

Eagerly anticipating a return to 'the best kids' ride in town'

TEXT AND IMAGES BY SAGE STOSSEL

More than two years ago, inspired by my Boston subway-adoring son, I started work on a children's board book about the joys of riding the T. In the following months, as a spate of high-profile transit mishaps ensued, some began jokingly suggesting that my project in progress should in fact be a humor book — or a horror story.

What I didn't imagine was that by the time of its intended publication, in June of last year, it would be something else altogether: a vestige of a vanished era. The book, like any prospect of comfortably riding the T, was indefinitely postponed.

The T's sudden transformation into a feared disease vector has been most problematic for those who most depend on it. But it's been a loss, too, for Boston-area children, for many of whom the T is all at once a beloved amusement ride, a marvel of engineering, a civics lesson, and a shared social reference.

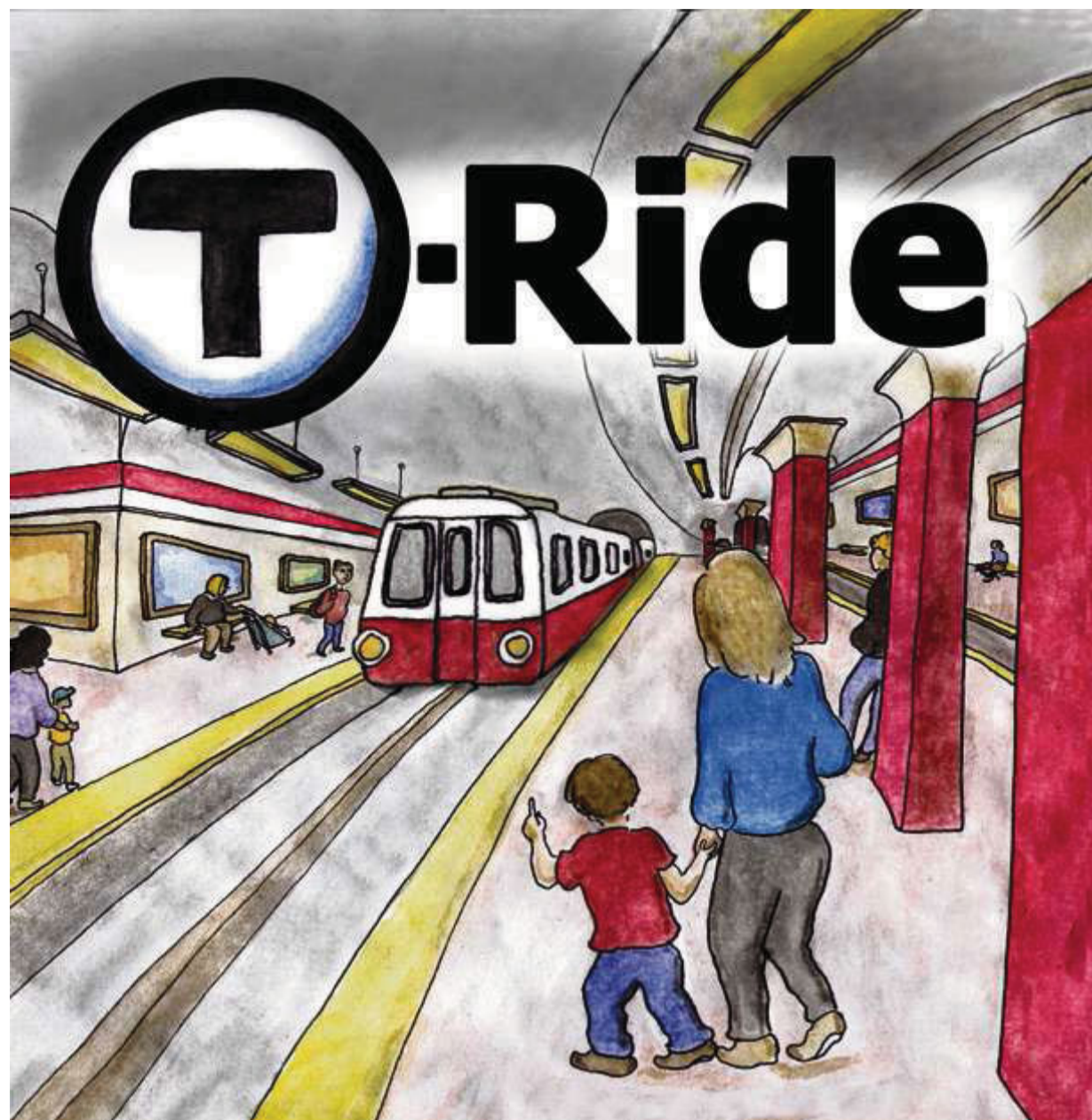


My 6-year-old has been smitten with the T since the age of 2 — thrilled every time he finds himself fortunate enough to take it somewhere and exclaiming in delight if he so much as catches a glimpse of a passing T train in a news spot or advertisement. It's an infatuation that, as far as I can tell, has been wholly beneficial.



