

2019 Best Novelette Hugo Award Finalist

Uncanny



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A Novelette by
Naomi Kritzer

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The Thing About Ghost Stories

by Naomi Kritzer

The most interesting thing about ghost stories is that almost everyone has one.

The other really interesting thing, to me, is that they're nearly all terrible stories if you try to take them as *stories*. A good story has a beginning, some buildup, and then a resolution or a twist or something at the end. Ghost stories go, "This creepy and inexplicable thing once happened to me. The obvious explanation is that I dreamed or imagined it; I am certain that I didn't dream or imagine it." Or in some cases, "I used to live in this house where creepy stuff happened all the time. Then we moved." Every now and then you'll hear a story with a ghost that has a beginning, middle, and end, but those are most often urban legends: "One day we were driving along and we picked up a hitchhiker." (Beginning.) "As we drove, we had this creepy conversation with the hitchhiker." (Middle.) "Then we reached our destination and the hitchhiker had *vanished from the back seat*." (Twist!) That one's not a real ghost story. It did not happen to your cousin, no matter what he says.

It feels like ghost stories should *mean* something, but it's not at all clear what. I managed to get about a hundred pages out of the question, "What *do* these mean, anyway?" when I wrote my doctoral dissertation to get my PhD in Folklore, all without reaching an actual conclusion. My mother helpfully pointed that out when she read the manuscript.

"If I give them a real answer, they'll just complain about it," I said.

"So just tell *me*, Leah," she said. "What do *you* think ghost stories mean?"

"I think they're the manifestation of people's desire for answers about death and eternity," I said. "But I could be totally wrong, especially since there's a whole category of ghost stories that don't seem to have anything to do with identifiable dead people."

"You'll never be a bestseller if you don't give your readers *some* sort of answer," she said.

“Dissertations don’t become bestsellers,” I said. “If I’m lucky, I’ll be able to sell it to a university press as a book.”

Mom was already living with me, at that point. I was working ABD as visiting faculty in Indiana while I wrote my dissertation. Mom had moved to Indiana with me, even though it was just for a year, because she said she thought I’d write my dissertation faster with someone there cooking for me. I figured she was just feeling lonely after Dad’s death. In retrospect, I wondered if she’d felt the first whispers of dementia, and figured that if she wrapped herself around my ankle early, it would be that much harder for me to shake her loose later on.

Just to be clear: I don’t go out with a blinky machine or a video camera trying to *investigate hauntings* or anything like that. I don’t study *ghosts*. I study *ghost stories*. Ghost stories as told by ordinary people willing to sign a statement claiming that the story they’re telling me is true and really happened to them. I collect, catalog, and classify these stories, trying to answer questions like, do ghost stories vary by region? What influences do we see from popular culture? How do people explain these experiences to themselves? Do we see stories that are common but interpretations that vary, or vice versa?

Fairy and folk tales have a numerical system—the Aarne-Thompson-Uther classification system. (For example, the Six Swans is Type 451, “The Brothers Who Were Turned Into Birds.”) I made up my own system for ghost stories, tagging with numbers to indicate sensory manifestations; emotional content; individual vs. communal experience; whether physical evidence of any kind was involved; etc.

So here’s an example. I just pulled this one out of my files at random.

I had this apartment one time that was haunted by some guy who’d hung himself. The first night I was there, I got up to pee and I saw him hanging in the bathroom. I screamed and turned on the light and he was gone and I thought I’d imagined it, but then a few nights later I saw him again. I figured out that if I put up nightlights everywhere there’d always be enough light I wouldn’t see him, he only showed up when the only light was coming in the front window. Anyway, I lived in that apartment

for four years because the rent was great and as roommates go, ghosts don't leave dirty dishes. This was in Cambridge, Massachusetts, so you can see why I was worried about the rent.

So the tags I put on that were visual manifestation, frightening emotional content transitioning over time to neutral, individual experience, no physical evidence. The catchy name for it is Story 42a, "vision of a stranger's suicide." These are really quite common. There's a hotel in Saint Louis that has a ghost like this. I mean, there's a hotel in Saint Louis where a lot of people will *tell this story* and say they've seen it.

I slip up that way a lot. It was one of the things Mom marked when she was going over my dissertation. Even though she personally would have preferred me just saying that the hotel in Saint Louis had a ghost of a suicide. She stuck to the style guide I'd given her, but nagged me about it over meals, along with the stories I'd cut because they didn't fit my overall thesis.

