

# The Writer's Arena

## Roundup

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### TWA #61 – Trains

“Christmas Haul” by Joseph Devon

vs

“Last Stop” by Frederick Doot



Greetings, short story lovers, and welcome to another year in the arena.

Somewhere in the dark you can hear a mournful wail, faint, but getting closer. You feel the rumble of the approaching behemoth coming up through your feet. The rumble crescendos until a yellow light appears around the bend, illuminating two shining rails, and then the train rumbles past.

Trains are an important part of the world we live in, and they've been part of our cultural iconography since they were first introduced. From the iconic steam trains of the eighteen hundreds to the subways, freight trains and superfast maglev commuter trains of today, trains come in many forms. Whether we interact with them directly or not, they still play an important part of our everyday lives, and from Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* to Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* they've had a huge part to play in our fiction too.

The authors' task this week was to write us a story centered around, or featuring, a train. And it must be an actual physical train. No “trains of thought” or other sneakiness.

Who caught the 4:01 to Cleveland and who will be left waiting at the station?

Let's find out!

Joseph Devon represents the arena with “Christmas Haul.”

Frederick Doot fires back with “Last Stop.”

The Train Tug-of-War is on!!

## “Last Stop” by Frederick Doot



On Day 1, the first thing you notice is the subway. It feels different, something not right. The world is off. Sure the sounds and smells of the subway are unchanged. Piss and dirt and scum linger in the air, the masses scurry like ants or rats or whatever insectian-vermin cliché enters your mind today. You join them in their scurrying and cram into the car. As expected, no one pays any mind to anyone else. Blank stares or affixations to smartphones steal everyone’s eyes. No need for talk, however small, nor pleasantries nor “nice to meet you’s.” everyone’s numb in their own life; no one else exists. You stand and hold the railing with your shirtsleeve, scouring the subway car looking at the people.

You’ve always been a people watcher. Businessmen with their slicked salt-and-pepper hair and chiseled chins sit while an old lady stands, struggling to maintain her balance from the jarring car as it accelerates out of the station. Secretaries with their phony high heels and short skirts and tits hanging out trying to woo the businessmen into a happy hour drink and maybe more. And you can always tell the married folk, dead to the world, living out life according to society’s expectations.

People suck, you think, and you continue scanning their faces, glancing past the two old men in the corner, one dressed in white, the other in black, whispering secrets to one another about death and the meaning of life. Curious perhaps, but this is New York City, and here the norm is the only thing abnormal. When you’re done with your people-perusing, you look down and see a briefcase at your feet.

The case is of average size, standing upright on its side. Black in color, leather in substance. Presumably belonging to the gentleman standing beside you. The one who must’ve showered in his cologne. At least it’s better than the normal piss and dirt and scum smell your nose has already acclimated to, or is it? You think nothing of the briefcase, and think nothing of nothing as your mind enters the same trance as the rest of the car’s occupants.

Two stops later, you exit and make your way home. Thousands of people line the streets, and you mingle with none of them. When you get home, it’s like this too. The

dog welcomes you with a wag of the tail and sniff of your outstretched hands. The spouse and kids aren’t home. It’s Wednesday and they’ve gone out to the movies. Another happy hump day for you. You have a glass of wine, hit the fridge for leftovers, and retire before they even get home.

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By midday on Day 2, you realize something’s up. You’re up pre-dawn, and hail an Uber to LaGuardia for a quick trip to Boston for the meeting. You flip open your phone when the plane rolls into Logan International a few hours later, and notice the screen’s cracked. Funny. When’d that happen? Phone still works though, and you check your email. You’re reading the news as you exit the plane, and instinctively sidestep around the black briefcase at the door of the plane. The meeting’s cancelled, and they will reconvene once they figure out how to handle the disturbing news. You’ve always felt out of the loop at work, this is nothing new. You enjoy a nice long late lunch, forgetting about life for a while, and book your early evening return flight home.

Like the subway, no conversations are made on either flight, no pleasantries exchanged, no “Nice to meet ya’s”, to anyone. Not even the man in white or the man in black sitting in the last row of the plane acknowledge you.

God people are dull.

