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Who Jumped from the Tracks Today?

Matt Thurber

The pregnant woman lay on the sidewalk, mouth foaming. I had to step long to avoid treading on her. I'd been working in Manhattan for a year and had honed my streetwalk to a fine rhythm. Nothing stopped me on the streets. It took exactly four minutes and 37 seconds to walk the four blocks from the subway station to my office. I never stopped for red lights.

As I stepped over the pregnant woman, she heaved, thrusting her bulging midsection so high I thought she'd break her back. Her thin body didn't look like it could support the life it carried, and her brown face lacked meat, cheekbones jutting out, eyes open but switched off.

She was dying. I don't know how I knew, but life was leaking out of her, bubbling on her lips and splashing into the dirty gutter along with the rest of the city's trash.

A gurgling breath spat out of her mouth, then her body relaxed. She reached her hand towards me, long dirty fingernails trying to grip the cement sidewalk like a spider trying to climb out of a toilet bowl. A choking sound replaced her gasping breathing and her eyes rolled whites up. I debated calling an ambulance. Too late. She was dead, and I was already half a block away, the opening to the subway beckoning, its hot vinegary breath exhaling as a train compressed the air in the station, welcoming me.

I take the Path train from 34th Street to Hoboken, then New Jersey Transit all the way to Netcong. People ask where I live, Netcong, I say, It's a suburb of Saigon. It might as well be, it's in the middle of nowhere at the end of the NJ Transit line. Total commute time, including the walk to the office and the walk home, two hours and 18 minutes.

It costs 75 cents to take the Path train. Today I check carefully for transit cops and jump the turnstile. No one notices, but no one sits near me. I watch the sheep standing where the door's going to open when the train stops. They all gather in expectant clumps, and if the train operator feels like having some fun, he'll stop the train a couple of feet off of normal, and the sheep have to shift over to get in the door. When the train finally screeches to a stop, brakes shrieking, the doors puff open and the sheep burst into the train, fighting for a valuable seat.

Surprise. A lady glares at me when she sees me already sitting in the choice back window seat on the right side. I refuse to join the herd; the herd doesn't like that.

The train operator has to look out the side window to see that everyone is inside the train before he shuts the doors. So he pokes his head out and then pushes the button and the doors close without snagging arms or legs or briefcases. The operator – they all do it – leaves the window open or at least unlatched, and that's how I make my entrance. Instead of waiting with the herd or risking not getting a seat by squeezing in with the rest of them, I wait at the spot where I know the operator's window will stop. I make sure the operator isn't looking, he's usually still inside his cab setting the brakes and I jump through the window and grab a seat, just as the commuters stream in through the open doors.

Sometimes the operators latch the window, not often, so I just jump on the coupling between the trains and enter through the back door.

No one else but me does this.

On the way home, I arrive at Hoboken well before the NJ Transit train is due to leave. This guarantees me an empty two-seat row. I sit next to the aisle and take a nap. The commuters always go for another seat because it's too much of a hassle to climb over me into a window seat and they don't want to wake me up. It's rare that anyone tries to sit next to me, but if they do, I shift over to sit in the window seat. I don't care if they give me dirty looks. I do this every day, five days a week, 50 weeks a year.

My favorite time is the morning ride into Hoboken. At certain times of the year, especially in the fall, the sun rises while I'm napping. And as the train pulls into the station, the golden sunlight makes everything look beautiful, even the trashy train yard. We glide across the marshlands near the turnpike, the grass waves in a light breeze, deeply green in the early light. The corrugated steel buildings in the yard are burnished with highlights of silver and red rust, and the

wooden ties that anchor the tracks glow with earthy brown life.

The problem with arriving in the morning is that the train has 11 cars, and each one carries over 50 commuters. Our train is just one of dozens emptying into the station, sometimes at the same time, and most of the commuters are headed for the Path train. It doesn't matter whether I jump in through the window or not, sometimes in the mornings just getting to the Path train means fighting through hundreds of commuter bodies.

It took me a while to figure out how to beat the herd to the Path station.

Normally, if I get off the train like the rest of the commuters, I first have to wait for them all to get off so I can get off, then walk as fast as possible to keep up with the pack, then try to jockey for position at the Path station. Dealing with all those people adds minutes to my commute, plus it's aggravating. They think I'm one of them.

I notice that the train slows down considerably before entering the station. And it goes right by the entrance to the Path station. The conductor always opens the doors to get ready for the rush before the train stops.

Next day, I make my move. As the train slows and starts braking, I wait for the conductor to open the doors. As soon as I hear the pneumatic swish and the doors retract into the walls, I step onto the bottom step of the doorway. Checking for trains on the other tracks, I jump onto the roadbed and cross the other tracks, carefully balancing my briefcase. I make it to the Path station way ahead of anyone else.

Stupid sheep.

The newspaper said nothing about the dead epileptic pregnant woman. I figured there'd be something in the paper, maybe something about



Marc Wolens

a miracle baby rescued from the still-warm flesh of an epileptic homeless woman who'd died on the street. Well, nobody noticed her when she was alive, maybe nobody noticed her dead, and she just got picked up with the garbage.

Commuting continues to go well. I've saved \$75 so far by jumping the Path turnstiles. I don't bother checking to see if anyone is looking anymore. Nobody cares.

