

From: *Breaking the Borders: Global Migration and the Walls of Nationalism*

by Erik de la Reguera

THE FIRST PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

The Death Train

Seen at close quarters, the diesel locomotive inspires awe. Five meters high, twenty meters long and weighing over one hundred and sixty tons, it would make anyone think twice before stowing away on one of the freight cars. The great wheels that will soon be turning are motionless on the track for now. But a drawn-out wheezing and a few low-pitched snorts show the engine has started to come alive.

Now there is a burst of feverish activity on the embankment. People who have been waiting patiently for hours get to their feet. Requests are called out on all sides, knapsacks tossed up into waiting hands. The railcars' axles creak in response to the idling engine, and the locked doors vibrate. Up to now, the hazy morning has been just a long, hot period of waiting, but all of a sudden time is short. A kind of shudder runs throughout the body of the train. Groups of people come running over the gravel behind me. When the train whistles, there's no longer any room for doubt.

I grab hold of a metal ladder. Within a few seconds, several hundred of us have clambered onto the roof. It's tightly packed. Bodies collide, suspicious looks are exchanged. Many people sit with their legs dangling over the side, a good five meters from ground level. A few young men take a death-defying leap over to the roof of the next railcar, to find more space to sit. Below us, the doors are bolted and cannot be opened.

The train rumbles slowly out of the station, and soon we have left the small town behind us. The railcars are surrounded by a broad, desolate plain, dotted with sparse trees and bushes in dry earth burnt yellow by a merciless sun.

This is Chiapas, Mexico's most southerly state, and the view could just as well be from a first-class railcar. But the people around me on the roof have on long-sleeved tops, threadbare jeans and caps or beanies to keep the sun off. Two-liter plastic bottles of water slosh around in their knapsacks. Most of them are men, though there are a few young women too. Nearly all are under thirty-five. They have boarded this train because the Mexican border police have

set up ID checks on all northward-bound roads accessible to motor vehicles.

The railcar I happen to have boarded is painted white and full of concrete. There are four ladders up to the roof, which is covered by a horizontal iron platform. That means it doesn't slope down to the edge in the treacherous way many others do. My colleague, photographer Roger Turesson, is kneeling beside me to take pictures of the passengers: some are sitting, others half-lying. I settle down amongst the luggage and limbs and say hello to José Luis Lux from Guatemala, squashed in on my right. A short man in his thirties, he is peering curiously at Roger and me. Not surprisingly, he wants to know what we're doing here. I explain we've been sent by a big daily newspaper, that Roger has flown over from Sweden, and that I live in Mexico City, where I've been working as a freelance journalist for some years. José Luis nods. He's here on account of work too, he says - or rather the lack of it.

'The textile factory where I used to work shut down two years ago. The owners moved it abroad, to somewhere in Asia, I think.'

Now José Luis is hoping to find a new job in the US. He knows there has been an economic crisis there, that unemployment is still relatively high and that hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants have been deported after raids in recent years. But that doesn't deter him. José Luis has a cousin in California who has promised to find him work in a textile factory, and he's handy with a sewing-machine, so that will work out just fine - if he manages to get there in the first place, that is.

'I've no choice. Back home, we can't even afford milk now. Can you imagine that? Can't even afford milk for my kids...'

The roof around us is packed with people who know just what he means: fishermen from El Salvador, building laborers from Guatemala, peasant farmers from Honduras, auto mechanics from Nicaragua. Most have grown up in families with parents, brothers and sisters working in the informal sector, which, though not controlled or taxed by the state, provides work for about half of all Central America's workforce. The informal sector includes everyone from urban street vendors and people doing odd bits of business to rural day-laborers and small farmers. Incomes are often so low that they would be regarded as a bad joke north of the Rio Grande or in western Europe. But when people feel the pangs of hunger,

there's little they won't put up with. And in José Luis's home country, Guatemala, half of all children are malnourished.¹

'There's no jobs there anymore. None that I can get, anyhow,' says José Luis, gazing out gloomily over the plain.

A small middle class has started to emerge in Central America since 2010. Quite a few jobs have been created in the formal economy, too. For the vast majority of people, however, it remains difficult to make ends meet. Many of the new jobs are in free trade zones (*zonas francas*) where multinationals have relocated the simpler manufacturing processes. The working day in these free trade zones is long, and wages are low. According to workers I've interviewed, it's not unusual for people to work ten to twelve hours a day, six days a week, for a monthly wage of about US\$170.

Workers say that companies often claim to abide by laws and regulations, while in fact paying only part of the agreed wage and forcing their workers to put in hundreds of hours of unpaid overtime. If - against all the odds - a labor union manages to improve conditions a little, the owners can relocate the plant to another country. The state seldom intervenes.

There's little the individual can do but emigrate - without a permit.

'We crossed the river at the Mexican border near Tapachula. It wasn't that hard. The tricky bit's still ahead of us,' says José Luis, as we pass a clump of giant cacti.

To reach the US, he and the other paperless migrants on the roof will have to travel the length of Mexico, a country the size of Germany, France, Spain, Italy and the UK put together. The journey can take anything from ten days to several months, and there are many dangers on the way.

