

This has been Russified into the slangy *депрессняк* or *депрессив*. Russians have also borrowed “down” and use it to describe that state of depression that is just the pits: *Он был в таком дупне!* (He was so down/in such a funk!)

Russians often describe the loss of common sense that overtakes one in these last months before fair weather as *весеннее обострение*. This is literally, “the spring exacerbation,” i.e., when people with illnesses — including mental illnesses — go around the bend. That is, when they go off to Rio with their tax money and their married lover. That is, they get spring fever.

### **Масленица: Bitter Week, Pancake Week** (the festival week before Lent)

Unless you are barricaded in your office from dawn to midnight, you have to notice the holiday spirit bursting through the mountains of snow and ice. This is *Масленица* (which you sometimes still see with the old spelling *Масляница*), a once pagan celebration to end the winter that was Christianized into the Russian version of Mardi Gras. The name comes from *масло*, an all-purpose word that can mean any kind of oil or fat. Here it refers to butter, which people eat by the kilo since it cannot be eaten for the entire 40 days of the very strict Lent (called *Великий пост* — the Great Fast). The week is sometimes also called *сырная неделя* (“cheese week”) because dairy products can be — and are — consumed in great abundance. In the old days it was called *широкая неделя* (lavish week) or *разгульная неделя* (celebration week) — a time of over-the-top eating, drinking and carousing.

Each day of the week had a special name and tradition associated with it. Monday was called *встреча* (greeting day), the first day that opened the celebration. Tuesday was *закрытие* — the start of merriment (from *играть*, to play). Wednesday was *лакомства* (“delicacies” — something like “yummy day” or “sweet-tooth day”). Thursday — *широкий* (“lavish”), the day when no one worked and everyone pulled out all the stops. Friday was called *мещинь-вечерки* — “mother-in-law parties.” In the very complicated Russian terminology for family relations, a husband’s mother-in-law is *мэча*, so on this day the wife’s mother had a party for her family. (In the headache-inducing terminology, a wife’s mother-in-law is called *свекровка*.)

On Saturday the tables were turned, as it were, and called *полюбкины посиделки* — daughter-in-law parties. *Посиделки* is from the verb *посидеть* (to sit for awhile) and means any kind of get-together, where you sit around a table for hours of good food and talk. Sunday was called *проводы* (“seeing off”) or *прощание* (“saying goodbye”), but more commonly *Прощённое воскресенье* (Forgiveness Sunday). On this day people call all their friends and relatives and ask forgiveness for anything hurtful they might have done or said to them. You say: *Проссти меня, пожалуйста* (Please forgive me) and hear in reply: *Я тебя прощаю да прости тбя* (*Прости/Бог* (I forgive you and may the Lord/God forgive you).

The idea is a kind of last blast before the spiritually and physically trying period of Lent, which people enter having cleansed their souls of sin and reconciled themselves with friends and relatives.

The food part of the last blast involves mountains of *блины* (pancakes or crepes) served with everything from jam to caviar, usually with as much *сметана* (sour cream) and butter as you can eat. The pancake-making mania has given us the expression *нервный блин комом* — the first pancake gets balled up — which, if you’ve ever tried making these crepes, is a fairly accurate description of the mess you produce. The expression is used to describe a first unsuccessful attempt at doing something and has the unstated hopeful note that “then you get the hang of it.” In English this is something like “we haven’t gotten the bugs out of the system yet,” or the more positive “practice makes perfect.”

In the old days the entertainment part of the last blast involved *сани с ледяных гор* (sleigh rides down ice hills); *ярмарки* (fairs); *экоморохи* (traveling bawdy minstrels); *балаганы* (skits and buffoonery); and lots of *частушки* — four-line folk rhymes that are sung (and often require parents to cover the ears of their children). There were also performances of *Петрушечная комедия* — something like Punch and Judy shows (*Петрушка* is the Russian Punch). And *кулачные бои*: highly ritualized fist-fights (one-on-one or between huge lines of men) designed to show off to the maidsens the strength and prowess of the combatants. However, a beau with a shiner seems hardly alluring.

On the other hand, it gives the guys something to apologize for on Sunday.

