MORE THAN DOOR OPENERS

I arrived at the New York City Personnel Office the day filing opened for the Civil Service Examination for Bus Operator and Conductor. Even though the office still had not opened for the morning, hundreds of people were already waiting in a line extending for blocks. It was July 1, 1981, and good unskilled jobs were already hard to find. Most of the people on line were young black men, but just about every kind of New Yorker was represented. I had expected that, as a woman, I would encounter hostility from fellow filers. Instead, I found camaraderie.

The written part of the test was given two months later. It was mainly reading comprehension, with a few questions about rules of the road, which as a conductor I would need only if I drove to work. There were some judgement questions, also some about bus operation. Everyone wanted to do as well as possible, since one's score determined when one would be called for the job.

Although I got only one answer wrong on the exam, it was more than a year before I was called. I was scheduled for a physical test on August 3, 1982. I was especially apprehensive about the physical. I asked every conductor I met about it during the week before the test. None could recall taking it.

On August 3, I arrived at 370 Jay Street, Transit Authority Headquarters, carrying eight pages of forms I had filled out with information including my every address and job for the past twenty years. I had my birth certificate and my social security card with me.

They did give me the physical, and it was rough, but I passed it. The next stop was a huge grey room filled with desks. The guy in a tie who went over my application noticed my education: "You won't be a conductor long. You'll be up on the thirteenth floor with the bosses."

Training began on August 10. We reported to a former elementary school in South Brooklyn.

There were about fifty of us. I was surprised that so many of us, around half, were white. There were about half a dozen women. The atmosphere was friendly, with everyone asking everyone else, "What division are you in?" "Where do you live?" "What were you doing before this?" We were now on the payroll at the starting rate of around $7.35 an hour.

The first day, we were assigned to either the "A" or the "B" Division of the subways. The "A" Division is the I.R.T.; the "B" Division is the B.M.T. and the I.N.D. Each of us was given a pass and a pass number, a badge, a flashlight, and a set of keys, and we swore an oath of office.

My title was "conductor," one of the two-person crew of a train. The other worker, who drove the train, had the title of "motorman." Until around 1980, all motormen were in fact men; by 1985, the title had been changed to "train operator," but drivers of both sexes continued to be called motormen.

The union reps came to our classroom, distributed literature, and collected membership cards. Thus we became members of Transport Workers Union Local 100.

Our instructor regaled us with numerous stories of conductors whose trains left without them, and his special delight was stories of employees getting "clipped," or hit by trains. "Don't extend your arm out the window"; then he described how a conductor had his arm torn off by a signal. I was getting the idea these calamities were weekly occurrences, which shook me up. I scribbled into my notebook:

fatality
fatality

During the question period, I asked how many transit workers were actually killed on the job each year. The instructor paused to think. "Three last year," he said finally, "only one so far this year." I knew of two during the previous year. The best known fatality was Jesse Cole, a motorman, killed in a collision. His train had rear-ended another standing just inside the tunnel entrance on the New Lots line.

The instructor concluded, "Walking the track, you should be a little afraid. It's something people never get used to and never like. And that's good." If fear was good, I reflected, I was going to be sensational.

One day, our instructor explained the signal system to us. He said that

any train that failed to stop for a red signal would be "tripped." As long as a signal was red, a little arm in front of it, called the "trip arm" would be raised. If a train passed the red signal, this arm would hit a part of the car next to the wheels called the "trip cock." This in turn would automatically activate the train's emergency brakes and stop the train. Our instructor said that if the power goes out on the signals, the trip arms come up automatically.

I came to attention. I thought of the accident that killed Cole. The power on the signals had been out. According the article I'd read in the *New York Post*, however, that section of the railroad didn't have the feature the instructor described. Instead, it claimed, there was a seventy-year-old system in which the stop arms froze in position if the power stopped.

I raised my hand, "The system you described, it's not on every part of every line, is it?"

He insisted that it was.

I continued, "What about the collision last summer that killed the motorman?"

"He didn't follow instructions, didn't heed the signals."

"But what about the trip arms?" I persisted, "Did they fail?"

The class grew restless. I suddenly felt afraid that I'd asked too many questions.

But the instructor turned more reflective and less defensive, "Everything was against the poor guy. First of all, it was a bright, sunny day. His leader was standing just inside the portal. Second, there'd been trouble on the line. The signals had been dark for days previously. Every trip all week, he'd stopped and called in that the signals were dark, and had been told to proceed according to thirty-seven Nancy" (that is, rule 37(n): "Proceed at restricted speed and with extreme caution, at a speed that will permit a stop within half your range of vision."). "He was going downgrade. The train ahead of him had experienced brake problems and had stopped. He never even saw it, because there was no brake application, and he was still in the cab. Once you dump it" (that is, apply the emergency brake), "you might as well leave the cab."

At the end of the day's notes, I scribbled in my notebook:

200 ways to get killed by a train
1,000 ways to hang a conductor

We were introduced to the world of signals and communications, auto-

matics and interlockings. The most important signal for a conductor is the conductor's indication board, a zebra-striped board about eight inches wide and at least four feet long, located in the middle of the station platform, facing the train. It is usually six or seven feet off the ground, fixed to a wall, or suspended from the ceiling. If the motorman makes his stop properly, so that the entire train is in the station, the conductor's position is directly opposite this board.