José Luis has already learned one lesson: he's not welcome in Mexico.

'We'd only just got over the border when we were robbed. The police stopped our minibus, asked to see ID and frisked the lot of us. But oddly enough, we weren't arrested. They just took our stuff instead,' he says.

¹ 'Uno de cada dos niños guatemaltecos sufre malnutrición crónica' ('One Guatemalan child in two suffers from chronic malnutrition'), UNICEF, 17 February 2009. See:

http://www.unicef.org/spanish/infobycountry/guatemala_48087.html

See also: 'Speed up progress for Guatemala's children or risk a generation, says UNICEF', UNICEF, 22 March 2013, http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/media_68376.html

'Despite being a middle-income country, Guatemala has the sixth highest malnutrition rates in the world with 49 per cent of children under five chronically malnourished or stunted.'

‘I said goodbye to my knapsack. There were a couple of sweaters, a spare pair of pants and my toothbrush in it. When they’d finished, they waved us on.’

José Luis is by no means the only one to have lost his belongings like this during a police check. Another ten people on our roof say the same thing has happened to them. This type of theft is so commonplace that it seems to be systematic.

‘Watch out for the branch!’

The warning is passed along among the stowaways. I grab Roger’s belt and pull him down onto the roof. A few seconds later a thick branch sweeps over the top of the car like a broom. The foliage sweeps just over our heads, as we lie squashed together in a trembling mass of bodies.

A few seconds later a new warning comes from the railcars before us: ‘Look out for the cable!’ We stay put and wait for the electricity line to swish overhead too.

A few weeks ago, a young man was pulled off a train roof by a low-hanging electricity line. He dangled in the air like a rag doll, his hands knotted in spasm around the cable and his feet dragging over the roofs of the railcars while electricity pumped through his body. It was not until the whole train had rattled through beneath him that he fell onto the track. That was probably the only reason why he survived. But not everyone is as lucky.

The freight train we’re on is known in south-east Mexico as *el Tren de la Muerte*, the Death Train. The migrants themselves have dubbed it *La Bestia* - The Beast. The reason for the name is as simple as it is horrific. Of the approximately 100,000 people who illicitly ride the Mexican goods trains northwards to the US each year, several hundred fall off and die. Some are thrown off by robbers. Others fall off by accident and lose their arms or legs - or their lives.

Yet what the migrants fear most are not branches, robbers or electricity lines, but kidnappers. At least 22,600 Central Americans are abducted each year in Mexico, according to the country’s state human rights organization, CNDH.² That means an average of sixty-two abductions *every day*. On the stretch we are travelling along now, Arriaga-Ixtepec, armed

² ‘CNDH reportó a la CIDH 62 secuestros diarios de migrantes en México’ (‘CNDH, the National Human Rights Commission, has reported 62 abductions a day of migrants in Mexico to ICHR, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (*La Crónica de Hoy*, 3 August 2011. See: http://www.cronica.com.mx/nota.php?id_notas=596246

men held up a train just over a month ago. About fifty people were abducted then. Some of the hostages were helped by family members at home to pay the ransom the kidnappers demanded. Others have disappeared without trace.

Up on the train roof, a wary mood prevails. As soon as the locomotive brakes, people exchange worried looks. They crane their necks to see what's going on. A raid by the migration police? A train hold-up? Do we have to climb down and run for our lives?

One of those peering anxiously into the brilliant sunlight is Norma de la Rosa. A few weeks ago she left a poor *barrio* on the outskirts of Guatemala City with her partner, Oscar López. Now they're on their way to the US, a country they've only read about in books and seen on TV.

Norma knows she's not on any registers in Mexico, and there will probably be no police report if anything happens to her here. She knows she could disappear without trace, and her family would never know what happened.

In a sense, Norma's journey began four years ago with the birth of her youngest daughter, April. The delivery was complicated, as the baby turned out to have a seriously malformed head. She was kept in hospital for nearly two months. When she was finally allowed home, she was still weak and listless. Norma kept an anxious eye on her, registering how little she ate and grew.

At one and a half, April weighed only six kilos. Norma had to have her hospitalized again, this time in a private clinic. The diagnosis was anemia. The hospital bills multiplied, and it became increasingly difficult to pay them.

To provide for her family, Norma took a job as a waitress at a restaurant called 'Club Alemán', the German Club. With a clientele consisting largely of Europeans, Americans and wealthy Guatemalans, it served relatively expensive dishes. However, Norma earned only the minimum wage of 1,900 quetzales a month (about US\$248), and the bosses sometimes insisted she sleep over at her workplace, which was difficult to combine with single parenthood.

It was at Club Alemán that she met Oscar. He had started off washing dishes but worked his way up to assistant chef, although he was still on a low wage. And he didn't live far from Norma, so they often took the same bus to and from work. They began to have long

conversations and exchange confidences on the way. It turned out that Oscar was going through a marital crisis as well. In time, the attraction between the two workmates grew, and finally Oscar moved in with Norma and her children.