I look, for example, at how he rides in our car — recumbent, immobilized in his car seat, and often clamoring for a toy or electronic device to pass the time — and compare it with how he looks riding the T: up on his knees, peering out the window, his head swiveling every which way as he excitedly issues observations and questions.

In the car, meanwhile, it's just us — the rest of the world at a remove beyond a pane of glass. But on the T, he's surrounded by people of all ages, fortunes, ethnicities, and cultures.



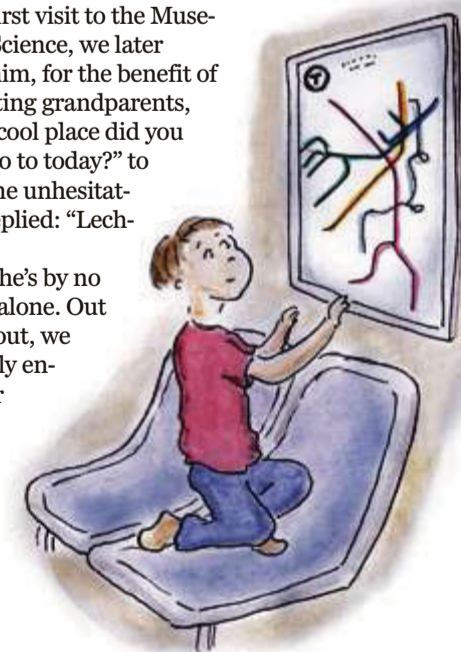
Red Line station between Harvard and Central. Another, commuting home from work, gave us her unused tickets to the City Hall Plaza ice cream Scooper Bowl. And a year ago January, a fellow 5-year-old sat himself down beside my son, shared M&Ms with him, and invited him on a playdate.



The T has even proved to be a motivating learning tool. Long before he could read words like "is" and "be," my son was recognizing words like "Park Street" and "Commuter Rail." And though he's not generally a precocious writer, one of the first words he ventured to write on his own at school last year was "Braintree," inscribed over a drawing of the Red Line. It's proved helpful in other ways, too: the tallying of stops between locations serves as a useful math exercise, and the plotting of possible routes from one place to another a fun problem-solving game.

As devotion to the T goes, my son's might be on the extreme side. He occasionally pauses over subway grates, hoping to get a whiff of "my favorite smell: subway air." And when, a few years back, we took him on a much anticipated first visit to the Museum of Science, we later asked him, for the benefit of his visiting grandparents, "What cool place did you get to go to today?" to which he unhesitatingly replied: "Lechmere!"

But he's by no means alone. Out and about, we regularly encounter kids



sporting MBTA-embazoned gear, leading to enthusiastic conversations about favorite T lines, coolest stations, and which stop is closest to whose house. Fellow parents have offered tips and advice, too, like that the commuter rail from Back Bay to South Station is free or that you can hit a transit-fan trifecta by getting to the airport by subway and bus, and then watching the planes take off.



At a popular playground near our apartment, the child-propelled merry-go-round is often piloted by kids calling out subway stops, thanking passengers for riding the T, and quibbling over which stop comes next.

One afternoon last winter, a group of slightly older kids wanted to pretend it was an airplane, while the younger set wanted to play Red Line. To the amusement of the adults present, an alternating arrangement was worked out such that the first stop was the Amazon rainforest, the next, JFK/



UMass, followed by the Great Wall of China, Savin Hill, the Eiffel Tower, and so on, ending with the Mattapan trolley.

The incongruity of locations was comical. But it was also apt. After all, for many area children, the T is one of the great sights of the world — or of their world, anyway.

Yet sadly, over the last, COVID-plagued year, they've been about as likely to find themselves at the Great Wall of China as they have been to ride the T.

Now, as debates over transit funding intensify, here's hoping state leaders will include the enrichment kids gain from the T among factors they're weighing. And with the end of the pandemic now in sight, here's hoping, too, that we're on our way back not just to normalcy but to the best kids' ride in town.

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The experience exposes him, too, to busker-performed music in all manner of styles, and to civic art. He's especially taken with the sculpted gloves cascading down the escalator divider at Porter Square and the user-controlled chimes at Kendall — created, it turns out, by a grandson of Henri Matisse.

And he's enjoyed serendipitous interactions with strangers. One woman, seeing him peering intently into the tunneled darkness, clued us in about a still-visible abandoned