"You should never cut the best stories," she said. "People care about ghost stories because they care about ghosts. They like these stories because they think the ghosts are real."

"Maybe," I said, "but I'm a folklorist, not a ghost hunter."

"What would you do if you had your own amazing story? How would you use that in your research?"

"I would never," I said. "That would be unprofessional." I will admit that to some extent I was baiting her, but it was also true. I was a story collector. I couldn't collect my own stories. Fortunately, I didn't have any particularly compelling stories of my own.

I bought a house in Baltimore, Maryland a year after I got hired at Goucher. My mother lived there with me until she died last year. This year I'm on sabbatical. I was way overdue for a sabbatical, because there was no way I could travel to do research when I was caring for my mother, and I hated the thought of wasting a sabbatical on caregiving.

You know, there's a type of ghost story (31c, "mischievous poltergeist") where the ghost moves stuff around. Losing things is a very common non-supernatural experience and typically people who tell you this sort

of story spend a lot of time defending their ability not to lose things. They'll talk about how before and after they lived in the haunted house, they never lost anything, and then they'll work their way up to telling you about the ghost that hid their stuff. I used to think about this a lot because I lived with that ghost, only it wasn't a ghost, it was my mother with Alzheimer's. I wound up developing all these elaborate hiding places and installing childproof locks that she found difficult to open just so I'd have somewhere safe to leave my keys, phone, and glasses. Of course, sometimes I'd also tuck things into a hiding place and then never find them again, so it wasn't *always* her fault. It is pretty crazy-making, though, living like this. I wouldn't want that sort of ghost. Give me a hanged guy in a bathroom any day.

I was lucky that I got enough journal articles published to get tenure before Mom really started to lose her marbles, because it got harder to do research as caring for her got more time-consuming. I kept up with teaching and grading, and I worked on turning my dissertation into a book, and I managed to scrape together time to do just above the minimum required committee work. But I'd planned to compare the ghost stories I'd collected for my dissertation in the Bay Area of California to the ghost stories of Appalachia, and that goal drifted away on a sea of neurology consults and phone calls to home health care agencies.

When Mom died, though, my first thought was, "I guess I can get back to work on my research now," as awful as that sounds. I'd spent so many years losing her a piece at a time, though, that grieving was really strange. Also, I don't know if there's anything after death but I could at least imagine her *whole* somewhere. Restored to the person she was before the dementia.

Brains are *so weird*. The department office (I'm part of the Anthropology department) has this wall with a bank of open mailboxes. Once upon a time you'd have the students leave papers in them. They're still used for mail. I used to imagine my mother's brain as a wall with mailboxes like that. But vandals had come through and stolen all the stuff out of some, but not all, of the boxes. She could still read my manuscripts for

grammar and usage at a point when she couldn't find her way to the end of the block and get back, when she couldn't visually identify a ring of keys, when she couldn't use the stove safely. ("Someday, this will be published," she said, as she went over each chapter of my book. She said that as she edited. She said that when her edits had stopped being reliable. She said that when I'd give her a manuscript every day to keep her busy, even though I knew I'd just be quietly leaving that stack of red-marked pages in the neighbor's recycling bin where my mother wouldn't see.)

I knew I needed to find some sort of daytime care for her about six months after I'd started shutting off the stove from the circuit breaker box in the basement every morning so that she wouldn't burn the house down. Sometimes things just sneak up on you.

By the time I found a publisher for my dissertation, I don't think Mom even remembered who I was.

After Mom died, I took my overdue sabbatical to travel around the Appalachian region collecting stories. Back to the work I'd hoped to do.



When I'm in a reasonably large city like Baltimore I tend to use coffee shops, but in small towns I'll use diners and bars. I get a table, I talk to the waitress, and I tell her I'm a folklorist collecting ghost stories. I can't actually *pay* people for stories but I tell her to let people know that I'll buy them a drink if they want to come over and talk for a bit.

"I'm Leah," I say when I introduce myself. "I'm writing a book about ghost stories. Do you have one?"

"Oh, yeah—"

"Hang on, before you start I want to turn on my recorder, is that okay?" I set the recorder on the table and pull out the consent. "Also, if you don't mind signing this, it's just saying that you're okay with me recording the story, collecting it, and putting it in my book. If you'd like to be named

if I quote you, check that box there and make sure to print your name. Okay! I'm all ears."

