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Fistfights, Gunshots, A Phony Nun Make Jim Dwyer's Day

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Columnist Chronicles Doings
Of New York's Subways;
The Near-Headless Rider

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NEW YORK—It's the morning rush hour, and the elevator at the 190th Street subway station has broken down once again. Molly Birnbaum, 75 years old, is steeling herself to walk 10 flights down to the train. Maria Soto gasps for breath after walking 10 flights up. "I can't take this," she says. "I'm pregnant."

To many, it's just another rush hour, another reason to move to New Jersey. But to Jim Dwyer, one of the world's few full-time subway critics, it is also another newspaper column. Mr. Dwyer, who writes for the New York edition of Long Island's Newsday, has the job every New Yorker wants: He is paid to complain about the subway.

The 190th Street elevator cost \$1.1 million, was installed—19 months late—in 1985 and broke down 67 times in its maiden year, Mr. Dwyer reported. "Sounds about right," says a Transit Authority spokesman, who later confirms it is exactly right.

Part-Time Turnstiles

For all its world-famous woes, the subway has actually made many improvements in the past few years. But not enough to keep New Yorkers from enjoying their griping about it. So three days a week, Mr. Dwyer shows how the nation's largest subway system makes the day for its 3.5 million daily fares.

He explains why a sign at Broadway Junction promised that a train would stop at the Parsons Boulevard station when there is no such station. (Someday, there will be one.) And why four turnstiles in a bank of eight at Grand Central Station were closed during a recent rush hour. (The rules say turnstiles controlled by part-time token clerks may themselves be open only part time.)

Mr. Dwyer tells why an angry conductor threw all the passengers off the D train one recent Wednesday morning this month. (A passenger had spit on him.) And he recalls what happened when a train was held at the 96th Street subway station because one passenger shot another in the jaw. (Other passengers swore at the victim for causing a delay.)

Mr. Dwyer's column, "In the Subway," is one of New York Newsday's most popular features, says Donald Forst, the paper's editor. "I can't think of anything that is more of a New York experience than the subways," he says.

Mr. Dwyer adds: "People are obsessed with the subway because it shapes your day in the morning and your mood at night. The least little thing goes wrong, and 100,000 people are delayed."

The 30-year-old columnist clearly has the right stuff for a subway griper. A lifelong New Yorker, he had already been mugged on the subway by his 12th birthday.



Jim Dwyer

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lice force of 4,000, the subway is a world unto itself. Mr. Dwyer has no trouble showing how the system affects riders' lives—and sometimes threatens to cut them short.

As the A train pulled out of the Chambers Street station one day last February, "all of Marie Loafer was inside the train—all except her head," Mr. Dwyer reported. The hapless Ms. Loafer, whose near catastrophe was attributed to a faulty door, escaped with a brief trip to the hospital for minor injuries after frantic fellow riders pulled her head, still attached to her body, into the train. But on the New York subway, door problems alone can fill any amount of white space.

Another column shared the woes of a local woman who hoped a tour of New York would lure her Texan boyfriend to move here. "The problem was the first thing we did was ride the subway," she recalled mournfully. At one station, they saw a fistfight and heard what sounded like a gunshot; at another, police officers were forcing a teen-ager to cough up a stolen neck chain he had swallowed. Soon the Texan was back home on the range, his romance thwarted by the Lexington Avenue line.

Besides documenting disaster, Mr. Dwyer shows how to survive the system. He once dug up a veteran straphanger, Kevin Reilly, who had made a videotaped study of how people grab seats successfully during rush hours. "Before the train gets to any stop, watch the other passengers for signs that they are getting ready to leave. Pocketbooks will be clutched more tightly," Mr. Reilly advised. When a seat opens up, "use a quick side-to-side movement to close in on your target," he added.

Of course, even in New York, pushiness has limits. "I don't beat out old ladies for seats," Mr. Reilly said chivalrously in his interview for Mr. Dwyer's column. He insisted he is also willing to give up his seat—"to pregnant women and people with knives."

Mr. Dwyer, who says his journalistic background includes reporting on "sleazy real-estate developers," gets much of his material from his own experience and hands-on research. In summer, he has traveled the system with a sensitive thermometer seeking the system's nadir of comfort. At 104 degrees, a Grand Central Station subway platform was his pick for the pits.

Riding the New York subways 15 to 20 hours a week has naturally made Mr. Dwyer an expert on many subjects, like crooks. "There's that phony nun again," he says of a plump woman in one station who is wearing a slightly incongruous habit. Encouraged by her pious smile, one innocent passerby after another plunks a coin in her bowl.

Mr. Dwyer knows, as people who travel by taxi and limousine never will, subway tunnels where hundreds of homeless men sleep every night, often two or three feet away from the roaring trains. And he knows why token clerks' bulletproof booths now have fire extinguishers. A few years ago, white youths poured gasoline into a booth and incinerated a black token clerk.

Column after column captures the straphangers' mood. In early January, Mr. Dwyer wrote: "The last four-day weekend of 1986 has slipped into history, and all around the city yesterday, working people launched another year of subway riding." Evelyn Kropfl in the Bronx sighed that morning as "the smell of burning metal wafted through the cars, followed by a haze of blue smoke. . . . Everything was back to normal."

Of course, the Transit Authority doesn't enjoy reading all of this. "There are a lot of positive things in the subway system, and you don't get that impression from each and every column," a spokesman