

THE GREAT RAILWAY BAZAAR

By Train
Through Asia

Paul Theroux



The Great Railway Bazaar

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HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY BOSTON

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Theroux, Paul. The great railway bazaar.

1. Asia—Description and travel—1951—

2. Railroads—Asia. 3. Theroux, Paul. I. Title.

DS10.T43 915'.04'42 75-9981

ISBN 0-395-20708-8

Printed in the United States of America

C 10

Portions of this book have appeared in
The Atlantic and *Oui*.

***The
Great
Railway
Bazaar***

ALSO BY PAUL THEROUX

Fiction

WALDO

FONG AND THE INDIANS

GIRLS AT PLAY

JUNGLE LOVERS

SINNING WITH ANNIE

SAINT JACK

THE BLACK HOUSE

Criticism

V. S. NAIPAUL

*“To the legion of the lost ones, to the cohort
of the damned,
To my brethren in their sorrow overseas . . .”*

*And to my brothers and sisters,
namely Eugene, Alexander, Ann-Marie,
Mary, Joseph, and Peter,
with love*

—

Marian had just caught the far-off sound of the train. She looked eagerly, and in a few moments saw it approaching. The front of the engine blackened nearer and nearer, coming on with a dread force and speed. A blinding rush, and there burst against the bridge a great volley of sunlit steam. Milvain and his companion ran to the opposite parapet, but already the whole train had emerged, and in a few seconds it had disappeared round a sharp curve. The leafy branches that grew out over the line swayed violently backwards and forwards in the perturbed air.

“If I were ten years younger,” said Jasper, laughing, “I should say that was jolly! It inspirits me. It makes me eager to go back and plunge into the fight again.”

— George Gissing, *New Grub Street*

frseeeeeeeffronnnng train somewhere whistling the strength those engines have in them like big giants and the water rolling all over and out of them all sides like the end of Loves old sweet sonnnng the poor men that have to be out all the night from their wives and families in those roasting engines

— James Joyce, *Ulysses*

. . . the first condition of right thought is right sensation — the first condition of understanding a foreign country is to smell it . . .

— T. S. Eliot, “Rudyard Kipling”

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The 15:30—London to Paris

EVER SINCE CHILDHOOD, when I lived within earshot of the Boston and Maine, I have seldom heard a train go by and not wished I was on it. Those whistles sing bewitchment: railways are irresistible bazaars, snaking along perfectly level no matter what the landscape, improving your mood with speed, and never upsetting your drink. The train can reassure you in awful places — a far cry from the anxious sweats of doom airplanes inspire, or the nauseating gas-sickness of the long-distance bus, or the paralysis that afflicts the car passenger. If a train is large and comfortable you don't even need a destination; a corner seat is enough, and you can be one of those travelers who stay in motion, straddling the tracks, and never arrive or feel they ought to — like that lucky man who lives on Italian Railways because he is retired and has a free pass. Better to go first class than to arrive, or, as the English novelist Michael Frayn once rephrased McLuhan: "the journey is the goal." But I had chosen Asia, and when I remembered it was half a world away I was only glad.

Then Asia was out the window, and I was carried through it on these eastbound expresses marveling as much at the bazaar within the train as the ones we whistled past. Anything is possible on a train: a great meal, a binge, a visit from card players, an intrigue, a good night's sleep, and strangers' monologues framed like Russian short stories. It was my intention to board every train that chugged into view from Victoria Station in London to Tokyo Central; to take the branch line to Simla, the spur through the Khyber Pass, and

the chord line that links Indian Railways with those in Ceylon; the Mandalay Express, the Malaysian Golden Arrow, the locals in Vietnam, and the trains with bewitching names, the Orient Express, the North Star, the Trans-Siberian.

I sought trains; I found passengers.



The first was Duffill. I remember him because his name later became a verb — Molesworth's, then mine. He was just ahead of me in the line at Platform 7 at Victoria, "Continental Departures." He was old and his clothes were far too big for him, so he might have left in a hurry and grabbed the wrong clothes, or perhaps he'd just come out of the hospital. He walked treading his trouser cuffs to rags and carried many oddly shaped parcels wrapped in string and brown paper — more the luggage of an incautiously busy bomber than of an intrepid traveler. The tags were fluttering in the draft from the track, and each gave his name as *R. Duffill* and his address as *Splendid Palas Hotel, Istanbul*. We would be traveling together. A satirical widow in a severe veil might have been more welcome, and if her satchel was full of gin and an inheritance, so much the better. But there was no widow; there were hikers, returning Continentals with Harrods shopping bags, salesmen, French girls with sour friends, and gray-haired English couples who appeared to be embarking, with armloads of novels, on expensive literary adulteries. None would get farther than Ljubljana. Duffill was for Istanbul — I wondered what his excuse was. I was doing a bunk, myself. I hadn't nailed my colors to the mast; I had no job — no one would notice me falling silent, kissing my wife, and boarding the 15:30 alone.

