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GHOST TRAIN TO THE EASTERN STAR

ON THE TRACKS OF THE GREAT RAILWAY BAZAAR

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NIGHT TRAIN TO SINGAPORE

THE LANKAWI EXPRESS

WHEN THE TRAIN pulled into the station at Butterworth I felt ill — the *laksa,* I guessed. Greedy for the taste of it, I'd had seconds. I had not stopped at Penang on my previous trip. I might have passed by this time too, except that my guts were griping. I was dizzy and couldn't bear the thought of onward travel. So, bent double, I took the ferry across the harbor to Georgetown, got a taxi to the Eastern and Oriental Hotel, and curled into a ball, rising only to rehydrate with glasses of water fortified by a pinch of salt and a pinch of sugar. I felt so ghastly the next day I took a pill; when that didn't work I went to a Chinese herbalist down a side lane and got a potion. I stayed in bed. After three months of travel I was seriously laid low.

All that second night I heard loud music from the nearby streets — the bars, the clubs, the narrow lanes of massage parlors and neon signs. I had been sick only a few times on this trip, but this was by far the worst — cramps and nausea. My usual way of dealing with illness was to suspend all activity, find a good hotel, and sleep it off — eat nothing, keep drinking salted water. I did so here at the E & O.

Eventually I felt well enough to shuffle around the town on the sea legs of convalescence. With its colonial houses and covered walkways, its monsoon drains and narrow Chinese shops stacked high with goods, Georgetown (named for King George III) was a marvel of preservation. It looked much like the Singapore where I had worked in the 1960s. I had been to Georgetown once before, in 1970, on my way to a remote fishing village up the coast, Batu Ferringhi (Foreigner's Rock). Out of curiosity I went there again, in a taxi, and found that it had become a

corniche of high-rise hotels and condominiums, luxury homes, big resorts, and dreary tenements crowding the beachfront, a place of unparalleled ugliness.

Chandra, the taxi driver, was of Tamil extraction but born in Penang. He had never been to India. I asked him why. He said, "Too many people." He was married to a Chinese woman who had been a childhood neighbor and friend. They had two children. His sense of hospitality was such that he invited me to his house for tea, and when I commented on his addressing his wife in Tamil, he said, "We always speak Tamil at home." His wife was a Hokkien-speaker, and of course the national language was Malay, and he was fluent in English and knew "a bit of German. *Danke. Guten morgen.*"

Many Germans had second homes here, he said. But mainly it was a resort for Arabs.

"Saudis — they have the money," he said. "But also Jordanians and Syrians. Their country is too hot — they have to leave, but they don't want to go to Europe or America. They know people hate them there. Americans say they're terrorists. They get double-checked at airports. And they don't want to be in a country where the women have to remove veil."

"They wear veils here?" It seemed odd in a country where Muslim women were gracefully dressed in sarongs and tight-fitting blouses.

"The women eat like this," Chandra said, and gestured, lifting an imaginary veil and sipping an imaginary drink. "No man can look at their wife. Only them."

"Lots of Arabs?"

"Thousands. Many thousands. Big planes, full of families — women in black, men in suits. Children. They can be very rude. They break things at the hotels and they fight when we ask them to pay. And rude when they talk to you. Sometimes they say to me, 'We go'" — and Chandra flapped his arms — "because they can't say 'airport.'"

"So what do you think?"

"I think if you're a good person, you don't need religion."

"They've got a lot of religion."

"They pray five times a day, and still they are terrible. So rude!"

Chandra took me to Penang's botanical garden so I could see the varieties of bamboo. I debated whether to look up the procuress Lily, but I was still convalescing. I felt too fragile to roam the streets at night. I

found an old paperback of *The Great Railway Bazaar* in a Georgetown bookstore and read some of it and thought: I am not that man anymore, nor do these places exist anymore. I was impatient to get to Singapore, so I bought a ticket and returned to Butterworth on the ferry and got a night train to Kuala Lumpur, in a compartment that was jammed with so many cardboard boxes there was hardly room for me. My fellow traveler was a Malay salesman for a firm dealing in table fans.

"Samples-lah!" he explained, but he was gone, with his boxes, when I woke up.

Even in the dim early morning I could see that Kuala Lumpur's main railway station was a marvel of good design, with marble floors, efficient clerks, and lots of trains to choose from. Any city in America would have been proud to have such a station. I bought a ticket on a later train to Singapore so that I could have my noodles here.

Pulling away from Kuala Lumpur, I could see the city like a mirage hovering at treetop level, a capriccio of spires — jungle and palms in the foreground, the otherworldly skyscrapers showing in the mist, silvery in all the green, a fantasy skyline. That sight was a reminder that Malaysia was an oil-producing nation; the beautiful railway station and this train were more proof of the country's prosperity.

In the seven hours through the jungles of southern Malaysia, the kampongs of graceful houses, the palm-oil plantations, I wrote more of my Indian story. The verdant zone was restful and reassuring. Approaching Johore Bahru and the border, I saw that all I had written in my notebook was *jungle — palms — muddy river.*

Welcome to Singapore was the greeting at Woodlands Station, the customs post, and under it a warning: *The Penalty for Drugs Is Death.*

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LITTLE TINKY-WINKY SINGAPORE was unrecognizable, the most transformed of any city I had ever known in my life, a place twisted into something entirely new; and the people, too, like hothouse flowers that are forced to grow in artificial light, producing strange blooms and even stranger fruit. But I was disarmed by the feline good looks of Singapore women, soft, pale, kittenish girls with skinny arms and fragile bones; vulpine women, fox-faced and canny, quick-eyed, tense with frustrated intelligence. In great contrast, the toothy men hurried clumsily after

them, down futuristic streets, giggling into cell phones, pigeon-toed in their haste.

No one was fat. No one was poor. No one was badly dressed. But many Singaporeans had (so it seemed to me) the half-devil, half-child look of having been infantilized and overprotected by their unstoppably manipulative government. The entirety of Singapore's leadership was personified by the grouchy, hard-to-please Lee Kwan Yew. This tenacious nag, it seemed, refused to go away: after forty-one years in the government, at age eighty-three, he was still micromanaging the place. The city-state showed his tweaked and tinkered-with look, and so did the people. I had lived and worked here, at the University of Singapore, for three years in the 1960s. Then I'd passed through on my Railway Bazaar in 1973. Now I was back again, and nothing was familiar.