April has now reached the age of four and put on a few kilos. She can walk and talk. But her treatment has left the family with a debt of over 20,000 quetzales (about US\$1600). And Norma's and Oscar's wages at Club Alemán only cover the bare essentials. So just over a month ago, Oscar said he wanted to travel to the US.

'Give me five years,' he said, 'and I swear I'll pay off the whole debt and get some savings together for the children's education.'

Norma listened, and asked for time to think it over. She knew they needed money. But something told her not to let Oscar go off on his own. In the end, she decided to accompany him. Her oldest son, Abél, aged nineteen, had to take on the daily responsibility of looking after the four other youngsters.

Here, on the train roof, Norma is finding it hard not to start thinking about them. 'I'll call them this evening,' she tells herself. 'If nothing bad happens, that is.'

But today she's in luck. The electricity lines and the thick branches turn out to be the most serious threats along the line. Norma, Oscar and the rest of us can climb down onto the gravel at Ixtepec, the first stop on the way. Dry-throated, with aching legs and the rhythm of the train in our bodies, we leave the station in small groups. It's like the way you feel when you've just walked ashore after a blustery day at sea.

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That evening, a hundred of the migrants are given a place to sleep at the little hostel in Ixtepec run by Father Alejandro Solalinde. While Norma, Oscar and the others are served a simple meal in the refectory, the priest receives me in his workroom. Solalinde is not a physically demonstrative man, but his eyes are thoughtful and he is known for having a sharp tongue. Seated on a white plastic chair, he bends towards me. Insects circle around a bare light bulb hanging from the roof.

'These migrants are the poorest of the poor. There's something about their travels that represents a huge challenge; they're rebelling against a system we're part of,' says Solalinde, unfastening his white clerical collar.

The *system* of which he speaks is not some far-fetched conspiracy theory; it can be illustrated simply by juxtaposing the world's collected visa regulations³ with the UNDP's Human Development Index.⁴ A pattern rapidly emerges; those countries that suffer most from poverty and armed conflicts are the ones whose passports are of least value as travel documents. The fact that an Afghan national can travel to only twenty-five countries without needing a visa, whereas Britons and Germans are welcome in 173 countries (and US citizens in 172), is something that many take for granted in the 2010's. Yet 150 years ago it would have been considered almost abhorrent, being so clearly at odds with one of the most influential ideas of the day – the right to freedom of movement.

'Give me your tired, your *poor*,

Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free,' reads the inscription on the Statue of Liberty on the way into New York Harbor. Yet since the early twentieth century these masses have come up against ever higher walls, visa requirements and passport controls – and not just in the United States. Well-off tourists, business travelers, financial assets and most raw materials and industrial products are welcome all over the world today. But that doesn't apply to the people who manufacture the products, flee from persecution or simply dream of a less precarious life.

One of the thinkers who have tried to understand and articulate this contradictory development is the Polish-born sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who has worked in the UK for many years now. Bauman has used the terms 'tourists' and 'vagabonds' to illustrate how freedom of movement has become perhaps the chief status marker of our time. By 'tourists', Bauman means that section of the world's population that can travel unhindered whenever they wish, while 'vagabonds' refers to the millions of people who, despite the barriers to travel put in their way, travel anyway because they feel they are obliged to do so.

'The tourists stay or move at their hearts' desire. They abandon the site when new untried opportunities beckon elsewhere. The vagabonds, however – know that they won't stay for long, however strongly they wish to, since nowhere they stop are they welcome: if the tourists move because they find the world irresistibly *attractive*, the

³ Henley & Partner's Visa Restriction Index 2015. See: 'The Wanderers', *The Economist*, 10 August 2011, at: <http://www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/2011/08/visa-free-travel>

⁴ United Nations Development Programme, 2001, Human Development Index. UNDP.

vagabonds move because they find the world unbearably *inhospitable*. The tourists travel because they want to; the vagabonds – because *they have no other choice*.⁵

In other words, the two are ideal types – or extremes – on a scale. But on the freight trains in southern Mexico and at Solalinde's hostel, Bauman's vagabonds suddenly seem to be all around me. Solalinde points out that although the South and Central American migrants are driven first and foremost by a determination to find work and improve their standard of living, their vulnerable situation is not just economic, but above all political in nature. Passport and visa systems are created not by the invisible hand of the market, but by states and governments that want to secure control over territory, population and economic resources. And those who challenge that control often face reprisals. Solalinde is more aware of that than most.

'I can hardly keep track of all the times we've received threats. It was worse under the previous mayor and governor, who were openly hostile and set the police on us. I had to buy this plot of land in secret. But after all those years serving the Church, I wanted to do something really meaningful – not just sit at a desk and hold masses for my congregation once a week.'

A cricket chirps in the shadows while Solalinde continues:

'The authorities don't like us running this hostel, nor do the criminals. But the day something really serious happens to me, the order will have come from the highest political level – I'm convinced of that.'

