Moscow Dayze

How often do you visit your childhood home? Do you still live there? Is it still yours? Does it belong to someone new? Or is it gone?

I've changed my address at least eighteen times, not counting the backpacking months in Southeast Asia when there was none. Out of all the places I've called home, my grandparents' tiny concrete box in the Moscow suburbs is still the longest-lasting one: eleven years.

The last thing I remember about that place is the hug I gave to my grandpa before moving with my mom, dad, our dog, and our stuff to Toronto.

I had always intended to visit, but military conscription and immigration laws pushed the trip back by years. School, work, travel, dual citizenship, a grossly-expired passport, and the confusing, inefficient Russian bureaus turned the wait into a double-decade.

Once it finally took place, death, lousy weather, and awkward timing tainted my long-deferred trip with gloom.

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All the photos in this book — except for the next two — were exposed as I wandered around my childhood streets, witnessing my past life's foggy memories materialize: familiar, enchanting, and repulsive all at once.

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Late 2019: my grandmother visits clinics and stays in hospitals with increasing frequency. I know she doesn't have much time, though her confident, kind voice over the telephone leaves me content and oblivious.

2020 is the year I was hoping to finally fly to Moscow, hug grandma, and maybe even introduce her to my wife. The frustrating journey through the Russian consulate's web of fees, changing rules, and multi-year delays was nearly complete.

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I got the news of her passing early in January 2020. A week later, I learned of the funeral from my mother over the phone. She sounded scared and lonely in a country she no longer knew.

Having paid the "emergency" processing fees, I finally got the papers and booked an eight-day return flight.

Unpleasant. Loathsome. A gruelling 36-hour journey in crammed cabins through terrible weather. The descent had finally resolved my disturbing expedition with the dark, snowy outskirts of Russia's megapolis spiking from under the grey mantle. I softly breathed "Mordor" and thought of how ridiculous this whole thing had been so far.

My comfort rested with the two old cameras in a small backpack under the cabin seat in front of me. After all, I get to travel to a strange "new" place and take pictures.

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Aunt Masha, dressed in a large fur coat, met me at the airport. Together, we walked towards an old minivan and drove away through the snow-covered highways with my uncle at the wheel.

Last time I saw Masha was also at an airport — in 1999. She was hugging my mom; my mom sobbed softly as they uttered their goodbyes.

As we sped through the streets, we phoned my dad in Toronto and then mom at grandma's flat. **"Welcome back; it's been a while; who knew it'd take this long."**

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A few days later, when the jetlag had finally settled, mom and I went to meet with my half-uncle, Feodor. We ate dinner at a hipster cafe as I observed his gentle influence over mom's otherwise unyielding opinions. He looked a lot like my grandpa; I ate up his stories about working as a travelling geologist until the topic changed to personal trivialities, and I drifted away.

My grandparents were architects, whereas my parents and most of their friends have art degrees. Uncle Dmitri, my dad's brother, is a theatre professor and a known stage/costume designer. My dad looked up to Dmitri ever since they grew up in Chelyabinsk, became career artists in Moscow, and met their wives through art.

Uncle's apartment, where mom and I went for our next dinner, is in a historic downtown building with an ancient elevator and creaky hardwood floors. His family lives in a space packed with books and art. It reminds me of an apartment portrayed in the old film "Canine Heart" — a remarkable piece of Soviet cinematography.

I used Aunt Masha's delicious food at the dinner table as a steady supply of menial work for my jaw to avoid looking awkward — as I didn't feel like participating in or starting a conversation. Instead, I let my gaze drift across the room and snapped pictures of a "flying cow" and my cousin-actress with her French bulldog.

A table full of artists, and I'm
the odd one out.

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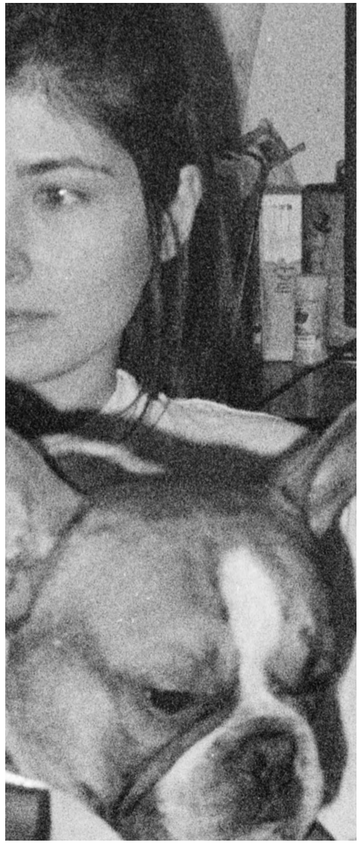


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Russian subways are famous for their lavish decorations and massive spaces — a "gift" to the citizens from a socialist regime.

I looked forward to photographing the deep underground Moscow Metro since I began working on my travel documents; trains have been my mild obsession ever since my parents left a German TT-scale set for me under a fir tree three decades ago. It was an expensive gift, as were many others — mom and dad tried their best to make a connection while I lived full-time at my grandparents'.

