By Paul Theroux

Subterranean Gothic

[1981]

New Yorkers say some terrible things about the subway – that they hate it, or are scared stiff of it, or that it deserves to go broke. For tourists it seems just another dangerous aspect of New York, though most don't know it exists. "I haven't been down there in years," is a common enough remark from a city dweller. Even people who ride it seem to agree that there is more Original Sin among subway passengers. And more desperation, too, making you think of choruses of "O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark . . ."

"Subway" is not its name, because strictly-speaking more than half of it is elevated. But which person who has ridden it lately is going to call it by its right name, "The Rapid Transit"? You can wait a long time for some trains and, as in the section of T. S. Eliot's "East Coker" I quoted above, often

> . . . an underground train, in the tube, stops too long between stations
> And the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence
> And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen
> Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about . . .

It is also frightful-looking. It has paint and signatures all over its aged face. People who don't take it, who never ride the subway and have no use for it, say that these junky pictures are folk-art, a protest against the metropolitan grayness, and what a wonderful sense of color these scribblers have – which is complete nonsense. The graffiti are bad, violent and destructive, and the people who praise them are either malicious or lazy- minded. The graffiti are so extensive and so dreadful it is hard to believe that the perpetrators are not the recipients of some enormous foundation grant. The subway has been vandalized from end to end. It smells so hideous you want to put a clothespin on your nose, and it is so noisy the sound actually hurts. Is it dangerous? Ask anyone and he will tell you there are about two murders a day on the subway. It really is the pits, people say.

You have to ride it for a while to find out what it is and who takes it and who gets killed on it.

It is full of surprises. Three and a half million fares a day pass through it, and in 1981 the total number of murder victims on the subway amounted to thirteen. This half-dozen does not include suicides (one a week), "Man-Under" incidents (one a day), or "Space-Cases" – people who quite often get themselves jammed between the train and the platform. Certainly the subway is very ugly and extremely noisy, but it only *looks* like a death-trap. People ride it looking stunned and holding their breath. It's not at all like the BART system in San Francisco, where people are constantly chattering, saying, "I'm going to my father's wedding" or "I'm looking after my Mom's children" or "I've got a date with my fiancée's boyfriend." In New York, the subway is a serious matter – the racketty train, the silent passengers, the occasional scream.

We were at Flushing Avenue, on the GG line, talking about rules for riding the subway. You need rules: the subway is like a complex – and diseased – circulatory system. Some people liken it to a sewer and others hunch their shoulders and mutter about being in the bowels of the earth. It is full of suspicious-looking people.

I said, "Keep away from isolated cars, I suppose," and my friend, a police officer, said, "Never display jewelry."

Just then, a man walked by, and he had Chinese coins – the old ones with a hole through the middle – woven somehow into his hair. There were enough coins in that man's hair for a swell night out in old Shanghai, but robbing him would have involved scalping him. There was a woman at the station, too. She was clearly crazy, and she lived in the subway the way people live in railway stations in India, with stacks of dirty bags. The police in New York call such people "skells" and are seldom harsh with them. "Wolfman Jack" is a skell, living underground at Hoyt-Schermerhorn, also on the GG line; the police in that station give him food and clothes, and if you ask him how he is, he says, "I'm getting some calls." Call them colorful characters and they don't look so dangerous or pathetic.

This crazy old lady at Flushing Avenue was saying, "I'm a member of the medical profession." She had no teeth, and plastic bags were taped around her feet. I glanced at her and made sure she kept her distance. The previous day, a crazy old lady just like her, came at me and shrieked, "Ahm goon cut you up!" This was at Pelham Parkway, on the IRT-2 line in the Bronx. I left the car at the next stop, Bronx Park East, where the zoo is, though who could be blamed for thinking that, in New York City, the zoo is everywhere?

Then a Muslim unflapped his prayer mat – while we were at Flushing

Avenue, talking about Rules – and spread it on the platform and knelt on it, just like that, and was soon on all fours, beseeching Allah and praising the Prophet Mohammed. This is not remarkable. You see people praying, or reading the Bible, or selling religion on the subway all the time. "Hallelujah, brothers and sisters," the man with the leaflets says on the BMT-RR line at Prospect Avenue in Brooklyn. "I love Jesus! I used to be a wino!" And Muslims beg and push their green plastic cups at passengers, and try to sell them copies of something called *Arabic Religious Classics*. It is December and Brooklyn, and the men are dressed for the Great Nafud Desert, or Jiddah or Medina – skullcap, gallabieh, sandals.

"And don't sit next to the door," the second police officer said. We were still talking about Rules. "A lot of these snatchers like to play the doors."

The first officer said, "It's a good idea to keep near the conductor. He's got a telephone. So does the man in the token booth. At night, stick around the token booth until the train comes in."

"Although, token booths," the second officer said. "A few years ago, some kids filled a fire extinguisher with gasoline and pumped it into a token booth at Broad Channel. There were two ladies inside, but before they could get out the kids set the gas on fire. The booth just exploded like a bomb, and the ladies died. It was a revenge thing. One of the kids had gotten a summons for Theft of Service – not paying his fare."

Just below us, at Flushing Avenue, there was a stream running between the tracks. It gurgled and glugged down the whole length of the long platform. It gave the station the atmosphere of a sewer – dampness and a powerful smell. The water was flowing towards Myrtle and Willoughby. And there was a rat. It was only my third rat in a week of riding the subway, but this one was twice the size of rats I've seen elsewhere. I thought, *Rats as big as cats*.