Outside the little office, the plates have been put away and blankets laid out on the concrete floors of the dormitories. The migrants get ready for the night. In the first few months after the hostel opened, Solalinde couldn't even offer them a roof over their heads, just a patch of bare ground next to the railroad tracks. Thanks to the support of a German organization, there are now a few simple concrete buildings – though no beds yet. Solalinde himself sleeps in a hammock, and the volunteers at the hostel beg at markets for left-over food, so they can scrape together enough ingredients for meals at the simple soup kitchen. But it's clear the migrants appreciate the consideration shown them.

'You have to show compassion, whatever it takes,' says Solalinde. 'Even at a time when

⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences*, 1998. Columbia University Press, pp. 92-93.

that's seen as being very subversive.'

Subversivo: the word lingers on in the air. I take hold of it as one picks an apple from a tree; it will accompany me over the months of research and fieldwork that lie ahead.

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The next day, the migrants are up just before dawn and set off to the railroad tracks to find a new freight train. Roger and I miss their departure, but with the help of Irineo Mújica, an activist who grew up in Arizona, we manage to rent a car and catch up with the train. We share the sky-blue Dodge with Olvan, a young man from Honduras who has spent several months at the hostel in Ixtepec – after being robbed and beaten up and breaking a leg on the way there. Father Solalinde and Irineo have helped Olvan obtain a temporary residence permit for Mexico, and now they have also persuaded us to give him a lift on his way to the United States.

We catch up with the train in a small town called Matías Romero. Something seems to have happened to the locomotive, which is standing silent and abandoned at the station. A hundred or so migrants are sitting in the shade next to the railroad, waiting until they can continue their journey. No-one seems to know where the engine driver is, and some people have already had an eventful morning.

'Three armed men dragged me off the railcar. They hit me over the head with the butt of a pistol and took all the money I had – a hundred and twenty pesos,' says Inés Montoya, gingerly stroking a bloodied bandage wound around her head.

'I can't go back to Honduras. I owe the boss money,' she adds softly.

A little further away I spot Norma and Oscar. They have found a patch of grass to sit on, next to one of the freight cars. At thirty-eight, Norma is somewhat older than the average migrant. As a woman, she stands out among all the young men. Today she has on a navy blue T-shirt, blue jeans and black sneakers. Her chestnut-colored hair is gathered up in a bun. She smiles a lot and does her best to appear in good spirits. But it's clear that something isn't quite right. Norma is pale, and she prefers not to budge from the spot where she's half-lying. After a while she says in a low voice to Oscar:

'I don't know if I can keep going now...'

Norma turns out to have an upset stomach. She has spent the whole morning on the railcar

roof vomiting into a plastic bag. Oscar has been sick too, but he has started to feel better now. They blame the soup they were given at Father Solalinde's hostel the evening before. They're beginning to wonder just what they've let themselves in for.

'We knew it'd be hard to travel by train. But we didn't know it'd be this hard. I'm starting to get worried, to be honest,' says Oscar.

He's twelve years Norma's junior, short and not as powerfully built as many of the other men. The occasional nasal laugh - slightly childish - makes his eyes sparkle, and the tenderness he displays towards Norma can hardly spring from anything but love.

Just two weeks have passed since they took the bus to the Mexican border together. But a great deal has happened since.

At the river that marks the border between Guatemala and Mexico, they came upon some people selling counterfeit Mexican ID cards. They bought two for eight hundred pesos apiece, one for Norma and one for Oscar, but that turned out to be a bad bargain. They were arrested at the very first roadblock on the Mexican side.

The police shut them into a small roadside lock-up, and their adventure might have come to an end there and then, had it not been for one of the migration police who chanced to see Norma reading her Bible.

'Think your god can help you?' he asked gruffly.

'Yes, my God is a living God, not a god of wood and stone,' replied Norma, stroking the Bible.

'You pray to your god then, and we'll see if he can help you,' said the guard, going out and closing the door behind him.

That night, Norma prayed fervently on the rough cement floor of the cell. She pleaded with her Lord to let them continue on their journey, so that it would not all have been in vain, and her children would have a better life than she had had. And the next morning the policeman came back and asked them:

'Do you two want to go home or carry on northwards?'

'We want to go north,' replied Norma.

The policeman opened the cell door, turned on his heel and went out to flag down a minibus. He opened the sliding door and told them to jump in. Norma and Oscar couldn't believe their eyes. They were being given a safe passage. But it wasn't the right moment to

ask questions, so they got in the bus – and in a trice they were on their way northwards again. The first place they came to was called Escuintla, and there they got out.

They stayed in Escuintla for just over a week, helping out in restaurants and markets to save a little money. On the last day they met a young man called Omar who seemed pleasant enough. He was originally from Honduras and had travelled north many times before. He offered to help them. It wasn't long before Norma and Oscar realized that he was actually employed by a powerful people-smuggling organization based in the border town of Nuevo Laredo to look out for people like themselves who could pay to cross the northern border.

But Norma had heard of such 'guides'. They were paid for each person they accompanied on the journey to the north. So they decided to put their trust in Omar. When he asked for an advance of one thousand two hundred pesos (about US\$75), that sounded quite reasonable to them.