The train was rumbling through Clapham. I decided that travel was flight and pursuit in equal parts, but by the time we had left the brick terraces and coal yards and the narrow back gardens of the South London suburbs and were passing Dulwich College's playing fields — children lazily exercising in neckties — I was tuned to the motion of the train and had

forgotten the newspaper billboards I had been reading all morning: **BABY KRISTEN: WOMAN TO BE CHARGED** and **PLAN TO FREE STAB GIRL AGED NINE** — none lettered **NOVELIST VANISHES**, and just as well. Then, past a row of semidetached houses, we entered a tunnel, and after traveling a minute in complete darkness we were shot wonderfully into a new setting, open meadows, cows cropping grass, farmers haying in blue jackets. We had surfaced from London, a gray sodden city that lay underground. At Sevenoaks there was another tunnel, another glimpse of the pastoral, fields of pawing horses, some kneeling sheep, crows on an oasthouse, and a swift sight of a settlement of prefab houses out one window. Out the other window, a Jacobean farmhouse and more cows. That is England: the suburbs overlap the farms. At several level crossings the country lanes were choked with cars, backed up for a hundred yards. The train passengers were gloating vindictively at the traffic and seemed to be murmuring, "Stop, you bitches!"

The sky was old. Schoolboys in dark blue blazers, carrying cricket bats and school bags, their socks falling down, were smirking on the platform at Tonbridge. We raced by them, taking their smirks away. We didn't stop, not even at the larger stations. These I contemplated from the dining car over a sloshing carton of tea, while Mr. Duffill, similarly hunched, kept an eye on his parcels and stirred his tea with a doctor's tongue depressor. Past the hopfields that give Kent a Mediterranean tangle in September; past a Gypsy camp, fourteen battered caravans, each one with its own indestructible pile of rubbish just outside the front door; past a farm and, forty feet away, the perimeter of a housing estate with lots of interesting clothes on the line: plus fours, long johns, snapping black brassieres, the pennants of bonnets and socks, all forming an elaborate message, like signal flags on the distressed convoy of those houses.

The fact that we didn't stop gave this English train an air of hurrying purpose. We sped to the coast for the Channel crossing. But it was a false drama. Duffill, at his pitching table, ordered a second cup of tea. The black train yards of Ashford

loomed and tumbled past, and we were crossing the hummocky grass of Romney Marsh, headed towards Folkestone. By then I had left England behind. So had the other passengers. I returned to my compartment to hear Italians raising their voices, perhaps deriving courage from the assurance that we were at the edge of England. Some Nigerians, who until that moment had been only a quartet of bobbing headgear — two Homburgs, a turban, and a beehive wig — became vocal in Yoruba, seeming to spell out each word they used, smacking their lips when they completed a syllable. Each passenger migrated to his own language, leaving the British muttering and averting their eyes.

"Oh, look," said a woman, unfolding a handkerchief on her lap.

"It's so neat and orderly," said the man at the window.

"Fresh flowers." The woman gently bandaged her nose with the handkerchief and snorted on one side, then the other.

The man said, "War Graves Commission takes care of them."

"They do a lovely job."

A small figure carrying paper parcels bound with string walked down the passage, his elbows thumping the corridor window. Duffill.

The Nigerian lady leaned over and read the station sign: "Fockystoon." Her mispronunciation was like sarcasm and she looked as unimpressed as Trollope's Lady Glencora ("there was nothing she wanted so much as to see Folkestone").

The wind, rising from the harbor, which was lead gray and pimpled with drizzle, blew into my eyes. I was squinting with the cold I had caught when the first September chill hit London and roused in me visions of palm trees and the rosy heat of Ceylon. That cold made leaving all the easier; leaving was a cure: "Have you tried aspirin?" "No, I think I'll go to India." I carried my bags into the ferry and made for the bar. Two elderly men stood there. One was tapping a florin on the counter, trying to get the barman's attention.

"Reggie's got awfully small," said the first man.

"Do you think so?" said the second.

"I'm afraid I do. Awfully small. His clothes don't fit him."

"He was never a big man."

"I know that. But have you seen him?"

"No. Godfrey said he'd been sick."

"I'd say *very* sick."

"Getting old, poor chap."

"And awfully small."

Duffill came over. He might have been the person under discussion. But he wasn't: the elderly gentlemen ignored him. Duffill had that uneasy look of a man who has left his parcels elsewhere, which is also the look of a man who thinks he's being followed. His oversized clothes made him seem frail. A mouse gray gabardine coat slumped in folds from his shoulders, the cuffs so long, they reached to his fingertips and answered the length of his trampled trousers. He smelled of bread crusts. He still wore his tweed cap, and he too was fighting a cold. His shoes were interesting, the all-purpose brogans country people wear. Although I could not place his accent — he was asking the barman for cider — there was something else of the provinces about him, a stubborn frugality in his serviceable clothes, which is shabbiness in a Londoner's. He could tell you where he bought that cap and coat, and for how much, and how long those shoes had lasted. A few minutes later I passed by him in a corner of the lounge and saw that he had opened one of his parcels. A knife, a length of French bread, a tube of mustard, and discs of bright red salami were spread before him. Lost in thought, he slowly chewed his sandwich.