This time when you get home, the spouse and kids are asleep; after all, it’s after 11, and who expects the love of your life to wait for you, to even check and acknowledge that you made it home safely during the course of your day? Not even the dog greets you when you enter. His ears twitch when you close the door behind you. He raises his head and looks around, then settles back into sleep.

When you slip into bed after the shower, the spouse doesn’t even stir.

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It’s Friday, Day 3, and it feels like a Friday. One more day, this time slugging around the office, and you can call it quits for the weekend.

The regular crowd shuffles into the subway, someplace else they’d all rather be. The morning crowd is no different from the afternoon crowd. You feel like a zombie when you enter the car, lethargic and slow and not giving a shit about work or life or anything. You slump into a seat and scan the car looking at the people. Old habits die slow. Same slog, different day. Or is it?

Your mind shuts off sooner than usual, and you hardly notice that the car has cleared on the first stop, except for two people. The man in white and the man in black. Both staring at you. Staring and waiting.

When you stand, it comes to you. Hits you hard. Hits you like a bus you never saw coming when you darted out between the cars to make that goddamn meeting Wednesday afternoon, all to avoid that arrogant look of disdain and disappointment on your boss’s face. But you never did make that meeting, did you?

Shit, no you didn’t.

And this is it, and you know it. This isn't some M. Night Shyamalawhateverhisnameisan movie. This comes as a surprise to you at this moment, though it shouldn't have. You knew it all along. It is the end. And now you know it.

You turn and walk towards the sliding doors, though they don't open. At the base of the doors stands that black briefcase, shaking just a bit, screaming at your eyes. Dancing. Waiting.

You stare. It shakes.

The doors remain shut, but a smoky fog is oozing from the cracks into the subway car. You glance back again at the two men. Their stares are locked on you in anticipation.

You reach for the briefcase and it sieges your hand, locking your fingers around its handle.

Now tell us, how heavy is the briefcase? How burdensome is the weight you'll have to bear?

And that smoky fog coming through the doors. When the doors open, as you know they will, will you be met with a bed of clouds and sun and smiles, or a floor of coal and screams and scours?

[Be sure to vote for your favorite story here!](#)

Frederick Doot writes literary fiction, screenplays, film reviews, and blogs both on the craft of writing and the continually woeful New York Mets. He is also a freelance editor and participant in various writers groups near Glen Rock, N.J. For much of the summer, his alter-ego, Rick Tood, can be found meandering the woods of the Catskill Mountains near Livingston Manor, New York, hiking, fishing, sippin' whiskey while staring at the stars, and churning out words for the endless supply of speculative fiction stories that sneak into his mind. He is also Managing Editor at [Fantasy Scroll Magazine](#), a new publication publishing high-quality, entertaining, and thought-provoking speculative fiction. Doot is Chief Editor of Total New Games currently developing [Zombacane: The Card Game](#), destined to invade tables across the world veeery soon. Doot is owner of a small sign and lettering company, doot designs, based in Bergen County, New Jersey.

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## “Christmas Haul” by Joseph Devon



The bright red train rumbled along through the candy forest. The trees ripe with sugared treats chugged slowly by as the cars climbed the steep grade of the last hill before the valley. There were bluebirds singing in all the trees, a mass of chirping that organized into a chipper chorus of a happy morning tune.

Ruttiger was making final rounds before they crested the hill. With an easy side-step he made his way along the outside walking rail of the engine itself and showed his face at the engineer's window. He was wearing red-rimmed goggles over his eyes and when he smiled his pointed ears perked up in a charming way.

Ruttiger nodded at the engineer, who gave a nod back and continued eying the track ahead and watching the gauges inside the locomotive, making sure pressure and temperature were all okay. Ruttiger kept a broad smile on his face, his green and red elf outfit catching the morning sunlight in festive flashes.

The engineer felt his smile and tried to mimic it, but his face was wooden agony as he looked from gauge to gauge and throttled back a touch, adjusting as the dials moved. He pulled down a funnel-like device attached to a playful hose that twisted its way up into the cherry red ceiling. “Back off the heat,” he said, his voice somehow quashed down, as if afraid to make too much noise despite the ongoing chirping from outside heralding nothing but joy.

