

## **Café con Leche**

JAMES T. FITZGERALD  
THE LITERARY CLUB – CINCINNATI, OH  
MAY 17, 2010

Some experiences are hard to forget – especially a near death experience. After that, life goes on and new experiences layer over old ones, and a lifetime of memories are stored away as well. But one detail of that night of August 13, 2008 in Venezuela comes back unexpectedly like the sudden dark cloud on a sunny day. It's the memory of looking into that round black hole that was the barrel end of a revolver aimed at my face.

My wife Leslie and I along with our son, Sean had arrived in Caracas' Maiquetia airport on Delta flight #193 from Atlanta on the night of August 7 to attend the wedding of one of my wife's nieces. It was my second trip to Venezuela that summer and perhaps the 40<sup>th</sup> or more flight I had made to the country since I had met my Venezuelan born wife whom I married there in 1967.

Maiquetia International Airport has a rather spectacular setting on a narrow strip of flat land with the Caribbean Sea immediately to the north and mountains rising up 7500 feet to the south. If you're lucky enough to land in daylight you will see the Venezuelan coastline as you approach the airport with sheer mountains draped in the multiple greens of fern and frangipani and palm diving sharply into the aquamarine and turquoise sea.

The tranquility of that scene dissipates quickly, however, once the arriving passenger leaves customs and is carried forward by exuberant fellow travelers into an equally exuberant mass of Caraqueños greeting arriving family and friends. Beyond the shouting, hugging crowd are swarms of official and unofficial baggage handlers, taxi

drivers and greeters shouting offers of assistance, money exchange and rides into Caracas.

Having heard the oft repeated tales of travelers who had loaded themselves and luggage into legitimate looking taxis for the 45 minute drive to the city, only to be hijacked and robbed and sometimes even kidnapped or killed, we had arranged in advance to be met by a dependable driver service. With the airport at sea level, the expressway, originally built by military dictator, Perez Jimenez in the 1950's, rises 2500 feet, tunneling through mountains before arriving in the City and Federal District of Caracas. The setting of this city of 4.5 million residents is spectacular, stretched out in a long valley surrounded by mountains many of which are now covered with tens of thousands of shacks, euphemistically called ranchitos or little ranches. The ranchitos, concentrated on the western part of the city, were originally squatters shacks built of scrap materials by newly arrived transplants from the countryside looking for a better life in the city. Over the past 50 years they have morphed into permanent neighborhoods with purloined electrical service, satellite dishes and even schools and churches. As shabby as they appear in daylight, at night these urban slums are transformed into a fantasy of countless twinkling lights that seem to be a multitude of quaint villages spread over the mountain sides.

Following a ride through a tangle of double deck expressways, we arrive at the Hotel Intercontinental Tamanaco, in the upscale eastern neighborhood of Las Mercedes. Built in 1953 and renovated and updated several times, the Tamanaco is a gated and civilized island of tranquility in a city known for its chaotic traffic and its distinction of being the murder capitol of the world. The name, Tamanaco, is that of an Amerindian

chief who lead his tribe against the Spanish invaders in the Caracas valley where the city is now located.

The country that is now Venezuela was first seen by Europeans when Columbus landed there on his third voyage in 1498. A year later, in 1499, Amerigo Vespucci led a naval expedition along the northwest coast where he saw the native people living in villages whose buildings, called palafitos, were built on timber posts set in the water, and as a result he gave this land the name, Venezuela or “little Venice.” Similar villages, occupied by the Guajiro Indians, still exist today along rivers near Lake Maracaibo.

It was not until 1567, however, that Caracas was founded by the Spanish Captain, Diego de Losada, and it was his troops who finally captured and executed the native chief, Tamanaco, who has subsequently become a legend among the indigenous people. More recently President Hugo Chavez has tried to identify himself with Tamanaco and has called upon his name in speeches as a symbol of resistance to foreign influences, American imperialism and the Venezuelan white elite he brands as oligarchs.

The pleasure of travel to any part of the world comes in three phases, I believe. There is the planning and anticipation that can stretch out over many months. Then there is the actual trip itself which is often measured in days or weeks. And finally there are the memories of travel that last a lifetime. As part of the planning phase, I always think it is interesting and helpful to step back and look at some of the peculiar and distinctive influences that helped shape the history and culture of the country. Venezuela has its own unique history and the origins of some of the present problems in Venezuela have strong roots in the country’s colonial and post colonial past.

