

WHERE WE BELONG

By NATHAN CARLSON

HOME IS WHERE MY HEART BEATS,
RIGHT NOW. IN THIS MOMENT. IN THIS BREATH.
AND THAT'S ENOUGH.

There are places we leave, and places that leave us.

I've spent the last few years asking myself: *Where do I belong?*
Where is home?

The kitchen table where we ate dinner as a family. The backyard where I played as a child. These places still live somewhere inside me. So does the scratchy couch I cried into the night my father died. The wall I blankly stared at for hours the night my mother passed. Home is not always a place we choose — but it's often the place that shapes us, quietly and relentlessly.

I've moved a few times — chasing something I couldn't quite name. Sometimes a sense of belonging. Sometimes trying to outrun the weight of life. Each move has felt like a small act of survival. No one has my ability to leave situations that no longer serve me — though I don't always give myself credit for that. When I found the strength, I rolled out the same rugs in unfamiliar rooms, trying to make them feel like mine. But sometimes, those rooms just felt like waiting spaces — temporary, uncertain. I never fully settled, unsure if I even deserved to make a place a *home*.

I used to think finding home was about arrival. A final destination. The perfect apartment that checked all the boxes. The correct set of coordinates where the inner unrest would finally settle. I believed in a version of belonging that was still, permanent, effortless.

But life has taught me something else entirely.

Belonging, I've come to understand, isn't fixed — it's fluid. It grows and contracts. Sometimes it hides. Sometimes it roars. Sometimes it sits in silence and waits for us to catch up.

There are places where we once belonged that no longer welcome us. Some of us have been made to feel like guests in our own families. Some of us left our hometowns because the mold didn't fit — or because we refused to shrink ourselves to fit it. I couldn't feel more distant from my hometown. Just the thought of going back hurts. It holds my memories now — the good, the bad, and the people I've loved and lost.

When both of my parents passed, the family home became less of a shelter and more of a story. I would wander its empty rooms in my mind, trying to remember how the light used to land across the dining room table, how the house smelled in October. The people who made it feel like home were gone. What remained was something more like a museum: beautiful, but distant.

Again, I asked myself: *Where do I belong now?*

Still, even in absence, home finds a way to echo. I see my mother's handwriting in her cookbooks. I hear my father's voice when I fix something with my hands (a rarity and somewhat laughable, but true). These moments remind me that home can survive inside us, even when the structure is no longer standing.

And in time, we begin again.

A new apartment. A mismatched set of dishes. A neighbor who knows your name. A city that doesn't question who you love. A quiet morning routine that finally feels like safety. The peace found in solitude or the laughter of friends around a worn kitchen table.

Home isn't built through grand gestures. It's made in the ordinary act of choosing to stay. It's the stack of books beside the bed, the familiar corner of a local café, the feeling of slipping into clothes that feel like you after too many years of trying to wear someone else's life.

It's also the bravery of return — not just to physical places, but to the pieces of ourselves we once abandoned. For me, that return has meant feeling the full weight of my emotions after years of trying to be tough. It has meant making room for joy, even in the long shadow of loss.

I don't know if I'll ever stop searching for home. But I do know this: home is less a destination than a relationship — with ourselves. It's not just where we live; it's where we are seen. And if we are lucky, it's a place we can return to, again and again, as the truest version of who we are.

And if that place no longer sees us, or no longer helps us thrive, we find the courage to move on.

If we're really lucky, we learn how to carry that truest version of ourselves forward — a little clearer, a little braver each time. We build belonging not just from where we've been, but from wherever we choose to go next.

Where do I belong? Life has taught me: we belong in every room we enter. Learn to take up space. Let yourself be seen. You are worth it.

Where is home? I still struggle with this — especially on silent nights or solitary holidays. But when I feel those moments getting spicy, I remind myself: home is where my heart beats, right now. In this moment. In this breath. And that's enough. ▀