



# Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

0:7:00

## GHOST TRAIN

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### Tuesday

I saw her again this morning. It's definitely her. I wasn't sure yesterday, five years' distance can play tricks with your memory. But this morning I knew it was Helen. Standing on the platform, in her smart leather coat and high heeled boots. A bit long in the tooth for that kind of thing, I would have thought.

What the hell is she doing here?

She hasn't seen me yet, or she's decided not to. Stuck up cow, thinks she's so superior with her neat little figure and kitten face.

It really used to gall me that no-one else seemed to see through her.

"Isn't Helen lovely?" they'd say.

"Isn't Helen something?"

"Isn't Helen sweet?"

"Don't you just wish you could be more like Helen?"

Don't you just wish Helen would die of a horrible wasting disease.

I remember the first time we were invited to her place for dinner, a few of us. I should have seen the signs then. The little flashes and sparkles, the little low laughs and tosses of the head.

"Just something simple," she'd said, "no need to dress up." Yeah, of course.

Adrian answered the door. Ushered us in. Got drinks.

"Helen won't be long, just changing out of her cooking clothes."

We sit and chat, drink, stuff ourselves with fancy canapes. Look round at Helen and Adrian's stuff. Low budget tasteful.

She comes down the stairs, followed closely by one of those heavy perfumes that makes you think of sex. Short black leather skirt, little cashmere cardy.

The men behave like dogs offered a biscuit. Sit up straight, eyes bright, wagging tails. The women -

"Ooh Helen, don't you look nice."

"What a lovely top, wherever did you get it?"

"If I'd know you were going to be smart, I'd have worn something else!" this said lightly, with a little laugh, and a look with shards of ice in it.

Helen glows and purrs and wafts.

She serves us ambitious food almost competently cooked, which we devour. She picks.

"I always find it hard to eat when I've been cooking," she tells us, as if I cared.

She drinks without getting drunk. The rest of us get drunk. Martin gazes at Helen in that rather stupid way that some men have when they've had too many.

She flirts with all of us.

I look across at her now, remembering that first dinner party. She sits reading her book. Occasionally she glances up to see who is looking at her. I have placed myself in a seat where I can watch her in the train window. I'm not ready to make contact yet.

I'm careful to leave the train after her, and walk slowly behind, watching where she goes. She takes the Jubilee line. I don't.

## **Wednesday**

Today is colder. She's there again, same spot on the platform, different coat. This one's wool but it's nipped in at the waist (of

course) and has a fur collar that perfectly frames her perfect face. She's talking into a mobile phone, laughing, animated. Must be a lover – who the hell else do you want to talk to at 7.00 in the morning?

There's a problem with the trains. A crush on the platform and double the amount of people get on. I don't get a seat, but she does. Some old fool gallantly gives up his seat for her. She takes it and rewards him with lowered lashes and a special smile. It makes his day.

I'm standing further down the carriage, face carefully turned away. But she's stuck in her book again. Some pretentious novel I expect.

I try to remember the first time I realised what was going on. It was one night at our flat – a party. I walked into the kitchen to get a refill. Helen and Martin standing too close, not touching, but too bloody close. Helen looking at him with that look you give men when you want them to think you'd like to go to bed with them.

Martin turns abruptly away when he hears me, Helen doesn't move.

I say nothing.

I get off the train before her today, the crush of people cover me. I'm angry. Unwanted memories forcing themselves out of dark crevices and crawling over my skin. It's the same anger I felt back then. A rage against humiliation. Jealousy is the worst of emotions, cancerous and blinding, futile and exhausting. It still lingered when I got home. I was scratchy and distant with Martin. I still don't mention seeing Helen.

**Thursday** – same train. Helen back in leather, carrying a small overnight bag. Whose husband is she seeing tonight?

I'd confronted Martin the day after that party.

"Is there something going on between you and Helen?"

"Don't be stupid, of course not."

"I saw you in the kitchen, I know the signs."

“You were drunk, you know what you’re like when you’re drunk.”