"Stay with the crowds. Keep away from quiet stairways. The stairways at 41st and 43rd are usually quiet, but 42nd is always busy – that's the one to use."

So many rules! It's not like taking a subway at all; it's like walking through the woods – through dangerous jungle, rather: Do this, Don't do that . . .

"It reminds me," the first officer said. "The burning of that token booth at Broad Channel. Last May, six guys attempted to murder someone at Forest Parkway, on the 'J' line. It was a whole gang against this one guy. Then they tried to burn the station down with molotov cocktails. We stopped that, too."

The man who said this was six-feet four, two hundred and eighty-one pounds. He carried a .38 in a shoulder holster and wore a bullet-proof

vest. He had a radio, a can of Mace and a blackjack. He was a plainclothesman.

The funny thing is that, one day, a boy – five feet six, one hundred and thirty-five pounds – tried to mug him. The boy slapped him across the face while the plainclothesman was seated on a train. The boy said, "Give me your money," and then threatened the man in a vulgar way. The boy still punched at the man when the man stood up; he still said, "Give me all your money!" The plainclothesman then took out his badge and his pistol and said, "I'm a police officer and you're under arrest." "I was just kidding!" the boy said, but it was too late.

I laughed at the thought of someone trying to mug this well-armed giant.

"Rule one for the subway," he said. "Want to know what it is?" He looked up and down the Flushing Avenue platform, at the old lady and the Muslim and the running water and the vandalized signs. "Rule one is – don't ride the subway if you don't have to."

A lot of people say that. I did not believe it when he said it, and after a week of riding the trains I still didn't. The subway is New York City's best hope. The streets are impossible, the highways are a failure, there is nowhere to park. The private automobile has no future in this city. This is plainest of all to the people who own and use cars in the city; they know, better than anyone, that the car is the last desperate old-fangled fling of a badly-planned transport system. What is amazing is that back in 1904 a group of businessmen solved New York's transport problems for centuries to come. What vision! What enterprise! What an engineering marvel they created in this underground railway! And how amazed they would be to see what it has become, how foul-seeming to the public mind.

The subway is a gift to any connoisseur of superlatives. It has the longest rides of any subway in the world, the biggest stations, the fastest trains, the most track, the most passengers, the most police officers. It also has the filthiest trains, the most bizarre graffiti, the noisiest wheels, the craziest passengers, the wildest crimes. Some New Yorkers have never set foot in the subway, other New Yorkers actually live there, moving from station to station, whining for money and eating yesterday's bagels and sleeping on benches. These "skells" are not merely down-and-out. Many are insane, chucked out of New York hospitals in the early 1970's when it was decided that long-term care was doing them little good. "They were resettled in rooms or hotels," Ruth Cohen, a psychiatric social-worker at Bellevue Hospital, told me. "But many of them can't follow through. They get lost, they wander the streets. They're not violent, suicidal or

dangerous enough for Bellevue – this is an acute-care hospital. But these people who wander the subway, once they're on their own they begin to de-compensate –"

Ahm goon cut you up: that woman who threatened to slash me was de-compensating. Here are a few more de-compensating – one is weeping on a wooden bench at Canal Street, another has wild hair and is spitting into a Coke can. One man who is de-compensating in a useful way, has a bundle of brooms and is setting forth to sweep the whole change area at Grand Central; another is scrubbing the stairs with scraps of paper at 14th Street. They drink, they scream, they gibber like monkeys. They sit on subway benches with their knees drawn up, just as they do in mental hospitals. A police officer told me, "There are more serious things than people screaming on trains." This is so, and yet the deranged person who sits next to you and begins howling at you seems at the time very serious indeed.

The subway, which is many things, is also a madhouse.

When people say the subway frightens them they are not being silly or irrational. The subway is frightening. It is no good saying how cheap or how fast it is, because it looks disgusting and it stinks. It is also very easy to get lost on the subway, and the person who is lost in New York City has a serious problem.

New Yorkers make it their business to avoid getting lost. It is the stranger who sees people hurrying into the stairwell: subway entrances are just dark holes in the sidewalk – the stations are below-ground. There is nearly always a bus-stop near the subway entrance. People waiting at a bus-stop have a special pitying gaze for people entering the subway. It is sometimes not pity, but fear, bewilderment, curiosity, or fatalism; often they look like miners' wives watching their menfolk going down the pit.

The stranger's sense of disorientation down below is immediate. The station is all tile and iron and dampness; it has bars and turnstiles and steel grates. It has the look of an old prison or a monkey cage. Buying a token the stranger may ask directions, but the token booth – reinforced, burglar-proof, bulletproof – renders the reply incoherent. And subway directions are a special language.

"A-train . . . Downtown . . . Express to the Shuttle . . . Change at Ninety-sixth for the two . . . Uptown . . . The Lex . . . CC . . . LL . . . The Local . . ."

Most New Yorkers refer to the subway by the now obsolete forms "IND," "IRT," "BMT." No one intentionally tries to confuse the stranger; it is just that, where the subway is concerned, precise directions are very hard to convey.