I insisted we take the Metro as mom and I traversed the city, settling grandma's affairs. From the graveyard to the notary and friends' houses.

Underground, we bounced softly on vinyl benches in the fast, loud cars as they whirled by familiar stations. I felt comforted by how little they have changed compared to the often wildly altered cityscapes above.

In the tube, I was reliving my childhood trips to friends' and relatives' homes, school excursions, and holiday outings.

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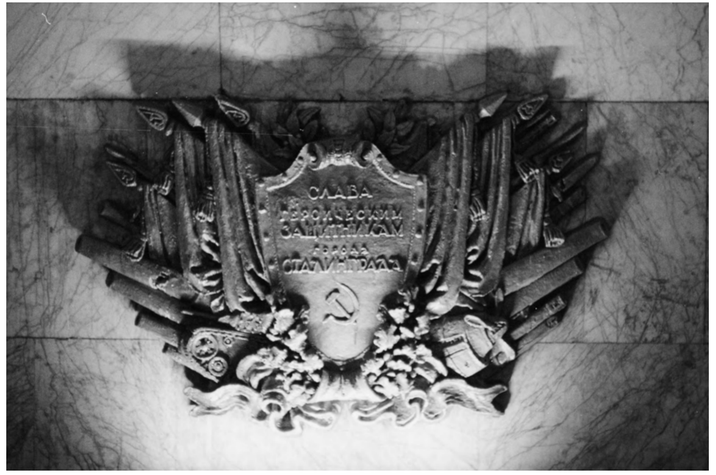
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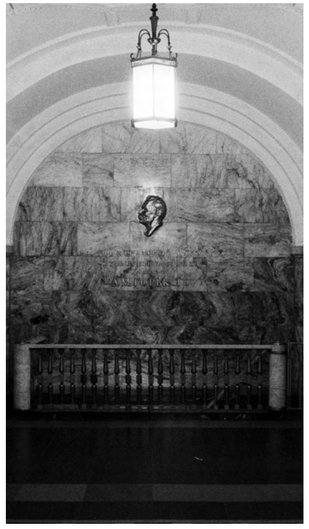

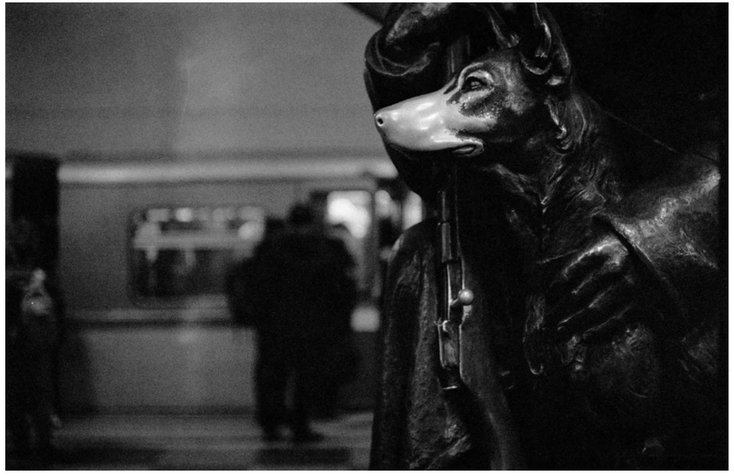

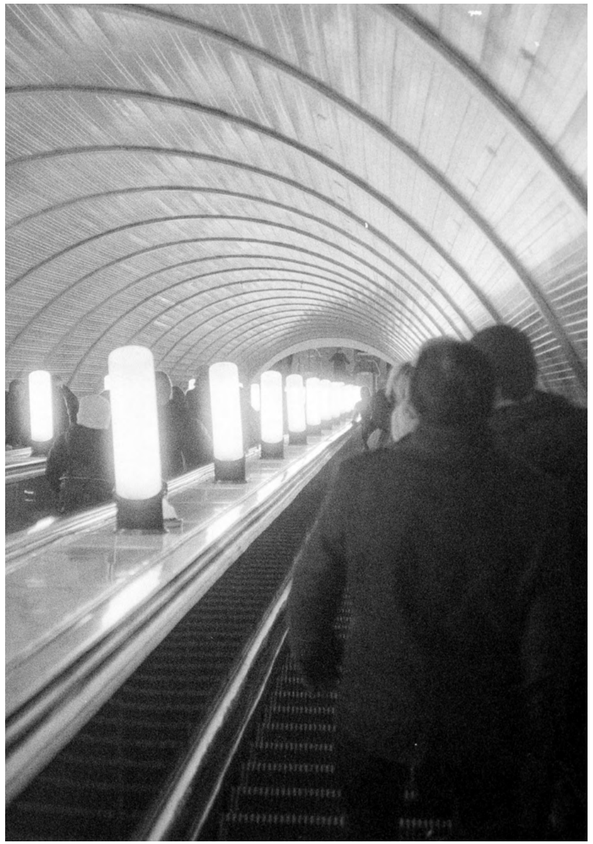

I loved visiting my dad at his downtown office. He worked at the Bolshoi Theatre workshop, an enormous seven-storey building with an expansive atrium in the midst of the old city. I enjoyed walking with him through the windy little streets between his sites amongst old brick and stone houses, none of which looked like the next.

