

The world in a train by francisco b. icasiano

[Transportation](#)



One Sunday I entrained for Baliwag, a town in Bulacan which can well afford to hold two fiestas a year without a qualm.

I took the train partly because I am prejudiced in favor of the government-owned railroad, partly because I am allowed comparative comfort in a coach, and finally because trains sometimes leave and arrive according to schedule.

In the coach I found a little world, a section of the abstraction called humanity whom we are supposed to love and live for. I had previously arranged to divide the idle hour or so between cultivating my neglected Christianity and smoothing out the rough edges of my nature with the aid of grateful sights without - the rolling wheels, the flying huts and trees and light-green palay seedlings and carabaos along the way.

Inertia, I suppose, and the sort of reality we moderns know make falling in love with my immediate neighbors often a matter of severe strain and effort to me.

Let me give a sketchy picture of the little world whose company Mang Kiko shared in moments which soon passed away affecting most of us.

First, there came to my notice three husky individuals who dusted their seats furiously with their handkerchiefs without regard to hygiene or the brotherhood of men. It gave me no little annoyance that on such a quiet morning the unpleasant aspects in other people's ways should claim my attention.

Then there was a harmless-looking middle-aged man in green camisa de chino with rolled sleeves who must have entered asleep. When I noticed him he was already snugly entrenched in a corner seat, with his slippered feet

comfortably planted on the opposite seat, all the while his head danced and dangled with the motion of the train. I could not, for the love of me, imagine how he would look if he were awake.

A child of six in the next seat must have shared with me in speculating about the dreams of this sleeping man in green. Was he dreaming of the Second World War or the price of eggs? Had he any worries about the permanent dominion status or the final outcome of the struggles of the masses, or was it merely the arrangement of the scales on a fighting roaster's legs that brought that frown on his face?

But the party that most engaged my attention was a family of eight composed of a short but efficient father, four very young children, mother, grandmother, and another woman who must have been the efficient father's sister. They distributed themselves on four benches - you know the kind of seats facing each other so that half the passengers travel backward. The more I looked at the short but young and efficient father the shorter his parts looked to me. His movements were fast and short, too. He removed his coat, folded it carefully and slung it on the back of his seat. Then he pulled out his wallet from the hip pocket and counted his money while his wife and the rest of his group watched the ritual without a word.

Then the short, young, and efficient father stood up and pulled out two banana leaf bundles from a bamboo basket and spread out both bundles on one bench and log luncheon was ready at ten o'clock. With the efficient father leading the charge, the children (except the baby in his grandmother's arms) began to dig away with little encouragement and aid from the elders. In a short while the skirmish was over, the enemy - shrimps, omelet, rice and

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tomato sauce - were routed out, save for a few shrimps and some rice left for the grandmother to handle in her own style later.

Then came the water-fetching ritual. The father, with a glass in hand, led the march to the train faucet, followed by three children whose faces still showed the marks of a hard-fought-battle. In passing between me and a person, then engaged in a casual conversation with me, the short but efficient father made a courteous gesture which is still good to see in these democratic days; he bent from the hips and, dropping both hands, made an opening in the air between my collocutor and me - a gesture which in unspoiled places means " Excuse Me."

In one of the stations where the train stopped, a bent old woman in black boarded the train. As it moved away, the old woman went about the coach, begging holding every prospective Samaritan by the arm, and stretching forth her gnarled hand in the familiar fashion so distasteful to me at that time. There is something in begging which destroys some fiber in most men. " Every time you drop a penny into a beggar's palm you help degrade a man and make it more difficult for him to rise with dignity. . ."

There was something in his beggar's eye which seemed to demand. " Now do your duty." And I did. Willy-nilly I dropped a coin and thereby filled my life with repulsion. Is this Christianity? " Blessed are the poor . . ." But with what speed did that bent old woman cross the platform into the next coach!

While thus engaged in unwholesome thought, I felt myself jerked as the train made a curve to the right. The toddler of the family of eight lost his balance and caught the short but efficient father off-guard. In an instant all his

efficiency was employed in collecting the shrieking toddler from under his seat. The child had, in no time, developed two elongated bumps on the head, upon which was applied a moist piece of cloth. There were no reproaches, no words spoken. The discipline in the family was remarkable, or was it because they considered the head as a minor anatomical appendage and was therefore not worth the fuss?

Occasionally, when the child's crying rose above the din of the locomotive and the clinkety-clank of the wheels on the rails, the father would jog about a bit without blushing, look at the bumps on his child's head, shake his own, and move his lips saying, "Tsk, Tsk." And nothing more.

Fairly tired of assuming the minor responsibilities of my neighbors in this little world in motion, I looked into the distant horizon where the blue Cordilleras merged into the blue of the sky. There I rested my thoughts upon the billowing silver and grey of the clouds, lightly remarking upon their being a trial to us, although they may not know it. We each would mind our own business and suffer in silence for the littlest mistakes of others; laughing at their ways if we happened to be in a position to suspend our emotion and view the whole scene as a god would; or, we could weep for other men if we are the mood to shed copious tears over the whole tragic aspect of a world thrown out of joint.

It is strange how human sympathy operates. We assume an attitude of complete indifference to utter strangers whom we have seen but not met. We claim that they are the hardest to fall in love with in the normal exercise of Christian charity. Then a little child falls from a seat, or a beggar stretches forth a gnarled hand, or three husky men dust their seats; and we are,

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despite our pretensions, affected. Why not? If even a sleeping man who does nothing touches our life!