Verbal directions are incomprehensible, written ones are defaced. The signboards and subway maps are indiscernible beneath layers of graffiti. That Andy Warhol, the stylish philistine, has said, "I love graffiti" is almost reason enough to hate them. One is warier still of Norman Mailer who naively encouraged this public scrawling in his book *The Faith of Graffiti.*

Graffiti are destructive; they are anti-art; they are an act of violence, and they can be deeply menacing. They have displaced the subway signs and maps, blacked-out the windows of the trains, and obliterated the instructions. *In case of emergency* – is cross-hatched with a felt-tip; *These seats are for the elderly and disabled* – a yard-long signature obscures it; *The subway tracks are very dangerous. If the train should stop, do not* – the rest is black and unreadable. The stranger cannot rely on printed instructions or warnings, and there are few cars out of the six thousand on the system in which the maps have not been torn out. Assuming the stranger has boarded the train, he can only feel panic when, searching for a clue to his route, he sees in the map-frame the message, *Guzmán – Ladrón, Maricón y Asesino.*

Panic: and so he gets off the train, and then his troubles really begin.

He may be in the South Bronx or the upper reaches of Broadway on the Number One line, or on any one of a dozen lines that traverse Brooklyn. He gets off the train, which is covered in graffiti, and steps onto a station platform which is covered in graffiti. It is possible (this is true of many stations) that none of the signs will be legible. Not only will the stranger not know where he is, but the stairways will be splotched and stinking –no *Uptown*, no *Downtown*, no *Exit.* It is also possible that not a single soul will be around, and the most dangerous stations – ask any police officer – are the emptiest. Of course, the passenger might just want to sit on a broken bench and, taking Mailer's word for it, contemplate the *macho* qualities of the graffiti; on the other hand, he is more likely to want to get the hell out of there.

This is the story that most people tell of subway fear – the predicament of having boarded the wrong train and gotten off at a distant station; of being on an empty platform, waiting for a train which shows no sign of coming. Then the vandalized station signs, the crazy semi-literate messages, the monkey scratches on the walls, the dampness, the neglect, the visible evidence of destruction and violence – they all combine to produce a sense of disgust and horror.

In every detail it is like a nightmare, complete with rats and mice and a tunnel and a low ceiling. It is manifest suffocation straight out of Poe. And some of these stations have long platforms – you have to squint to see what is at the far end. These distances intensify a person's fear, and so do all the pillars behind which any ghoul could be lurking. Is it any

wonder that, having once strayed into this area of subterranean gothic, people decide that the subway is not for them?

But those who tell this story seldom have a crime to report. They have experienced shock, and fear, and have gone weak at the knees. It is completely understandable – what is worse than being trapped underground? – but it has been a private little horror. In most cases the person will have come to no harm. But he will remember his fear on that empty station for the rest of his life.

When New Yorkers recount an experience like this they are invariably speaking of something that happened on another line, not their usual route. Their own line is fairly safe, they'll say; it's cleaner than the others, it's got a little charm, it's kind of dependable, they've been taking it for years. Your line has crazy people on it, but my line has "characters." This sense of loyalty to a regularly-used line is the most remarkable thing about the subway passenger in New York. It is, in fact, a jungle attitude.

"New York is a jungle," the tourist says, and he believes he has made a withering criticism. But all very large cities are jungles, which is to say that they are dense and dark and full of surprises and strange growths; they are hard to read, hard to penetrate; strange people live in them; and they contain mazy areas of great danger. The jungle aspect of cities (and of New York City in particular) is the most interesting thing about them – the way people behave in this jungle, and adapt to it; the way they change it or are changed by it.

In any jungle, the pathway is a priority. People move around New York in various ways, but the complexities of the subway have allowed the New Yorker to think of his own route as something personal, even *original*. No one uses maps on the subway – you seldom see any. Most subway passengers were shown how to ride it by parents or friends. Then habit turns it into instinct, just like a trot down a jungle path. The passenger knows where he is going because he never diverges from his usual route. But that is also why, unless you are getting off at precisely his stop, he cannot tell you how to get where you're going.

The only other way of learning how to use the subway is by maps and charts – teaching yourself. This very hard work requires imagination and intelligence. It means navigating in four dimensions. No one can do it idly, and I doubt that many people take up subway riding in their middle years.

In general, people have a sense of pride in their personal route; they may be superstitious about it and even a bit secretive. Vaguely fearful of other routes, they may fantasize about them – these "dangerous" lines that run through unknown districts. This provokes them to assign a specific character to the other lines. The IRT is the oldest line; for some people it is dependable, with patches of elegance (those beaver mosaics at

Astor Place commemorating John Jacob Astor's fur business), and for others it is dangerous and dirty. One person praises the IND, another person damns it. "I've got a soft spot for the BMT," a woman told me, but found it hard to explain why. "Take the 'A' train," I was told. "That's the best one, like the song." But some of the worst stations are on the (very long) 'A' line. The 'CC', 8th Avenue local, was described to me as "scuzz" – disreputable – but this train, running from Bedford Park Boulevard, The Bronx, via Manhattan and Brooklyn, to Rockaway Park, Queens, covers a distance of 32.39 miles. The fact is that for some of these miles it is pleasant and for others it is not. There is part of one line that is indisputably bad; that is, the stretch of the '2' line (IRT) from Nostrand to New Lots Avenue. It is dangerous and ugly and when you get to New Lots Avenue you cannot imagine why you went. The police call this line "The Beast."

But people in the know – the police, the Transit Authority, the people who travel throughout the system – say that one line is pretty much like another.