Ruttiger, knowing he was being a nuisance, gave a reassuring shout into the wind and left the engineer to his job. He sidestepped his way back down the train, passing the firebox, where a pair of elves, coal dust masking their bright red and green elf-outfits, were leaning on their shovels having gotten the engineer's order to lay off the heat.

Ruttiger gave them a smile as he walked past outside their window, and then he was at the first cargo car. He checked latches and couplings, looked over spots where maintenance had been done in-station to patch up any worn areas.

Then he moved on to the first armored car. These were designed to have room to move inside, with even more handles for mobility all around. But Ruttiger wasn't checking the outside of these cars. He took a last look around at the sunshine reflecting off of the candy coated trees, rainbows and sparkles appearing everywhere as the birds continued their delightful song. Then he ducked inside the train and stood on solid ground again.

Inside the car there was a sense of split attention. All of the elves kept casting glances from their gear to the sound pipe running along the roof that carried orders. The last thing they had heard was the engineer saying to lay off the heat, and they all had theories on what that meant.

From the side gunner's spot, Edgar looked up. He swung a lazy arm onto the red and white striped grips of his cannon and lifted his goggles up, itching his eyes. “If she can't take this much heat it's gonna be a slow trek through the valley.”

“Maybe we've got extra weight this year?” A younger elf spoke up. “I know the toy elves were saying it was the biggest year yet. On the decline that might help us pick up some speed.”

“There's not enough weight in all of creation to keep us coasting through the valley. Eventually we need steam, and if the old box can't take this much even now...” Edgar trailed off.

Ruttiger looked over the younger elf. “You're Figgy, right? This is your first year on the train?”

“Yes, sir. I was with maintenance up until now.”

“Listen, Edgar's been doing this almost as long as I have. He just likes to rattle the new guys when he gets bored. Just tell him to go spit.”

Almost on cue, Edgar shifted the mass of chewing gum in his mouth from one side to the other and then expectorated onto the sugar floss grass outside.

Ruttiger stepped towards him and received a grumpy glare in return. “Spoilin' my fun,” Edgar said.

“Just double-check your ammo,” Ruttiger said as he walked by.

Edgar gave a grunt, but respectfully looked over the coils of brass and led that wound into the firing mechanism of his gun.

Ruttiger moved down the line, checking in on each car. Then he doubled back and returned to his own station in one of the armored cars nearest the middle. The insides were bright and cheerful, despite there being only a few slits of the outside sunshine coming through the various defenses.

He assembled all the elves in his car and did his final check as the train rumbled and rolled under his feet. He gave each elf a once-over as he passed, checking their gear. A loose strap needed securing here, an extra ammo clip was handed over there.

Then he waved everyone off and sent them back to their stations. He had been smiling and keeping up morale all up and down the train and the muscles in his cheeks felt sore. He let his smile fade and walked to the center of the car, his face taking on a stony sense of purpose that was almost frightening. He sat down and crossed his legs. Then he withdrew the packet that he wore across his back and unfolded it. It was

made out of an old holiday blanket, a snowman stitched onto a landscape of repeated evergreens. On top of that was a set of blades. He removed a knife and took up his honing steel. He held the knife up, handle pointed to him, and eyed the blade, insuring it was true. He squinted, his arms perfectly steady as the train continued to chug uphill and the sun lit up the birds singing all around, and then he slid the steel along the blade a few times on either side. Satisfied, he placed the knife in the blanket alongside the others. He continued doing this with each blade, growing calmer with the ritual. When he was done he folded and wrapped them all up into an easily transported and accessible bundle that he strapped across his back.

The train slowed imperceptibly as it hit a bend in the track near the top of the grade. For a moment it was like everything was pausing, pregnant with forbidding. One of the elves at the side-guns leaned out and squinted into the distance. The valley was visible now as they crested the hill. A gray-black sky loomed ahead on the other side where the valley stretched out in a seemingly never ending beach of ash. One of the bluebirds was chirping happily up ahead near the top of the hill. It coasted along towards the valley when suddenly there was an unwordly thump it the bird squawked as an invisible barrier flared up around where it had hit.