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The morning sun has given way to afternoon sun, and on the embankment at Matías Romero Norma is gradually recovering from her food poisoning. She is gathering her courage together. It is another three thousand kilometers to her destination – Los Angeles, California. One of Oscar's sisters lives there, who has promised to help them with jobs and a little money. But first they have to reach the US border, which feels infinitely distant right now. What's more, the next stretch is said to be one of the most dangerous stages of the whole journey to the north. Suspicion about the engine driver is growing amongst the people waiting alongside the tracks.

'You have to ask yourself why he's taken it into his head to have a break of several hours when we're on our way to Medias Aguas, of all places,' Norma says to me.

Many engine drivers feel uncomfortable about having migrants sitting on railcar roofs. But there are also reports about drivers who collaborate with criminals. The small junction settlement ahead, Medias Aguas, has long been notorious as a haunt of kidnappers. It's said to be controlled by the Zetas, a feared criminal syndicate set up by former elite soldiers a decade or so ago, which has now expanded into one of Latin America's most powerful mafias. The organization is involved in smuggling cocaine, methamphetamines and other drugs, as well as in blackmail, diesel theft on a grand scale and – last but not least –

kidnapping.

Joxso Medina, a young man from Honduras I meet at the tracks, tells me how he and his three female cousins were kidnapped on their way through Medias Aguas the year before. Their families had to pay three thousand dollars for their release. He has no intention of continuing his journey if the train leaves after dark. Irineo and Olvan, too, strongly advise us against taking the train to Medias Aguas.

To keep in touch with Norma, I offer her a simple cell phone with a pay-as-you-go card. She nods in assent on hearing the proposal, but is careful to make sure that no-one else sees her accept the phone and charger. On the railroad, even the paltriest belongings can lead to robbery – or something even worse.

Not until dusk does the engine driver climb up into the driver's compartment. He is a stout man who merely gestures in irritation when asked his name and why there has been such a long delay. And those accusations that he's in cahoots with the mafia – how about them?

'Can't say anything about that. Guess you'll know what to make of my silence, though...'

He starts the diesel engine.

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The darkness surrounding the body of the train is impenetrable. The railcars thunder through the night, between clumps of trees and high mountains. Above them is a vast, starlit sky, and on the horizon the full moon has just risen over the tree-tops. Norma snuggles into Oscar's arms. Around them she glimpses the others' huddled silhouettes. There are ten in the group now: five from Guatemala, three from El Salvador and two from Honduras. Norma is the only woman.

But they are not alone on the roof. By the light of the moon, Norma glimpses a man with shoulder-length hair crawling over to the guide, Omar, and whispering something in his ear. A minute or two later, Omar comes over to them and says in a low voice that the long-haired man claims he knows people in Medias Aguas and that there's a safe place for them to sleep. But Omar is skeptical. He's heard similar stories before. It's exactly the kind of thing kidnappers tell their intended victims, to lull them into a sense of security.

The next time the train brakes, Omar orders the group to climb down off the roof. Norma, Oscar and the others obey quickly, climbing down on to the gravel while the railcars roll on

into the night. Soon they see that the long-haired man has got down onto the embankment too. Walking towards them, he urges the group to come with him.

‘It’s far too dangerous to sleep outdoors.’

Now Omar declines his offer formally. They don’t need any help, he declares. But then the long-haired man’s expression changes. There’s something menacing in his voice when he says:

‘It’s best you do as I say. We’ve got people at stations all the way up, you know...’

The ten fellow-travelers move aside to discuss what to do. Forming a ring, the men speak in tense, low voices. They agree to attack the long-haired man if he threatens them again.

‘Even if he’s got a gun on him, he can’t hurt more than a couple of us before we wrestle him to the ground,’ says Kevin, a big Salvadoran who has lived in Houston, where his wife and children are.

Omar leads the group down from the embankment. In the gloaming, they feel their way ahead among tall trees and thorny bushes. Though they quicken their pace as much as possible, the suspected kidnapper follows them at a distance. Now and then they hear him talking on the phone. Maybe he’s calling for reinforcements.

When they reach a creek, Omar says it’s time to take a short rest. Norma says she has to go for a pee. But once she’s a few meters away from the others, she hides behind a tree and stealthily pulls out the mobile phone. She puts it on silent and taps in a text message, which she sends to me.

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‘They tried to rob us, so we got off in Jesús Carranza.’

In the dark of the car, the text appears in bright letters on the screen. Roger is at the wheel, his eyes on the road. He nods silently when I say I’m going to try and call Norma. But the reception is poor and it takes a while to get through. Finally, Norma answers in a hoarse whisper, her voice fearful:

‘I can’t talk, there are people here and it looks as if they’re after us. We’re hiding under a tree next to the river.’

The call is cut off. I dare not call her again now. But Jesús Carranza is only a few dozen kilometers away, so we decide to turn off onto the side road that leads there. Sitting on the

back seat, Irineo and Olvan look silently out of the side windows. Neither of them is particularly knowledgeable about the place we're going to. Somewhat half-heartedly, Irineo says we could maybe contact a representative of the Catholic Church to see whether they have a hostel for migrants.