I'll buy people coffee or beer if they want, but here's another interesting thing about ghost stories: people *love* telling them.

"I lived in a house for a few years where the lights would go out sometimes. When I went to the basement to reset the circuit breaker, nothing was ever flipped and they'd usually just come back on as soon as I opened the box. My ex-husband said it was probably just a loose wire but here's the other weird thing: my dog Max usually follows me all over the house when I'm home but he would *not* come to the basement. He'd stand at the top and growl. Anyway I lived there for about two years and a half years, I think." Was it a rental? Did you ever call the landlord about it? "We did, but he kind of blew us off. He came and looked at it once, said he didn't see anything wrong, we were supposed to try to call him when it was actually happening only of course he never answered his phone, so..."

"My sister's husband is in the Marines and they live on base. My little nephew Alex, he's four years old, he used to have an imaginary friend, Bill. Bill was a soldier, which isn't all that surprising given Alex's Dad is a Marine and they live on base, you know? But one day my sister overheard Alex talking about Fallujah. She thought he must have heard something about Fallujah on TV but she got curious and asked Alex to spell it. Alex turns around and asks Bill, and then spells out 'Fallujah' perfectly. So my sister says to Alex, 'Where's Bill right now?' and Alex points. And she looks at this empty spot in the room and says, 'Listen up, Bill, there are stories that are not appropriate for a little boy, and you'd better not share any.' And Alex says, 'He says, yes ma'am, I understand.' I know it could've all been made up but she doesn't know how Alex would have learned to spell Fallujah, and also when she asked around, it turned out there *was* a Marine named Bill who'd lived in that house with his wife. And Bill died in Iraq. In the Battle of Fallujah." Did Bill keep coming around? "He did. After a while my sister actually tracked down his wife and sent her a letter. And his wife actually came for a visit, and talked to Bill, and he stopped showing up. Completely." Bill's widow

came, really? What did she say? “My sister went out for a while to give them some privacy. She says either his widow talked him into going on, or talked him into moving in with her, and really, either was fine.” I’m always a little skeptical of those occasional ghost stories that *do* have a beginning, middle, and end. Maybe sensing that, this woman pulls up photos of her family—her nephew, her sister, her brother-in-law in his dress blues.

“We have a ghost that leaves us hairpins. 1950s-style hairpins. No one in our house has ever, ever bought them, and yet they just turn up. In the carpet, on the counter, the cats find them under furniture, it doesn’t matter how many times I sweep or vacuum there are always more hairpins. Look, I have one in my pocket right now. Would you like it?”

“When I was a teenager we lived in a house with so many strange noises none of my friends would stay the night. Also, sometimes I felt something touching me. Like, on the shoulders, when I was going down the stairs, like it was trying to decide whether or not to push me. I *hated* that house. My parents moved to a new house around the time I finished high school.”

“There’s a ghost sitting next to you right now.”

Mediums have their own category in my system. If you show up asking for ghost stories, you get a certain number of mediums. My main concern with mediums is that (a) they often want money (that’s a no-go) and (b) they have a *lot* of stories and I would rather get one story each from ten different people than ten stories from one person.

A really good cold reading can be a hell of a thing to see, though, so I just smiled at her blandly and handed her the release. She signed it, gave the waitress her drink order, and sat back for a minute, gazing at me.

“She looks a little like you. Your... mother?”

I tried not to react but I was not surprised that I didn’t succeed. “Oh, yes. She’s nodding to tell me I guessed right.”

I took a sip of my own coffee.

“It’s a recent loss, but it left less of a wound. Maybe you weren’t close. Or maybe she had a very long illness. Yes, I see. Dementia.” She looked at me. “She made a gesture at her head.”

“I see,” I said.

“You think I’m doing a cold reading.”

That got a smile out of me. “You’re pretty good so far. I did indeed lose my mother six months ago, after a long decline into Alzheimer’s. But yes, I’m a folklorist who studies ghost stories, so I’ve run into mediums before. I know the tricks of the trade.”

She sighed. “I’d be a much better medium if I could *hear* spirits as well as see them. Playing charades with ghosts is a really frustrating hobby. Your mother must have been a smart woman, she figured out right off that I could see her but not hear her, she’s been going with gestures.”