"You think they'd figure out at some point that only certain creatures can pass through," one elf said, watching the bird recover.

"You think they'd figure out at some point that only we would want to," another elf surmised.

All along the train in the armored cars, elves put finishing touches on their routines, wiping last flecks of dirt from their boots, double-checking sights on their weapons, putting the heavy guns through the all-points pattern to test for stickiness in the bearings one last time. Things grew quiet, no elves spoke, and the boisterous call of the birds was starting to become muffled, like they were still singing their best but the air itself was pressing down on joy with a steady hand.

The locomotive crested the rise, the long train winding behind it, still pulling with all its mass to drag everything backwards, down the hill and into the rainbow world of bird songs and sunshine and candy. But slowly more and more cars crested the hill and started pushing into the valley, more and more weight began being pulled forward into the bleak gray flats, and the train began to pick up speed for the first time.

Ruttiger stood at the ladder leading up to the top of the train car. He reached up and hung a hand on the highest rung he could touch, and looking up he paused. His knives were slung across his back, wrapped in their snowman knitted blanket. He took a deep breath and looked up through the ceiling hatch, at the gray clouds webbed with black above. Then he waited.

In the engine room, the engineer rested his arm out the window, one hand on the wide-open brake. He tilted his head, as if an odd thought had occurred to him, then he shook that off and reached his free hand up to wipe at his goggles. His eyes returned to the horizon and his head craned forward on his neck.

It had looked like another swirling eddy of dust at first. Just another desperate blur on this wretched excuse for a

landscape. But it hadn't disappeared, it had stayed and grown larger and now he was looking at a black speck far off in the distance. Soon he saw another, then another.

He rolled the steel cover of his window shut and closed the latch. Then he reached up and grabbed his megaphone. "Right side, three o'clock!" he bellowed into the funnel, and he imagined that even above the noise of the engine he could hear all the guns along the train as they swiveled in unison to put eyes on the target. "Here we go," he whispered to himself.

Slowly a sound grew louder on the ashen landscape, a low hum that began to overtake the constant rolling of the train's wheel. The black mass began to separate into smaller discernible figures. Breathing heavily, Edgar began to turn his gun left and right, his breathing coming faster. "Hello, boys," he said around his mouthful of gum. One spot in particular grew larger, and Edgar could see a mouth and black spikes and legs and arms and when he saw the tongue, long and lashing, he pulled the trigger. His gun erupted in a cacophony of noise, coughing out round after round. One by one the other guns started firing, the entire side of the train spraying lead death.

The swarm of black monsters wavered, their speed slowing as the occasional beast in the front line toppled and fell. The surging mob behind them tripped and staggered around them. Those who fell were trampled by the mob of wide-mouthed slavering things behind them, thousands deep and all screaming, crazed and hungry, towards the train.

As the monsters drew closer their dark-red teeth were visible in the black emptiness of their maws. The guns cut down the first waves, slavering mouths split open with gunfire. A few made it through and slammed against the train walls, one so out of control its tongue lolled in between the wheels and was severed off. They were frenzied and there were thousands of them, but they were slow and stupid. More than one knocked themselves out flying headfirst into the train. A few simply ran alongside, struggling to match speeds instead of attacking. They tangled in each other's feet and tripped each other up.

But a few grabbed hold, the black spikes all over their bodies scratching at the candy-red wood. Arms with dozens of fingers gripped the train and their mouths, hinging open from one side of their head to the other to show rows of red teeth, began to chew and rip and tear.

"Hand-to-hand!" Ruttiger yelled out. "Gunners and spotters call them out loud and clear. We can't kill 'em if we don't know they're there!"

He climbed up the ladder and out of the hatch and spotted an idiot beast, gnawing away on a guardrail. It was windy up top and his goggles were the only thing allowing him to see in the cloud of ash kicked up by the attacking herd of beasts. He paused, just for a second, reeling in disgust at the thing, its eyes lolling back in its head as it chewed, grit and dirt plunking into its parted mouth to be removed by the overflowing spit that dripped down over its lips and face.

