему (It looked like she did it intentionally, to spite him). Russians often think that this is something of a national sport: 14 процентов россиян оформляют больничный по причине "назло работодателю" (14 percent of Russians get a doctor's sick slip "to spite their boss"). In fact, one writer asserts that this is a particular Russian character trait: Мы же любим делать "назло" и "вопреки." (We love to do things "to spite" and "despite.")

There is also another expression that is slightly different thanks to one of those irritating little words — this time как (like). Как назло means "as if in spite" and is said whenever things go wrong as if by design. You know how it is — you have to look your best for a meeting, and then on the way: Как назло обрызгала меня машина из лужи. (It was Murphy's Law — a car went through a puddle and sprayed me.) In English the usual response to this sort of disaster is "just my dumb luck." А тут, как назло, всю неделю — нелётная погода. (And then — just my dumb luck! — a week of no-fly weather.)

Note that назло is now written as one word. Written separately, на зло (to evil) is something else entirely: Прежде всего не поддаваться искушению ответить злом на зло. (The most important thing is not to give in to the temptation to respond to evil with evil.)

When you get tired of being spiteful, you can be ornery. Here the word is наперекор (contrary to): Идти наперекор общественному мнению способен не каждый. (Not everyone can act in defiance of public opinion.)

But I bet that one-eyed son-in-law can.

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