

Homecomings

By Jonathan Livingstone-Banks

The blurred outlines of trees sail by in that non-descript way they do when you don't pay attention. Persistent vibrations nag from the spot where my forehead rests against the train window.

'You look tired. Been a long day?' The woman across from me doesn't look concerned. A middle-aged spread of floral patterns under a puffy gilet, if anything she looks excited. Why the sight of me would inspire enthusiasm for conversation is beyond me. Still, cringingly British as I am, I can't dismiss her.

'Sorry?' I say. I heard her. I don't know why I pretend I didn't. Maybe I'm stalling, as if this brief delay will help spend the remaining two hours of my journey.

'You look rather tired. I couldn't help notice. Is everything okay? I hope you're not feeling poorly.' I must have paused for too long, because she follows up with, 'are you going home?'

There's no malice in it, but the question stings. The polite, unthinking, answer freezes on my lips. What could I possibly say that's true? I am going to my hometown. I'm going to my family home, the home I was raised in. But am I going home?

Mum's been sick for a while. The long and slow kind that could go either way, but only ever seems to go one way. I live far enough away that I miss the mundane grind of her deterioration, but every visit carries the weight of worried scrutiny, trying to judge if anything is better, or if it's just a brave face. And then there are the private tears, being pulled aside for hushed conversations in kitchens and hallways about how things 'really are'.

I don't know when I stopped wanting to come. Visiting family has often felt like an obligation, a chore, but one wrapped in the warm quilt of love and familiarity, the feeling of being home, even after making a home of my own, so far away.

All the love and warmth is still there, but it only penetrates so deep. I feel the iron core of self-preservation thickening inside me.

The world shifts around us in a hundred small and subtle ways, in spite of the unfair insistence that this part of it should stay frozen in time, never changing. The people who raised and protected us slowly diminish. Now we pay for dinner, quietly make decisions on their behalf, privately think horrid practical thoughts about a future without them.

I look into the woman's eyes, now stained with concern. I force a polite smile and say, 'yes, I'm going home.'

A sad part of me hopes that's true.