

Late Train

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Lori heard banging pans in the kitchen and knew that the ghost must be cooking again. She fell onto her couch to wait, not bothering to turn on the light, and set her bag down beside the red whorls of graffiti on the wooden floor. Inside the bag were nine phones that she hadn't managed to sell that day. Across the room, thick clouds of steam hung in the kitchen door, obscuring everything but the yellow edge of the linoleum. There was the metallic smack of a skillet hitting the range, then a sizzling noise.

At her feet, the bag chirped and warbled to itself. The phones—which never were able to get signal at her apartment—were checking with each other, each one politely insistent that the error might be only with itself. One after another each phone messaged the other eight to ask if they were getting reception. One by one, each of the nine apologized that, no, they weren't getting reception either. After that was settled, they started a digital game of cards, except for one at half battery who decided to hibernate early.

Lori checked her watch. It was already eleven thirty. Usually the ghost was done cooking by the time she got home. Then she'd have to straighten up the mess he'd made of the kitchen and pick up the living room after the train had come by and shaken her books and records off the walls. But the books were still on their shelves, and the ghost was still here. She wondered what was going on.

There was a final whoosh of steam in the kitchen, and then the fog started to clear.

Lori got up and sighed. Time to go see what mess he'd left her tonight.

She walked into the thinning vapor. Warm droplets beaded on everything, pooling and dripping from the light fixture hanging over the card table. Every skillet she had was strewn around the counter, along with egg-shell and stray bits of peppers. As usual, he'd left the milk out. Her heavy skillet was still smoking on the stove. She waved the smoke out of the way and saw that he'd left a little food in the pan. That was a first.

She picked up the skillet and a fork and sat down at the table. It was still hazy in here. She lifted the tines in the air and was about to dig in when she heard the chink of cutlery across from her. Lori looked up and saw that the ghost hadn't left yet.

He was all steam and vapor, a rolling cloud balled into the shape of a big man in a suit. A sheet of water covered his side of the table. He ate quickly, balancing a soggy newspaper on his lap. Lori shrugged. She speared some of the egg mixture and put it in her mouth. She was surprised at how good it was.

She watched him while they ate. He fought with the pages of his paper. From the living room, there was a chiming as the phones ended their game and said good night to each other. Lori got up to get some of the coffee he'd made, stopping to refill his cup when she did. He sat the paper aside and fumbled with his creamers and sweeteners irritably. Well, at least she'd tried.

Then the cabinets behind them began to tremble, the cups dancing on the thin shelves. Lori braced herself. The ghost jumped to his feet and added a briefcase and hat to his shape. The rumbling became louder. The boards under her feet started to jump, and books fell to the floor in the living room. A train whistle squealed, keening into Lori's skull and making her dizzy. It sounded twice. The ghost exploded in a soft rush of warm air and

swept out the window and into the night. The train whistled again and roared by, the apartment slowly settling in its wake.

So that was why he was always gone by the time she got in. Lori wondered what part of town the train went to and where the ghost took it to so late. She put the pans in the sink and opened the window wide so the kitchen could dry out. It was a clear, warm night, with just a slice of moon left hanging in the sky. She walked into the living room and straightened her books, rescuing the ones that had fallen to the floor. She settled onto her couch and thought that, someday, she'd catch the train and follow him. She pulled a blanket over herself and rolled onto her side. Just not tonight.