



Notes from the underground

Bette-Jane Raphael

When I was a kid growing up in Brooklyn, the subway was my friend. Hey, it got me out of Flatbush. On Saturdays, a group of us took it to Greenwich Village and pretended to be beatniks. On weekend nights, my dates and I took it to movies Downtown and to a certain hotel bar in Brooklyn Heights where nobody ever asked if we were eighteen.

Fast forward several decades: what was once a nervy teenager's shuttle to the big time has become a busy woman's *bête noire*.

Take Monday morning, Sept. 20.

7:50. Breakfast over. Husband grabs briefcase, as he does every a.m.; breezes downstairs to hail cab. (Before 8:00 the traffic's light and a cab is time-efficient. He says it gets him to his office in 10 minutes. Hey, great.)

7:51. I get my 12-year-old and his sundry paraphernalia out the door to school. Then, between bouts of pulling my baby daughter away from electrical outlets, I get dressed.

8:01. Baby-sitter late. I put my daughter on kitchen floor with a box of Cheerios for a toy. Clear away breakfast dishes.

8:17. Baby-sitter arrives, full of apolo-

gies. Her D train from Brooklyn was late. Big surprise.

8:30. I rush out the door, although my daughter starts to cry and I feel like a felon.

8:42. I plunge downstairs to the express track at 86th and Lex. A #4 train has just pulled out. It's hunkered down on the tracks beyond, blocking the number five. The #5 is approaching—at the same pace my daughter crawls. After it comes to a stop, I step, a doomed soul, into one of its cars, hallucinating words written above the doors: "abandon hope all ye who enter here."

8:50. We are still in the station; doors ajar. A disembodied voice tells us that there is an injured passenger somewhere. Congestion on the tracks. We could be here for days. If I'm not at work by 9:10, I'll have to cancel today's madcap lunch date (for Pap smear at noon), or leave the office late and trust someone else to mash up my daughter's bedtime banana exactly the way she likes it.

8:50 (and 5 seconds). I'm sprinting upstairs to try to catch the local.

8:54. I hop a local that arrives at more or less normal speed and I am heartened enough to open my newspaper. The day may be salvageable yet.

8:56. The train comes to a standstill. So

does my heart. A tiny voice comes over the P.A. system, a system clearly designed for dogs, and tells us that there is congestion on the tracks. (My husband says the real problem is that junkies are stealing the subway's copper wiring to sell for crack money, thereby crippling its signaling system. He read this one morning while on his way to work—in a cab.)

9:25. We arrive at 59th Street. I flee the five for an N or an R.

9:29. There's good karma on the N train. No slowdowns. I briefly entertain the idea of moving to Queens.

9:38. I get off at Union Square and walk the two blocks to work, arriving 45 minutes late. (Dr. Kramer and his speculum will have to wait another week.)

9:48. At the coffee machine I meet a snarling colleague. Her #2 train sat, like dead meat, in every station between Grand Army Plaza in Park Slope and 14th Street at Seventh Avenue. She too was late. Now she is behind in her work.

9:50. We vow to write a letter of complaint to the transit authority. When we get the time.

Bette-Jane Raphael is an editor at large for Family Circle Magazine.