The station at Calais was dark, but the Paris Express was floodlit. I was comforted. Lady Glencora says to her friend, "We can get to the Kurds, Alice, without getting into a packet again. That, to my way of thinking, is the great comfort of the Continent." Well, then, to Paris, and the Orient Express, and the Kurds. I boarded and, finding my compartment oppressively full, went to the dining car for a drink. A waiter showed me to a table where a man and woman were tearing their bread rolls apart but not eating them. I tried to order wine. The

waiters, hurrying back and forth with trays, ignored my pleading face. The train started up; I looked out the window, and when I turned back to the table I saw that I had been served with a piece of burned fish. The roll-shredding couple explained that I'd have to ask the wine waiter. I looked for him, was served the second course, then saw him and ordered.

"Angus was saying in the *Times* that he did research," the man said. "It just doesn't make sense."

"I suppose Angus has to do research," said the woman.

"Angus Wilson?" I said.

The man and woman looked at me. The woman was smiling, but the man gave me a rather unfriendly stare. He said, "Graham Greene wouldn't have to do research."

"Why not?" I said.

The man sighed. He said, "He'd know it already."

"I wish I could agree with you," I said. "But I read *As If By Magic* and I say to myself, 'Now there's a real agronomist!' Then I read *The Honorary Consul* and the thirty-year-old doctor sounds an awful lot like a seventy-year-old novelist. Mind you, I think it's a good novel. I think you should read it. Wine?"

"No, thank you," said the woman.

"Graham sent me a copy," said the man. He spoke to the woman. "*Affectionately, Graham*. That's what he wrote. It's in my bag."

"He's a lovely man," said the woman. "I always like seeing Graham."

There was a long silence. The dining car rocked the cruets and sauce bottles, the dessert was served with coffee. I had finished my half-bottle of wine and was anxious for another, but the waiters were again busy, reeling past the tables with trays, collecting dirty plates.

"I love trains," said the woman. "Did you know the next carriage on is going to be attached to the Orient Express?"

"Yes," I said. "As a matter of fact —"

"Ridiculous," said the man, addressing the small penciled square of paper the waiter had given him. He loaded the saucer with money and led the woman away without another glance at me.

My own meal came to forty-five francs, which I estimated to be about ten dollars. I was horrified, but I had my small revenge. Back in my compartment I realized I had left my newspaper on the table in the dining car. I went back for it, but just as I put my hand on it, the waiter said, "*Qu'est-ce que vous faites?*"

"This is my paper," I snapped.

"*C'est votre place, cela?*"

"Of course."

"*Eh bien alors, qu'est-ce que vous avez mangé?*" He seemed to be enjoying the subtlety of his cross-examination.

I said, "Burned fish. A tiny portion of roast beef. *Courgettes*, burned and soggy, cold potatoes, stale bread, and for this I was charged forty-five, I repeat, *forty-five* —"

He let me have my paper.

At the Gare du Nord my car was shunted onto a different engine. Duffill and I watched this being done from the platform and then we boarded. It took him a long time to heave himself up, and he panted with effort on the landing. He was still standing there, gasping, as we pulled out of the station for our twenty-minute trip to the Gare de Lyon to meet the rest of the Direct-Orient Express. It was after eleven, and most of the apartment blocks were in darkness. But in one bright window there was a dinner party ending, like a painting of a city interior, hung and illuminated in the shadowy gallery of rooftops and balconies. The train passed and printed the window on my eye: two men and two women around a table on which there were three wine bottles, the remains of a large meal, coffee cups, a raided bowl of fruit. All the props, and the men in shirt sleeves, spoke of amiable intimacy, the sad comedy of a reunion of friends. Jean and Marie had been away. Jean was smiling, preparing to clown, and had pulled one of those confounded French faces. He waved his hand back and forth and said, "She got up on the table like a madwoman and began shaking it at me like this. Incredible! I said to Marie, 'The Picards will never believe this!' This is the truth. And then she —"

The train made its slow circuit of Paris, weaving among the

dark buildings and shrieking *frseeeeeeeffronnnng* into the ears of sleeping women. The Gare de Lyon was alive, with that midnight glamour of bright lights and smoking engines, and across the gleaming tracks the ribbed canvas over one particular train turned it into a caterpillar about to set off and chew a path through France. On the platform arriving passengers were yawning, shambling with fatigue. The porters leaned on luggage carriers and watched people struggling with suitcases. Our car met, and coupled with, the rest of the Direct-Orient Express; that bump slid the compartment doors open and threw me forward into the lap of the lady opposite, surprising her from sleep.