"Is this line bad?" I asked Robert Huber of the Transit Authority, and pointed to the map in his office.

"The whole system is bad," he said. "From 1904 until just a few years ago it went unnoticed. People took it for granted. In 1975, the first year of the fiscal crisis, Mayor Beame ordered cutbacks. They started a program of deferred maintenance – postponed servicing and just attended to the most serious deficiencies. After four or five years of deferred maintenance, the bottom fell out. In January-February, 1981, twenty-five per cent of the trains were out of service, and things got worse – soon a thirty minute trip was taking an hour and a half. No one was putting any money into it. But of course they never had. It was under-capitalized from the beginning. Now there is decay everywhere, but there is also a real determination to reverse that trend and get it going right."

No train is entirely good or bad, crime-ridden or crime-free. The trains carry crime with them, picking it up in one area and bringing it to another. They pass through a district and take on the characteristics of that place. The South Bronx is regarded as a High Risk area, but seven lines pass through it, taking vandals and thieves all over the system. There is a species of vandalism that was once peculiar to the South Bronx: boys would swing on the stanchions – those chrome poles in the center of the car – and raising themselves sideways until they were parallel with the floor they would kick hard against a window and burst it. Now this South Bronx window-breaking technique is universal throughout the system. Except for the people who have the misfortune to travel on "The Beast" no one can claim that his train is much better

or worse than any other. This business about one line being dependable and another being charming and a third being dangerous is just jungle talk.

The whiff of criminality, the atmosphere of viciousness, is so strong in the stations and trains that it does little good to say that, relatively speaking, crime is not that serious on the subway. Of course, many crimes go unreported on the subway, but this is also true outside the transit system. In one precinct they might have seventy-seven murders in a year, which makes the thirteen on the subway in 1981 look mild by comparison. In the same year there were thirty-five rapes and rape attempts (an attempt is classified as rape), which again, while nothing to crow about, is not as bad as is widely believed ("I'll bet they have at least one rape a day," a girl told me, and for that reason she never took the subway). The majority of subway crime is theft – bag-snatching; this is followed by robbery – the robber using a gun or knife. There are about thirty-two robberies or snatches a day in the system, and one or two cases of aggravated assault a day. This takes care of all "Part I Offenses" – the serious ones.

It is the obvious vandalism on the subways that conveys the feeling of lawlessness. Indeed, the first perception of subway crime came with the appearance of widespread graffiti in 1970. It was then that passengers took fright and ridership, which had been declining slowly since the 'fifties, dropped rapidly. Passengers felt threatened, and newspapers gave prominence to subway crime. Although the 'CC' line is over thirty-two miles long a passenger will be alarmed to hear that a crime has been committed on it, because this is *his* line, and the proprietorial feeling of a rider for his line is as strong as a jungle dweller for his regular path. Subway passengers are also very close physically to one another, but this is a city in which people are accustomed to quite a lot of space. On the subway you can hear the breathing of the person next to you – that is, when the train is at the station. The rest of the time it is impossible to hear anything except the thundering of the train, which is equally frightening.

"Violence underground attracts more coverage in the papers, but it is foolish to imagine the subway is some sort of death trap." This statement was not made by anyone in the New York Transit Authority, but by Nadine Joly, the twenty-eight-year-old head of the Special Paris Metro Security Squad. She was speaking about the Paris Metro, but her sentiments are quite similar to those of Edward Silberfarb of the Transit Authority Police.

"The interest in subway crime is much greater than in street crime," Mr Silberfarb said. "Crime actually went down six per cent in September, but the paper reversed the statistic and reported it as having gone up. Maybe they're looking for headlines."

The most frequent complaint of subway passengers is not about crime. It is, by a wide margin, about delayed trains and slow service. The second largest category of complaint is about the discourtesy of conductors or token-sellers; and the third concerns unclean stations. "Mainly the smell of urine – it's really horrible at some stations," said Mr Huber of the Transit Authority.

The perception of crime is widespread, and yet statistically the experience of it is quite small.

"But what do those statistics matter to someone who is in a car and a gang of six guys starts teasing and then threatening the passengers?" the New York lawyer, Arthur S. Penn remarked to me. "Or that other familiar instance – you get into a car and there's one guy way down at the end sitting all by himself, and the rest of the people are crowded up this end of the car. You know from experience that the man who's sitting alone is crazy, and then, when the train pulls out, he starts screaming . . ."

Discomfort, anxiety, fear – these are the responses of most passengers. No wonder people complain that the trains are too slow: when one is fearful, every trip takes too long. In fact, these are among the fastest subway trains in the world. Stan Fischler, in his enthusiastic history of the system, *Uptown, Downtown* (1976) gives fifty-five mph as the top speed of an average express, such as the Harlem-Bronx 'D'. The train going by sounds as if it is full of coal, but when one is inside, it can feel like a trip on "The Wild Mouse."

People's fears can be at odds with reality. It is interesting that the two most famous movies with New York subway settings, *The Incident* (about a gang terrorizing a group of passengers on an express), and *The Taking of Pelham 1–2–3* (about the hijacking of an IRT train) are both preposterous. But as fantasies they give expression to widely-held fears of subway violence. (The famous chase in *The French Connection* starts at Bay 50th on the B-line and finishes deep in Bensonhurst on the West End line.)

