

Enrique's Journey

This is the story of Enrique, a Honduran teenager who attempted to escape the gangs that ruled his city. He would do it by illegally riding trains through Mexico to the Texas border, 2000 miles north. Every year, tens of thousands of Central American migrants attempt to escape crime and poverty by riding these trains north to the United States.

On this day, March 26, 2000, Enrique is among them. He sprints alongside rolling freight cars and focuses on his footing. The roadbed slants down at 45 degrees on both sides. It is scattered with rocks as big as his fist. He cannot maintain his balance and keep up, so he aims his tattered tennis shoes at the railroad ties. Spaced every few feet, the ties have been soaked with creosote, and they are slippery.

Here the locomotives accelerate. Sometimes they reach 25 miles per hour. Enrique knows he must heave himself up onto a car before the train comes to an orange bridge that crosses the Coatán River, just beyond the end of the cemetery. He has learned to make his move early, before the train gathers speed.

Most freight cars have two ladders on a side, each next to a set of wheels. Enrique always chooses a ladder at the front. If he misses and his feet land on the rails, he still has an instant to jerk them away before the back wheels arrive. But if he runs too slowly, the ladder will yank him forward and send him sprawling. Then the front wheels, or the back ones, could take an arm, a leg, perhaps his life.

“Se lo comió el tren,” other migrants will say. “The train ate him up.”

Already, Enrique has four jagged scars on his shins from frenzied efforts to board trains.

The lowest rung of the ladder is waist-high. When the train leans away, it is higher. If it banks a curve, the wheels kick up hot white sparks, burning Enrique's skin. He has learned that if he considers all of this too long, he will fall behind—and the train will pass him by. This time, he trots alongside a gray hopper car. He grabs one of its ladders, summons all of his strength, and pulls himself up. One foot finds the bottom rung, then the other.

He is aboard.

Enrique looks ahead on the train. Men and boys are hanging on to the sides of tank cars, trying to find a spot to sit or stand. Some of the youngsters could not land their feet on the ladders and have pulled themselves up rung by rung on their knees, which are bruised and bloodied.

Suddenly, Enrique hears screams. Three cars away, a boy, twelve or thirteen years old, has managed to grab the bottom rung of a ladder on a fuel tanker, but he cannot haul himself up. Air rushing beneath the train is sucking his legs under the car. It is tugging at him harder, drawing his feet toward the wheels.

“Pull yourself up!” a man says.

“Don’t let go!” another man shouts.

He and others crawl along the top of the train to a nearby car. They shout again. They hope to reach the boy’s car before he is so exhausted he must let go. By then, his tired arms would have little strength left to push away from the train’s wheels.

The boy dangles from the ladder. He struggles to keep his grip. Carefully, the men crawl down and reach for him. Slowly, they lift him up. The rungs batter his legs, but he is alive. He still has his feet.

GETTING ABOARD

There are no women on board the train today; it is too dangerous. There are several children, some much younger than Enrique. One is only eleven. He is among the 20 to 30 percent of those boarding the trains in Tapachula who are fifteen or under, by estimate of Grupo Beta, a government migrant rights group in Chiapas. This eleven-year-old tells Enrique that he, too, was left behind with his grandmother in Honduras. He, too, is going alone to find his mother in the United States. He tells Enrique that he is frantic to see her.

Enrique has encountered children as young as nine. Some speak only with big brown eyes or a smile. Others talk openly about their mothers: “I felt alone. I only talked to her on the phone. I didn’t like that. I want to see her. When I see her, I’m going to hug her a lot, with everything I have.”

Enrique guesses there are more than two hundred migrants on board, a tiny army of them who charged out of the cemetery with nothing but their cunning. Arrayed against them is la migra, along with crooked police, street gangsters, and bandits. They wage what a priest at a migrant shelter calls la guerra sin nombre, the war with no name. Chiapas, he says, “is a cemetery with no crosses, where people die without even getting a prayer.” A 1999 human rights report said that migrants trying to make it through Chiapas face “an authentic race against time and death.”

All of this is nothing, however, against Enrique’s longing for his mother, who left him behind eleven years ago. Although his efforts to survive often force her out of his mind, at times he thinks of her with a loneliness that is overwhelming. He remembers when she would call Honduras from the United States, the concern in her voice, how she would not hang up before saying, “I love you. I miss you.”