Colonial Venezuela differed from major centers of the Spanish empire in several ways. It lacked highly developed native societies such as the Incas or Aztecs and seemed to offer few opportunities for mining gold and precious stones. Without the get rich quick atmosphere of Mexico and Peru, it remained somewhat on the fringe of the Spanish empire and initially attracted fewer settlers from Spain. Smugglers, traders, pirates and adventurers from Portugal, France, England, Holland and even Germany frequented and sometimes settled along the coast in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

Like all the colonies, Venezuela started with a sizeable population of indigenous peoples whom the Spanish, thinking they were in India, mistakenly named Indios, or as we more properly, if somewhat awkwardly now call Amerindians. The early Spanish colonists in Venezuela established a diversified agricultural economy. Since the native Amerindian population would not conform to the disciplined plantation regime, wealthy Spanish landowners began importing large numbers of African slaves in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Unlike the colonists of the same period in North America, who frequently came in family groups, the Spanish arrived mostly as single men. The natural result was that liaisons and marriages with local women were common and inevitable, and the children of these unions were of mixed race.

To preserve the Spanish crown's power in the colonies, the colonial society and power structure was developed on the basis of an elaborate caste system, directly related to a person's degree of descent from parents of Spanish blood and the purity of that Spanish blood. This comprehensive Spanish version of apartheid placed the population into a hierarchical pyramid. In Venezuela this pyramid consisted of six levels.

1. Españoles were at the top point of the pyramid. These were people born in Spain who had emigrated to the colonies.
2. Immediately below them were the Creoles, who were people of Spanish ancestry who were born in Latin America.
3. The third and next layer down were the Mestizos who were individuals with one Spanish and one Indian parent.
4. Immediately below the Mestizos were the Cholos who were people with one Mestizo and one Indian parent.
5. The next lower slice of the pyramid consisted of Pardos, also called Mulattos, who were people with one Spanish and one black parent.
6. The sixth and bottom level of this societal pyramid was made up of blacks, Amerindians and Zambos who were mixtures of these two races.

As amazing and abhorrent as this elaborate racial parsing of society in Venezuela was, the Mexican colonial regime of the 18<sup>th</sup> century further elaborated and refined the system to be able to describe and categorize 16 racial mixtures and caste levels.

These defined societal levels codified and institutionalized racial discrimination to a fine degree in Spanish colonies, like Venezuela, for almost 400 years, and only began to break down during and after the wars of independence. In Venezuela it was the Creole General, Simon Bolivar, at the head of an army whose foot soldiers were made up largely of Pardos, Zambos and Blacks, who successfully led Venezuela to independence in 1821.

With independence came the abolition of slavery and in theory the dissolution of discriminatory laws. In fact, however, many customs and attitudes remained much the same as they had always been. The white or light skinned elite still largely controlled the

wealth and power in Venezuela. In fact, immigration laws until almost the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century blatantly opposed entry for non-whites and actively favored white Europeans, but racial discrimination in Venezuela has always been more complex and nuanced than that in the United States.

It was during the post revolutionary period in 1842 that my wife's great grandfather, Heinrich Schmilinski, emigrated from Hamburg, Germany and settled in Maracaibo, Venezuela where he met and married a lady from Brazil, had 3 sons and set up a successful coffee export business. Family history indicates that this German immigrant was so successful, in fact, that jealous local Venezuelan businessmen made life so difficult, that he packed up his family, moved temporarily to New York where he became a U.S. citizen in 1873, but eventually returned to Hamburg. One son, Lucas Federico Schmilinski decided to stay, marry a local girl and make a life for himself in Venezuela. His son, Eduardo, was my wife's father. Eduardo's 8 children and his 36 grandchildren who have begun to produce yet another generation are part of a singular but common story of how one European immigrant has been responsible for an ever expanding impact on the diversity of Venezuela.