“You ever run into a ghost who could finger-spell?” I asked. “My mother knew the ASL manual alphabet.”

“Oh! Oh, huh.” She looked perplexed. “That’s a really good thought, I’ll have to try to learn, she’s... she’s trying something now. I’m sorry, sweetie, I have no idea what you’re saying.”

I could actually imagine my mother, sitting next to me, *smart* (she’d been really, really smart before the dementia), trying patiently to come up with a way to communicate with this woman who could *see* her but not *hear* her.

“Honey,” the medium said to me, “she’s pointing at your hand, and her hand, at something she’s wearing. Did she have a ring?”

“Yes,” I said, “but it was stolen by one of her caregivers.”

“She’s shaking her head,” the medium said. “Like she wants you to know it wasn’t stolen.”

I heaved another sigh. This wasn’t fun anymore. “Well, maybe it’ll turn up one of these days, then! That’d be nice.”

The medium must have heard the brittleness in my voice because she apologized, irrationally since I was in fact *asking* for ghost stories, and slid out from her spot in the booth. She did take her large mocha with extra whipped cream with her when she went.

The next woman had a story about a ghost that manifested as a smell, which was much more what I was there for. I waved at the waitress to see if she’d pour me more coffee, and re-focused.



The ring was a medieval fede ring, gold. “Fede” rings have a set of sculpted hands, clasped. You’ve probably seen a Claddagh ring, with the two hands clasped around a heart with a little crown on it. Claddagh rings are a type of fede ring, but there are lots of other styles, or were, centuries ago. They were commonly used as wedding rings in medieval and Renaissance Europe. My mother’s ring had come from her mother, and before that her grandmother, and we weren’t actually sure how far back that went, except that we did know that it had come from Europe on the hand of my great-great-grandmother when she left her village after her own mother died, and she decided that she didn’t want to marry the boy her father had picked out for her.

It had not occurred to me to take the ring off my mother’s hand for safekeeping until one day it was gone, and so was about \$100 in cash and some silver-plate items that someone might have mistaken as valuable. I called the home care agency and there were a whole lot of apologies and someone took off ahead of the cops and we never saw the ring again. We’d never had it appraised, stupidly, so we didn’t even get properly compensated for it. (The thing was, my mother knew that if she knew how much it was worth, she’d feel like she needed to leave it in the safe deposit box, and she wanted to *wear* it.)

When I got home after running into the medium while story-collecting, I went looking. I mean, maybe *Mom* hid it, like she hid everything else. But I remembered her favorite spots for stuff: the bread box, the back of the pantry, the medicine cabinet on the first floor, the drawer where I kept the tea. I looked faithfully in each spot, and found nothing but bread, canned beans, expired aspirin, and tea.

Her favorite sort of tea was Earl Grey. I started to take an Earl Grey tea bag out of the tea drawer, then thought the better of it and picked an herbal tea instead. I filled the electric kettle and turned it on, opening the day’s mail as the water heated. Something had arrived in a padded

envelope, and when I saw the return address, I tore it open eagerly. It was a first-off-the-press copy of *The Stories We Tell in the Dark*—my book.

I set it down on the counter and just looked at it for a minute. It was published by the Indiana University Press and it looked really good: the cover image was a fog-shrouded forest, very spooky looking without appearing so much like a book for the layperson that no respectable folklorist would consider assigning it to their students in class.

The water came to a boil. I left my tea to steep as I paged through the book. There was *my name* on the title page. *And* on the copyright page. I'd spent weeks overthinking all the chapter titles, and now here they were, chapter titles for an *actual book*. And there was Appendix A, with my ghost-story-categorization system, explained with numbers and a table and everything.

I picked up my tea to sip it as I paged through, careful not to drip tea on the pages or crease the binding. It was a book: finally, it was a *real book*.

I set it back on the mail and the whole stack promptly collapsed onto the floor; I barely caught the book as it fell. Apparently I'd been stacking my mail a bit too long. I moved all the catalogs to the recycling bin and stacked up everything else again. This time it all stayed put, and I shut off the lights and went to bed.



I've had papers published on the social functions served by ghost stories. If you ever went on a camping trip with peers (a Scout troop, for instance) as a child or teenager, there were probably ghost stories told around the campfire. Campfire stories are usually a proper narrative, with an ending that's supposed to elicit a specific strong reaction—a laugh or a scream. There's heavy overlap with urban legends, especially any urban legend about teenagers.

