

**2 P.M.**  
**MAY 12**  
**A RIVER**  
**OF**  
**JEWELS**

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*These days, the black coats worn by many of the Hasidim in the Diamond District are bulletproof. Beneath them are vests and secret pockets where fortunes are carried. Of all the thousands of people who work in the diamond trade on 47th Street in Manhattan—Indians, Venezuelans, Italians, and Asians—the Hasidim are the most recognizable.*

*The street swarms with runners and loan sharks, cops on horseback and millionaires in rags, all of them rushing from Fifth to Sixth Avenues and back again, as though they were riding the waves in an aquarium tank.*

*In a swirling, bobbing mass is a few hundred million dollars in diamonds and gems, walked and subway'ed around Manhattan six days a week: "You can't believe the extent to which people are going up that street with hundreds of thousands in gems—in nothing but white envelopes," said Michael Berne, of a security company called Fairfax Consultants.*

*"Something happens on the street, we shut it down," said Jeffrey Staub, who runs a business at the corner of 47th and Sixth. "The person will just start shouting for help, and*

*someone will trip the guy making trouble and the rest of us will bury him."*

*Some years back, when there was a particularly vicious and public robbery, then-Brooklyn District Attorney Eugene Gold explained how diamonds get to 47th Street. They arrived at a customs building on Varick Street in lower Manhattan, said Gold, and the practice called for up to \$100,000 in goods to be transported on the subway; above that, a taxi was hailed, very casually.*

*For those who work 47th Street, it is a safe, comfortable sleeve of the city where people can scratch off a piece of the treasures buried inside their clothes. The block is protected by its own earnest chaos.*

*"To the outside, it just looks like a bunch of people running wild in a one-block area," said a manager for one of the biggest stone dealers in the world. "Guys may be walking down the block with several hundred thousand dollars of merchandise in their pockets."*

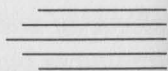
*So how do they stay alive?*

*"They may look like they are alone as they go from building to building. They're not. They take a different person, they vary the route. They make the deposits one day, not another. It is a compulsively paranoid business."*

*Today is a Friday, and by 2:00 P.M., the block begins to lose a few volts of its vigor; the Jewish Sabbath begins at sundown, and the Hasidic dealers are now dropping their diamonds in vaults for the weekend, if they are big-timers, or slipping them deeper into their clothing if they are not.*

*Then they will board the subway at the Sixth Avenue end of 47th Street and ride home to Crown Heights, in time for the chores that must be done before the candles are lit.*

**3 P.M., On the Road and in the Subway:**  
**Tom Thomasevich**



Tom is spinning along the highway to Long Island and glances at the clock. He's away, and not a moment too soon.

The three o'clock school bell is a call to arms, a trumpet sounding the armies of the afternoon into the clash.

Time to get paid.

Onto the Broadway subway swarms one group, seventeen in number, not quite evenly divided among boys and girls, kicking out windows, punching on passengers for their jewelry or their feebleness.

One young man has neither feebleness nor money nor chains worth having. Teenagers at each limb, he is dragged to the end of the car, where the struggle is to throw him out the door and onto the tracks.

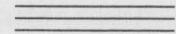
"Hey, let him go," hollers a man who has seen quite enough.

The victim is dropped to the floor, forgotten, and attention turns to this Subway Samaritan.

From the pocket of one of the schoolboys comes a knife, a dazzling, awesome, nine-inch blade of a knife found only in the pockets of crazed murderers and occult freaks. The young scholar carrying it hands it off to a companion with these instructions:

"Yo, man. That guy seen you. Do him."

The Samaritan is stalked, in a sputtering frenzy of teen hormones and mob terror, until one of the kids grabs the knife wielder and orders the Samaritan off the train.



Payday, the kids called the afternoon hours when they prowled the trains. In 1987, the number of kids aged fifteen and under arrested in the subway system was 498. The final tally for 1989 was 1,054.

Toward the end of the decade, the subways saw more and more robberies, and they were being done by kids: arrests in 1989 for robberies by juveniles nearly tripled over 1987. And kids were being charged with a greater share of the robberies: in 1987, youngsters accounted for 266 of the 2,051 arrests for robbery, or 12.9 percent. By 1989, juveniles were a quarter of all robbery arrests—784 of 3,146.

Twice a year, transit workers pick the shift and jobs they will take. For Tom Thomasevich, who had risen from bed hours before dawn, this means that now, just before school lets out, he will be calling it a day.

Not only adults were terrorized: kids, the primary targets of the gangs, transfer out of desirable Manhattan schools to avoid train rides from outer boroughs.

Recreational crime, says a transit police official. Nearly half the cases brought to juvenile justice courts aren't prosecuted—just lost and forgotten.

For all that, as the ranks of the city's police departments swelled during the last half of the 1980s, New York saw and felt crime rise off its statistical charts, to the point where the press could pick from among five or six murders for the outrage *du jour*. More cops and more jails and more judges had not stopped the growth of crime. Getting tough, by itself, wasn't working. And the fear of crime had crawled under everyone's skin.

And by 2:30, Tom Thomasevich wants nothing else but to get the hell home to Ronkonkoma.

**3:15 P.M., Lexington Avenue, Manhattan:**  
**Scene**

A young man has an empty car to himself. He is dressed to a prosperous turn in a soft, determinedly shapeless jacket. Good shoes. Across his pleated lap lies a big, fat fashion magazine. He has a sharp eye, and not only for his own threads: he warily inspects the two people who walk into his car. One man sits next to the conductor's booth; another plants himself across the aisle and opens a newspaper. They have no interest in him.