**Блины: a pancake; an expletive; a symbol of health, warmth, well-being and rebirth**

*Блины!* I like everything about bliny, the traditional Russian pancakes that are eaten during the week of *Масленица* (Butter or Pancake Week). I like making them, eating them, and making other people eat them by the dozen. In or out of the kitchen, *блины* is the key word in some of my favorite folk expressions. And, to top it all off *блины* is my expletive of choice during times of great stress, anger or frustration. All in all, it's one great little pancake.

*Блин* is a cradle-to-grave pancake. For the record – a terrible bilingual pun, since the round and flat *блин* was once a slang term for a record album – *блины* were ritually served to women right after birth, eaten at weddings, and consumed at graveside immediately after a funeral. In Siberia two days after the wedding night the bride was traditionally served a *блин* with a hole in it, through which wine was poured. This rather obvious symbolic act was called *блин продоить* (to cut a hole through a pancake).

Poets and anthropologists speculate that *блин* is symbolic of the sun and rebirth. One poet wrote: *Блин – символ солнца, красных дней, хороших урожаев, ладных браков и здоровых детей.* (Bliny are the symbol of the sun, beautiful days, good harvests, happy marriages and healthy children.)

Today *блин* appears metaphorically in the political arena, usually in the expression *первый блин комом* (literally, the first pancake was all balled up), which is used to figuratively express the philosophical acceptance that things rarely go well right from the start. At a recent meeting of G-8 finance ministers, Russia's representative summed up the results: *Это первый блин, котрый, несмотря на постоицу, не вышел комом, а стал настоящим, хорошо испеченным блином.* (Contrary to the folk saying, this first pancake of a meeting didn't come out messy – it was a truly nicely-fried pancake.) In other words: Wow – we didn't expect it to go this well!

Other handy *блин* expressions refer to the speed and ease with which a cook prepares them. *Он написал безумное количество стихов!* *Он нех так, как блины.* (He wrote an astonishing number of poems – he turned them out like hotcakes.) *Писать стихи – это не блин стечь!* (Writing poems is not like flipping a batch of pancakes!)

If you want to describe someone's fawning behavior, you can say: *Блином масляным в рот лезет!* (literally, "he's slipping into my mouth like a buttered pancake"). Or if someone rushes over to tell you the latest gossip, which is already old news, you can say: *Тот же блин, да подмазан!* (literally, "it's the same old pancake, only buttered"). This can sometimes mean "the same old thing in a new form." *Да, читал его стихи. Тот же блин, да подмазан!* (Yes, I've read his poetry. It's old hat.)

*Блины* also lend themselves to metaphorical usage. In the original world *блины* are counterfeit bills; in the computer world *блины* can mean CD discs, although this expression is rather dated. In the gym *блины* are the round weights you put on a bar for lifting. Best of all, *блин* is good word to use when you want to say something quite obscene (that starts with the same two letters), but are too well-bred to do so. *Блин! Я забыла ключи!* (Damn! I forgot my keys!) Or you can use it as a general intensifier and stick it in a sentence as many times as you want. *Ты, блин, понял, что он, блин, сказал?* (Did you bloody get what he bloody said?!)

When you are particularly frustrated or furious, you can stretch out the word until it sounds something like *бааааааааааа!* I have yet to do research on this, but it seems that the length of the word correlates with the level of ire.

So you see: a pancake is a pancake, except when it's a *блин*.

**Разговляться: to break the Lenten fast immediately after the midnight Easter service**

For most secularized Westerners, Easter is a religious holiday connected, mysteriously, with a rabbit that brings pastel-colored eggs and dim memories of light-weight suits and fresh white shirts, or white cotton gloves, a straw hat with a pink ribbon, and brand new Mary Janes (stiff patent leather shoes with a single strap that invariably left a mean blister on each heel). Not so for Orthodox Christian Russians, a mean blister on each heel). Not so for Orthodox Christian Russians, who celebrate Easter with the most joyful and colorful religious service of the year, feasting, and celebrations with family and friends.