Campfire stories are told partly for entertainment, and partly for group bonding.

Ghost stories that are alleged to be true stories of personal experiences serve those same two purposes, but more so. Typically ghost story exchanges do *not* happen around campfires, because at this point there are some specific expectations about campfire stories and one of them is that they're good narratives. Ghost story exchanges are most effective in a group where there's a pre-existing level of trust, and are significantly more common in female-dominated or exclusively female groups.

The initial conversation is usually started by someone who says something like, "I want to hear ghost stories. Who's seen a ghost?" There's an implication that what's wanted is entertainment, ideally creepy entertainment, but this framing also confers some validation on those who've had odd experiences they can't explain. "Who's seen a ghost?" or "Has anyone seen a ghost?" is a question that suggests that there are ghosts out there to be seen.

The first stories offered are usually pretty simple. The people with the more elaborate stories are worried that they won't be believed, so they tend to hang back and wait to see if the basic stories are met with skepticism.

The elaborate stories tend to be a whole lot creepier, and in fact, there's a communal experience of creepiness that's part of what people are seeking. They'll say "oooooh" and give a sort of purposeful shiver, although it's also not uncommon for people exchanging ghost stories to shiver for real. The sensation people are going for is possibly akin to Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, which is the shivery feeling some people get when hearing a certain whispery tone of voice, and in fact ghost stories are sometimes told *in that tone of voice* by people who do not themselves experience ASMR. (I would really love to study this in more detail, but I'd need funding that just doesn't exist for Folklore professors.)

Campfire stories don't work nearly as well for generating this sensation as real ghost stories. My theory is that little kids are often the target audience for campfire stories and they get way too freaked out by real ghost stories and the adults don't want to deal with it. Although that doesn't explain why some people tell campfire stories and arrange for some accomplice to sneak around and startle the audience at a key

moment. (You've heard the one about the hook left dangling from the car door handle; now imagine hearing that and having someone grab your shoulders from behind and shake you at the key moment. I don't recommend doing this, by the way, some people find it really upsetting.)

Sometimes my research subjects ask me if *I* have ever seen a ghost.

And I have, in fact. Like I said earlier, it doesn't make for a particularly good story, but it serves me well when someone wants reassurance that I won't laugh at them. It's the kind of story you roll out early, if it's a communal story share, to establish trust and clear a path for the people with the dramatic stories. It goes like this: when I was five, I saw a ghost in my house. It looked like a little wisp of cloud. It was there, and then it wasn't. That's it. I never saw it again.

The thing that's most interesting about this story *to me* is I found out years after the fact that my mother believed me. I told her about the ghost at the time, but assumed she thought I'd imagined it. I did remember that she didn't *tell* me I'd imagined it: she said, "It won't hurt you," not "There wasn't anything there," but I assumed she was just trying to calm me down.

But she believed I'd really seen something. "You were a truthful child," she said, "and imaginative, but you knew the difference between real and pretend."

I thought about this sometimes when I was caring for her, in the last year, or maybe it was the last two years, it's hard to remember now when some of her symptoms started. She stopped recognizing her own reflection and would get angry about the old woman who was watching her through the windows. I wound up covering or taking down all the mirrors except for the one in my own bathroom. She'd sometimes see a reflection in the glass of the doors to the built-in cabinets where I keep the wine glasses and china: that wasn't clear enough for her to see her own face but sometimes it really freaked her out. Once or twice she probably thought it was a ghost. More often she thought it was aliens, or someone with a sniper rifle with a scope who was after me or her. (I know, this sounds crazy. I promise, my mother did not have some

sort of badass personal history that would explain this. She used to like watching action movies. I think that was probably the source.)

I never told her I didn't believe her. I told her the old lady was friendly, and she should try smiling at her. I told her that the aliens were our friends. I told her that I'd keep her safe from danger. I guess I did reassure her that the reflection she'd seen wasn't a sniper targeting thing. Once, I actually told her it was aliens. Friendly, helpful aliens. It had been a really long day.



“I haven't talked about any of this in at least twenty years.”

I was at 24-hour diner in York, Pennsylvania, which is less than an hour's drive from Baltimore but feels like I've at least *gone* somewhere. It's about an hour from Gettysburg. I've collected stories in Gettysburg a few times; I'm working on a paper on Gettysburg-specific stories and folklore and how the ghost stories line up with the other stories people tell, but I set that aside to work on collecting stories for my new book.

