

'THE TRAIN'

A NOVELLA

BY HANK SCHACHTE 2006

(AN EXCERPT)

LIKE THE IRON NEEDLE of a giant compass the train tracks bisect Ontario in a thin north-south line. He was riding up the needle pointing north, away from Toronto, alternately making notes for the eulogy and looking out through the picture windows of the dome car. The occasional farms seemed isolated, more like islands in the deep trackless snow. A birdlike loose-jointed old conductor worked his way down the aisle quickly. Behind him the large black porter shifted side-to-side with every burdensome step, bending to chat briefly with each passenger in turn. At length he gained the man with the yellow lined pad on his lap staring out the window. *Doesn't look like a businessman* the porter thought. He looked a little wild but the porter saw the page in his lap was neatly filled with little bursts of clustered words. *Maybe he's a writer — a poet or something.* The man felt the presence of the porter and glanced over away from the glare of the snow scene. The warm colors of the car behind him looked dark and inviting though the cold window-light on the black porter gave a blue cast to his face that seemed to drive the blackness deep below the surface. Then the porter smiled and his bright eyes and friendly red mouth took over. The man returned the porter's smile. The porter held a little notebook and pencil up to his chest. 'Would you like first or second call for dinner?' he asked.

'I don't know. Which is better?'

Leaning in with voice soft and very deep he answered 'Well I'd have to recommend the first. Sometimes they run out of things for the second.'

'Okay — thanks — first it is.'

'Fine.' He made a tally. 'You'll hear the bell.'

The porter walked on. At the end of the car he turned in time to watch the man with the pad get up and walk down the aisle alone, watched him turn and say casually over his shoulder to no-one 'Remember going to Columbus with mother on the sleeper?'

SEVERAL PEOPLE INCLUDING THE PORTER the maitre d' and the waiter had noticed that the young-looking man with the yellow pad was talking to himself. 'At first he didn't do it' the waiter told them 'but now he's talking all the time.' After the last run's heart attack, which really upset some of the older passengers, he felt he'd earned an ordinary week and the thought of any more trouble didn't seem fair.

The porter spoke last. 'But he's not bothering anybody' he said.

'The other diners are beginning to stare' said the maitre d' more harshly. 'It's unnerving.'

But for the moment they agreed there was nothing to do but watch him and make sure he didn't do anything worse to annoy the others.

The waiter and the maitre d' started down the corridor toward the dining car to prepare for lunch. When they were out of earshot of the porter the waiter said confidentially 'Guys like that give me the creeps. They're unpredictable.'

'I'll tell them he's a famous actor rehearsing his lines' said the white maitre d'. At that the younger black waiter laughed with some enthusiasm.