I was disoriented as soon as I left my hotel near the city center, a place I had once known well, at the top of Orchard Road. But it no longer looked like Orchard Road. The street names had stayed the same, which made it all the more confusing because the streets themselves had been redrawn. Singapore had been a tiny colonial city on a tiny island, with a hinterland. It was now a single modernized piece of geography — island, city, and rural areas had been combined to form a city-state, with muddy shores. It was a thoroughly urbanized island, 270 square miles of it — about the size of the Spanish island of Menorca, but much smaller than New York City.

It was a place without solitude. Cameras everywhere, snitches too. You can be arrested and fined for being naked in your own house, if someone gets a glimpse of you through a window and reports you. This is an inconvenient law, because being a place with no privacy, Singapore is also a place of great loneliness and fear, the apprehension of people who know they are forever being watched. Singaporeans are encouraged to spy on each other; rats are rewarded.

Joseph Conrad would have been able to find his way around the Singapore of the 1960s. He described a walk through the city in his long story "The End of the Tether." But the old horizontal city of shophouses and bungalows had become a vertical city of tall buildings, and because of intensive land reclamation, the whole of Singapore was bigger by forty-three square miles. What had been the waterfront was now far from the sea — Beach Road was nowhere near the beach. Restrictions

and subways limited the traffic on this island of merchandise for sale, highly organized streets, clusters of housing estates, and many mansions. Flyovers had replaced narrow lanes, parks had replaced slums and shophouses. A city of restaurants and department stores. A city of frenzied shoppers, most of them young. What struck me was that, as an effect of living in this place, Singaporeans were strange without knowing they were strange.

"You are here at an auspicious time," a Singapore friend said.

"I hear that a lot."

"No, really. They just unbanned *Saint Jack*."

My Singapore novel, published in 1972, was at last available in Singapore. And the movie made from it in 1978, by Peter Bogdanovich, was being shown in theaters. It was the only Hollywood film ever made entirely on location in Singapore — but done by trickery, as the Singapore-based writer Ben Slater had revealed in his recent book, *Kinda Hot: The Making of Saint Jack in Singapore.* Bogdanovich had not revealed to the authorities that he was filming my banned book, and because of this deception, and the film's portrayal of the sex trade, the Chinese gangs, and the more colorful neighborhoods — such as Bugis Street, thoroughfare of transvestites — the film had been banned. Because the ban had been lifted, and I had just arrived, my friends alerted the press. I was interviewed. It was the first and last time on my trip that my face appeared in the local papers.

Four interviews, each posing the question (among others) "What do you think of Singapore?"

Singaporeans, keenly aware that they live in a safe, very tidy, highly organized, and generally unfree city-state, need to be reassured that it is Shangri-la. It didn't matter that I'd been in Singapore for only two days.

"It all looks absolutely marvelous," I said.

Interviewers can encourage harmless self-glorification in their subject, or they can be obstinate and unimpressed, or devious. But they have their uses. A great way to find old friends in a foreign city is to be interviewed for the press. In Singapore I met many people I would otherwise have been unable to find: great friends growing old here, and even old enemies — enemies, after all these years! But a cruel and unforgiving government can make its citizens cruel and unforgiving. Several people who were informants for the interviewers said, in so many words, what a horse's ass I had been and how they hadn't liked me.

"I talked to two or three of your former students," one interviewer said, clicking her pen over her stenographer's notebook. The open page was covered with neat handwriting.

"Let me say one thing," I said, interrupting her. "The university students I had in Singapore were the brightest, the best, the most hard-working of any students I'd ever taught. And they spoiled me. I never found students that good anywhere else, so I gave up teaching."

"That's quite a compliment. What did you teach?"

"Shakespeare's contemporaries, like Middleton and Tourneur. The revenge plays of the Jacobean period. What else? I gave a series of lectures on *The Winter's Tale,* and tutorials in Conrad, Henry James, and D. H. Lawrence — all the stuff on the Cambridge syllabus. *Great Expectations.*" She was writing this down. "So what did they say?"

"They weren't very complimentary."

"Really?" I was surprised. The head of the English Department, D. J. Enright, a highly regarded English poet and literary critic, much loved by the students, affected an air of bonhomie with them, while being something of a taskmaster with his staff. He was a hard worker himself, and he suspected me of being an upstart. His need to assert himself had turned him into an inveterate gossip, and his puritanical streak made him a retailer of steamy rumors. He held court in the Staff Club, where we all drank beer, moaned about the government and the weather, and speculated on campus adulteries. As the first American who'd ever taught in Enright's department, I had to prove I was a scholar. And I needed the job; I tried hard to impress him. I liked the diligent students, so I felt my effort was in a good cause.

"One of your students said, 'If you can't say something nice, don't say anything. So I'm not saying anything.'"

I swallowed and said, "Go on."

"Another one said you were arrogant. Does this bother you?"

"No," I said. But it did. I saw my earlier self in my office, working my way through a stack of students' essays about *The Changeling.* I was twenty-seven years old. I was on the lowest lecturer's salary, earning the equivalent of $50 a week. I had a wife and two children to support. I was trying to write *Saint Jack.* I wasn't arrogant, I was desperate.

My novel was about a man of fifty, hard up in Singapore, with dreams of happiness. I was hard up; I felt fifty. I had dreams too.

"And another one . . ."

"Oh," I said, because being belittled made me remember, "I lived in a tiny house with no air conditioning."

"This one said you were unapproachable."

"I was in my office from nine to five — Enright insisted we keep office hours. 'Where's Paul?' he'd say, even when I didn't have to deliver a lecture. Students dropped in all the time. I thought they liked me."

She was still studying her notebook page. "One described you as a 'less than perfect teacher.'"

"Less than perfect! Ha! Probably true."

"Do you remember a student called Kirpal Singh?"