It was too focused on eating to even notice Ruttiger, and he drew a knife and dispatched it quickly. As he watched it fall, its eyes rolling lifelessly, he felt like pulling Suzy Perkins' pigtails.

The first wave continued to be held back. Other elves scrambled along the roof and there were reports of gunshots

and splatters of dark black blood as the megaphones all around erupted with the voices of gunners and spotters directing the hand-to-hand crews. The idiot beasts were many, but they were easy to handle. And they were only first.

Ruttiger winced inwardly as he saw one of the first tallboys wading through the pile. Smarter and meaner, with uncountable arms and legs that charged it forward, the tallboy bowled through the smaller critters and leapt past a gun onto the side of the train, gripping it with toes like hooks.

Ruttiger tried to dive in quickly before it got its bearings, but another of the idiot beasts latched on at his feet and he paused to lash down, slicing it through its lips and gums, blood spraying out, and he suddenly thought of sneaking a tenner out of mom's purse.

The outside of the cars were lined with elves now, crouched and ready, as more of the tallboys closed with the train. Outsized and deceptively awkward looking, like a great spider's limbs dangling from a smiling skull, the tallboys clambered onto the cargo cars and began to rip at the bright-red wood.

Their thin limbs hid a surprising strength, and the first elf to close with a tallboy met a swatting arm swinging out while he was still many feet away, the tallboy's rock-hard hook cracking him across the face and sending him down between the cars.

Ruttiger approached his target more carefully, and he saw another elf coming in slow and smart from the other side of the car. He recognized the other elf as Figgy, and tried to get across some sort of plan of attack with hand signals, but the tallboy spotted him and Ruttiger ducked under a long thin arm as it whipped over his head. Surprise lost, he closed quickly and swiped with one of his knives, but the thing leaned back, way back, its arms extending its body an easy ten feet out from the train car.

Up and down the train the slobbering monsters and the wily tallboys lurched and jumped and scrambled to get a grip as the cars rumbled past.

One side-gunner screamed as a hairy clawed arm wedged suddenly in his view-port. The arm twitched and writhed and then a lipless grinning face appeared outside, hollow eyes of black rising slowly into view as the tallboy pulled itself alongside the train. The gunner grabbed his side arm and with demonstrative anger he pushed the barrel through the tiny steel window and fired round after round into the tallboy's head, a lurching feeling of cheating on a spelling test rumbling in his stomach.

Ruttiger rolled along the train top as the tallboy used its distance to toy with him, gripping with various legs and stabbing down with others. It leered at Ruttiger, like he was a beetle being tortured by a little boy. Its dark red teeth were dripping with foam as it smiled, thinking itself safe, enjoying the elf's antics.

It didn't notice Figgy creeping up near one of its furthest legs. Getting a good grip on the side of the train, Figgy pulled himself forward and sliced down on the leg with all of his weight, severing it in a spray of thick black blood and leaving behind a hook hand dangling on the rail. Furious, the thing raged, no longer playing, all legs engaging in battle. It was

like seven monsters fighting at once and despite blocking and ducking a few blows, one sharp claw managed to pierce through Ruttiger's shoulder, his body spasming as the hairy hook drove through bone and muscle and pinned into the train car underneath.

Further down the train the wood was splintered at the corner of one cargo car where a snouted thing with tusks like a boar was pushing its mouth into the opening, tongue trying to reach the presents wrapped in shining paper inside. Two elves moved to close, one prying its mouth away, the other going towards the body for a kill. The tusked thing fell, screeching, to the side of the train and both elves thought of Joshua Olsen punching his little sister.

Screaming out a warning one elf fired at a rare flying beast, some sort of sleek leech with leathery wings, and he managed to tear the thing apart before it could attack. And with every round that punctured the flying beast the elf found himself disoriented and thinking about blaming friends for the broken windows in the garage.

Ruttiger lay, coughing, reaching a hand weakly up towards the body of the tallboy as it thrashed and swung at Figgy. Each movement of the pendulous mass caused the arm stabbing through his shoulder to writhe and twitch, tweaking his wound and grinding against his broken collarbone. He felt his vision tunneling in, the sides of his view growing narrower and narrower. The thing gave some horrible scream and the movement that came with it caused Ruttiger to scream out and grip weakly at the leg in his shoulder, his hand barely able to grip the hard carapace, and his head lolled to one side.