The season actually begins with the last pre-Lenten splurge of *Масленица*. Then comes Lent, called *Великий пост* (literally, "the great fast") since it is the strictest of all the many fasts in

the Orthodox calendar: no alcohol (except a bit of *кагор*, a sweet church wine), no milk, eggs, or meat, and fish only on a few special occasions. *Постное масло* is vegetable oil (that is, not butter); some people even used *постный сахар*, unrefined sugar, since bone ash (an animal by-product) is used in the refining process of regular sugar. Russian conveniently groups all forbidden foods in the phrase *скромная пища*, that is, food not to be eaten during a fast. In prerevolutionary times, Russian cookbooks had entire chapters of Lenten foods, “*чтобы можно было принять гостей достойно*” (so that one could entertain guests respectfully); today vegetarians revel in these 40 days, since Moscow restaurants now offer *постное меню* (a Lenten menu) for the observant.

In Russia’s northern climes, Palm Sunday is *Вербное воскресенье* – Pussy Willow Sunday. It is considered “good luck” to beat someone with a branch of pussy willows: *Это не я бил тебя! Вербка тебя бьет!* (It’s not me beating you! It’s the pussy willow!) This is the start of *Святая неделя* (Holy Week) in which each day is called *Великий*: *Великая пятница* (Good Friday). In observant Orthodox homes, it is a torturous week: even stricter fasting combined with the temptations of shopping for and cooking the delicacies for the Easter feast. The main delights are *пасха* (usually transliterated as *paskha*, or sweet potted cheese) and *куличи* (sweet round brioche-like breads), but also the full array of food and drink proscribed by the Lenten fast.

It’s curious that both Passover and Easter are *Пасха* in Russian (the former often called *Еврейская Пасха*) since you’d think the belief in Easter – the resurrection of Christ – is precisely that which differentiates Jews from Christians. But remnants of this exist in English as well in a word of the same derivation: *paschal* refers to both holidays (and the paschal lamb is served at both tables).

Late Saturday night, families attend the long midnight Easter service, which culminates in the *Крестный ход* (Procession of the Cross): the congregation circles the church three times (symbolizing the disciples’ search for Christ’s body, which was not in the tomb). When Easter day is finally here, you greet your neighbor with *Христос воскрес!* (Christ is risen!), to which he replies *Воистину воскрес!* (Verily He is risen!). This exchange is accompanied by three kisses, and is called *христосоваться*.

Usually families gather to break the long Lenten fast immediately after the service. This midnight snack is called *разговейться*, and was traditionally, before the Revolution, one of the few meals where servants and masters shared the same table.

Russians don’t have Easter bunnies (nor can I explain to them why we do), but they do have colored Easter eggs. And they have egg rolling contests, which are called *катать яйца*. Another game is *бить яйца* – egg-cracking contests, in which two celebrants knock their eggs together and the “winner” is the one whose shell remains whole. These games are played with *крашеные яйца* – colored eggs – but never with *писанки* – the elaborately decorated Ukrainian and Western Slavic Easter eggs. These are so dear they were once a symbol for “beloved” or “beautiful” – *Писанка ты моя!*

### ***Первомай: May Day, Labor Day***

*Двоеврие* (dual beliefs, dual belief system) is a useful concept that is particularly apt in times of change (like now): the old rituals and beliefs get mated with the new, and you have a lovely hybrid that satisfies everyone and no one. *Первое мая*, or *Первомай* (May Day) is an extreme example of this – it’s not *двоеврие*, but something like *пятиеврие*.

For some people the first set of *майские праздники* (the May holidays) are a nostalgic last gasp to unite the working class; for others, it’s a good time to clear the dacha garden; and for still others, a chance to zip down to the Canaries for some diving. It’s hard to recall that *Первомай* was declared a working class holiday after a demonstration of workers ended in bloodshed. The idea of decent working conditions caught on with the Russian comrades. *Да здравствует 8-часовой рабочий день!* Here’s to the eight-hour workday!, an early Leninist May Day pamphlet read. In Soviet times, there wasn’t as much show of military might as on November 7<sup>th</sup>, so this was definitely a *демонстрация* (demonstration, rally) and not a *парад* (which only means “military parade” in Russian). *Ходили на демонстрацию, поднимали плакат “Пролетарии всех стран, соединяйтесь!”* (We took part in the demonstration, holding a placard that said “Proletarian of the World, Unite!”) There were lots of paper flowers and urgent pleas for the working people of the world to throw

October: *листопад* (“when leaves fall”) or *свадебник* (“the time of weddings”);

November: *полузимник* (nearly winter) or *зрудень* (from *зруд* – pile – when the frozen earth is “riled up”);

December: *студень* (the time of cold).