"Very well. A nice kid. What I remember was that he was poor and studious, odd man out — a Sikh among the Chinese. And the government took his scholarship away. The government's line was that studying English didn't build the nation. They wanted engineers and economists. Kirpal got screwed and so did lots of other scholarship students. More of Lee Kwan Yew's meddling."

She was reading: "'Singh recalls that Theroux would be late for class, not return assignments on time, and fail to give individual feedback, making him feel shortchanged as a student.'"

"Are you going to print that?"

"I'm going to write a balanced piece."

"Shortchanged?" I said, my voice becoming shrill. "I stuck my neck out and complained to the vice chancellor when his scholarship was taken away!"

Several interviews were published, with the anonymous abuse and innuendo, and the one with Kirpal Singh's criticism. In that piece Kirpal, who was fifty-seven, was described as "a poet and associate professor of creative thinking at Singapore Management University."

I called his office. I said, "Kirpal, this is Paul Theroux. Why are you saying these terrible things about me?"

"They misquoted me," he said, and gabbled a little about his innocence. "Want to meet for a beer?"

"Time for a Tiger," I said.

Over fish-head curry at an open-air restaurant, Kirpal was shamefaced and apologetic. I smiled as he explained that he had said to the reporter I was *sometimes* late and *occasionally* didn't return assignments and *now and then* . . . He was bearded and grizzled, still wearing a turban, hot-faced, jolly, and plump. His new wife was Chinese. They had a

small boy. It was wonderful to see Kirpal, talking about his poetry, still alive, animatedly trying to convince me that he had not maligned me, while I laughed and drank Tiger beer.

"There should be a retraction," he said, tugging his beard.

The other interviews rubbished me in the same way, not for being a bad writer but for having been a poor teacher, for my dubious character. In Singapore, a place that demanded absolute loyalty of its citizens, accusing someone of being unreliable or disloyal was much worse than saying his writing was bad.

An old colleague who got in touch after the interviews invited me to his club. He said, "They were so unfair. You must be annoyed."

"Not annoyed. Fascinated."

One of the characteristics of autocratic rule, even a benign, well-intentioned autocracy like Lee's Singapore, was that whispers and betrayal, survival skills, had become modes of being. Wayward citizens were punished unmercifully: anyone caught with drugs was hanged, and even petty criminals were flogged with a rotan, a narrow rattan rod, sometimes thirty or forty strokes on the back or buttocks. What I have written so far here would be enough to get my ass whipped in Singapore.

Strange blooms, eh? Cruel and unforgiving government, eh? Drop your pants and bend over, Mister Thorax! You're getting fifty cuts of the rotan!

An exaggeration? Not really. My friend Christopher Lingle, the scholar and journalist, wrote an op-ed piece for the *International Herald Tribune* in 1994 that mentioned "certain south-east Asian countries . . . bankrupting the opposition by means of a compliant judiciary." He did not mention Singapore by name, yet the Singapore government took umbrage. Lingle lost his job at Singapore's National University and was charged with contempt of court and violating a law against "scandalizing the judicial system." He was placed under house arrest, from which he cleverly escaped, doing a midnight flit out of the country.

I happened to see Lingle in Bangkok, on my way here. He is a serious and widely published political economist and university professor.

"Lee takes too much credit for Singapore's success," Lingle had said. "What has he actually produced? Seventy percent of Singapore's businesses are foreign-owned."

"Singapore is a success, though."

"Cities are always places of high productivity. He wouldn't have been able to run Malaysia."

"Tell me why."

"Because he is articulate but incoherent."

"How would you rate him?"

"I don't rate him at all. Singapore is an example of banal economic theory," Lingle said. "A monkey could do it."

Punishment for not toeing the government's line was always on the Singaporean's mind. It shows in the Singaporean face, typically an anxious face — pouting kittenish women, frowning nerdish men. When I'd lived in Singapore — because of my writing, and for speaking my mind in lectures — I had not been popular with the government, and the government had not changed. After three years here, I was told by the new department head — a whiny, fretful-faced local man, politically connected — that my contract would not be renewed. I was fired for being a political liability. *You talk too much,* my colleagues said. *You tell too many jokes.* I published stories in *Playboy* magazine. So I left under a cloud of growing xenophobia. Thereafter, I became someone a loyal Singaporean could not praise, which was why, decades later, I was still being rubbished.

"If you play along, you advance here," an Indian labor organizer told me. I had met him in the Indian district, on Serangoon Road. He was bringing me up to date. "But if you criticize, the PM will crush you like a cockroach."

"There is no other place like this on earth," said my old club-going Singaporean friend, whom I will call Wang. He meant this in every possible sense. He was a citizen, and he spoke with the usual Singaporean ambivalence.

Nominally, Singapore is a democracy. In reality it is no such thing. Any critic of the government is subject to criminal proceedings, heavy fines, libel suits, threats, or jail. The leader of the opposition party once said euphemistically that the government had engaged in shady dealings. A lawsuit followed. The Singapore technique is diabolically effective. Foreign critics like Chris Lingle are deported or placed under house arrest, and if they are journalists, their newspapers or magazines are sued. This has happened numerous times to the *Far Eastern Economic Review,* the *International Herald Tribune,* Bloomberg.com, and other news outlets. Singaporean critics or aspiring politicians are pursued

through the courts with fanatical zeal, and sued with such severity they are bankrupted. Judges are appointed by the government and are indeed compliant. Destroyed financially, an opposition politician can't run for office — can hardly live.

"But he doesn't beat people in the streets," Wang said, speaking of Lee Kwan Yew, who now held the title of "minister mentor" and whose son was prime minister. "He," in Singapore, always meant Lee.

I reminded Wang that Lee had famously praised the Chinese in 1989 for brutally suppressing, shooting, and imprisoning the demonstrators in Tiananmen Square, backing the Chinese government in the massacre of thousands. And Lee's uncompromising approval of this cruelty had frightened Singaporeans to such an extent that similar demonstrations had never occurred here, though individually critics had been persecuted.

"He's very shrewd," Wang said. But Wang was also shrewd. He said, "Think of the Machiavelli line about 'economy of violence.'"

"Kill a chicken to scare the monkeys, the Chinese disciplinarians say."