It is just after nine when we drive into Jesús Carranza. The streets are empty and poorly lit. Low concrete buildings loom out of the gloaming. Here and there, neighborhood stores have left bulbs on outside bolted wooden doors. The terrain is hilly, so it's not easy to get an overview, and we can't spot a river. After searching for a while, we at least manage to find the priest's residence.

'What's the matter? Who are you?'

The man who has opened the door is standing some ten meters behind the barred gate, which is locked. He makes no move to come forward and greet us. We explain why we are here, but the man just shakes his head. There's not much he can do, he says. There's no hostel here, and while it's true that there are many abductions in the area, all he can advise us to do is contact the police. It doesn't help when we point out that Norma and Oscar don't have a permit to be in Mexico, and that the police make a habit of robbing undocumented migrants. The man gives the impression of being afraid.

After leaving the priest's dwelling, we stop at the side of the road to discuss what to do next. Insects whine past in the tropical night. When I get the phone out to check Norma's direct number, I spot a few figures walking towards us in the dim light - three powerfully built men in police uniforms.

'Your papers, please!' one of them calls out.

Their feet planted far apart and their hands resting demonstratively on their big, black machine guns, they form a semi-circle around us. We hand over our passports and press cards and explain that we are journalists, and that we're here to write about migrants. The man who appears to be in command doesn't move a muscle. He takes his time scrutinizing the documents.

'If you're journalists, you'll know what "suspects" means. And you're suspects as far as we're concerned. You go knocking on people's doors though it's late in the evening. We don't like that in these parts.'

He refuses to give a name or show his police ID. But he makes it very clear we aren't

welcome here, and that it would be best for us to leave, promptly.

We know the Zetas sometimes use police uniforms to disguise their men, so we don't argue. Besides, if these men are genuine police officers, there's a serious risk that we would just cause problems for Norma if we took them to where she and the others are hiding. On the way out of the village, I have to text her to say there's no help to be had.

We stop at a shabby old motel in a village a few dozen kilometers further on. Although mobile coverage is virtually non-existent, I manage to find a spot close to the village's one and only taco stand where a signal bar appears in the corner of the display. We sit down and order a few tacos. The other customers eye us curiously while our food and soft drinks are handed to us. I have an eye on the phone the whole time. But no message arrives. The phone stays silent.

At the motel, we are each assigned a tiny room resembling a prison cell. They can't be locked from the inside, only from the outside. Unlike Roger, I at least have a small window.

'Guess I'll see you tomorrow, then,' I hear Roger say somewhat laconically, as he bangs his door shut.

The little window looks out over the back yard. A few black pick-up trucks are parked alongside our sky-blue Dodge. Behind the cars, tall trees and rolling mountainsides are silhouetted against the sky. We have crossed the border into the state of Veracruz, and I recall Father Solalinde's words from the evening before: 'In Veracruz, all the authorities are involved. The Church and the military are alone in being free of organized crime – up to a point.'

I lie down on my back on the hard mattress. The crickets have started their nocturnal concert. Somewhere out there in the darkness is the group of migrants, surrounded by the mountains and valleys where the legendary Olmec culture once emerged. That sophisticated culture is long gone now. I reflect that it is best known for the unique monuments in the shape of huge stone heads it left behind, but that the mountains and valleys of the Coatzacoalcos delta also bear witness to the central role of migration in the history of humankind.

*

The first migrants, those from whom all the people on our planet are descended, are most likely to have lived in Namibia in south-west Africa, some 150,000 years ago. Thanks to modern DNA research, we know they were indefatigable itinerants, always on the move, searching for game or places with plenty of vegetables, nuts, fruit, water and other natural resources. Sometimes they were forced to move by local over-population or conflicts between people. But generally their nomadic way of life seems to have been a major evolutionary advantage, as it stimulated the species' capacity to adapt, sometimes resulting in technological and organizational breakthroughs. It may even have been people's curiosity and constant movement that saved them from extinction eighty thousand years ago, when total numbers of *Homo sapiens* are reckoned to have declined to barely more than two thousand individuals.⁶

But it was not until our early ancestors developed a more abstract way of thinking – probably owing to a genetic mutation – that they would swarm out over the whole of the planet. The first group of hunter-gatherers left Africa about sixty thousand years ago, and was soon followed by many more. Huge migratory movements got under way, heading both north-west and north-east. People wandered through the forests of Europe, where they met their close relatives, the Neanderthals (*Homo neanderthalensis*). They crossed the Asian steppes, the habitat of *Denisova hominins*. We still bear the results of these encounters within us: between one and four per cent of our genetic material is believed to come from the Neanderthals,⁷ and up to six per cent from the Denisovans.⁸

Both these human species died out around thirty thousand years ago, when the long Ice Age dramatically changed living conditions and halted any further expansion. But our species, *Homo sapiens*, survived. And when the snow and ice retreated 16,500 years ago, our early ancestors resumed their restless wandering and exploration. A few thousand individuals who

⁶ Ian Goldin, Geoffrey Cameron and Meera Balarajan, 2011. *Exceptional People: How Migration Shaped Our World and Will Define Our Future*. Princeton University Press, pp. 11-16.