What lyrical and descriptive words for plain old months! What a shame Russian didn’t retain them as many other Slavic languages did. We English speakers would have had an easier time right after Russia accepted the Western names of the months: январий, феввар, маррот, априль, маи, июнь, июль, август, сентемврий, октемврий, нояембар, декаембар. But Russians seem to have suffered with these unpronounceable and incomprehensible names. From the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, chronic scribes added the traditional name after the new name. And over the centuries the names were Russified to their present form.

Days of the week were easier to understand – and there were fewer of them. Ancient Slavs seem to have had a six-day week: *неделя* (“не дела,” “no work,” i.e., Sunday), *понеделок* (Monday, the day that follows *неделя*), *второкъ* (Tuesday, the second day), *среда* (Wednesday, the middle day), *четвертокъ* (Thursday, the fourth day), and *пятокъ* (Friday, the fifth day). There was no Saturday; that came later, when the Slavs accepted Christianity and modified the ancient Hebrew name of the day to *суббота*. At that time the first day of the week became *воскресенье* (Sunday, “day of resurrection”) and the word *неделя* began to be used to describe the entire cycle.

In addition to the four seasons, there used to be four mid-seasons: *пролетье* (late spring–early summer); *бабье лето* (what Americans call Indian summer, but appearing earlier in the year); *осенины* (mid-September); and *позимье* (the beginning of winter).

And for all you global warming believers out there, in ancient times “the beginning of winter” was in October.

### *Медовый Спас: Savior of the Honey Feast Day*

August, which may be a tragic month for Russia historically, is a rich month for festive church holidays, which have been wedded to folk traditions about harvesting and the weather.

The three big church holidays in August are all called *Спас*. *Спас*

in old Russian is Savior – *Спаситель*. This should not be confused, as I have done with unintended blasphemy, with *спаситель*, which is a life-saver, rescuer or life-guard. *Спас* is also used commonly to refer to churches dedicated to the Savior.

For the curious, this is the derivation of the name Spaso House, the Moscow residence of the U.S. Ambassador. It gets it comes from the street it’s located on, *Спасо-Секоевский переулок* (“Savior-on-the-sands” Lane), which in turn is named after the church there, called in full *Храм Спаса Преображения, что на Песках* (the Church of the Transfiguration of the Savior on the Sands). Since there were many churches dedicated to the Transfiguration of the Savior in Moscow, people added an identifying note; in this case, “on the Sands” refers to the sandy ground in the surrounding Arbat district. Spaso House actually sounds a bit jocular – something like Savior House – but it is so widespread it is simply transliterated back into Russian as *Спассо-Хаус*.

*Спас* is also the folk name for the three Feasts of the Savior in August. The first is called *Медовый Спас* (“Savior of the Honey Feast Day”) or *Мокрый Спас* (“Savior of the Water Feast Day,” literally, “Wet” Savior Feast Day), celebrated on August 14. In the church calendar it’s called *Прокормление Честных Древ Животворящего Креста Господня* (The Procession of the Venerable Wood of the Life-Creating Cross of the Lord). It was the custom in Constantinople to take a relic of the cross Christ was crucified on around the city in this month (to battle seasonal ailments). In Russia August 1 (the Old Style date of this holiday) was also the day Great Prince Vladimir and all of Rus was baptized, hence the “watery” folk name. Traditionally it is the day beekeepers harvest the season’s honey: *На Первый Спас и нищий между попробует*. (On the First Savior Feast Day even the poor get to taste some honey).

The second *Спас* (August 19) is *Яблочный* (Apple), more properly *праздник Преображения Господня* (holiday of the Transfiguration of the Savior). Traditionally people bring fruit to the church to be blessed and then give it to children, the ill and poor. There is also a belief (verging, it would seem, on superstition) that mothers whose children have died and daughters whose mothers have died cannot eat apples or other fruit until this holiday, otherwise they will be denied apples in the afterlife. It is also a weather-predicting day:

*Каков Второй Спас – таков и январь.* (As is the Second Savior Feast Day, so will January be).