Lee gave a rare press conference when I was in Singapore. I saw it on television. He had aged in a remarkable way, not just becoming white-haired but acquiring withered, almost simian features — not the thuggish scowl of a Triad chieftain he'd had when I'd last seen him, but a pinched and unforgiving look that I associated with unhappy captives, like a caged thing scowling through bars.

"I can't retire," Lee protested at the beginning of this talk. And throughout it he kept up the tone of an old meddler who says, *Look what you're making me do!* He went on, "There are things in Singapore that no other minister can do." Even at the age of eighty-three, he refused to retire and play golf. "I still have ideas. I want to tweak it a bit more."

Lee's use of the word "tweak" always meant meddle and micromanage and fiddle with people's lives.

"Why not leave that to younger politicians and leaders?" someone inquired.

"I'm the only one who understands what Singapore needs," he snapped. "Next question."

A foreign journalist suggested obliquely that this was an arrogant way of governing — after all, he had been out of office for some years.

"If I were arrogant, would I be talking to you?" Lee said, and told the man to sit down, adding, "There are very few things you can tell me

about Singapore — what will work, what won't work. That's my value to the government." He was annoyed at having been defied. Before he left the podium, he said, "I know what will work here because I tweaked the system to get us here!"

"He's respected, he's somewhat admired, but not loved," my friend Wang said. "He knows that. He's rather sad that he's not loved."

Lee is of course a cold and single-minded control freak, a puritanical, domineering know-it-all, oddly resentful in the things he says; and Singapore society reflects everything in Lee's personality. Not surprisingly, Lee's domineering father was a severe disciplinarian, who insisted his son speak English at home. Lee is a highly emotional man who has publicly sobbed, to his own shame and to the horror of his stoical electorate. People said, *I thought that was the whole point of him, that he didn't cry,* and yet there he was, on national television, blubbing his heart out.

Beware the blubbing autocrat, for he will make you cry. As a leader, Lee allowed his personal agonies to eat into people's lives, making Singapore a reflection of one man's anxieties. He famously hates gum-chewing, smoking, littering, and nudity. Chewing gum is banned in Singapore, hardly anyone smokes, no one litters — the fines for them are severe, and *Playboy* has been banned for decades. Lee suspects he is being plotted against, so it is a society without any privacy and virtually without an opposition. Lee is xenophobic; Singaporeans likewise tend to be dismissive or sarcastic about foreigners, regarding them as decadent and disorderly. Lee is puritanical. So are they. Movies are routinely censored, TV shows too. *The Sopranos* was sharply edited and bleeped. *Deadwood* was so bleeped it became incomprehensible, and broadcasts were stopped. *Six Feet Under* was chopped to pieces for its sexual innuendo. Lee refuses to be challenged or questioned, much less criticized. Apart from anything else, this condescension and censorship is odd in a highly educated country, with one of the highest literacy rates in the world.

Virtually the only Singaporean who has dared to speak openly to the government is a fiction writer and former linguistics professor, Catherine Lim, a courageous woman in her mid-sixties. Unlike her imaginative and witty novels, her op-ed pieces read like stern memos. She asks for more transparency, more idealism, more heart, more sentiment. In a 2007 essay published in the *Straits Times,* she wrote: "Even in a society often described as aggressively materialistic and coldly efficient, there are, fortunately, Singaporeans who believe idealism has a place, and that the fire, passion and commitment of the Old Guard, who saw Singapore through the difficult early years with little hope of financial reward, are still alive in some young Singaporeans."

No sooner does one of Lim's pieces appear than it is jeered at by a government functionary, and Lim is put in her place. In any other country, she would be regarded as a caring, auntie figure. She is not so much a critic of the government as someone who is trying to define a national mood and suggesting modest proposals, but even so, such temerity in Singapore makes her sound like Thomas Paine.

Despising and belittling the electorate, intolerant of the political opposition, which he regards as riffraff, Lee is as prominent now as he was forty years ago when I first arrived to teach at the University of Singapore — and was told by the vice chancellor to get a haircut. That was in 1968, not a notable year for barbershop visits by twenty-somethings.

On my return trip, I tried to talk to my interviewers and friends about Lee and his party and Singapore's political direction, but no one except my old friend Wang would discuss politics — and he did so in a whisper. For fear of being misunderstood or overheard, no one mentioned Lee Kwan Yew by name. He was like the Mafia capo who is never named. In the Genovese crime family, a soldier would refer to the boss, Vincent (the Chin) Gigante, only by touching his chin, never speaking the name. It was rare to hear anyone say "Lee." They said "He" or "LKY," sometimes "the Old Man" or "Uncle Harry," or they winked.

Because Lee shaped Singapore, the place bears all his characteristics and is stamped with his personality, his quirks, his crotchets. He has caused Singaporeans to take up golf. He has no sense of humor — laughs are rare in the city-state. Singaporeans' personalities reflect that of the only leader most of them have ever known, and as a result are notably abrasive, abrupt, thin-skinned, unsmiling, rude, puritanical, bossy, selfish, and unspiritual. Because they can't criticize the government, they criticize each other or pick on foreigners. And in this hanging and flogging society they openly spank their children.

An expatriate woman from Europe who had lived in Singapore for many years said to me, "Singaporeans have no grace. They are the rudest

people I've ever met. I was pregnant with my second child. I had a tiny child by the hand. On a bus, no one would ever stand up to give me a seat." A moment later, she added, "But I love living here. I have a comfortable house. My children have good schools. It's well organized. It's safe."

Lee, a Cambridge graduate, is a great admirer of the British. He has a prickly history with the United States — his socialist utterances in the 1960s provoked the CIA to subvert some people in his party with payoffs and intrusions. He has never forgiven America for this.

"He's a frank admirer of President Bush," one of my Singaporean friends said. "But he disliked Clinton for his irregular private life. Do you remember when that American boy damaged the car and was caned for it?"