Enrique considers carefully. Which freight car will he ride on? This time he will be more cautious than before.

Boxcars are the tallest. Their ladders do not go all the way up. Migra agents would be less likely to climb to the top. And he could lie flat on the roof and hide. From there he could see the agents approaching, and if they started to climb up, he could jump to another car and run.

But boxcars are dangerous. They have little on top to hold on to. Inside a boxcar might be better. But police, railroad security agents, or la migra could bar the doors, trapping him inside.

Another migrant, Darwin Zepeda López, recounts what can happen in a locked boxcar. Coyotes, or smugglers, mistook him for a paying customer and herded him along with their clients toward four boxcars, their doors open. Then they loaded him and about forty of the others into one of the cars. Zepeda, twenty-two, says he heard the metal doors slide, then clang shut. The smugglers locked them in from the outside, so the boxcar would not look suspicious. It was April 2000 in southern Mexico, and the outdoor temperature was climbing past 100 degrees. Inside, the car was turning into an oven.

As the train rolled north, the migrants drank their water bottles dry. The air in the car turned rank with sweat. Zepeda could hardly breathe. People began screaming and shouting for help. Some knelt and pleaded with God to stop the train.

Fistfights broke out in his boxcar as the riders jockeyed to suck fresh air through tiny rust holes over the doors. After four hours, he says, a woman with asthma begged for water, then slumped to the floor, unconscious. Others pried open her mouth and tried to give her the few drops they could find. Finally, they left her for dead. Some stood on her to reach the highest airholes.

In the next five hours, before immigration agents and Mexican soldiers stopped the train and opened the doors, Zepeda saw seven migrants fall to the floor. The boxcar, he says, looked like a rolling morgue.

Enrique looks elsewhere. A good place to hide could be under the cars, up between the axles, balancing on a foot-wide iron shock absorber. But Enrique might be too big to fit. Besides, trains kick up rocks. Worse, if his arms grew tired or if he fell asleep, he would drop directly under the wheels. He tells himself, "That's crazy."

He could sit on a round compressor at the end of some hoppers, his feet dangling just above the train wheels. Or stand on a tiny ledge, barely big enough for his feet, on the end of other hopper cars. His hands would turn numb and callous after hours of hanging on.

Enrique settles for the top of a hopper. He finds one that is full, making it more stable. He holds on to a grate running along the rim. From his perch fourteen feet up, he can see anyone approaching on either side of the tracks up ahead or from another car. Below, at each end, the hopper's wheels are exposed: shiny metal, three feet in diameter, five inches thick, churning. He stays as far away as he can.

He doesn't carry anything that might keep him from running fast. At most, if it is exceptionally hot, he ties a nylon string on an empty plastic bottle, wraps it around his arm, and fills the bottle with water when he can.

Some migrants climb on board with a toothbrush tucked into a pocket. A few allow themselves a small reminder of family. One father wraps his eight-year-old daughter's favorite hair band around his wrist. Others bring a small Bible with telephone numbers, penciled in the margins, of their mothers or fathers or other relatives in the United States. Maybe nail clippers, a rosary, or a scapular with a tiny drawing of San Cristóbal, the patron saint of travelers, or of San Judas Tadeo, the patron saint of desperate situations.

As usual, the train lurches hard from side to side. Enrique holds on with both hands. Occasionally, the train speeds up or slows down, smashing couplers together and jarring him backward or forward. The wheels rumble, screech, and clang. Sometimes each car rocks the other way from the ones ahead and behind. El Gusano de Hierro, some migrants call it. The Iron Worm.

In Chiapas, the tracks are twenty years old. Some of the ties sink, especially during the rainy season, when the roadbed turns soggy and soft. Grass grows over the rails, making them slippery.

When the cars round a bend, they feel as if they might overturn. Enrique's train runs only a few times a week, but it averages three derailments a month—seventeen accidents in a particularly bad month—by the count of Jorge Reinoso, chief of operations for Ferrocarriles Chiapas-Mayab, the railroad. One year before, a hopper like Enrique's overturned with a load of sand, burying three migrants alive. In another spot, six hoppers tumbled over. One migrant was crushed between the train car and a bridge the train was crossing. Another migrant was found dead downstream. The cars' rusty remains are scattered, upside down, next to the tracks. Enrique was once on a train that derailed. His car lurched so violently that he briefly thought of jumping off to save himself. Enrique rarely lets himself admit fear, but he is scared that his car might tip. El Tren de la Muerte, some migrants call it. The Train of Death.

