PASSING THROUGH PROVIDENCE

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"Text me when you get to Providence," you said.

You'd asked me to text you so you could estimate the minutes to Back Bay, our meeting point. Four years later, I'm back on Amtrak, headed to Boston for different reasons. And when I pass Providence, it's just another stop on the train.

And so my memory drifts to the last time I took the train from New York to Boston. Meeting you—no, not meeting, relating—that's a better word. Relating to you was a surprise. Those days I had so little life in me. I was a widow, forced to close the book on twenty-five years of abiding love. I had to learn to live without her. It seemed impossible. So out of range. Wait. Not really impossible. Inconceivable. That's a better word. Because, let's face it, nothing's impossible. After all, I met you.

When I thought of going online to find someone, I felt desperate, lonely, odd—a cast away of sorts. Isn't that what I had become? Lost in the world, unprotected, and alone. Desolation left me hungry. Hunger became starvation. And then—that day. I received an email from you.

It wasn't easy getting close to you. "That's okay," you said, "I'm brave enough for the two of us." And with your kindness you helped me discover intimacy once again. And the astonishment—another hand touching me. Different lips. Falling asleep those nights, I was happier than I had been in so long.

With you, I soared. Was it love? Infatuation? Or just old-fashioned romance? It was so simple. I liked you. And you liked me. What more do two humans need?

Sometimes though, I wondered if the closeness that I felt with you meant the same to you, if you'd follow through on all the things you said. I wanted you to, so badly. "If you ever need a place to live. You could always live with me." Or, during Hurricane Sandy, "Hi Cutie. Wish you were here. Want me to come and get you?" You lived in Cambridge. I lived in Manhattan. Zone A. No power. No subways. Floods everywhere.

As the train pulled out of Providence, I remember that Sunday you called. The angst and sadness in your voice. "I can't do this. You're lovely and fun and I really like you, but I am not ready." I guess you were too afraid. Funny how the tables can turn, isn't it?

You're a phantom in my life now. Sometimes I wonder if you even existed. You did. I have the proof: your texts, your emails, your voicemails, and your photographs, too. I recall one of you in particular. There you are. Perched between Scorsese and Spielberg. Studio headphones around your neck. A big smile. In command.

I wasn't dreaming.

Sometimes I let myself get carried along by the memory of being with you, trying to believe that you would come back to me. But I know that is an illusion. I prefer reality to fantasy, anyway.

Ten minutes, a little more, and I'll hit Boston around dinnertime. Not that it matters. No one will be waiting for me. I'll find a place and have a meal. And I'm haunted by a feeling I never expected to

FROM A TO LGBTQ

have, realizing that there is something more pressing to fear than loss—that I might spend the rest of my life alone. With you, I wasn't alone. I liked you. I still do. In fact, I liked you so much I was happy to be left by you.

Even though you're gone, you stay with me. Our time together a gift of light after years in darkness.

I get out at Back Bay.