The train was swarming with darkness, a seemingly endless field of red teeth and prickly black and leering eyes cackling with laughter as they finally won, the train finally would be derailed, and thoughts of children stealing and lying and cheating and pushing friends down stairs and flooded through Ruttiger's head as they came and he stared off into the horizon and saw red.

He blinked.

No. Not red. At least not only red. And not the red of the monster's teeth.

There was blue too, and yellow, and pink, and purple and they were almost there, the grey ash of the valley was almost gone and the rainbow of the world on the other side was growing stronger.

Blood was dripping down Figgy's cheek and he was alarmed at how tired he was, ducking and rolling around on the deck as the tallboy's legs tried to swat and stab him. Two legs would have been easy, an elf's reflexes were faster than most creatures, but seven or eight or however many arms the thing had was tiring him out and he was starting to get sloppy. He tripped and fell next to Ruttiger. He knew the thing would have him, would dispatch them both, would tear open the train and the hundreds of other beasts would rip everything to pieces. They had failed. He was beaten.

He was about to apologize to Ruttiger, expecting the thing to dispatch him at any second, when he noticed Ruttiger was smiling at something towards the front of the train.

"Santa," Ruttiger whispered through lips pale from pain.

Figgy turned, wide-eyed, as the tallboy gave a scream, not of pain or anger or frustration, but of fear this time. A terrible high-pitched note that somehow comforted the elves, and it turned all its legs and desperately flailed towards the front of the train where something was coming.

Figgy lifted his head up and saw a furious red warrior, the big man himself, sword held high as an army of colorful warriors stood all around him at the next barrier. The train was moving out of the valley and into the land of men. The black beasts furthest away wheeled off, knowing what would happen if they crossed that border. The ones focused on the train rode through with it and were obliterated. Their bodies torn apart and ground into the robust green earth by the waiting warriors.

As Figgy watched the ephemereal army swirl and tear at the beasts, thoughts of sharing precious snacks with friends and laughing with siblings and finding the courage to admit to wrongdoing flooded his heart, and the slaving beasts were slaughtered with a ferocity that would have been alarming if not for its purity.

More and more elves came up onto the roof of the train, cheering and waving at the army picking off any of the beasts that traveled through.

“Bad run this year, lads?” Santa bellowed as they rolled past.

Ruttiger mumbled something, then tried to laugh as he started to cough. Then he rolled his head back in pain. Figgy sat with him as someone brought up a bolt cutter to snip the tallboy’s leg off on either side of his shoulder, and they eased Ruttiger onto a stretcher.

“What did he say?” Edgar asked, shifting the gum in his mouth.

Figgy watched as Ruttiger was lowered down an open hatch into the train. “He said, ‘No more. Next year I’m switching jobs to the toy lot’” Figgy answered solemnly.

The train was becoming a parade as the last of the beasts were put down and the colorful soldiers began to step and cheer alongside. Some elves were beginning to open up the cargo hatches to prepare for unloading and bottles of ale and mead were being tossed to elves resting on the roof.

“Hah!” Edgar bellowed out, spitting off the side of the train into the lush green grass below as the engineer blew the train whistle in a triumphant blast. “He says that every year.”

[Be sure to vote for your favorite story here!](#)

Hailing from New Jersey, Joseph Devon is sarcastic, caustic, abrasive, and yet a surprisingly good cook. As the eldest member of the arena’s cadre, Joseph has come to rely on discipline over flash and dozens of rewrites over bursts of creativity. He also sometimes remembers where he put his dentures. Joseph grew up fighting for attention over loud guidos and even louder New Yorkers and polished a knack for concise, striking imagery. A fan of most anything silly, Joseph also has a depth hidden under his love of talking animals that can rope in unsuspecting readers and make them think before they realize they’re reading anything of substance.

Joseph is the author of the first two books of the Matthew and Epp trilogy, [Probability Angels](#) and [Persistent Illusions](#) and is hard at work on the third.

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