STAYING AWAKE

The Iron Worm squeaks, groans, and clanks—black tankers, rust-colored boxcars, and gray hoppers winding north on a single track that parallels the Pacific coast. Off to the right are hillsides covered with coffee plants. Cornstalks grow up against the rails. The train moves through a sea of plantain trees, lush and tropical.

By early afternoon, it is 105 degrees. Enrique's palms burn when he holds on to the hopper. He risks riding no-hands. Finally, he strips off his shirt and sits on it. The locomotive blows warm diesel smoke. People burn trash by the rails, sending up more heat and a searing stench. Many migrants have had their caps stolen, so they wrap their heads in T-shirts. They gaze enviously at villagers cooling themselves in streams and washing off after a day of fieldwork and at others who doze in hammocks slung in shady spots near adobe and cinder-block homes. The train cars sway from side to side, up and down, like bobbing ice cubes.

Enrique's head throbs. The sun reflects off the metal. It stings his eyes, and his skin tingles. It drains the little energy he has left. He moves around the car, chasing patches of shade. For a while, he stands on a narrow ledge at the end of a fuel tanker. It is just inches above the wheels. He cannot let himself fall asleep; one good shake of the train, and he would tumble off.

Moreover, the Mara Salvatrucha street gangsters, some deported from Los Angeles, always prowl the train tops looking for sleepers. Many MS gangsters settle in Chiapas after committing crimes in the United States and being expelled to their home countries in Central America. The police in Chiapas are more forgiving of gangs than those in El Salvador or Honduras. "There, the

police don't arrest you. They kill you," says José Eduardo Avilés, twenty-five, who was deported from Los Angeles to El Salvador and settled in Chiapas along the tracks.

The MS control the tops of freight trains operating north of the Río Suchiate, where many migrants going to the United States begin their trek through Mexico. They rob migrants riding the trains. Migrants, who are often afraid to press charges, make ideal victims.

About two hundred street gangsters in Chiapas share the rolling criminal enterprise. Father Flor María Rigoni, the priest at the Albergue Belén migrant shelter, counts nineteen groups. Each controls a specific part of the train route and certain stations. Periodically, the groups meet to decide who gets what.

"We ask for money to take people to the U.S. on top of our trains," says Jorge Mauricio Mendoza Pineda, twenty-four, describing what he and his Mara Salvatrucha gang do in Chiapas. "They give me their money. If people treat me well, I treat them well. If they don't, I don't.... If someone says, 'Please don't kill me,' I won't listen."

Before the train leaves, the gangsters roam the Tapachula depot, eyeing which migrants are buying food and where they stash their cash afterward. They try to get friendly with the migrants, telling them they have already done the train ride. Maybe they can offer tips? Many of the gangsters wear white plastic rosaries around their necks so the migrants will be less suspicious. They ask, "Where are you from? Where are you going? Do you have any money?"

Ten or twenty board the train, armed with machetes, knives, bats, lead pipes, and pistols. When the train gains speed, they surround a group of migrants. They tell them: hand over your money or die. Drugs embolden them. The gangsters carry marijuana and rocks of crack cocaine in the headbands of their baseball caps. A train engineer, Emilio Canteros Méndez, often sees the armed gangs through his rearview mirror. Fights erupt on top of the boxcars. Migrants who anger the gangsters because they don't have money or resist are regularly tossed off the moving train or left dead on the tops of the cars, to be discovered by train workers at the next stop.

Gangsters' warnings to migrants not to go to the police are ruthlessly enforced. Julio César Cancino Gálvez, with Grupo Beta Sur, recalls how a group of about thirty migrants at the Tapachula train station asked him why the authorities weren't clamping down on the gangsters. Cancino told them they needed witnesses. He urged the migrants to step forward and report abuses. One nineteen-year-old Honduran in the crowd spoke up. He described his assailant in detail.

Hours later, the Red Cross asked Cancino if he could help an injured migrant. It was the same Honduran teenager. His right ribs were broken. His entire chest and face were badly bruised. He spoke slowly, in a whisper, clasping his chest. Two gangsters had overheard his description and kicked him mercilessly. "Next time, we kill you," the gangsters told him. The teenager, afraid for his life, asked to be deported.