I'd arrived in mid-afternoon and only intended to stay a couple of hours, but it was 10 p.m. and I was only just getting through the people who'd been waiting to talk to me. I hate to be superstitious about this sort of thing, but it was a full moon, and that really does seem to make some sort of difference.

The man sitting across from me looked about fifty. He'd mentioned during the preliminaries that he worked as a machinist, and he did not have the slightly-flaky vibe that sometimes clung to people who wanted to tell me their stories. He'd requested a bottled root beer rather than a coffee, saying that he wanted to get to sleep before midnight. Now he turned the bottle around and around, not making eye contact.

At one point, I wondered if he was going to offer to repay me for the soda, and then leave. I'd set down my pen, and had to consciously

resist the temptation to pick it back up and doodle with it, afraid that he'd take it as a sign of impatience.

“When I was eight, my parents bought a house. It was small, like, a bungalow, I guess? One and a half stories, two bedrooms downstairs, a finished half story upstairs with a low ceiling. They'd gotten a good price on the house because it needed some work. I didn't like the house. None of us kids did. My parents didn't listen, because the price was so good.

“About six months after we moved in, things started moving around. At first it was while we weren't looking. You'd put a glass down, and when you reached for it you'd knock it over because it would have shifted a few inches. Easy to just assume it's clumsiness, right? But not when it's every one of us kids, every time we put down a glass of juice. The TV broke. The radio broke. The blender broke. Anything that plugged into a wall outlet didn't last long, and my father figured it was something wrong with the wiring but he couldn't trace it down.

“Then stuff started shifting around in front of us. One day when I was home with my brother, there was a knife out on the counter, just a little paring knife I'd been cutting cheese with to put on crackers for a snack. The knife lifted up and pointed itself at my heart, and then flung itself across the room—not at my brother, fortunately.

“About a week after *that*, a fire started. We all got out. Fire department said it was the wiring. And, who knows, maybe it was? Doesn't explain the thing with the knife, though.”

“Thank you,” I said, jotting down notes. *Physical manifestation, moving objects, frightening.*

“Say, before I go, my wife wants to talk to you for a minute.”

His wife had graying blonde hair and looked like she probably taught fifth grade. I offered her a drink but she shook her head. “I'm not here to tell you a ghost story, I just wanted to let you know you have a ghost sitting next to you.” She looked at the empty space next to me, then back at my face. “This doesn't surprise you. Someone else told you about her?”

This woman was really not a *typical* medium. “Yeah,” I said.

“Is she your mom?”

“Apparently.”

“When did you lose her?”

“Eight months ago or five years ago, depending on whether you count when I lost her to death or when I lost her to Alzheimer’s.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. My father-in-law—the handyman my husband mentioned—that’s how he went. It’s the absolute worst, I think.” She looked at the seat beside me, a little perplexed. “I think there’s something that went missing that she wants to tell you where it is, but I’m not sure she’s entirely *sure* where it is. The dementia might be part of the problem. I think she’s trying to say that it *wasn’t* in one of the usual spots. She’s pointing at your tea bag and shaking her head, does that mean something to you?”

“Yeah,” I said. “She used to sometimes hide things in the drawer where we keep tea. I checked there, the last time I had a conversation like this with someone, but the missing object wasn’t in there.”

“She wants you to look for it.”

“I *have* looked for it.” I put my face in my hands. It had been a long day. Losing the ring wasn’t anything like losing my mom, but I was pretty upset when it went missing, and to be honest, having it come up like this was bringing back the emotions I’d felt at the time. I’d been angry and sad but mostly I’d felt a lot of shame. All these generations, and it disappeared forever on my watch. I mean, technically it was my mother who was in possession of it at the time, but I really didn’t think it was reasonable to hold her responsible.

“Do you still live in the same house?”

“Yes,” I said. “She lived with me until she died. That’s where we were when the ring went missing.”

“Okay.” She studied the space next to me and I realized, appalled, that I was thinking, *she is looking at my mother*. “Okay. I think you should look harder in the kitchen, but not in the tea.”



So when I went home, I looked in the goddamn kitchen.

I got out a stool, although God knows Mom wasn't in any shape to climb up on a step stool when the ring went missing, and I got down the pottery from the high shelves and looked inside the tea pots and the coffee mugs that were a size we didn't use much and the fancy china sugar bowl. Then I put it all back, because the ring wasn't inside any of them.