⁷ 'Neanderthals, Humans Interbred, DNA Proves', Discovery News, 6 May 2010. See: <http://news.discovery.com/human/neanderthal-human-interbreed-dna.html>

⁸ 'Denisovaflickans dna ger oss vår historia' [The Denisovan girl's DNA shows us our history], Dagens Nyheter, 2 December 2012. See: <http://www.dn.se/nyheter/vetenskap/denisovaflickans-dna-ger-oss-var-historia/>
'New DNA analysis shows ancient humans interbred with Denisovans', *Nature*, 31 August 2012. See: <http://www.nature.com/news/new-dna-analysis-shows-ancient-humans-interbred-with-denisovans-1.11331#/b1>

had settled on the narrow strip of land linking today's Russia and Alaska were thus the first to colonize the Americas. It was these immigrants from Asia – not some fifteenth-century European on a voyage of discovery – who discovered America.⁹

The nomadic way of life continued to dominate human existence until the invention of agriculture between seven and fifteen thousand years ago. The techniques of plowing, sowing and harvesting were developed in parallel in six different regions of the world, and as a result the population gradually became more sedentary. Private ownership – or at least clan-based ownership – took on increased importance in human thinking, at the same time as borders were drawn between plots of land and domesticated animals were marked and driven to organized slaughter. The surplus from agriculture made it possible for more people to live together in a smaller area and provide for a growing administrative and cultural elite, who settled in towns.

The first civilizations emerged in fertile river valleys such as those of the Euphrates and the Tigris in the Middle East. Ramparts and walls were built around urban settlements to protect them against hostile intruders. While concentration of population clearly had disadvantages sometimes - epidemics and famine - its advantages included the more rapid spread of information and more active collective learning. Strangers who came with peaceable intentions were generally welcome, and the divisions between peoples and cultures were porous.¹⁰

This development is clear in Mexico too. Archaeologists have discovered evidence of an expanding farming culture along the Coatzacoalcos, San Juan and Tonalá rivers, as far back as seven thousand years ago. Regular floods were used as natural irrigation, yielding good harvests. In time, the farmers were able to support a growing cultural and political elite, who erected the buildings and monuments we today associate with the Olmec culture.¹¹

The Olmecs were the first in the Americas to develop a system of writing for their language, and they extended their influence over the whole region. Ritual ball games, religious beliefs about a plumed serpent god, and a fascination with jade are some of the

⁹ Ian Goldin, Geoffrey Cameron and Meera Balarajan, 2011. *Exceptional People: How Migration Shaped Our World and Will Define Our Future*. Princeton University Press, p. 17.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 20-21.

¹¹ Richard A. Diehl, 2004. *The Olmecs – America's First Civilization*. Thames & Hudson, pp. 23-24.

features of their culture that survived long after the fall of their civilization around 400 B.C. By that time, a network of trade links had disseminated craft techniques, religious ideas and improvements in agriculture throughout Mesoamerica. It was thus largely thanks to migrant people that the Mayan culture and the later Aztec empire were able to benefit from the Olmecs' knowledge. This pattern recurs everywhere on our planet.¹²

*

The first rays of sun filter in through the window, and in the back yard a rooster greets the morning. Mexican *banda* music blares out from a radio nearby. I shower quickly and try to imagine what awaits us now. The whole night has passed without a message from Norma. Presumably her cell phone is either switched off or engaged. I tell myself the problem is poor reception. But it is with some anxiety that we set off a little later in our sky-blue rental car on the road to Medias Aguas.

Mist hangs over the green fields as we near the village. The windscreen becomes fogged with moisture, and Roger and I take turns to wipe it clear. With us are not only Irineo and Olvan, but also Elizabeth Lara, who works for the Mexican state human rights commission, CNDH. Knowing she has visited Medias Aguas on several earlier occasions, we contacted her the night before.

Elizabeth tells us about a young woman who travelled through Medias Aguas a few months ago. Her group of Central American migrants was held up by robbers who ordered everyone to hand over four hundred pesos (about US\$25). But since the woman had no money, the robbers gang-raped her instead. When they finally let her go, she was so dazed that she fell while attempting to board a moving train. Both her legs were severed at the knee.

'You can't get a thing like that out of your head. It affects you, like it or not,' says Elizabeth Lara, who has visited the young woman in hospital several times.

According to a report by Amnesty International, six out of every ten women travelling illegally through Mexico are sexually assaulted. Their situation is so vulnerable that it is common for women to offer men sex, in an indirect way, in exchange for protection on the

¹² Ian Goldin, Geoffrey Cameron and Meera Balarajan, 2011. *Exceptional People: How Migration Shaped Our World and Will Define Our Future*. Princeton University Press, p. 28.

journey. Many get a contraceptive injection before leaving their home countries, to avoid falling pregnant in the event of rape.¹³

We arrive at Medias Aguas. By the light of day, this village of about a thousand inhabitants looks peaceful. A few elderly ladies seated in rocking chairs on a terrace greet us in friendly fashion. They say we're the first journalists they've seen for a very long time.

