



6

Tracking the Death Train

MEXICO/EL SALVADOR, 2005

For the coffee farmers of the Americas, 2000 was not the New Millennium, it was the Perfect Storm. Coffee prices to farmers were at historic lows (well below the cost of production). The World Bank was forcing governments to cut back social services under the sterile name of “Structural Adjustment.” Free Trade was flooding Central and South America with cheap, subsidized corn from the United States, taking away local markets and jobs. By hundreds of thousands the farmers left or were thrown off their coffee farms and migrated to the bloated cities. Yet, unlike in the perfect world of economics, there were no jobs in the cities either. Many farmers headed north, crawling past borders, wading rivers, and hiding from cops and robbers in the hope of making it to El Norte, the fabled United States, where they would get jobs and be able to send money back to their impoverished families. At the same time, coffee companies throughout the United States were making the grossest of gross profits. They could buy the

beans for so little, without dropping their prices to customers who were so unaware of the economics and true human cost of the trade.

Thus was created a human wave that surged north with the power and intention of Katrina at the levees of New Orleans. Much of this stream of refugees washed up on Mexico’s southern border with Guatemala. Here, in the small city of Tapachula, they waited for the massive freight train of the Chiapas Mayab Company that hauled sugar, oils, and cement from this depot all the way to the U.S. border. It was a free ride north for many, but some paid a terrible price. They called it *El Tren de Muerte*—the Death Train.

I had heard stories of the Death Train in the coffee villages of Nicaragua and Guatemala, yet there was little publicity in the United States. There were three possible outcomes for those who rode the train. You made it to the U.S. border but still had to get across. You fell asleep or got thrown off the train by gangs preying on the migrants and died. Or you were sucked under the wheels of the train, losing arms and legs. These people ended up in a little shelter in Tapachula run by a remarkable woman, Dona Olga, who has dedicated her life to the *amputados*, the amputees who end up in her care. Michael Lundquist of the Polus Center for Social and Economic Development in Amherst, Massachusetts, had also heard of the victims of the Death Train. The Polus Center is a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups not only in the United States but throughout the developing world. We have worked together in Nicaragua and Ethiopia, forging public/private partnerships that make meaningful change in the lives of disabled peoples in coffee communities. Michael wanted to take a look at Dona Olga’s shelter, El Albergue de Buen Pastor Jesus (The Refuge of the Good Shepherd Jesus), to see if there was anything Polus could offer given its expertise in prosthetics and social services. I wanted to understand how coffee farmers from El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and beyond could end up in this place, and what we and the coffee industry could do about it. I headed south with Marta, a twenty-three-year-old Ecuadoran who worked at Polus and whose native Spanish put my street Spanglish to shame. This was Marta’s first trip for Polus. It would also be her last.

When we checked into the small hotel off the main plaza in Tapachula, the guy at the desk looked at my business card.

"You a coffee importer? We got a lot of great coffee here in Chiapas. My cousin has a farm . . ."

"No thanks," I interjected quickly. "I am a *tostador*, a coffee roaster, and I already work with some Chiapas cooperatives. In fact, we'll be visiting them next week."

He seemed to lose interest until he noticed Marta near the luggage. He leaned over the counter and said in a conspiratorial whisper, "She your wife?"

"No, my companion."

"Oh, your *companion*." He nodded knowingly, his eyebrows moving up and down rapidly in some international symbol of sleazy male solidarity.

"Really, we work together. She is with Polus Center. See? It says so here on her card."

"So what kind of work do you and *your companion* do?" Emphasis and eyes again.

"We're here to look at the Death Train, and to see what we can do to help the *amputados* at Dona Olga's shelter. So we're going to the Death Train tonight and . . ."

"Tonight? You're going there tonight with that lady? Don't be crazy, man! You know about the bad cops and the *Mara Salvatrucha*, the gangs?"

"Well, yeah, I've read about . . ."

"Well, reading isn't going there, man. Don't go alone. Be really careful. Don't take no wallet, no watch, don't even wear good shoes. And maybe she should stay here."

"Thanks for the tips. We just want to see the train, talk to some of the migrants, see how many were coffee workers, maybe see the *Mara* . . ."

He was completely exasperated. "You'll be lucky if you *don't* see the *Mara*. But if you're so hot to meet one, maybe we can help."

"Yeah, well, thanks. I'll take you up on that. Can we have the keys, please?"

I got a note from Dona Olga sometime during the early evening. It said that she wouldn't be available to meet tonight, but she had arranged for BETA, the migrants' protection agency, to take us out to the train. Around eleven o'clock a red pickup truck pulled up to the hotel. Three khaki-clad, burly men got out and knocked on my door. Francisco is the head of BETA, and he explained that they are a federal agency that polices the migrants' ranks, helping with legal or logistical problems and delivering food to the depot every evening.