Some people do get mugged – about twelve thousand a year. I asked a uniformed police officer what reaction he got upon entering a car. "A big sigh of relief," he said. "You can actually hear it. People smile at me. They're relieved! But the ones who are the most pleased to see me are the handicapped people and the old people. They're the ones who get mugged mostly."

That is the disgraceful part: the victims of subway crime are most often the old, the mentally retarded, the crippled, the blind, the weak. The majority of victims are women. Minorities comprise the next largest category of victim: a black person in a white area, an hispanic in a black area, a white in an hispanic area, and all the other grotesque permutations of race. Of course, the old and handicapped are also minorities, regarded

as easy targets and defenseless. But cities can turn people into members of a minority group quite easily. What makes the New Yorker so instinctively wary is perhaps the thought that anyone who boards the wrong train, or gets off at the wrong stop, or walks one block too many, is capable of being in the minority.

The most-mugged man in New York must be the white-haired creaky-looking fellow in Bedford-Stuyvesant who has had as many as thirty mugging attempts made on him in a single year. And he still rides the subway trains. He's not as crazy as the looks: he's a cop in the Transit Police, a plainclothesman who works with the Mobile Task Force in the district designated "Brooklyn North." This man is frequently a decoy. In the weeks before Christmas he rode the "J" and the "GG" and the "2" lines looking like a pathetic Senior Citizen, with two gaily wrapped parcels in his shopping bag. He was repeatedly ambushed by unsuspecting muggers, and then he pulled out his badge and handcuffs and arrested his attackers.

Muggers are not always compliant. Then the Transit Police Officer unholsters his pistol, but not before jamming a colored headband over his head to alert any nearby uniformed officer. Before the advent of headbands many plainclothesmen were shot by their colleagues in uniform.

"And then we rush in," says Sergeant Donnery of the Mobile Task Force. "Ninety per cent of the guys out there can kick my ass, one on one. You've got to come on yelling and screaming. 'You so-and-so! You so-and-so! I'm going to kill you!' Unless the suspect is deranged and has a knife or something. In that case you might have to talk quietly. But if the guy's tough and you go in meek you get sized up very fast."

The Transit Police have three thousand officers and thirteen dogs. It is one of the biggest police forces in the United States and is separate altogether from the New York City Police, though the pay and training are exactly the same. It is so separate the men cannot speak to each other on their radios, which many Transit Police find inconvenient when chasing a suspect up the subway stairs into the street.

What about the dogs? "Dogs command respect," I was told at Transit Police Headquarters. "Think of them as a tool, like a gun or a nightstick. At the moment it's just a test program for high-crime stations, late night hours, that kind of thing."

I wondered aloud whether it would work, and the reply was, "A crime is unlikely to be committed anywhere near one of these dogs."

The Canine Squad, doing its part towards taking a bite out of crime, is housed with a branch of the Mobile Task Force at the underground junction of the LL and GG lines—Metropolitan Avenue. The bulletin board

on the plainclothesmen's side is plastered with Unit Citations and Merit Awards, and Sgt Donnery of the Task Force was recently made "Cop of the Month" for a particularly courageous set of arrests. Sgt Donnery is in charge of thirty-two plainclothesmen and two detectives. Their motto is "Soar With the Eagles". A sheaf of admiring newspaper clippings testifies to their effectiveness. As we talked, the second shift was preparing to set out for the day.

"Morale seems very high," I said. The men were joking, watching the old-man decoy spraying his hair and beard white.

"Sure, morale is high," Sgt. Donnery said. "We feel we're getting something accomplished. It isn't easy. Sometimes you have to hide in a porter's room with a mop for four days before you get your man. We dress up as porters, conductors, motormen, track-workers. The idea is to give the appearance of being workers. If there are a lot of robberies and track-workers in the same station we dress up as track-workers. We've got all the uniforms."

"Plainclothesmen" is something of a misnomer for the Task Force that has enough of a theatrical wardrobe to mount a production of *Subways Are For Sleeping*.

And yet, looking at Howard Haag and Joseph Minucci standing on the platform at Nassau Avenue on the GG line you would probably take them for a pair of physical education teachers on the way to the school gym. They look tough, but not aggressively so; they are healthy and well-built – but some of that is padding: they both wear bullet-proof vests. Underneath the ordinary clothes the men are well-armed. Each man carries a .38, a blackjack and a can of Mace. Minucci has a two-way radio.

Haag has been on the force for seventeen years, Minucci for almost seven. Neither has in that time ever fired his gun, though each has an excellent arrest-record and a pride in detection. They are funny, alert and indefatigable, and together they make most television cops look like hysterical cream-puffs. Their job is also much harder than any City cop's. I had been told repeatedly that the average City cop would refuse to work in the conditions that the Transit Police endure every day. At Nassau Avenue, Minucci told me why.

"Look at the stations! They're dirty, they're cold, they're noisy. If you fire your gun you'll kill about ten innocent people – you're trapped here. You stand here some days and the cold and the dampness creeps into your bones and you start shivering. And that smell – smell it? – it's like that all the time, and you've got to stand there and breathe it in. Bergen Street Station – the snow comes through the bars and you freeze. They call it 'The Ice-Box'. Then some days, kids recognize you – they've seen you make a collar – and they swear at you, call you names, try to get you to

react, smoke pot right under your nose. 'Here come the DT's' – that's what they call us. It's the conditions. They're awful. You have to take so much crap from these schoolkids. And your feet are killing you. So you sit down, read a newspaper, drink coffee, and then you get a rip from a shoe-fly –"

Minucci wasn't angry; he said all this in a smiling ironical way. Like Howie Haag, he enjoys his work and takes it seriously. A "shoe-fly", he explained, is a police-inspector who rides the subway looking for officers who are goldbricking – though having a coffee on a cold day hardly seemed to me like goldbricking. "We're not supposed to drink coffee," Minucci said, and he went on to define other words of the Transit Police vocabulary: "lushworker" (a person who robs drunks or sleeping passengers); "Flop Squad" (decoys who pretend to be asleep, in order to attract lushworkers); and "skell" (an unwashed person who lives in the subway).