This was Michael Fay, an eighteen-year-old who was stripped naked, bent over a trestle and tied, then ass-whipped with six strokes. He also got a heavy fine and four months in prison — this for spray-painting graffiti on cars in a Singapore parking lot. Fay was a punk who deserved to be disciplined. But whipped? Yet his punishment was mild, practically ridiculous, in comparison with the torture meted out to many others in Singapore's jails, whose cases never got into the newspapers: many more strokes, long prison sentences on political grounds or for thought crimes, or death by hanging for drug offenses.

Wang said, "Fay would not have been caned had Reagan been in power. Lee was trying to teach Clinton a lesson, showing Clinton that Singapore disapproved of him by whipping the American boy."

Some U.S. senators lodged a protest. President Clinton called the punishment "excessive," though his outrage at the caning must be weighed against his unseemly haste just two years earlier, in 1992, to stop campaigning for president in New Hampshire and fly back to Arkansas to authorize the execution of Ricky Ray Rector, a mentally retarded black man.

The American reaction to Fay's punishment provoked Lee to reveal in an outburst what he really thought of American society and how he viewed Singapore. "The U.S. government, the U.S. Senate, and the U.S. media took the opportunity to ridicule us, saying the sentence was too severe," he said in a television interview. The United States "does not restrain or punish individuals, forgiving them for whatever they have done. That's why the whole country is in chaos: drugs, violence, unemployment, and homelessness."

Like the head of an isolated cult who preaches to his people that only they are pure in a wicked world, Lee actually believes that America is "in chaos," and he enjoins Singaporeans to believe this nonsense and to count their blessings. We Americans are undisciplined and bestial, out of control and criminal. Singapore is the opposite, orderly and safe, nonviolent and hard-working, and will continue to be so under Lee's leadership.

Some time ago, on a rare trip to Paris, so a well-placed friend told me, Lee was granted a meeting with François Mitterrand. Lee began lecturing the premier of France on governance. After Lee had left the room, Mitterrand said, "Who is this ridiculous man who wastes my time? Running Singapore is like running Marseilles. I am running a whole country!"

Lee's Anglophilia is shared by Singaporeans, but it is based on a dated notion of English ways, a set of social snobberies — tea-drinking, cricket-watching, and harmless affectations — and an overformal way of dressing in the Singapore heat, turning up the air conditioning so they can wear tweeds and Burberry sweaters. Like Lee, Singaporeans are assiduous, honest, tidy to the point of obsessiveness, and efficient. They also tend to be inflexible and stern. They are fluent in English, though with a small vocabulary, and in pronunciation and idiomatic bewilderments they have made the language their own. Their jaw-twisting yips and glottal stops are so sudden and glugging that some words can sound less like language than a gag reflex.

Lee is a vain and domineering patriarch, and with the passing years he sounds more and more like the head of a cult than a political leader. His son Lee Hsien Loong is prime minister, and a chip off the old block. Hsien Loong's wife, Ho Ching, is the executive director of the government-linked Temasek Holdings. The Lee family is the nearest thing to a political dynasty. Yet Lee never smiles. He is never satisfied.

"No one ever gets a compliment here," a Singaporean woman told me. "There is no flattery. People are suspicious of compliments or any expression of appreciation. Toughness is the style. Good manners are suspect."

In a Singapore joke, a man goes into an antique shop and sees a lovely

image next to an ugly one. "I know that's Kwan Yin, the goddess of mercy," the man says, "but who is that ugly one?" The shop owner says, "It's Kwan Yew, the god of no mercy."

Singaporeans are intensely aware of their living like lab rats in this huge social experiment. It seems to make them melancholic and self-conscious and defensive.

Singapore is a real tinkered-with experiment — not the political con game of Turkmenistan, or the free-for-all of India, or the tyranny of Myanmar, or the muddle and make-do of Sri Lanka, or the neglect of Laos. Thailand seemed to me exceptional — a success because people were proud, loved their king, had a sense of unity, and had never been colonized. Singapore came into existence because the British colonized the jungly place. Having made it a class- and race-conscious island of clubs and bars, the British kept it as an imperial artifact until the Japanese invaded, during World War II, little skinny soldiers riding in on bikes, capturing the island, and humiliating the British for four years in diabolical prisons.

The Japanese demonstrated that British rule was hollow, self-interested, and weak. After the war, the British looked impotent and lost their will to govern. Singapore was dominated by Islamic, Chinese-hating Malaya, which became the Republic of Malaysia in 1963. At last, in 1965, in a lachrymose display, weeping on TV (but he cries easily), Lee declared the island's independence. He was humbled, because he had believed his destiny was to be Malaysia's prime minister, not CEO of this tiny island, more a corporation or a cult than a country. But he reminded Singaporeans that they were surrounded by enemies, and he invited the world to do business in his city-state. Foreign companies relocated here, invested their capital, and helped Singapore to become an economic success. It has flourished because it made itself useful to the great powers and to global business.

Because initiative is dangerous in an autocracy, Singaporeans are employees, not innovators. And because space is at a premium and the cost of living is high, Singaporeans marry late and, either through pessimism or procrastination, tend not to produce children. The birth rate fell so sharply in the early eighties that a government dating agency was started in 1984, to host matchmaking parties, to promote marriages and births. This agency, called the Social Development Unit, or SDU (known to

Singapore wags as Single, Desperate, and Ugly), was a failure. While I was in Singapore in 2006, it was disbanded.

Over the course of my week here, I reacquainted myself with old Singapore friends and heard their stories.

One said: "My wife went to Australia. She was studying for a degree. But when she finished, she wouldn't come back. I went there and tried to persuade her. She said that she could never live here again, although she was born here. It wasn't a man. She just couldn't bear Singapore anymore. So we got a divorce."

One said: "Your student [and he named him] killed himself. Your student [and he named her] also killed herself. Suicide is a Singapore solution."

One said: "We never go to Malaysia or Indonesia, although they're right next door. The Muslims are crazy. They want to overwhelm us. They deliberately isolated us."

One said: "Life here is shopping and eating. Also 'What kind of car do you have?' and 'Where are you going on vacation?' When women get together they talk about clubs, investments, money, stock tips, and servants."

One said: "Do you remember [and he named two former students]? They got married, but when they split up she became a fanatical Catholic. She never goes out. She only stays in her flat and prays."