I feel like I live on trains.

No one ever talks to me or to each other. It's like an unwritten rule. I might sit next to the chairman of Chemical Bank one day or a janitor the next day. I'd never know. The only rule seems to be, fold your paper correctly so that you don't invade the space of the person next to you. I find it easiest to read the Daily News, even though it's trash. It's a tabloid format. The New York Times is just too wide, plus it doesn't have comics.

It started to go wrong the day the fellow next to me told me his life story. Not that I wanted to hear it. He didn't fall for my pretending-to-be-asleep ruse on the train and claimed the window seat before I had a chance to pretend to wake up and move over.

"Been riding this train for 47 years," he told me. Red faced and fleshy, he looked like the good life had been extra good to him. "When I first started riding this train, it was coal-powered, and if you didn't close your window when we went through the tunnel, everyone in your car would be black from the soot."

I wondered if he'd still get on the train every day after he retired.

Three days after the pregnant epileptic lady died, I got up as the train approached the yards, diesel chuffing across the swampy grassland, brakes grabbing and releasing, shrieking and silent as the train negotiated the switches that directed it toward its berth in the station. When

the doors breathed open, I was glad that all I could smell was diesel smoke and not steam train soot. I waited for the train to slow down and jumped. A rod slipped away as my foot landed and my ankle twisted with sudden pain. I had to sit down on the filthy roadbed and catch my breath; the train slowed and stopped; bored businessmen stared at me, not surprised, but disapproving. The man who'd ridden the trains for more than half his life smiled at me and winked.

Even limping, I still made it to the Path train waiting area before the rest of the crowd. Getting through the window was not too difficult. My ankle didn't even swell up, and it felt okay by then.

Somebody already had my seat. The people rushing on through the door glared at her, and I stared. How did she get on before me? This station is the end of the line. Unless she made a mistake and is going back again, she beat me onto the train.

I tried to avoid staring at her. She looked familiar, but not like someone I knew, more like *deja vu* familiar. You wake up and realize that all that detailed important stuff that's been happening all night was just a dream. And during the rest of the day, you keep thinking you're forgetting something. I couldn't see her too well, anyway, standing pressed on all sides by sweaty commuter bodies.

At 34th Street, I waited until she stood up. She was pregnant. It was the epileptic lady. Not dead. A high-powered woman in power skirt and tennis shoes elbowed me as I tried to follow the epileptic lady. When I finally elbowed my way onto the crowded platform, she was gone.

I didn't work much that day.

I didn't get to see if she got my seat on the way home because the Path trains stopped running. I could tell something was wrong as I

crossed Broadway. A horde of angry commuters jammed the entrance. I asked someone in front of me what was wrong. He just shook his head. I didn't need to join the sheep to find out that the trains weren't running, so I tried to figure an alternate way of getting to Hoboken. The Port Authority bus terminal would be crowded too – no use trying to catch the NJ Transit bus. I headed for the Lincoln Tunnel. The usual traffic jam fought for the right to advance a few feet at a time, five lanes squeezing into two, every foot a precious commodity. Molecules can't touch each other, but when they get too close too quickly, things happen. Cars are like molecules, except they hit each other more often than molecules do.

Desperately, I jumped in front of a decent-looking car with a white guy at the wheel. I suppose he listened to me because I looked okay, and I didn't try to squeegee his windshield. "The trains are screwed up, and I need to get across the river. Can you give me a lift?"

He was a priest and he gave me a ride all the way to the train station in Hoboken, even though it was out of his way.

What a relief. I beat all the sheep good this time. They're still bleating in Manhattan, thinking that if they jam together tighter and force their way into the station, the trains will magically begin to work. I, meanwhile, climbed onto a very empty NJ Transit train.

She sat in my window seat.

The pregnant lady.

She is black and has epilepsy and should be dead.

And she smells.

I turned around and quickly walked into another car. It was the smoking car. It stunk. I didn't care.

I called in sick next day.

The following day I rode my motorcycle to work. I remembered why I never rode my motorcycle to Manhattan. Besides people trying to run me off the road, I almost died of carbon monoxide poisoning in the tunnel, and I couldn't find cheap parking in the city. None of the parking garages took motorcycles. I finally parked illegally and chained the motorcycle to a lamppost so that the police wouldn't tow it away.

I had to take the train to work.

I saw her again on the Path train, sitting in my choice seat before I could get there. This time, I sat next to her. I stared at her. Skinny, with prominent cheekbones, pockmarked skin, stained teeth. The baby part protruded like a big tumor, like it didn't belong there but was going along for the ride anyway. I finally got the courage to ask her, "What are you doing?"

She smiled and licked a fleck of foam off her thin lips. And winked.

I felt like I didn't exist any more.

New York Daily News, Page 15 –

Commuters in the 34th Street Path station told police that they saw no one push Steve Jones, an editor for Business Travel Weekly, who was killed when he fell in front of the 5:10 pm train. "He didn't have a chance," a police spokesman told the News. "It appears he bounced off the front of the train then was sucked under the wheels."

Emergency crews responded immediately, and Jones was pronounced dead on arrival at Doctor's Hospital at 5:25 pm.

New York Daily News, page 1 – Path trains resume normal services after jumper interrupts rush-hour commute. (See related story, photos on page 15.)