Just then, as we were talking at Nassau, the station filled with shouting boys – big ones, anywhere from fifteen to eighteen. There were hundreds of them and, with them, came the unmistakable odor of smoldering marijuana. They were boys from Automotive High School, heading south on the GG. They stood on the platform howling and screaming and sucking smoke out of their fingers, and when the train pulled in they began fighting towards the doors.

"You might see one of these kids being a pain in the neck, writing graffiti or smoking dope or something," Howie Haag said. "And you might wonder why we don't do anything. The reason is we're looking for something serious – robbers, snatchers, assault, stuff like that."

Minucci said, "The Vandalism Squad deals with window-kickers and graffiti. Normally we don't."

Once on the train the crowd of yelling boys thinned out. I had seen this sort of activity before: boys get on the subway train and immediately begin walking – they leave the car immediately, bang through the connecting doors and walk from car to car. I asked Minucci why this was so.

"They're marking the people. See them? They're looking for an old lady near a door or something they can snatch, or a pocket they can pick. They're sizing up the situation. They're also heading for the last car. That's where they hang out on this train."

Howie said, "They want to see if we'll follow them. If we do, they'll mark us as cops."

Minucci and Haag did not follow, though at each stop they took cautious looks out of the train, using the reflections in mirrors and windows and seldom looking directly at the rowdy students from Automotive High.

"They play the doors when it's crowded," Minucci said.

Howie said, "Schoolkids can take over a train."

"Look at that old lady," Minucci said. "She's doing everything wrong."

The woman, in her late sixties, was sitting next to the door. Her wristwatch was exposed and her handbag dangled from the arm closest to the door. Minucci explained that one of the commonest subway crimes was inspired by this posture. The snatcher reached through the door from the platform and, just before the doors shut, he grabbed the bag or watch, or both; and then he was off, and the train was pulling out with the victim trapped on board.

I wondered whether the plainclothesmen would warn her. They didn't. But they watched her closely, and when she got off they escorted her in an anonymous way. The old woman never knew how well-protected she was and how any person making a move to rob her would have been hammered flat to the platform by the combined weight of Officers Minucci and Haag.

There were men on the train, drinking wine out of bottles sheathed in paper bags. Such men are everywhere in New York, propped against walls, with bottle and bag. A few hours earlier, at Myrtle-Willoughby, I had counted forty-six men hanging around outside a housing project, drinking this way. I had found their idleness and their stares and their drunken slouching a little sinister.

Minucci said, "The winos don't cause much trouble. It's the kids coming home from school. They're the majority of snatchers and robbers."

Subway crime to a large extent is schoolboy crime. So much for the Mafia. But some New York schoolboys are the very embodiment of menace.

Minucci went on, "On the LL line, on Grant Street, there's much more crime than before, because Eastern District High School relocated there. It's mostly larceny and bag snatches."

It is worth pointing out that what is called larceny in the subway might be called something else in the street. Necklace-yanking, which was very popular in the summer of 1981 (because of the high price of gold and the low necklines), was called "Robbery" in the street but "Grand Larceny" in the subway. If a so-called lushworker robs a sleeping drunk of his watch, the Transit Police have a choice not only between "Robbery" or "Grand Larceny", but if they want to bring down the crime statistics they can call it "Lost Property" – after all, the drunk did not see the thief and might well have lost it.

It was a salutary experience for me, riding through Brooklyn with Officers Minucci and Haag. Who except a man flanked by two armed plainclothesmen would travel from one end of Brooklyn to the other.

walking through housing projects and derelict areas, and waiting for hours at subway stations? It was a perverse hope of mine that we would happen upon a crime, or even be the victims of mugging-attempt. We were left alone, things were quiet, there were no arrests; but for the first time in my life I was traveling the hinterland of New York City with my head up, looking people in the eye with curiosity and lingering scrutiny and no fear. It is a shocking experience. I felt at first, with bodyguards, like Haile Selassie; and then I seemed to be looking at an alien land – I had never had the courage to gaze at it so steadily. It was a land impossible to glamorize and hard to describe. I had the feeling I was looking at the future.

Some day all cities will look like this, the way they appear from the windows of the el or the tunnels of the subway. You can see in New York how parts have become more dangerous and fiercer and other parts have softened or become richer. A large section of the Bronx has been levelled. There is no crime in that bare place. Some sections of Queens are very pretty, and blocks of Manhattan on the upper west side have become trendy. In most of Brooklyn the situation is different – haunted and awful – and you can well believe that there are people, not evil people but hopeless ones, who live and die on the dole and never know a day's work. In this patchy pattern the city will go on changing, one district breeding savages and another breeding bankers, until it is ten cities in one, some fortified, and others neutral and still others totally wild.

