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Living With Ghosts

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Nobody told me that when you sign on for this expat life, you need to be ready to live with ghosts.

Not the shrieking, wailing, chain-clanking kind that knock on your doors and windows, keeping you awake at night. No, these are gentler than that; they are the echoes of people you've met during your expat tenure in this city who, since you arrived, have packed up and moved on, leaving you with some memories, an e-mail address, a Skype number, and the hope that your paths might cross again in the future.

I suspect that most cities with a sizeable expat community go through exactly the same process, but I'm not sure they have such tangible ghosts; serial expats among my friends tell me that Moscow seems to attract a certain kind of person who, once gone, often leaves a space that is hard to fill. Living here is not necessarily the easy option, and many Moscow expats are — in my experience — adventurous, open, and willing to reach out to others who might be going through a difficult time, in recognition of the fact that in this challenging city it could be any of us needing help next time around.

It seems to me that the concept of "paying it forward" is alive and well in the Moscow expat community. When I arrived here nearly three years ago, I experienced this for myself, to the extent that I was sometimes suspicious of it. "Why are they being so nice?" I wondered. "What do they WANT?" (I come from London, don't forget. You can live next door to a person for years before you actually get round to saying hello.)

Here, however, people acknowledge that while this is a fascinating place to live, Moscow is not without challenges, and many try in any way they can to help new arrivals have soft landings. In itself, this is wonderful, but it does mean that when, in the expat way of things, those people who reached out to you move on to their next posting, they are missed.

For some reason, I see these ghosts more often in the autumn. It's probably because it's the start of a new school year and the summer changeover — the leavers leaving, the new arrivals arriving, both in time for the beginning of term — is pretty much complete.

So I walk past houses now empty of a good friend, past playgrounds no longer ringing to the calls of my children's playmates, and catch a glimpse of someone in a restaurant who could be the identical twin of someone I used to know, and I feel the Moscow expat ghosts walking beside me.

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