Present-day Moscow center stirred up memories so distant they felt deliriously fictitious. I found new malls, skyscrapers, and loads of decent ethnic restaurants planted amongst the familiar old brick and stone. Perplexed, I followed its labyrinth alleys, looking to somehow find myself.

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Sitting in a well-decorated Armenian restaurant across from a cultural district, I overheard racist remarks uttered privately. Growing up as a white boy in Moscow, I have often heard the existence of Russian racism denied: a lie I've learned to see through as I aged in Canada. Looking back at my experiences, I can clearly remember it permeating conversations, jokes, pop culture, and people's actions towards each other — including violence. A painful, disappointing truth to see play out about my place of origin.

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Moscow and I had two decades to grow independently. Now that we're together again, I know it's unlikely I could ever find myself living in this city. I can still read, write, love, and understand Russian culture, but I no longer feel like I belong or want to belong here.

I checked the itinerary and counted two days until my return flight.

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Radisson


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РОСГВАРДИЯ
РОСГВАРДИЯ

While many Western cities sprawl into gas-guzzling suburbs, Moscow's historical brickworks extend outwards into mundane concrete brutalism. Endless rows of tall, sprawling monoliths house millions of Russians on the outskirts of this enormous conurbation. Dingy and cramped with dark lobbies, claustrophobia-inducing elevators, these homes are little more than mixed cement slabs bolted together, facades slathered with dull-coloured tiles.

You can always tell which building is a school, no matter where you are — a three-storey structure with large windows amid high-rise living quarters. That stupendously boring architecture housed my peers and I for eight years. The memories of my woolly-voiced homeroom teacher and rowdy lunch breaks radiated from the grey facade as I looked at it from the hallway of my building. I recalled the carelessness of youth, unaffected by the gloomy backdrop.

I took a few steps away from my former neighbourhood into the dull yet strangely alluring streets of Domodedovo. The insipid buildings, towering imposingly, appeared humanized by shoddy urban repairs and Cyrillic storefront decorations. Streets lined with prolific birch trees, strange old cars, and masses of thawing grey snow triggered memory replays from my childhood that felt weathered by the twenty years' worth of forgetfulness.

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The night before my departure, back at my grandparents' apartment, I stood in an empty room alone and daydreamed about my youth.

I am four years old, waiting in the tiny hallway as grandma and grandpa fondle with the keys to our new home. It has that freshly-built feel: clean, bright concrete walls, smelling like earth and baking soda. My room looked much bigger back then. In it, I spend hours playing with my army of toy soldiers, cars, roads, buildings, and train tracks.

I looked out of the back window onto the ravine that used to be an illegal dumpsite with an unfinished six-storey concrete skeleton that stood unchanged for fifteen years. There's now a mall and a community swimming pool.

Beyond the ravine was a row of residential buildings, one of which housed my school friend's tiny room.

Preteens. I venture with a few buddies across the street, along the sidewalk and into the dingy-green hallways of his building. Stepping into a cramped elevator, emerging into a tiny apartment. We camp next to a friend's delightfully bright, vividly pixelated CRT display as we take turns playing computer games. His dad is not around, and his mom works late. We take that opportunity to discover that a pot of water will split into raindrops when thrown off the sixth-floor balcony. Paper planes also fly further, all the way until their tails turn into barely visible specs of white litter in the canopies below. We laugh out loud.

Even though, like all my peers, I had a strong desire for independence at that age, I spent a lot of time with my grandparents, especially grandpa. He helped me with my homework, cooked, cleaned, and made toys from paper and wood that looked and felt special amongst the sea of factory-made plastic extrusions. At night, he read me books; in the daytime, when he was free, he painted obsessively: seas, ships, nature. My love for his creative side was evident in the infantile jealousy I felt when he gave his art away as gifts to friends.

I slowly shuffled around the empty rooms, observing my grandpa's framed watercolours and grandma's untouched fine china sets.

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At night, I went through the thick stack of art and old family portraits with mom. It dawned on me that despite spending most of my childhood with my grandparents, I knew little of their past. They lived through World War II, years of Stalin's dictatorship and Soviet neglect. Still, the images I found from those years radiated youth, hope, and pride.

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ские авиалинии

Many years ago, grandpa read me stories about Moomintrolls. That book inspired me to seek adventures as I made choices about my life. It still affects my decisions today.

None of the adventures I chose for myself, however, affected me as deeply as this short flight to Moscow. It was tough learning that I indeed forgot where I came from. For years, Russia was a fading memory and a voice on the other side of the telephone.

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"Remember, if you don't like it, you can always come back," repeated grandma over the line for the first two years as I adjusted to the new life in Canada. I never dared to consider. Onwards.

I wish they would've left their home behind like my parents and I did, but their roots were too deep.

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Words and photography by
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