One said: "I bought a new car a few years ago. It cost me forty-five thousand dollars U.S. I first had to apply for a permit to buy it. In ten years I'll have to renew this permit, and that will cost money. Everything is regulated — buying the car, driving, access, parking. It's a fortune, and this is just a little Nissan sedan. But no one really needs a car here."

One said: "We never talk about politics, race, or religion. We never talk about the prime minister. We never tell ethnic jokes. We hardly tell jokes. Joking can be dangerous."

One said: "Yes, we're pushy. There's a reason for it — the Hokkien expression *kia su,* 'afraid to lose.' No one wants to be seen holding the short straw."

One said: "Remember [and he named a Singaporean]? He still hates you!"

One said: "Yes, it is a life without texture."

One said: "The big man [Lee] has erased the old Singapore. Singapore

begins with him. He has obliterated the past. Though you can see the city had a colonial history, he has tried to erase it. That's your problem here, Paul — you're a ghost from the past."

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AND HERE IS THE CONTRADICTION. Everyone I met in Singapore treated me with the utmost courtesy. I was fed the Singapore delicacies — chili crabs and dumplings and steamed fish and bowls of *laksa*. I was invited to give a lecture at the new national library, and four hundred people showed up. I was driven around by the sweetest, most solicitous people I'd met on my whole trip. They smoothed my way. What did I need? How could they help? Did I want something to read? Was there anyone I'd like to meet? Was I hungry? Was I tired? Was I having a good time?

I swore I would not carp. I had been sick on my trip, endured nasty governments and horrible hotels, drunk filthy water on dirty trains and eaten disgusting food and put up with drunks and thieves and pests. Here I was in a place where everything worked, everything was clean, everything was on time.

While I wrote my notes at night, my hand began to shake. It seemed ungrateful to be criticizing, yet it was horribly unfair that there was so little room for people to grow and be happy. The government's interest in the arts or culture was entirely fictitious, just another bid for control. For all the bright talk there was a reflex of pessimism when it came to action. No one wanted to have children in Singapore, not many people even wanted to get married. The city-state kept evolving, but because the rule was "conform or leave," Singaporeans remained in a condition of arrested development, all the while being reminded that they were lucky to be governed by inspired leadership — in effect, the Lee family.

Lee was a social leveler, but like all levelers he had elevated himself, introduced contradictions, and created a society in which there were privileges for the few, monotony for the many. Lee and his planners were full of great ideas. The trouble was — and it seemed to me a fault of most repressive, power-hungry people — they didn't know when to stop.

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BUT THERE IS ANOTHER SINGAPORE. It takes a while to find, and you need someone in the know to help. One of my friends, "Jason Tan,"

heard me denouncing Lee for sanitizing the place, and said, "Give me a couple of days. I'll show you things that most people don't see."

The first thing I saw, at midnight in the outer district of Geylang, was a skinny prostitute in a tight red dress, praying as she burned so-called gold paper (*kim chwa* in Hokkien) in a brazier on the sidewalk, a thick sheaf of gilt-embossed fake banknotes — quite a blaze, outside a noisy joint where other prostitutes (kittenish, vulpine) were groping men, who were standing at a bar.

"She is transferring gold," Jason said, "from this world to the souls in the underworld, who can spend it — like Western Union, into the next world."

I liked this unusual Singapore sight: decadent beauty, obvious vice, ancient superstition, defiant litter, veneration, smoke and ashes. There was something about this intense little ceremony, being performed by a dusky dragon lady in a crimson dress, white-faced with makeup, red lips, with long fingernails and stiletto heels, that made it superb.

In a Singapore that had turned its back on the past, that never talked about having been part of the British empire, or despised subjects of the Japanese for four years of occupation, or as the setting for books by Joseph Conrad, Somerset Maugham, Anthony Burgess, or even me — Singapore's history had started with Lee Kwan Yew — this prostitute praying in the open, using fake money and real flames, was a strange and wonderful thing.

Something stranger lay beyond her: twelve long streets of whorehouses, massage parlors, bars, knocking shops, and love hotels. Local lady-boys — young men in makeup — were cruising and winking, and so were transvestites; streetwalkers were perched on benches or motorcycles, looking decorous and making kissing sounds of invitation.

"How much?"

"Eighty dollah. Take me."

That was fifty U.S. dollars, and in Geylang it was the going rate for a short time.

"You want I come your hotel? Hundred dollah. Take me."

Some slender women from China with snake-like features and long legs simply held their breasts and offered them in delicate eloquence, saying, "No speak English."

It was the old recognizable Singapore, but there was much more of it than before. Because Singaporeans were encouraged to put the best

face on their city-state, and because (as I learned later) none of the sex workers were Singaporean, this wild side was never written about or advertised.

"See? See?" Jason Tan said. "This is Lorong Four — all the even-numbered streets up to Lorong Twenty-four or Twenty-six are reserved for sex."

Lorong is the Malay word for lane or small street, and we were walking up East Coast Road, which bisected the numbered streets, looking east down the lorongs where each shophouse held ten or fifteen prostitutes, some lolling on couches, others sitting inside glass enclosures like aquariums, each girl wearing a number and frantically beckoning as we came near.

"Does the government know about this?"

"Are you kidding? These are government-licensed whorehouses. The girls have medical cards. They have to get regular checkups."

It was more than a few licentious streets; it was a whole district of crowded roads, each one like Gin Lane — noodle shops, open-air bars, brothels, cheap hotels, women sitting on curbstones, teenagers gaping, groups of young men swigging beer; very busy on this hot night, very noisy, very lively. The pedestrians and gawkers were mainly locals — Chinese, Malays, Indians, with a smattering of bewildered *ang mohs*, the Singapore term for red-haired devils. Because Singapore was well policed, the district was safe; because Singapore is tidy-minded, there was no litter; and because of restrictions, there was hardly any traffic. Just strollers, cruisers, touts, pimps, and the usual selection of Artful Dodgers. The whole district was well organized while allowing freedom of movement. I didn't see any police, yet it was orderly, and I presumed self-regulated, probably by gangs, the Triads, the secret societies that have been enforcers in Singapore since the nineteenth century.