I knew I should be systematic about this or maybe call a friend to come help me but all I really wanted to do was hurl the fancy china sugar bowl down at my tile floor and scream at my mother that if she wanted to give me one last responsibility she was going to have to *send me better fucking directions*.

I didn't, of course, any more than I'd screamed in frustration any of the times I'd wanted to when I was caring for her. I just unloaded the next shelf's worth of dishes and rarely-used pots and misfit kitchen appliances to check over.

I turned on the little recording device like I was telling my own ghost story and I said, "I have never seen my mother's ghost, but twice now, people have told me she's with me and trying to direct me to find a ring we thought was stolen. They can't really tell me if my mother only turns up when I'm in diners and coffee shops and bars trying to find people to tell me ghost stories, or if she's always with me, if she's here at home and unable to give me a sign."

Nothing in the fondue pot, the bean pot, the mini crock pot that you were supposed to use for cheese dip, or the ice bucket. I really should hold a garage sale at some point. Had I *ever* used that mini crock pot? Mom had made fondue a few times before the dementia and we'd had it for dinner, but we never ate it out of the fondue pot. She'd made it in the ceramic-lined cast iron pot and we'd just eaten it out of there.

"My mother once asked me what I thought ghost stories *mean*. And, I mean, in some ways it's kind of obvious. Ghost stories mean that we don't want to let go of our dead. I don't know that this really explains the stories like 'Once upon a time I lived in a house with something terrifying that threatened me with knives and then burned the house

down.’ Sometimes I think what those stories mean is that something terrifying lived in that house and it’s safer, even decades later, to believe it was something supernatural. So maybe what ghost stories mean is, we have complicated feelings about our parents. Complicated relationships with our families. And that comes out in stories. All the stories.”

I opened the cabinet, then closed it again. “Mom, if you’re there, if you’re listening, you’re going to have to send me either better directions or someone to help me go through all this stuff. I have research to do and a book to write and I am *tired*.”



If ghost stories *mean* that we want to believe the loved ones we’ve lost are still out there, you’d think more people would have encounters with their own beloved dead.

There are the people who find pennies. When they tell me their stories, sometimes that’s all they have for me: they find pennies (or dimes) and they think they’re sent or left somehow by their dead grandmother. (It’s usually a grandmother.)

And quite a few people report a single visitation from around the time someone died. Their father was in the hospital, and they woke up to see him by their bed, and then in the morning they found out that he’d died. Or they knew their grandmother had died because of a vivid, vivid dream where they had a conversation and exchanged a last hug.

Oh, here’s a good one. I liked this story a lot. There was a woman who’d gotten a visit like that from her grandmother, the night her grandmother died. This woman lived in Ohio, and her grandmother lived in California, so they didn’t see each other very often, but they did talk on the phone. The grandmother liked to kibbitz on the woman’s romantic life—she was in her early 30s, single, dating but not really finding anyone. So in the dream she had when her grandmother died, they talked, and the grandmother told her, “Look, I found the man you’re going to marry, but

he's not in Ohio. He's in Maryland. You need to go to Baltimore to meet him. Trust me." Baltimore wasn't exactly on this young woman's list of places she wanted to move, or even visit, but she believed this dream really was a last message from her grandmother, so she planned a long weekend in Baltimore and drove down. She spent the weekend eating crabs and going to a baseball game and it was pleasant enough. Then on the day she was going to head back to Ohio, she locked herself out of her car, and this man tried to open it for her and couldn't. But! He had a friend who was a locksmith who'd come open it up for free. They'd have to wait, though, because the locksmith guy was coming free as a favor, so in the meantime they went into a coffee shop for coffee and their wedding was two years ago and she's never been so happy, yep. You probably saw that coming. That's another one with a beginning, middle, and end. It's one of those almost-too-good-to-believe stories, but she dragged over her husband to introduce him and she showed me a picture of her grandmother in her locket. Also, apparently her grandmother was a romance writer, and if there's a ghost out there who's going to want to make sure you get a beginning, middle, and happily-ever-after, it's got to be the ghost of a romance writer.