As the No. 6 train sits at Brooklyn Bridge, idling until its push up Lexington Avenue, the young man seems to be waiting, not only with a watchful eye, but with a careful ear.

*Ding dong.*

Ahh, the chimes of the closing doors.

He immediately opens a yellow envelope and pours the white powder onto the back of the fashion magazine, which is propped on his tightly clasped knees. He taps the pointed corner of the envelope, and a few more powdery wisps run onto the back of the magazine.

With the side of a credit card, he chops and sifts the powder, exploding tiny lumps into little white smithereens.

In a meticulous hand, he draws three keen lines in the powder. A \$5 bill is rolled into a tight tube. The entire operation takes less than a minute. He bends his head so an end of the tube is at his nostril and in three short snuffles makes a single line vanish. By now, the train has reached Canal Street, and the personnel composition of the car does not change. The man with the newspaper is peeking over the top of the sports pages at the man across the aisle.

*Ding dong.*

The doors close, and now the train gallops along toward Spring Street. Into the other nostril goes the \$5-bill tube, like the hose on a vacuum cleaner. *Sniff-iff-iff-iff-iff.* Another line gone.

In a violent breach of subway etiquette, the man with the newspaper is staring, frankly, but the magazine man is too involved with the white geometry to gouge out the intruding eyeballs.

At Spring Street, again, no one interrupts by getting on or off. *Ding dong.* On the way to Bleeker Street, the train rocks and shakes a bit. The third and final powder line breaks apart into spidery

little veins. The magazine man makes a noise of disgust with his mouth, as if he is going to write a letter to the MTA about these trains.

He straightens out the line, but by now, the train is pulling into Bleeker, and he must wait, impatiently, to inspect the entering passengers.

Only one. Another man who cares about clothes: he is wearing three or four jackets and two or three pairs of pants and has something to say: "Excuse me ladies and gentlemen," he begins. "My full time job is . . ."

*Ding dong,* chime the doors. The magazine man bends over and snorts the last line. ". . . being homeless," says the man in three coats. "I work at it twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Any help you could give me would be gratefully appreciated."

The magazine man unrolls the \$5 bill and tries to smooth it out. It keeps curling back. "Help me out, sir?" asks the man with the three jackets.

The magazine man reaches into his jacket and coins jingle as he fishes through his pockets for a quarter. "Fuck the change!" hollers the man with the three jackets. "Gimme the five. You just gonna blow it up your nose anyway." The train now has arrived at Astor Place and opened up. The man with the newspaper steps out toward the stairs. He can hear the doors on the No. 6 train closing, and the theme music of the subways being played yet again:

*Ding dong!*

**3:25 P.M., 125th Street:**  
**Rene Ruiz**

The train is called the No. 1 because it incorporated the first line in the city, starting way down at the foot of Manhattan Island, and reaching all the way into the northern reaches of the Bronx, past a village then called Kingsbridge. It's the Broadway local: a lurching journey along the spine of the city.

For most of its trip, it runs underground. But just after passing Columbia University at 116th Street, the No. 1 breaks outside. A

fault in the Manhattan rock base runs across the city at 125th Street, sneaking out of the Hudson River. The subway does not climb here; the land along the geological fault is nearly at sea level. To have stayed underground after 116th Street would have required the tracks to have plunged down nearly 100 feet, into the uncertain soil of the fault, and then climb back ten stories into the 137th Street station. No thank you. The engineers chose caution and hung a bridge across 125th Street.

The daylight is a landmark for Rene. Since 1970, the city has given travel training to six thousand young retarded people, "who have no conception of 'alone,' or 'danger,' or even what an intersection is," Carol Polsky once wrote. It "is rather like teaching reality as a second language." Wicked New York. Where nothing works. Where no one works anything—except miracles of chance-taking.

The train slips back into a tunnel for the 137th Street station, the stop for another great landmark, City College of New York. Its buildings are hewn from Manhattan schist that was excavated when the Broadway line was dug.

Seven more stops. 145th, 157th. At 168th Street, Rene looks out the window. Men are lying on unfolded cardboard boxes. 181st Street, 191st. Here the subway tunnels through Fort George Hill, the most difficult digging of that first line. Deep mining techniques were required, and workers discovered mastodon bones buried in the earth. The cost of running underground forever, or to the end of the line, was daunting for the people in charge. Put it on an elevated once you get out of Fort George, they ordered the IRT company. Dyckman Street, named for the old family that had farmland hereabouts before the Revolution. Their old fieldstone homestead is a few blocks away, the only eighteenth-century farmhouse still standing in Manhattan.

One more. 207th Street. No token clerk here. Not enough people. Rene is people enough. He is waiting when the conductor pushes the buttons, opens the doors. He steps out, onto the platform, into the fresh air. From the window at 130 Post Avenue, Grismelda Ruiz is leaning to see if he has gotten off, but the view is obstructed.

She watches the street for the trickle of riders, held for the moment of their journey by the No. 1 train, then slipping back into their neighborhood. She sees the men and the women and the normal kids streaming every which way.

She sees them all and then she sees her own.

He looks up at Mama leaning in the windowsill, Mama with the sparkling eyes.

Wave.

He waves.