The love hotels — Hotel 81, Fragrance Hotel, and others — were brand-new, several on each street, with prices posted: $25 for two hours. They were staffed by young male clerks in uniforms, in contrast with the pimps and the brothel managers, who were tattooed and looked tough and gang-connected.

"If you just gonna look, lah, get out. You waste my time," a thuggish man said to me, ordering me away from a fish tank full of numbered beauties.

"These guys are mostly ex-cons," Jason said. "Don't piss them off. They'll thump you."

Inside the entrance of every brothel was a Chinese shrine, a Taoist niche, with a furious god, one of the Immortals, and a pot of smoldering joss sticks and some fresh fruit and a dish of money.

"You come here to talk-talk-talk, lah?"

"I was just wondering . . ."

He was a short but muscular man with a brutal haircut, a scarred face, and badly inked prison tattoos. He darted at me and barked, "Get out!"

The sex industry is fastidiously time-conscious, much more so than most other industries; the minute, not the hour, is the important unit. There is no clock watcher like a pimp or a whore, though given the large amount of time they spent idly awaiting a trick, this seems an unreasonable statement.

"Are these local girls?"

Jason said no. He had the subtle Singaporean eye for ethnicity and racial distinctions. The girls, he said, were Thai, Burmese, Malay, Indian, Cambodian, Vietnamese, mainland Chinese, Indonesian, Mongolian, Filipino. They were the nationalities that served as domestics in Singapore: the scrubbers, the amahs, the child minders, the housecleaners, the car washers. The word here was that no Singaporean girls worked as domestics. The same foreign nationalities were sex workers as well.

Like the stews and baths of Elizabethan London, teeming with fearless whores and promenading clients, drunks and lurkers, spitting and spewing, guzzling beer, slurping oysters, this part of Geylang, with its great sweaty vitality, was vicious too, the women like zoo animals, gesturing and pleading from cages, promising a good time, something special, a bath, a Jacuzzi, a massage, making unambiguous gestures and mouthing obscenities.

"Choose one," the pimps cried. "Hurry up."

What made it unusual was that these women were not in bars, not dancing, not drunk. No strip clubs here, no shakedown. The brothels were arranged like Chinese shops, where instead of merchandise — but of course they were a form of merchandise — the women sat waiting for customers, hissing at them: Choose me!

Towards the end of one lorong, young prostitutes clutching handbags, wearing high heels, stood under the eaves of houses, smiling, or under

trees, or near cars. When I approached them, fierce boys appeared, shielding them.

"Don't talk to the girls. Talk to us!"

"You hungry?" Jason asked me. "You want noodles?"

We sat, each of us with a bowl of noodles and a beer, on a street corner at the edge of this floating world.

"There's Gerrie Lim," Jason said. He had told me earlier that Gerrie might show up.

I had heard of Lim. A Singaporean, he was the author of *Invisible Trade,* about the sex industry in Singapore, not just the business of whorehouses and high-priced escorts, but also the trade in rent boys, lady-boys, male prostitutes. Earlier in his journalistic career Gerrie had had a monthly column in *Penthouse* magazine, writing about adult films. In the noodle shop he told me he was something of an authority on a famous Singapore porn star named Grace Quek, who in 1995, under the name Annabel Chong, had had sex with 251 men in about ten hours, setting a record (later broken). Annabel's feat had been filmed.

"Her mother saw the movie. Poor old woman cried."

The pixie-faced twenty-three-year-old's sexual athleticism, which was both rebellious and weirdly competitive, had a local angle. In a film of her life, she said she was rebelling against the typical Singaporean restraint, the stricture "close yourself to the world." And in an interview she gave in 2000, she had elaborated on this: "I looked back on my entire life in Singapore and realized that all my life I had been processed." Perhaps Singapore repression did inspire her joyless exhibitionism, but it seemed to me that Grace Quek's most Singaporean trait was her reflex to blame the little island for her willful nymphomania. Blaming was a national vice. Singaporeans did not see themselves as individuals but rather as indistinguishable cogs in Lee Kwan Yew's experimental machine.

Gerrie Lim was noncommittal when I laid this out. His equivocation was also a Singapore trait and a survival skill. He was a slightly built but intense man in his late forties, with a polite manner. His overlarge glasses made him seem scholarly from one angle, lecherous from another.

"What do you think of this?" Gerrie asked, and gestured to the activity around us.

"I wasn't expecting it. Maybe old Singapore didn't change. Maybe it just moved to Geylang."

"This is the other Singapore," Gerrie said. "People don't believe it!" He said to Jason, "You take him to Paramount Shopping Center?"

"We go Paramount later."

"You take him to Orchard Towers?"

"Later."

"What's Orchard Towers?" I asked.

"Four floors of whores," Gerrie said. "You want to see an escort service? Russian girls, English ones. Big money."

"Maybe later," I said. I had finished my noodles. "I think I'll just walk around here."

I chose a lorong at random and walked down it, looking left and right at the glowing, freshly painted shophouses, each with the front door open, getting glimpses of girls seated just inside; some had fish tanks of girls. Farther down the lorong, the road narrowed; it was darker, the houses looked gloomier, but still their windows were lit, the distinct movement of women upstairs.

"That's all," Jason said.

We reached the end of the lorong, where a dark lane intersected. No streetlamps here, not even any shophouses, only shadows.

"Might as well go back," Jason said.

But I saw the lighted tip of a cigarette moving towards us, and the person who held it, a man in a white smock-like shirt.

"Good evening, gentlemen. Can I help you?"

"What have you got?"

"Come this way," he said. He almost disappeared in the darkness, but because his shirt was white we were able to follow him. No lights burned anywhere here. From time to time I saw the red tip of his cigarette when he puffed it. When my eyes became accustomed to the darkness I saw that he was leading us between two low tin-roofed buildings through a wooden gate. I followed the scrape and scuff of his loose sandals. Because it was too dark to take notes, I said to myself, Chicken coop. Behind me, Jason was sighing, sounding anxious. The man was beckoning.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"My name is King. Come through here."

He led us into a deeper darkness. No helpful sky or stars or moon here, just walls all around and a tin roof.

