

Late Lunch

By Eric D. Goodman

The morning sun lit up the cars of the train as Franklin walked through them. A few passengers still snoozed in their seats, but most of them were wide awake, ready to enter the new day in a new city. They were only minutes from Chicago, the Cardinal's final destination. For the sake of the sleepers, he made the announcement — just a part of his job as *the conductor*.

“We’ll be blowing into the Windy City momentarily, folks. Please make sure you collect all your belongings. Don’t want you leaving anything behind.”

Rustling, muttering, some stretches and yawns; Franklin was used to the sounds of dawn on the train. All these passengers and all their dreams.

He’d fulfilled *his* dream on the train, always meeting new people and having interesting conversations, but never being forced to get too intimate. On again and off again, none of them latched on for a lifetime.

Franklin liked people and he enjoyed helping them. But he’d learned the hard way that sometimes you had to leave people’s problems to themselves and not get involved.

The lounge was practically empty now — most people had returned to their seats or compartments, getting their things ready to leave the train.

Franklin watched an older couple exit the lounge and wondered what it was like to be so effortlessly in love with someone for so many years. It was a marvel, really, two people joined together as one for the majority of a lifetime. To still have that much to say to one another. He'd never been able to last more than a few years. The only way to make a relationship last, he figured, was to keep everything on the surface.

Still in the lounge, Helen awoke in her seat, looking around in confusion. For a moment, panic overtook her, but she quickly realized where she was and calmed her composure. She spotted Franklin, stood, and approached him. "Hi there," she said

"Good morning," he greeted.

"No offense, but it's going to be a relief to get off this train."

"So we still haven't won you over with our superior service?"

Helen frowned and smiled at the same time. "Nothing's ever going to make me like a train. Not even *your* sweet talk." She began to leave the lounge car for her seat, but turned back. "I'm looking forward to lunch. I'll look for you on the way off. We can share that cab."

"Now I don't want to be any trouble. Maybe I could just buy you a cup of coffee at the station."

“No trouble at all,” Helen insisted. “I promised to give you a taste of homemade pirogues and Polish potato vodka, and that’s what I have my heart set on. You’re not going to break an old woman’s heart, now, are you?”

“Last thing in the world I’d want to do, ma’am,” he said. He’d enjoyed talking with her on the train. Lunch would be nice.

The truth was, Franklin was more of a coffee break kind of guy. Getting a cup of coffee was the safest date you could make, because it could be cut off easily. If the conversation was flowing and living in the air around them, they could have a refill, a piece of pie, a pastry. If the conversation was really sparking, they could move on to lunch or dinner or a walk in the park. But if the conversation began to grow stilted or forced or awkward, a cup of coffee could be consumed quickly, and the date could be discarded. Not that this was a date by any stretch of the imagination. She was at least ten years his senior, barely capable of taking the train on her own. But the sort of conversational intercourse they were having was the most exciting type of intercourse there was, when you really got down to it. Conversation, when it was good, was as good as it got. But the escape route of a potentially short coffee break was vital to making it relaxed, keeping it unforced.

Long lunches were more likely to go bad. You never knew where lunch was going to go or how it was going to end. Especially a lunch at someone’s home, a hostess preparing and serving the meal herself. When placed in a

situation like that, a person had to expect to devote hours to one conversation. Idle chatter was obliged to evolve into something more, into meaningful, soul-deep discourse. That could be unpleasant.

The train hadn't even come to a complete stop, but passengers were already out of their seats and crowding into the aisle, in a hurry to file off the train. There was a subtle, unspoken language being communicated here, the push and pull of people out of their places and into the aisle, away from the person behind them and into the person before them.

Franklin would never pretend to know anything about science or theology, but he imagined the passengers who made up the soul of a train were much like the cells of a person. Every single one had a place in making up the whole, but every one was an individual. And when they all left this train, they would go off to form other matter. The soul bringing life to this train would never live again. Franklin peered out the window.

Outside, people waited for the doors to open and release their visitors. Some bored and impatient, others excited and already jumping and waving to

the train as though the cars themselves were the ones being welcomed. Franklin liked that idea.

The doors opened. Franklin bid farewell to the passengers as they got off the train. He smiled at the sight of people reunited outside. Husbands and wives, lovers and friends. The Army kid was embracing his mother and father, all hugs and smiles.

Franklin found himself longing for someone to be waiting for him at the station.

“You coming?” It was Helen, standing directly next to him.

“Oh,” Franklin said, at a loss. “Well, I have to finish up on the train. It’ll probably be another hour.”

“I can wait,” Helen said. “No reason to take two cabs when we can share one.”

“Tell you what. I have some errands to run in the city,” he said. “Maybe I should just take the address down and I’ll come when I get done.”

“You’re not skipping out on me.” She took a pen and a used envelope from her purse and began writing.

“No sir-ee,” he assured. “You’ve got my mouth watering for some pirogues.”

“The potato vodka’s nothing to sneeze at either,” Helen said, ripping off the back flap of the envelope and handing it to the conductor.

“Not to mention the savory conversation,” he added with a wink. He took the flap of envelope, the glue on its back still a little sticky, and put it in the pocket of his Amtrak jacket.

“Does two or three sound good? It’ll be a late lunch.”

“Three sounds just fine,” he said. “I can’t wait.” She took his hand to shake it, and they embraced as though they were good friends saying goodbye forever.

“I still hate trains,” she said as she stepped down to the platform.

“And I still love them,” he called to her. He couldn’t help but laugh as she waved him away like an annoying horsefly. She walked off, alone, but she looked happier than she had when he first met her.

Franklin was practically alone now. The train was empty. There were other workers aboard, but none of the noise and energy that filled a train when the passengers were on board. The soul had dispossessed the train, just as it always did at the end of a line.

He’d learned long ago that surface relationships were the best kind. People put their best foot forward, in many cases, because the other foot had something wrong with it. A person put up a good front, presented the better side for a photograph. That’s why everyone was a pleasure to know when you were just getting to know them. It was only when you scratched that shiny surface that you began to notice the tarnished innards. The deeper you dug, the

more rot you would find there. The more you scrutinized, the more damage became apparent. Deep, meaningful conversation could be a drag. Small talk was almost always a pleasure.

Franklin took the envelope flap from his pocket and read the address in its blue ink script. The still-sticky glue clung to his finger. Lunch and conversation in the suburbs wasn't going to kill him, he told himself. Maybe he would take the plunge and go.

But already, he found himself wondering what sort of soul would greet him on the train back to Baltimore.