One journalist couldn't resist a pun: he called his article about a possible merger of the Yabloko and SPS parties *ЯБЛОЧНЫЙ СПАС*. I guess he thought it would save democracy in Russia.

The third *Спас* (August 29) is called *Хлебный* ("Bread") or *Ореховый* ("Nut"), since this was the time to harvest the wheat and ripened nuts. This was the *празднование иконы "Нерукотворный образ" Господа нашего Иисуса Христа* (celebration of the "Not-Made-By-Hands" Image of our Lord Jesus Christ), dedicated to the image of Christ that appeared on a cloth He used. For this reason it's also called *Спас на полотне* ("Savior on Linen Cloth"). This is when one set about baking using the season's first flour: *Третий Спас – хлеба припас*. (The Third Savior Feast Day stocks up on grain.) This is also the day the birds take off for the winter.

If you missed the first two holidays, don't despair: churches are still selling fresh honey. And there's always next year.

### ***Бархатный сезон: the peak tourist season in the south of Russia and the Caucasus (late August – early September)***

August is an iffy month for Russians. It used to be a carefree and joyful month, the peak vacation season, when Muscovites and other Northerners, longing for some real sun, took turns waiting in week-long lines at the station to buy train seats south (this was before the weather went screwy and summer in Moscow could be 35 degrees Celsius). For those who stayed, the stores and streets were blessedly crowd-free. Then, in 1991, the *ЛэКаЧелПиты* (Emergency Committee) decided that Moscow's relatively empty streets would make it easy for tanks and armored personnel carriers to move in. So they put *Swan Lake* on TV and radio, to let everyone know that the party was over, and tried to take over the country. Since then, Russians get nervous as soon as August begins.

And with good reason. *В августе 1998 года Российское правительство чуть было не объявило дефолт по своим внешним долгам.* (In August 1998, the Russian government nearly defaulted on its foreign debt.) This turned the middle class into

the nation's poor, and gave Russians a new word: *дефолт*. (Note that *дефолт* is only "default" in the sense of nonpayment of debts. Default settings on your computer are *параметры по умолчанию*.) It also gave us a good joke. Sergei Kligyenko, the young Prime Minister who announced the default without warning, was dubbed "*киндер-сюрприз*" – "kiddie surprise," after the popular children's chocolate egg with a surprise inside.

Thank heaven summers have been calmer lately, though hotter than Hades. *Когда асфальт начинается плавиться от жары – я уезжаю на курорт!* (When it's so hot the asphalt melts, I leave the city for a spa resort!) In Russian one says: *купить путёвку в санаторий* – I bought a package tour to a sanatorium. *Путёвка* can be a "package tour," but it can also imply a subsidized package tour. *Я думал, что в этом году отдохнуть не получится – после ремонта меня было мало денег.* – *но моя родственница достала мне путёвку.* (I thought I wouldn't be able to take a vacation this year – I didn't have much money after remodeling the apartment, but a relative managed to get me a subsidized tour.)

In Russian time off from work is *отпуск* – from the word *отпускать*, to let someone off from something. *Меня отпустили только на две недели.* (I'm only getting two weeks off.) The word *каникулы* (always in the plural) is used to describe a vacation, usually from school: *Летние каникулы начались, и дети бегом по двору с утра до ночи.* (Summer vacation has begun, and the kids are tipping about the courtyard from morning till night.)

As you set off on to your spa-vacation, check to see what's included in your package tour. *Полный пансион* is full board, meaning three or four meals a day. Given that standard sanatorium breakfast fare is *манная каша, сосиски с макаронами* (cream of farina, hotdogs and macaroni), you may be happier with "*полупансион*" – half board. Once there, you become *курортник* (a vacationer, usually with the sense of someone in a sanatorium). You get to do fun things, such as *ходить на водные процедуры и на массаж* (take mineral baths and get massages). You can also walk around with your very own *пильник*, a spa cup, to drink various odorous but health-reviving mineral waters. The best time to do all this is during the *бархатный сезон*, the peak season when the air and sea are like velvet.

old. *лёд*. Минеральная вода со льдом при комнатной температуре 12 градусов? Сняли, что ли? (Ice in my mineral water when the room temperature is 12 degrees? Are you nuts?)