When my mother died I thought about the stories I'd heard about visits. But I only wanted a visit if it was my mother from *before* the Alzheimer's. Of course, when I've dreamed about my mother it's always been a dream about her *with* the Alzheimer's. Also, I don't dream that she's visiting me, I dream that she's lost somewhere, like I forgot to drop her at the adult day center and now she's wandered off into some woods or who even knows. Sometimes there isn't even a framing, I'm just looking for her in a fog or somewhere really dark. When I wake up, I remember that she's gone but it's not because of anything I did, and... that's always kind of a relief.

The mediums seeing her made it sound like she was more or less herself again as a ghost, not the lost, silent person she was by the end. Well, I guess she was still silent, since they could both see her, but not hear her.

What I really want is to sit down with her on the couch in our sitting room, with our feet propped up on the hassock that we kept midway between our favorite chairs. I want to make her a cup of Earl Grey tea and just *visit* for a while. There are all these things I want to hear her thoughts about, from departmental politics to international politics. And my *book*. My book that is *finally* done, finally *here*.

If I *had* the ring, I'd trade it in a heartbeat just to be able to show her the book.



I'd put on my pajamas but I padded back down to the kitchen and flipped on the light.

On the kitchen counter, I lined things up.

A cup of Earl Grey tea. Her two favorite books: *Sense and Sensibility* and Georgette Heyer's *A Civil Contract*, both paperback copies read so many times the spines were soft. One of her silk scarves, the one that usually hangs where she'd left it on a hook in the back hallway. A red pen like the one she used to copyedit my manuscript. That cast-iron ceramic-lined pot that she'd cooked so many meals in. A handful of pennies minted in my birth year, because there's a superstition that if you find a coin minted in your birth year on your birthday, you get three wishes, and she'd save any pennies she came across from the right year to give me on my birthday. The 1950s hairpin that woman handed me the other day.

Finally, I took my book, and opened it to the dedication page.

To my mother, Amelia Iris Kestenbaum, the dedication said. I'd thought about just making it *To Mom* but her name never went in the books she copyedited, back when she was a professional copyeditor. I wanted her whole name in my book.

I weighted the front cover with the cast-iron pot, so it would stay open.

And then I went to bed. Because this was the best summoning ritual

I could manage, but I didn't actually think her ghost was going to materialize in my kitchen to talk to me.

I tossed and turned for a while, asking myself what I expected, exactly. *If you could summon your beloved dead into your dreams by leaving their favorite books and tea on the kitchen counter before bedtime, everyone would do this.* How disappointed was I going to be when nothing happened? And of course, if you have some *reason* for really wanting to get to sleep, that's the worst way to get to sleep.

I finally drifted off around 3 a.m.

I woke up fairly early, despite the absurd time I fell asleep. And I didn't dream of my mother, but I did wake with this odd *sense* of her, like she'd just left the room. I lay in bed for a while, not particularly wanting to face the day, or my work, or the things I'd left in the kitchen.

I got dressed, and I went downstairs.

At first, I thought everything was exactly as I'd left it, other than the tea being stone cold.

But the morning light streaming through the kitchen window caught on something small, something that glittered, and I caught my breath and crossed the kitchen in three steps.

The fede ring was lying on the dedication page of my book.



The thing about ghost stories is that even if you have one, the person you loved is still gone.

But she didn't just bring back the ring; she left it on the dedication page of the book I wanted so badly to show her. So she'd seen it. She'd seen the dedication. And that's something. More than most people get.

And I was never going to be able to write about this in my research, and that would make Mom laugh at me. Laugh and laugh.

But I thought about it for a while, and then slipped the ring onto my finger, closed the book, and went to my study. And added variant 31f

to the “mischievous poltergeist” story: “heirloom restored.” There. She could be a founding story type. In a way, she’d probably like that better than the book dedication.

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(Editors’ Note: “The Thing About Ghost Stories” is read by Stephanie Malia Morris and Naomi Kritzer is interviewed by Lynne M. Thomas on the Uncanny Magazine Podcast Episode 25B.)



Naomi Kritzer

Naomi Kritzer has been writing science fiction and fantasy for twenty years. Her short story “Cat Pictures Please” won the 2016 Hugo and Locus Awards and was nominated for the Nebula Award. A collection of her short stories was released in 2017, and her YA novel, tentatively called Welcome to Catnet, is forthcoming from Tor Books. She lives in St. Paul, Minnesota with her spouse, two kids, and four cats. The number of cats is subject to change without notice.

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