Propped up by the plainclothesmen, unafraid, and sticking near the subway, I saw New York in a way I had never seen it before. What surprised me most, after seeing the housing projects and the desperate idleness and the rather fierce and drugged-looking people on these derelict frontiers, was that they had not wrecked more of the subway or perhaps even destroyed it utterly.

"It's not the train that's dangerous – it's the area it passes through."

The speaker was a uniformed Transit Police Officer named John Burgois. He was in his mid-thirties and described himself as "of Hispanic origin." He had four citations. Normally he worked with the Strike Force out of Midtown Manhattan in areas considered difficult – 34th and 7th, 34th and 8th, and Times Square. Officer Burgois told me that the job of the uniformed cop is to reassure people by being an obvious presence that someone in trouble can turn to. The Transit cop in uniform also deals with loiterers and fare evaders, assists injured people and lost souls, keeps a watch on public toilets ("toilets attract a lot of crime") and as for drunks, "We ask drunks to remove themselves."

I asked Officer Burgois whether he considered his job dangerous.

"Once or twice a year I get bitten," he said. "Bites are bad. You always need a tetanus shot for human bites."

One of the largest and busiest change-areas on the subway is at Times Square. It is the junction of four lines, including the Shuttle, which operates with wonderful efficiency between Times Square and Grand Central. This, for the Christmas season, was John Burgois's beat. I followed him and for an hour I made notes, keeping track of how he was working.

4:21 – Smoker warned (smoking is forbidden in the subway, even on ramps and stairs).

4:24 – Panicky shout from another cop. There's a woman with a gun downstairs on the platform. Officer Burgois gives chase, finds the woman. She is drunk and has a toy pistol. Woman warned.

4:26 – "Which way to the Flushing Line?"

4:29 – "How do I transfer here?"

4:30 – "Is this the way to 23rd street?"

4:37 – "*Donde es Quins Plaza?*"

4:43 – "Where is the 'A' train?"
As Officer Burgois answers this question, a group of people gather around him. There are four more requests for directions. It occurs to me that, as all maps have been vandalized, the lost souls need very detailed directions.

4:59 – *Radio Call*: There is an injured passenger at a certain token booth – a gash on her ankle. Officer Burgois lets another cop attend to it.

5:02 – "Where ees the Shuffle?" asks a boy carrying an open can of beer. "Over there," Officer Burgois says, "And dispose of that can. I'm watching you."

5:10 – *Radio Call*: A man whose wallet has been stolen is at the Transit Police Cubicle on the Times Square concourse. Officer Burgois steps in to observe.

Man: What am I going to do?

Officer: The Officer-in-charge will take down the information.

Man: Are you going to catch him?

Officer: We'll prosecute if you can identify him.

Man: I only saw his back.

Officer: That's too bad.

Man: He was tall, thin, and black. I had twenty-two dollars in that wallet.

Officer: You can kiss your money goodbye. Even if we caught him he'd say, 'This is my money.'

Man: This is the first time anything like this has ever happened to me.

5:17 – Seeing Officer Burgois, a member of the public says, "There's two kids on the train downstairs snatching bags – go get them!" Officer Burgois runs and finds the boys hanging over the gate between the trains, the favorite spot for snatching bags from passengers on the platform. Officer Burgois apprehends them. The boys, named Troy and Sam, are from the Bronx. They can't remember when they were born; they seem to be about fourteen or fifteen. They deny they were snatching bags. Each boy has about $35 in his pocket. They are sullen but not at all afraid. Officer Burgois gives them a Y.D. form and says, "If I catch you again, your mother's going to pick you up from the station . . ."

5:28 – "Hey, officer, how do I get to . . .?"

At this point I stopped writing. I could see that it would be repetitious – and so it was; dreary questions, petty crime and obstinate sneaks. But no one bit Officer Burgois. He has been doing this every hour of every working day for twelve and a half years, and will go on doing it, or something very much like it, for the rest of his working life.

It costs $25 or more to go by taxi from Midtown to Kennedy Airport. For $5 it is possible to go by subway, on "The JFK Express" and the forty minutes is the same or less than a taxi. But it is rumored that this service will soon be withdrawn, because so few people use it. If that happens, there is another option – the express on the "A" line to Howard Beach, which takes under an hour and costs seventy-five cents.

There are ducks at Howard Beach, and herons farther on at Jamaica Bay, and odd watery vistas all the way from Broad Channel to Far Rockaway. The train travels on a causeway past sleepy fishing villages and woodframe houses, and it's all ducks and geese until the train reaches the far side of the bay, where the dingier bungalows and the housing projects begin. Then, roughly at Frank Avenue station, the Atlantic Ocean pounds past jetties of black rocks, not far from the tracks; and at Mott Avenue is the sprawling two-storey town of Far Rockaway, with its main street and its slap-happy architecture and its ruins. It looks like its sister-cities in Ohio and Rhode Island, with just enough trees to hide its dullness, and though part of it is in a state of decay it looks small enough to save.

That was a pleasant afternoon, when I took the train to the Rockaways. I spent this freezing week in December doing little else except riding the subway. Each morning I decided on a general direction, and then I set off, sometimes sprinting to the end of the line and making my way back slowly; or else stopping along the way and varying my route back. I went from Midtown to Jamaica Estates in Queens, and returned via Coney Island. There are white Beluga whales at the Aquarium at Coney Island, and Amazonian electric eels that produce six hundred and fifty volts (the Congo River electric catfish is punier at three hundred and fifty volts), and the African lungfish which drowns if held underwater but can live four years out of water. There are drunks and transvestites and troglodytes in the rest of out-of-season Coney, and the whole place looks as if it has been insured and burned. Though it is on Rockaway Inlet, it is a world away from Rockaway Park. It is also the terminus for six lines.