"Many of these folks haven't eaten in a day or two. They need food to stay alert on the Death Train," says Francisco. Good cops. BETA also acts as a counterweight to the black-clad state police, who "protect" the migrants when they are not shaking them down for cash or sex. Bad cops.

The desk clerk seemed satisfied that we were in good hands. He knew these guys.

It was raining pretty hard when we arrived at the depot. Half of a big, black train was waiting to be coupled with the Death Train, and already there were a hundred people between the cars or sitting on top. The uniform of the day was black plastic garbage bags for ponchos and baseball hats. The only light came from a gas lantern at a food stall, where maybe fifty people crowded beneath its rusted corrugated awning to escape the downpour. Francisco pulled up to the tracks, his headlights cutting through the blackness as people swarmed the BETA boys, waiting for food packets.

"Here," Francisco said bluntly as he shoved a bunch of food packets into my gut. "Start tossing." We frisbee'd the packets out into the darkness. The atmosphere became surreal and festive as people caught and shared out the food. When the food was delivered, Francisco announced that I was there to talk to coffee farmers about their experiences heading north. Some of the crowd took their food packets and scurried away to eat or hide the food, while several young men came forward. We wandered off toward an embankment where we could all sit together. The food stand threw enough light to keep a confidential shroud over the faces.

I explained that I was trying to understand the situation of the coffee farmers in these hard times, and that I wanted to take this information to the United States to make people more aware of their plight.

"So where did you guys come from?" I asked tentatively, aware that these young men needed anonymity and stealth to get north successfully. Two brothers were from Nicaragua; a sixteen-year-old from El Salvador; an older man from Honduras; and two others remained silent.

"We are from Matagalpa," stated Benny, as he put his arm around his younger brother, Pablo. They appeared about sixteen and thirteen but I couldn't be sure, as the rain, the darkness, and the Houston baseball caps kept me at a respectful distance. "Our dad lost the farm a year ago. Pablo stopped going to school to help out. We couldn't pay his fees anyway and

he liked to play hide-and-seek with the girls instead of studying.” Benny whacked Pablo affectionately on the back of the head. The water from the brim of Pedro’s hat splashed me in the face. Benny continued, “We protested to the government most of last year, marching around the country with other farmers. But nothing happened, so we came north.”

Benny had participated in the Landless Farmers March, where tens of thousands of dispossessed coffee farmers walked the roads of Nicaragua to protest government and bank land seizures and the loss of livelihoods. It was a peaceful march that had lasted fourteen months. Yet like so much about the coffee crisis of the new millennium the march had received no attention from the U.S. press. I knew about it only because our Nicaraguan farmers requested that we send their annual profit share to the marchers to pay for plastic sheeting (housing) and food. The march gradually petered out amidst exhaustion, the need to feed their families, and ephemeral government promises to find land and jobs for the dispossessed farmers. I had also tried to visit one encampment in the town square of Matagalpa, but by the time I got there government trucks had carted the camping farmers off to other parts of Nicaragua to work on large farms.

Julio, the older man, had been a shopkeeper in an impoverished coffee village in Honduras. He shared a lesson in Survival Economics 101.

“I have only fifty *pesos*. I am hungry but I can’t buy food. I need the money to give to the gangs, the *Mara*. If I don’t have money to give, they might throw me off the train. Even those police in the black clothes steal from us if we look like we have something worth stealing.”

My education was disrupted by a deep rumble that shook the ground. We turned and saw a huge black shape edging up the tracks toward us. The Death Train had arrived.

The migrants scrambled to pick up their backpacks and near the train. In the dull light it was difficult to see the details of the train—but it was easy to feel that looming, menacing presence. The train screeched and banged as it backed up to grab the waiting freight cars. They came together with a loud pneumatic finality. Men and women scrambled to get in between the cars, the best place from which to hang on and not get hit by branches. Others climbed to the top and straddled the middle of the cars. I ran to the train and tried to talk to some of the new riders, urging them to hold on and care

for each other, warning them about the gangs and what could happen if they fell off. They were all aware of the risks, but each thanked me for the advice. Other voices of counsel came out of the night.

“*Ten cuidado!* Be careful!”

“Watch out for the cops!”

“Jump on!”

“Climb up here!”

The train lurched forward with a sudden and loud jolt. People screamed; some laughed. A few fell off amidst scolding or laughter from their companions, then jumped back on. The rain was pounding, bouncing off the black garbage bags like a shower off a curtain. The metal gleamed wet and slippery where the migrants would be grasping or stepping. The steel wheels, three feet in diameter, sharpened themselves on the tracks like a razor on a strop, waiting like a butcher’s slicer for the unfortunate. The train began to pick up speed, slowly, inexorably. In a minute it was swallowed up by the black night.

We entered the hotel lobby wet, cold, and unnerved. Marta grabbed her key and went straight to her room. I talked with Francisco for a minute before he drove off. I trudged through the lobby, vaguely aware of a seedy-looking character off to the left. The desk clerk called me over.