Like most riders, I'd never thought much about this aspect of train operation. I think I believed the doors would not open unless all the train's cars were in the station, rather like elevator doors that will not open between floors. A comforting notion, but not an accurate one. It sometimes happens that the motorman overshoots the station, not stopping until a door, or perhaps even a car, is facing tunnel or sky instead of platform. Sometimes it happens because the brakes fail, sometimes, because the motorman fails. Here is where the conductor really earns the paycheck. If the conductor is not directly in front of the board, the conductor is not supposed to open the doors. Of course, there are a few conductors who will throw open the doors the instant the train stops, with nary a glance to make sure they are where they should be, but there are few who have not goofed in this way once or twice.

We also learned about holding lights. These were three amber bulbs set overhead near the edge of the platform. When they were illuminated, it meant keep your doors open. But it could also have meant close your doors. It depended on where you were. If you were at a terminal, the dispatcher turned these on to tell you to close the doors and give the motorman the "proceed" signal of two long buzzes. At a "gap" station, along the route, however, the lit bulbs meant hold your doors. To make matters more complicated, the same station could be a terminal on some trips and a gap station on others. This system has been made more reasonable only recently, by adding new green bulbs at any station used as a terminal. The green ones go on to give the signal to start, and the amber ones still serve as the signal to keep the doors open.

We were taught a series of buzzer signals used for communication between motorman and conductor. Like the words "yes" and "no," they are ambiguous in meaning and change in context. A long buzz means stop. But what is to be stopped has to be inferred from experience and the situation. Two buzzes mean proceed, usually referring to whatever you have previ-

ously been told to stop. A motorman who overshoots the station is supposed to give the conductor a long, long buzz, which means don't open the doors.

When we had been measured for our uniforms, the guys from the uniform center told me, "Try one of the ladies' caps." They were soft, beretlike caps.

I said, "I want the one with the visor," the traditional flat-topped-visored one.

"Yeah, that's right. You have a choice."

A conductor came in to tell us the uniforms had arrived. Full of excitement, I went into the ladies' room to try it on. I was disappointed to find no mirror. One of the white women in my training class, who was going to "B" Division, also came in. The first thing she did was jeer at my hat.

"You're just jealous," I said.

She told me she didn't like the instructor's attitude. "It comes through by way of all his anecdotes and illustrations. Women are airheads, distracting men. He's always saying, 'And if the conductor is talking to some *chick* or something . . .' It sends me up the wall! And he picks on the ladies in the class, like when he asked you what some signal meant, and you opened the book, and he said, 'You won't have that book in the tunnel. Didn't you read the book last night?'" I shrugged it off. Most motormen and conductors were friendly to us "students."

After a couple of weeks at the old school building, we were assigned to report to the yards for "School Car," for instruction on equipment. Because the equipment for the "A" and the "B" divisions is different, the class was divided at this point. The twelve of us destined for the I.R.T., "A" Division, were sent to the yards at 239th Street in the Bronx.

Seven black people, two Hispanics, and three whites made up my class. Two of us were women. The other woman was Leah Goss. She had once worked for the Revenue Department of the T.A. Although small, she was as strong as I. She had trained as a gymnast in her teens and practiced karate. She was pursuing a master's degree in forensic psychology at John Jay College of City University.

The friendliest member of the class was Laurence Brown, a big, strong man in his middle twenties. He had been studying to become a computer programmer at City University, but dropped out and tried a variety of jobs. His last one had been orderly in a psychiatric hospital.

The yard, with its ribbons of tracks and third rails, frightened me. On my way there, on the first day, I was very much afraid that I would fall in the yard. Some people are so terrified of heights, I recalled, that they finally jump just to end the fear. Minutes later, Goss and I were picking our way among a veritable maze of third rails. We had inadvertently taken the longest way through the yards.

Motor Instructor Booth was our main School Car instructor. Unlike the instructor in Brooklyn, Booth treated the men and women in the class exactly the same, never making any special reference to the presence of women. He was a patient and attentive teacher. Booth told us, "Any monkey can open and close the doors. We're going to make more than door openers out of you. We're going to make you conductors."

Booth told us, "In a station, you must hold your doors open for ten seconds and then close with safety. There will be curved stations where you cannot see the front or the rear of the train. There, hold them open for twenty seconds. Then, you must observe the platform for three car-lengths as the train is leaving the station. Conductors don't like sticking their heads out, because people on the platform deliberately hit them. But the 'beakies'"—T.A. undercover inspectors—"look for observing the platform, especially. And it is part of your job."

"Observing the platform" is a misnomer, since you actually are supposed to have your eyes on the train. The purpose of this exercise is to make sure you are not dragging someone stuck in the doors, and someone who is stuck in the doors is not going to be on the platform. The conductor, however, usually does end up watching the people on the platform—to make sure no one is waiting to take a swing at him or her (or to check out attractive individuals on the platform).

On the last day of School Car, we went to Westchester yard. I walked into the yard and, after a while, I realized I was lost. I stopped and looked around slowly: I had walked right past the tower. Picking my way back among the tangle of tracks and third rails; I was angry at myself and nervous.

"Are you lost?"

"Why didn't you go that way?"

I looked at the switchmen who had addressed me. What kind of answer could they expect to those questions? I felt furious, but still less angry than scared and humiliated. I was scared I would be killed, literally. And I'd