Then there's *сосулька* (icicle), a thing of beauty when glimpsed from afar glistening in the sunlight, a life-threatening weapon when hanging over your doorway. *Достань из кладовки, пожалуйста, стремянку и сней сосульки с потолка.* (Could you get the stepladder out of the closet and clear the icicles from the ceiling?)

Let us not forget the tiny *леденец*, which can either mean a hard candy or a throat lozenge. *Горло болит. У нас есть леденцы в аптечке?* (My throat hurts. Do we have any lozenges in the medicine cabinet?) Not to mention the enormous *ледник* (glacier), which gave us *Ледниковый период* – literally, “the period of glaciers” – what we call the Ice Age. This may also be used in reference to Moscow in January 2006.

You might find it handy to know the verb *леденеть*, which means to ice up, literally, or figuratively. *Посмотрев на термометр, я оледенела от ужаса.* (When I looked at the thermometer my blood ran cold, literally, “I timed to ice from horror.”)

Another nice icy expression is a bit of a false friend. In Russian *разбить лёд* (to break the ice) has more of the sense of overcoming enmity or hostility than the American sense of making a bit of chit-chat to smooth over moments of social awkwardness. *На переговорах одна сторона смогла разбить лёд недоверия и вражды.* (At the negotiations one side was able to break through the distrust and hostility.)

If you are from more southern climes, it may be hard to grasp the image in the expression *лёд тронулся* (literally, “the ice moved”). When a river begins to thaw, it emits eerie deer whoops and howls and then finally cracks. That seems to take forever, but as soon as one crack appears, the ice will start to break up quickly. Hence the headline: *Газовая война – лёд тронулся* means that there has been a breakthrough in the gas war and we can now expect progress in negotiations.

The most slippery ice words are the paronymous pair *ледовый* and *ледяной*. Paronymous words have the same root but slightly different meanings. Here both are adjectives for ice. *Ледовый* is used when something is made of ice by nature (*ледовое поле* – ice

field); when referring to something on the ice (like *ледовая дорога* – the ice road – over Lake Ladoga during WWII); when referring to action connected with ice (*ледовое плавание* – Arctic navigation); or when referring to some instrument or machine that deals with ice (*ледовый мотор* – ice axe).

*Ледяной* is the word more commonly used in everyday speech. It refers to things made of ice by man, like *ледяной дом* (ice house), *ледяное царство* (ice kingdom), or even *ледяной Биг-Бен* (Big Ben ice sculpture). It is also used for things covered in ice (*ледяная крыша* – ice-covered roof) and anything that is icy cold.

Like, for example, my very own *ледяные ручки* (ice-cold hands).

### *Старый Новый год: Old-Style New Year's Eve*

The Christmas season and New Year's in Russia have always been an odd mix of old and new. First pagan holidays were adapted to fit Christian rituals, then Christian rituals were adapted to meet Soviet anti-religious sentiment, and now everything is being revived and celebrated. This means that you can start partying with *кампильское рождество* (Western Christmas) on December 25, and keep tipping until *старый Новый год* (Old-Style New Year's, and keep tipping until *старый Новый год* (Old-Style New Year's, celebrated according to the Old-Style calendar) on January 13. This is definitely the season to be merry.

Before the 1917 Revolution, festivities started on December 24 with *колядки* – a cross between Christmas caroling and trick or treat: people would go from house to house, singing songs and asking for sweets. This was really a pagan holiday in honor of *Коляда*, the god of feasts, but since it coincided with Christmas Eve (*накануне Рождества Христова*, also called *сочельник*) everyone pretended that this was really a celebration of Christ's birth. On this day and throughout the holiday season (called *святки*, *святые вечера* – Holy Week), people indulged in миммеру (*ряженые*) – dressing up in costumes – and circle dances (*хороводы*). *Дети ходили хороводом вокруг ёлки.* (Children danced around the Christmas tree, singing songs.) Traditionally hosts served *кутья*, a hearty mix of kasha, honey, raisins and other sweets (which, I have to admit, I've found utterly revolting every time I've tried it).