“It’s all arranged,” he said conspiratorially. He pointed to the man. “He’s over there.”

“Who?” I didn’t know what he was talking about, and I really didn’t care. I wanted to go to bed and let this awful night go.

“The *Mara Salvatrucha*, man. You wanted to meet a *Mara*, so I got you one.”

I’ve gotta work on my Spanish, I thought. I don’t remember asking for this. But when opportunity knocks . . . I rushed back to the room and hid my wallet and passport. I thought about Julio, the fifty-*peso* man on the train. I grabbed an American twenty (“Green looks good on everybody,” my mother used to say when she gave us money as a present) and went back to the lobby.

“I’ve got twenty bucks. We can drink until it’s done, but that’s all I’ve got.”

We sat at a small Formica table in a dimly lit bar down the block from the hotel. There were a few others in the bar. The lighting was low but garish.

A small television at the other end of the room showed some Mexican soap opera while Los Lobos sang on a radio.

I tried to have a little small talk in Spanish but I am not sure what I said. Neither was he.

“What the hell you talking about?” he snarled.

“Uh, can we speak in English?” (I didn’t want to chance calling him a big whale, like I did to the pretty dancer in Cuba—*baillena, bailerina*—the stakes were a lot higher here.) He agreed with a grunt. A couple of Tecate *cervezas* later and we got down to it. I asked him how I could be sure he was a member of *Mara Salvatrucha*. He showed me a number of tattoos on his arms and a set of numbers on his gums. Tattoos. For all I knew the guy was lying through his tattooed gums to get the beer money.

“I don’t mean to be rude, but anyone can get a tattoo, even one that’s supposed to be a gang’s colors or markings.”

“Okay, you want to go out with me and rob somebody at the train yard?”

“No, I’ll take your word for it.”

He told me that his family had immigrated illegally to Los Angeles in the mid-1990s. He had sold drugs in his public school “just like everybody else,” had gotten caught, and was sent to prison. In the slammer, he got hooked up with the *Mara Salvatrucha*, learning such valuable skills as breaking into a car and hot-wiring the ignition, and a total disrespect of anyone who was not a member of the gang. INS was waiting at the prison door when he was released, and he was put on a bus and dumped over the border into Mexico. He had no contacts, job prospects, or 401(k), so he found his social security in the network of ex-inmate gang members who reconnect on the outside. Apparently, there are several hundred thousand deported Latin gang members terrorizing Central America, so finding friends was no problem.

“So what are you, a reporter or something?” Twenty bucks goes a long way in a skanky bar in Tapachula. He was ahead of me four to two. I told him that I was trying to learn more about the coffee farmers who rode the Death Train and that I wanted to figure out how to help.

“Why do you want to help them?” he asked.

“*Así es lo que haga.*” (That’s what I do.)

“Yeah, well, my family rode that train, that’s how we got to the States.”

I let the beer get the better of me and got overly philosophical.

“So your mother rode the train, and now you rob people who are in the same situation as your mother was?” *Wrong question!*

His eyes flared at me. He gripped his bottle really tightly.

“Hey *bendejo!* (Asshole!) I gotta make a living! You got a problem with that?” His attitude seemed to go downhill fast, so I decided to feign Montezuma’s Revenge and go back to the hotel. I let him keep the change, thinking maybe it would keep him off the tracks at least one night. I felt sorry for the way his life had unfolded, but at the end of the day he was still a predator, and I had learned enough for one night.

8

Javatrekker: Dispatches from the World of Fair Trade Coffee by Dean Cycon

Chapter 6: Tracking the Death Train

Overview: This is an excerpt from the book *Javatrekker*, written by the founder of Dean’s Beans. Most of the chapter is about Dona Olga and some of the disabled people she cares for, but the chapter opens with a description of the “Death Train” and some of the people who are getting ready to climb onto it. There is also a brief profile of a gang member who once rode the train and now preys on people who do. It’s kind of a depressing story but well told!

Discussion questions to think about (no need to write down the answers):

1. Note where Cycon **describes** the setting, the train, and the people in the story. What are some of the descriptive details that help put a visual image in your head and/or appeal to your other senses?
2. Note Cycon’s use of **dialog**—the actual words spoken by the people he interviews and others he encounters along the way. What is gained by actually quoting, rather than just paraphrasing?
3. Brief though they are, the **profiles** of these people help give us a more in-depth understanding of what it’s like to be in these people’s shoes. What are some details of their lives that stood out to you? What point do the details make, or what feelings do they evoke?
4. In addition to the individuals he depicts, Cycon gives us some **background information** about this situation to provide **context** (the big picture) and **kairos** (the immediate relevance of this topic to the readers’ lives). Note where he does this. Was there anything particularly interesting or unexpected in these sections?