Never mind the dirt, ignore the graffiti – you can get anywhere you want in New York this way. There are two hundred and thirty route miles on the system – twice as many as the Paris Metro. The trains run all night – in London they shut down at quarter to midnight. New York's one-price token-system is the fairest and most sensible in the world; London's multi-fare structure is clumsy, ridiculous and a wasteful sop to the unions; Japan's, while just as complicated, is run by computers which spit tickets at you and then belch out your change. The Moscow Metro has grandiose chandeliers to light some stations, but the New York subway has hopeful signs, like the one at 96th and 7th Ave: "New Tunnel lighting is being installed at this area as part of a Major Rehabilitation Program. Completion is expected in the summer of 1980." They were over a year later in finishing, but at least they recognized the problem. In most of the world's subway trains, the driver's cab occupies the whole of the front of the first car. But on the New York system you can stand at the front of the train and watch the rats hurrying aside as the train careers towards the black tilting tunnel and the gleaming tracks.

The trains are always the same, but the stations differ, usually reflecting what is above-ground: Spring Street is raffish, Forest Hills smacks of refinement, Livonia Avenue on the LL looks bombed. People aspire to Bay Ridge and say they wouldn't be caught dead in East Harlem – though others are. Fort Hamilton turns into the amazing Verrazano Bridge and the "One" into a ferry landing. By the time I had reached 241st Street on the "2" I thought I had gotten to somewhere near Buffalo, but returning on the "5" and dropping slowly through the Bronx to Lexington Avenue and then to Lower Manhattan and across on the "4" to Flatbush, I had a sense of unrelieved desolation.

No one speaks on the subway except to the person on his immediate right or left, and only then if they are very old friends or else married. Avoiding the stranger's gaze is what the subway passenger does best: there is not much eye-contact below-ground. Most passengers sit bolt upright, with fixed expressions, ready for anything. A look of alertness prevails. As a New York City subway passenger you are J. Alfred Prufrock – you "prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet." Few people look relaxed or off-guard. Those new to the subway have the strangest expressions, like my English friend, who told me there was only one way to survive the subway: "You have to look as if you're the one with the meat cleaver. You have to go in with your eyes flashing."

In order to appear inconspicuous on the subway, many people read. Usually they read the *Daily News* – and a few read *Nowy Dziennik* which is the same thing; the *Times* is less popular, because it takes two hands to read it. But the Bible is very popular, along with religious tracts and the Holy Koran and Spanish copies of *The Watchtower*; lots of boys study for their Bar-Mitzvah on the "F" line in Queens. I saw *The Bragg Toxicless Diet* on the "B" and *La Pratique du Français Parlé* on the "RR". All over the system, riders read lawbooks – *The Interpretation of Contracts*, *The Law of Torts*, *Maritime Law*. The study of law is a subway preoccupation, and it is especially odd to see all these lawbooks in this lawless atmosphere – the law student sitting on the vandalized train. The police officers on the vandalized train create the same impression of incongruity. When I first saw the police they looked mournful to me, but after I got to know them I realized that most of them are not mournful at all, just dead-tired and overworked and doing a thankless job.

Not long ago, the *Daily News* ran a series about the subway called "The Doomsday Express". It was about all the spectacular catastrophes that are possible on the New York system – crashes and nuclear disasters and floods with heavy casualties. "Doomsday" has a curious appeal to a proud and vaguely religious ego. One of the conceits of modern man is his thinking that the world will end with a big bang. It is a kind of hopeful boast, really, the idea that it will take destruction on a vast scale for us to be wiped out.

It is easy to frighten people with catastrophes – much harder to convince them that decay and trivial-seeming deterioration can be inexorable. The New York subway system is wearing out, and parts of it are worn out; all of it looks threadbare. No city can survive without people to run it, and the class divisions which have distinct geographical centers in New York make the subway all the more necessary.

There is a strong political commitment to the subway, particularly among down-market Democrats. But only money can save it. To this end there is a plan afoot called "The Five-Year Capital Program" of $7.2

billion. It is the largest amount of money ever spent in a non-federal program and will involve fixing cars and buses, retiling and cleaning and lighting stations, restoring maps, windows and signs, repairing tracks and bridges – all the day-to-day things which, because they have been ignored, have given the subway a bad case of arteriosclerosis. It remains to be seen whether this program is instituted. If it isn't, New York will come even closer to looking like dear old Calcutta. There will be no big bang.

Anyway, I am a supporter of the Whimper Theory – the more so after my experience of the subway. "I pity you," people said when I told them what I was going to do. But I ended up admiring the handiwork of the system and hating the people who misused it, the way you hate kids who tear the branches off saplings. Most people who live in New York act as if they own it – it makes some people respectful and others it turns into slobs; and that is how they treat the subway.

The subway is buried and unspectacular-looking. Its worst aspects are not its crime or its dangers, but the cloudy fears it inspires, and its dirt and delay. It ought to be fixed, and very soon, because its slow death has made New York uglier and more inconvenient, and if it is not restored to health the future will be much nastier for us all.