The entire season was also the prime time for *gadanie* – fortune-telling, mainly for girls to foresee their future husbands. In Russian villages, marriage was the only event that changed a girl's life. If she married a young, handsome, kind and rich man, there was some hope of – if not happiness and abundance – then at least tolerable living conditions. But if he were old, poor, ugly or mean, a girl could only look forward to a life of misery and want. So it is not surprising that there are so many rituals connected with this: *gadanie na вещах, на куртицах, на лошадах; подслушивание, гадание у ворот, гадание башмаком* (fortune-telling using objects, chickens, horses; listening, fortune-telling by the gate, using a boot). Almost all these rituals are meant to tell an unmarried girl what direction her intended will come to her from. After the sign was given, she'd spend days racking her brain to think what villages lie to the north or east, and what unmarried men from there she might have met at church holidays or fairs. For *gadanie у ворот* on Christmas Eve or the eve of the Holy Theophany of Our Lord Jesus Christ (*Крещение*), a girl might stand by the gate and recite: *Загай, загай, собачейника! Загай, серый волк! Где залает собачейника, там живёт мой суженый!* (Bark, little dog, bark; howl, gray wolf; where the little dog barks, there lives the one destined for me!) To tell your fortune with a boot: *девушка снимает с левой ноги башмак и кладает его за ворота, наблюдая при этом, куда башмак ляжет носком* (a girl takes her boot off her left foot and throws it out the gate, watching which direction it points to when it lands). Her future husband lives in the direction the boot points. If it points to her house, it means she won't marry this year.

There are also indoor fortune-telling rituals that involve glasses of water, candles and wax, and mirrors – the idea is that you peer into them and see your husband to be. In fact, *ей бы перед зеркалом* is an expression that means “it's time for her to get married.” In my feckless youth I did a great deal of this at *девичники* (all-girl parties, hen parties), but frankly I never saw anything that couldn't be attributed to the vast amount of alcohol consumed before we began trying to part the mists of the future.

All of this ended with the 1917 Revolution, and New Year's became the official holiday. People still had *ёлки*, but they were called *новогодние ёлки* (New Year's trees) *по рождественские* (Christmas trees), and they still decorated them with *украшения* (decorations) or,

more commonly, *ёлочные игрушки* – literally, “little toys for the fir.” But instead of St. Nick they had *Дед Мороз* (Grandfather Frost) and *Снегурочка* (the Snow Maiden) to bring presents and treats. *Дети ходят на ёлку* means “children went to a New Year's party” where there would be a decorated tree, singing, dancing and mummery – that is, everything that has been done for the last two centuries, now dressed up as a secular celebration of the new year.

So, get out your mirrors, take off your left shoe, and start celebrating. *С праздником! С Рождеством Христовым! С Новым годом!*

### **Мерзляк/мерзлячка: someone who is always cold**

*Месяц январь – зимы государь!* (January is the Lord of winter!) Now there's a folk saying that has stood the test of time. There's nothing like standing at the bus stop and feeling like you're in a sci-fi movie: the wicked witch of winter blows frigid air over the city and the temperature drops five degrees in three minutes. You take off your glasses to keep the metal from freezing to your nose, and send mental thanks to crazy Aunt Gladys, who gave you that ridiculous snow mask for Christmas. Who thought it would come in handy so soon?

This is what Russians call *Крещенские морозы*. These freezing cold days (*морозы*) refer to the church holiday of *Богоявление* – *Крещение Господне* (properly called in English “the Holy Theophany of Our Lord Jesus Christ”), celebrated on January 19. This is the day when Christ was baptized (*Крещение*) in the Jordan River and as the church says, “the three Faces of God appeared – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” This is *Богоявление* (Theophany, the “appearance of God before man”), though Russians in everyday speech usually call the holiday *Крещение*.

So where does the cold come in? In much the same way that Americans have tracked hurricane seasons or know when to expect a “hot” easter,” over the centuries Russians have noticed that cold weather tends to show up around this church holiday. In 2006 it was right on schedule. The only consolation is in another bit of folk weather forecasting: *Если январь холодный, июль будет сухой и жаркий*. (If January is cold, July will be hot and dry.) Start booking your vacation now.