“I know what you’re like when you’re drunk. And I don’t trust Helen.”

He got angry, “You don’t trust any woman, for God’s sake. You think I jump into bed with every female I speak to. There’s nothing going on between me and Helen, it’s you that’s got the problem.”

And I begin to doubt myself again, agonising. Are these monsters real or imagined? Why do they plague me?

I stare at the back of Helen’s head, I want to look inside, I want to know for sure.

But all I can see are my reflections, all I can hear are my scratched recordings. And they tell me the same thing. Yes she did, yes she did. I feel the hatred grow again. Helen suddenly turns her head in my direction, as if she could feel my eyes. I look down quickly. I don’t think she recognised me.

Tonight Martin asks me if there’s anything wrong. I tell him work is getting me down. He’s sweet about it. I hold my little secret safe inside.

## **Friday**

No Helen today. Not in person anyway. She’s still invading my head. Like she did that weekend five years ago. The weekend we were due to go down to visit my brother. Saturday lunch time. Martin still not back from his ‘quick drink’, I went down to the pub to get him. He’s in there sitting at the bar with Helen. I went cold.

“We’d better get going,” I said.

“Look, love, I can’t face your brother, not after the week I’ve had. Could we cry off? Go another time?”

“No we bloody well can’t. They’re expecting us, I’m not cancelling.”

Helen sits smiling, looking down at her hands. “I really don’t want to go, I’ll be terrible company, I’m knackered. Why don’t you go on your own if you don’t want to cancel?”

I can't believe he's doing this.

"So the two of you can have a cosy weekend together, I suppose?" I shock even myself by saying the words out loud.

The both look at me, white-faced.

Martin gets up from the bar, turning briefly to Helen to say he's sorry. He walks quickly over to me and takes me by the elbow to the door.

"What the hell is the matter with you?"

We row. I go to my brother's alone, angry, ashamed, sobbing with self pity. I made some excuse for Martin. Sat up late, long after the others had gone to bed, drinking to obliterate the feelings. I rang the flat. No reply. I rang Helen's number, a sleepy Adrian answered. I put the phone down.

Martin wasn't home when I got back on Sunday. I didn't speak to him when he came in.

A bad week followed that weekend. He wasn't at home much, we rowed when he was.

I often tried to catch him and Helen together – no luck. Although once I was close. I came home early to see Helen's car parked outside the flat. What a strange mix of emotions, triumph, despair, terror. But all I catch is Helen and Martin sitting drinking coffee together, demurely apart. They looked surprised to see me, hiding their guilt. I'm cool, distant.

The rest of my journey is consumed with ghost rides. Incredible how five years can't dilute the poison.

## **Monday**

Not much of a weekend. I couldn't shake off the darkness. She's back, standing talking to another woman. I'm sure she looks in my direction and then whispers to her friend. They laugh, heads close, gloved hands up to their mouths.

It fuels the cold fire of bitter hatred in my stomach. I can taste its acrid smoke in my mouth.

I get on a different carriage. Can't face the evil witch. Spend the time remembering.

One night Martin was away, I was convinced he was seeing her. I rang Adrian, Helen was out. I gave him the third degree, where was she, who was she with, when was she coming back. At her friend's place, girl's night out, due back later. Why did I want to know? Nothing important I mumbled, I felt ashamed then and I feel it now as the train pulls into Waterloo.

I get off just as she and her friend reach my door. Too late.

"Kate! It is you! I thought I recognised you! How are you? How's Martin? Where are you living now? We must be neighbours!" Helen trills and smiles and sparkles at me.

I answer her questions with as much warmth as I can find in me, desperate to end the exchange. She tells me she and Adrian have recently moved near. We say we must get together soon.

## **Tuesday**

Another cold autumn day. Trains all over the place, leaves on the line. The station is crowded. Helen stands in her usual place, edge of the platform, looking down the track, watching the train approach, no friend with her today. I join the crush behind her. The train gets closer. No-one sees me push.

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