"In here," King said.

I could not see anything at all. He shot a bolt on a door and felt for a light cord. In a sudden brightening, King jerked a light on and I saw four young girls come awake, to a sitting position, on a bare mattress. They wore T-shirts and shorts, but because of the dazzle of the bare bulb they squinted and made faces. They were high school age and the room was like a crude bedroom, the girls blinking and covering their faces.

"Which one you want?"

I had been as startled as the girls. But they looked worried and unwelcoming, and who could blame them?

"Maybe we'll come back later."

Sighing, King turned off the light and locked the door. When we were in darkness again, he said, "Maybe you want something a little younger?"

He was leading. He scuffed on his sandals to another low tin-roofed hut and fumbled with a bolt, pulled the door open, switched on a bright light.

More blinking girls, like an apparition in the brightness, five or six of them squirming on a mattress that lay flat on the floor. Their blinking in the light made them look terrified — and they may well have been terrified, for none was older than fourteen or fifteen. They were Thais, with simple dignified faces, very skinny, almost frail, also in T-shirts and shorts, jostling.

King said something to them in their language. No sooner had he finished than they stood up in a little twitching group, their shoulders touching. They were at once fearful and eager, shy, looking pressured, like eighth-graders in a gym class being hectored by a fierce coach.

"Which one you want?"

One thin-necked unsmiling girl, with pale skin and a fragile body, narrow shoulders and no breasts, tried shyly, turning sideways, to catch my eye. She was attempting to smile, but her eyes gave her away, for as she posed as a coquette, she seemed afraid that I might choose her. She was a soft pale thing with muscles like custard. Was I imagining that she was twisting a little stuffed toy in her hands?

"Maybe later."

"I'll be here," King said.

I got one last glimpse of the girl before he switched the light off. Her child's face stayed with me the rest of the night and saddened me.

We met Gerrie Lim back at the noodle shop. We left Geylang and went by taxi to Katong and the Paramount Shopping Center, where energetic Filipinas howled when they saw us. This horde of clawing, screeching girls fell upon us and tried to drag us into one of the bars that lined the long hallway. We then went back to Orchard Road, where Gerrie brought me to an escort agency run by a lisping and unamiable Indian, who opened a fat album of photographs.

"Russian . . . Ukraine . . . Romania," he said. They were hard-faced women, alluringly posed in expensive dresses. It could have been a clothing catalogue. "This one works during day in estate agency . . . This one teacher . . . This one in shop. Booking fee three hundred. You work out the negotiation for whatever else."

He was one of many, Gerrie said after we left. Twenty-four pages of the Singapore telephone directory were filled with escort services. We took a short walk up Orchard Road to a busy intersection at the corner of Scotts Road. In an earlier time I used to go to the nearby movie house. I saw *Midnight Cowboy* here.

"What's this?" I asked, because we were right on Orchard Road, in the middle of one of the largest shopping districts. I had passed the building twenty times without knowing what was upstairs.

"Orchard Towers," Gerrie said. "Four floors of whores."

We went to the top floor and worked our way down, from bar to bar, seeing the same ethnic variety we'd seen in Geylang — Thai, Burmese, Mongolian, Lao, and all the others. The bars had themes. One was hard rock, another tropical décor. Gerrie's favorite was country and western; most of the girls were from Vietnam.

I bought some of the girls drinks. They smiled. "Please," they said. "Take me."

I said goodnight to Gerrie and Jason. Alone, I walked back to my hotel, which was surprisingly near. The face of the young girl who had been woken on her mattress by the overbright light at Ah King's stayed with me. Sad, fearful, frail, her small breakable body and bright eyes. What haunted me about her was that she was obviously a recent arrival, not yet debauched, with a luminous innocence, the glow you see on the face of a child.

The next day I was in a taxi, going to a book sale, hoping to stock up

for the next leg of my trip. I saw the driver's name on the identity disk on the dashboard: Wally Thumboo.

"Wally, can I ask you a question?"

"Can," he said with Singaporean economy.

I mentioned where I had been prowling — Geylang, Katong, Orchard Towers, even Serangoon Road, where taxi drivers themselves paid for sex — Indian girls for a few dollars, the lowest of the Singapore stews.

"No Singapore girls!" he said to my reflection in his rear-view mirror. That was his boast, and it was perhaps the rationalization for all of it.

"Why not?" I asked.

"We no do, lah!"

And he began lecturing me on the vices of foreigners. It was his master's voice, like listening to Lee Kwan Yew denouncing the morals of Americans while at the same time justifying the red-light district. The place of piggy lorongs was regulated, it wasn't dangerous, and best of all it was sanctioned because it didn't corrupt Singapore women. These were all foreigners. Only foreign women did those things. Singaporeans were well educated and much too pure for that.

"It is shameful for our girls to do such things." And he became sententious and preachy, boasting of Singapore virtue.

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THE SLOW TRAIN TO THE EASTERN STAR

BACK IN BANGKOK, buying a train ticket to the border, I ran into a *farang* who advised me to take the bus instead. I could even buy a bus ticket here at the main railway station. He smiled when I said that I had wanted to take the train to Cambodia long ago, but that it hadn't been possible.

"When was that?"

"Thirty-three years ago."

"Bus is quicker."

"I'm trying to be consistent."

The Cambodian border wasn't far, only half a day's journey. The beauty of it, and its singularity, was that the train tracks ran due east, an almost straight line to another twinkling point of the Eastern Star.

The train left at six in the morning and would be at the border town of Aranyaprathet in the early afternoon — plenty of time to struggle across the border and onward to Siem Reap. That was the other thing I'd wanted to do all those years ago, visit the Angkor ruins.

None of this travel had been possible before, and the Thai side of the border had been thick with refugees, because the whole of Cambodia was in the grip of the Khmer Rouge, ruled by the reclusive tyrant Pol Pot. The Cambodian nightmare had ended in the late 1980s, but there were plenty of people who said that Cambodia was still tyrannized and hopeless. Now at least I could get a train to the frontier, and probably a bus after that.

I was bleary-eyed in the predawn darkness when I boarded the train, which was almost empty, except for a Thai family and some huddled