



Mark Crimmins

PADANG BESAR

The train is a mini United Nations. The Japanese student who could not stop laughing when he heard you calling your passport your *piss pot*. The Norwegian couple who bonded with him because they all liked to eat whales, the three of them eventually calling themselves *The Evil Whale Eaters Club*. The Kiwis who described the best Southern Alps cycling routes, performed the All Blacks haka dance, and had NZ shaved into the hair on the sides of their heads. The Javanese girl from Singapore whose mother was Sumatran and whose father was Sri Lankan. The Ugandan who convinced you his strange way of playing was actually a distinct form of African chess. The guy from Shanghai whose dad took him to see *The Triumph of the Will* when he was four (so he could learn the evils of fascism young) but who cried because they sat in the front row and all the German soldiers seemed to him like giants who were going to march right out of the screen and crush his little head, so that—as he explained—his Dad’s plan actually worked. The Ottawa lawyers—one describing himself as Bahraini, the other claiming to be Carribanesanadian—who told you to go and get your passport off the train conductor who collected them (the passports), assuring you—the lawyers—that your passport was your property and that you didn’t ever have to give it to anybody other than an immigration officer at an international border. The panicked French guy on the platform who worked his way up the train sticking his head in a succession of windows and asking, increasingly urgently: *C’est le train Bangkok? C’est le train Bangkok? C’est le train*

Bangkok? Allo? Allo? C'est le train Bangkok? C'est le train Bangkok? C'est le train Bangkok? The Thai women who sold delicious foods from huge baskets they carried on their heads, coming to the open windows of the train and selling meals to the passengers who were lucky enough to lean out and buy them. The Malaysian conductor who was astounded that you had been permitted to sit on the train steps for the Thai portion of your journey, hanging off the train while it was in motion, and who insists, categorically, that this madness must stop now that you are in Malaysia, where such things are simply not permitted, and who, when you ask him why not, says, *Oh my God—there is no saying what terrible things might happen!* The laissez faire Thai conductor who let you sit on the steps of the train all the way down the Malay Peninsula, enabling you to watch—unframed by a window—the glorious spectacle of the undulating Siamese countryside: families sitting by the tracks and waving, children playing in streams, Thai temples with their stupas and flaming gables, water buffalo laboring in harness, sunset, dusk, dawn, the wreckage of derailed trains, pig-tailed macaques leaping from treetop to treetop, lazy rivers with muddy banks, marching columns of armed soldiers singing, farmers in straw hats toiling in rice paddies, monks in saffron robes hugging silver bowls and drifting along dusty country lanes, the great ever-unfolding deliciously-slowly-passing panorama of southern Thai life. And the Indian girl who sat next to you all the way from Kuala Lumpur to the border, teaching you about the pantheon of Hindu gods—Kali being the one she lingered over longest—right up until she stepped off the train at Padang Besar, set down her little suitcase, turned around, and waved to you in the sun as the train started rolling forward, the bangles on her arm tinkling as they caught the light.

--Toronto, Canada

