

## **All Roads Lead to Home**

**By Claire Sarah O'Neill**

I didn't think it could feel like coming home.

That was the biggest fear I had when I first came to Boston for college: Not the new world I was stepping into, but the loss of the one I was leaving. I feared the loss of stability and constancy, not the idea of being so far from all that I had known but the notion that I could never find such a haven again. It is hard to leave everything you know. It feels like the world is ending, even if you have a family to return to when the semester ends because it still feels so final, like you can never return. In a way, you can't. To go to college is to leave your childhood, and all the safety of it, behind.

Most people find their safe place in their homes, their secluded rooms where they are the kings of the castles that they rent. I have seen people find it in the warm arms of a diner's booths and a library's shelves; the spaces they can unwind even if they cannot truly call them theirs.

I didn't find that feeling in my dorm room, or anywhere on campus; I found my own in that rocking lullaby of the T's encapsulating cradle, the gently swinging motion as it lightly bounced on the rail lines. Standing and falling to the whims of the motion on twisting tracks that follow the same pattern it always does, that same path it always has, that same destination to which it always returns. It was the constancy in a world anew that gave me sanctum, replacing every anxiety I had about acclimating to a new city. I could be lost in a sea of people but still be wholly me, not on display or expected to be anything but what I am in the moment.

I prefer taking the orange line train over any other. Worn down by generations, charming, if not weary, with the stories of hundreds of people that the city nurtures in its arms. The seats of the T sink beneath the echoes of their weight. The pattern of the old fabric reminds me of arcades

and bowling alley carpets. The weary air of its citizens, so carefully cared for despite the rocky ride, breathes what could be a harsh city atmosphere to soft life. It might not be the cleanest or the nicest, but it is the friendliest: There's no ill will in there.

As I stand on the open-air platform of Ruggles waiting, tired from classes and begging to go home, begging to start my pilgrimage to my bed, it is the near unconscious soothing croon I hear, a homeward bound siren call from the city itself. Follow those little signs, it calls, from the pre-recorded voice above. That everlasting, unchanging tone that is its own "open sesame" to the mechanical doors that swing open into that permanence of a train car, old or new.

Stand stock-still on the cold platform underground, above ground, in the snow or rain. In waterlogged boots and muddy sneakers that numb your toes the way your brain feels after a long day. In those moments the train is coming I can see the lights of the first car in the tunnel, hear the car heralded by little robotic bells chime as it comes forward now, feel that rumbling forward march as the car speeds by and stops. Miraculously stops.

The doors open, a welcome embrace, and I step on, shoes scuffing the floor like I could barely think to lift them anymore. It is like stepping through the front door of my childhood home, opened for me and held open by my mother, beckoning me in. It is the warm lights that remind me of my bedside lamp, the soft hues that croon like a soft embrace as I read on my phone on the arcade-floor-patterned seats--no, it is the comfort beneath my covers in that golden haze that soft light brings--no it is like the dawn breaking through my windows, but isn't that the moon above I see through the train window on my way home?

It is nostalgia, the echo of and memory of the cue to a last long lost soft hope, the idea of safety and warmth and things I thought I would abandon and would abandon me.

I went back to New York for Thanksgiving, saw my family and met up with old friends. I found it strange that it wasn't strange when it felt like I couldn't wait to come back to Boston. Running to the Amtrak train gave me anxiety that didn't quell until I could sit and know without a doubt that coming back was fact. My shoulders relaxed, my breath evened out, my head rolled on my shoulders. It wasn't that mechanical lullaby call, siren call of hard T seats that delivers me back to campus housing, but-

But it was a promise.

It felt like coming home.

There is an eternal hum in the distance, that rolling car over tracks, the sound of crossing signs and the call of the train's chime -

I'm not scared.