Many of the migrants on Enrique's train huddle together, hoping for safety in numbers. They watch for anyone with tattoos, especially gangsters who have skulls inked around their ankles—one skull, police say, for every person they have killed. Some wear black knit hats they can pull

down over their faces. Their brutality is legendary. Migrants tell of nine gangsters who hurled a man off their train, then forced two boys to have sex together or be thrown off, too.

Enrique has heard of the most dangerous gangsters: El Indio, who claims the Guatemalan side of the Mexican border; Blackie, a chubby Salvadoran with dark skin and MS tattooed on his forehead, whose territory stretches from the border to Arriaga in northern Chiapas; and El Yaga, Porkie, and Home-boy.

During his first attempts north, a chance meeting saved Enrique from the worst of the gangs. As he set out on his trip, he noticed another teenager, a gangster named El Brujo, at the bus station in Honduras waiting to go to the Mexican border. Enrique doesn't like gangs. But as the two spent hours traveling through Honduras and Guatemala together, they became friends. On their first train ride through Chiapas, El Brujo introduced Enrique to a dozen other MS members, among them Big Daddy, who is skinny and short; El Chino (the Chinaman), who has slanted eyes; and El Payaso (the Clown), who has a big mouth and eyes. On subsequent trips, when he was deported, he always stuck with one of these gang members to protect himself from any attacks.

On his seventh trip, the convenient relationship ends. He is on the train with El Brujo and two other MS gangsters, who are carrying machetes. One of them is upset because a member of the rival 18th Street gang has stolen his shirt during a train stop in Chiapas. The MS gangsters decide to retaliate and throw the gangster off the train. Enrique refuses to participate, creating a rift. "If you are MS, you have to kill 18th Streeters. And if you are 18th Street, you must kill MS. I wasn't like that," Enrique says.

After the fight with his friends, halfway through Chiapas, the gang members stop riding with Enrique. That night, without their protection, the six men beat him on top of the train. Now, for a second time, he is alone on a train. He must stay alert.

Some migrants, after days without sleep, nap on their feet, using belts or shirts to strap themselves to posts at the ends of the hoppers. Others get off the train and stretch out across the rails, using one as a footrest and the other as a pillow. They believe it is the only way to catch sleep and not miss the next train—they trust that the vibrations from the locomotive will wake them. Some also believe, mistakenly, that snakes cannot slither over the rails, so they sleep there for protection. Exhausted, many sleep so soundly they do not hear the trains bearing down on them: the earsplitting horn, the screaming brakes. They lose limbs and are sometimes decapitated. By the time they see the migrants on the rails, train drivers know they don't have enough distance to stop the train. Many say they simply ask God for forgiveness and drive on.

Enrique allows himself to doze only on trains farther north, where the gangsters no longer control the tops of the trains. There, he jams his body into the crevice on top of a hopper, next to the trapdoors used to fill the car. Or he waits until the train rounds a curve, giving him a good view of all of the cars. He spots a boxcar with its door open. When the train slows, he jumps off and races to the boxcar, jumping inside for a quick nap.

In Chiapas, most train riders struggle to stay awake. Dagoberto Hernández Aguilar uses the memory of his first train ride to stay up. Two teenagers on top of a nearby boxcar dozed. The train suddenly lurched forward. The two slid off. He is not sure if they survived. He chants one sentence to himself, over money they'll make in the United States, tell jokes, pour drops of alcohol into their eyes, and sing. At 4 A.M. the train sounds like a chorus.

Today, Enrique is terrified of another beating. Every time someone new jumps onto his car, he tenses. Fear, he realizes, helps to keep him awake, so he decides to induce it. He climbs to the top of the tank car and takes a running leap. With arms spread, as if he were flying, he jumps to one swaying boxcar, then to another. Some have four- to five-foot gaps. Others are nine feet apart.

The train passes into northern Chiapas. Enrique sees men with hoes tending their corn and women inside their kitchens patting tortillas into shape. Cowboys ride past and smile. Fieldworkers wave their machetes and cheer the migrants on: "Qué bueno!" Mountains draw closer. Plantain fields soften into cow pastures. Enrique's train slows to a crawl. Monarch butterflies flutter alongside, overtaking his car.

As the sun sets and the oppressive heat breaks, he hears crickets and frogs begin their music and join the migrant chorus. The moon rises. Thousands of fireflies flicker around the train. Stars come out to shine, so many they seem jammed together, brilliant points of light all across the sky.