'There's a lot of bad stuff going on here, you know. Things happen at night that you wouldn't want to know about.'

Leaning forward in her rocking chair, one of them gestures down at the railroad.

'We found a dead man down there barely a month ago. Had tattoos on his back, he did. You bet we don't go out of doors after nightfall!'

We stroll down to the station area. Everything is calm and deserted along the railroad. We see no sign of any migrants. But as we approach the station building, a plump security guard emerges from the shadows and scrutinizes us suspiciously.

'Did any migrants arrive on last night's train? Not as far as I know. And if they did, I guess they're on their way by now,' he says.

The guard seems to welcome the break in his routine anyway; he goes and fetches a stack of plastic cups and a two-liter bottle of coke. Pouring the fizzy liquid into the cups, he says:

'I want you to know I sympathize with them. The migrants, I mean. I know what they go through.'

'A few weeks ago I was deported from the US. I'd been working in New York for a bunch of Chinese people, but they treated me really badly. I was clearing drains at all hours, but I earned next to nothing.'

Now he wants to earn enough money for another journey to the north, which is why he's working as a security guard. But when we ask him what goes on at night in Medias Aguas, he gives only vague, evasive answers. So we thank him for the drink and take our leave of him in the station building.

There aren't many other people to talk to in Medias Aguas. At a little bridge, we meet an elderly peasant farmer. He tells us he had kidnappers as neighbors for a few months.

'Armed men set up camp on a slope near my plot. They put up plastic sheeting and a tent,

¹³ Amnesty International, 2010. *Víctimas invisibles: Migrantes en movimiento en México* [*Invisible Victims: migrants on their way through Mexico*]

and they often had food and other provisions with them. And yes, I know they were holding people captive in the tent. Judging from their clothes, I reckon they were migrants. Luckily they disappeared a few weeks ago.'

There's no sign of Norma and Oscar anywhere. We can't get through on the phone, and I haven't received any more texts since last night. We are about to leave Medias Aguas when we spot ten people walking towards us along the railroad track.

*

Norma is eating tortillas with scrambled egg, given to her by Elizabeth. Between mouthfuls, she tells us what happened. All night, the group sat shivering under the bridge where they'd set up camp. She nodded off a few times, but woke again just as quickly from the cold. At first light, they heard footsteps: it was the long-haired man again. He was less threatening this time, but still tried to lure them into following him.

'Why are you sitting out here in the cold? Come with me instead.'

They refused his offer. Omar led the group to the nearest road, where they got a lift on a small truck. Barely half an hour later, they got off and crossed a number of fields on foot. They had no water left, so they stopped at a watering hole to fill their bottles. But it was full of newts and insects, recalls Norma, and the water tasted bad.

'I'm not going to feel easy in my mind till we're out of here,' she says, looking around her.

The group is sitting at a bend in the road outside Medias Aguas. The others are sprawling on the embankment, waiting for a train, though it's anyone's guess when it will turn up. Somewhat listlessly, Oscar is throwing stones into a ditch.

'My dad doesn't know I'm here, only my mom,' he tells me.

'But Mom wasn't happy about it. She said it was too dangerous, and I should stay at home. But I didn't listen to her...'

Oscar's stones rattle in the brushwood. Now and then birds start up, squawking and flapping noisily.

The leader of the group, Omar, tries to control his nerves by plucking the eyebrows of eighteen-year-old Carlos from El Salvador. He fools around with the others, but you can tell Omar also wants to leave Medias Aguas just as soon as he can.

Eduardo Temaj from Guatemala, short in stature, is probably the most anxious person

there. He's slightly clumsy and has difficulty climbing onto trains. The others tell him he needs to pick up speed running alongside the train for a while, and he must be careful not to jump onto the ladder until he's got a firm grip on it with both hands. Otherwise he could be dragged under the wheels by the stream of air caused by the moving train.

Norma sits down on the rail next to Eduardo, saying:

'I'm scared too, Eduardo. But please promise me you'll get on that train tonight. Sure, it could hurt you. But they'll kill anyone who stays behind tonight. And then your family will never get to know what happened.'

The sun is dipping behind the trees. Dusk is near. The nocturnal predators are emerging. Norma goes back to Oscar. She takes his hand, closes her eyes and prays quietly next to the railroad track.

'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want... He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.'

*

It's ten at night, and we're sitting in the car on the way to the next station when Norma rings from Medias Aguas.

'Erik? There's a black car with tinted windows driving around. We've had to run into the woods to hide. But we'll try to stay near the only store that's open in the village, so at least someone will see if anything happens to us.'

We stop at a café on a rest area next to the highway. It's pitch black now. Should we turn back? Or would that make things more difficult for Norma, attract attention?

Our coffee is cooling when a reassuring text appears:

'On the train to Tierra Blanca now. It's all OK.'

Translation: Fiona Graham