The mixture of races that is so deeply connected to the history of Venezuela is a source of pride to most Venezuelans. The poet Andres Eloy Blanco likened the racial composition in Venezuela and the many shades of skin color of its people to "café con leche" or coffee with milk. To completely appreciate that comment, you have to be aware of the typical Venezuelan's addiction to and love for coffee. Venezuelans are proud to proclaim that, per capita, they drink more coffee (and incidentally more premium scotch) than any other country in the world. Coffee was first cultivated in

Venezuela in the 1700's, and Venezuelan coffee is still considered to be among the best in the world.

But to order a cup of coffee in Venezuela is not as simple as saying, “Un café por favor.” Long before Howard Schultz opened his first Starbucks in Seattle and invented his menu of multiple choices of coffee sizes, flavors and colors, the Venezuelans had already devised over 15 combinations of coffee strengths and milk additions, each with its own name and its distinctive shade of brown. Former President, Romulo Betancourt liked to say “We are all a café con leche people, some with more coffee and some with more milk.” Because of their long history as a multiracial society, many Venezuelans, especially the upper and middle classes, like to think of themselves as egalitarian and free of prejudice, but the urban and rural under classes have long harbored resentments and a perception that racial democracy is a myth. Ambitious leaders have from time to time tapped into this simmering discontent.

But back to Venezuela in August 2008. My family and I had settled into the manicured tranquility of the tropical retreat that is the Tamanaco Hotel. In this secure and peaceful environment, with Caracas' eternal spring-like climate, it is easy to forget about the turmoil and danger and indignities that face so many citizens who live in this city that spreads out below.

The early evening wedding we had come for took place in a nearby chapel and was simple and elegant, it was followed by a reception, in an historic hacienda set in a large park-like setting just outside the city. The rustle of palms in the evening breeze, the chorus of tree frogs and the strains of a Baroque string quartet greeted the arrival of the

wedding party. The ancient candle lit buildings enclosed a large courtyard where the reception took place.

Over the years, I have attended many wedding receptions in Venezuela staged by families both rich and poor. All have three common notable characteristics. They are lavish, loud and long. As the guests arrive the food courses commence and carry on in elaborate variety literally all night long, as waiters continue through the night to bring fresh bottles of Moet Champagne and Johnnie Walker “Black” to all the tables. It seems to me that all Venezuelans love music and they like it loud. They also love to dance and do it very well and as a result the sometimes deafening pulsations of Latin rhythms never seem to stop. The third element that also seems to never end is the party itself which goes on until dawn, when by tradition, a special chicken soup made for the occasion is served to the surviving guests to ease their transition into the reality of a new day. My 89 year old mother-in-law insists on staying till this soup course, but my wife and I head back to the hotel at the more sensible hour of 4 a.m.

After a day of recovery at pool side, Leslie, Sean, and I together with Leslie’s sister Betsy and her husband Ramon load their car and head out on the road early in the morning for some exploration of the countryside and some much anticipated vacation time. We plan our itinerary to take us west out of Caracas to the Caribbean coast and some of the most beautiful and deserted beaches in the country. Following a couple of restful days there in one of the lovely little posadas, or country inns that can be discovered throughout Venezuela, our drive will take us south across the middle of the country to the city of Barinas and later to the lovely old colonial city of Merida, high in the Andes.

A drive of no more than a few hours in any direction in Venezuela will reveal the incredible variety and beauty of the land. Venezuela is the only place on earth where a chain of snow capped 15,000 foot peaks run to the sea – the Andes with beaches, and mountain towns with tropical warmth. The country has more than 1800 miles of beaches and is said to have largest rainforest in the world. Twenty percent of the country is untapped jungle wilderness where small Amerindian settlements deep in the jungles have rarely if ever encountered outsiders. The world’s tallest waterfall, Angel Falls at 3212 feet, is in the eastern state of Bolivar near the Brazilian border, in a misty and mysterious landscape of tepuys, or table top mountains, said by some to have been discovered by Sir Walter Raleigh and certainly inspired Author Conan Doyle’s “*The Lost World.*” The country also has vast flat grasslands that were for many years the breadbasket of the country and grazing land for large dairy farms and cattle ranches. All of this is found in a relatively compact country with a land mass only twice that of California.

Barinas, then, was our destination since we planned to spend the night there at the home of Betsy and Ramon. Barinas is Ramon’s home town and it also happens to be the home town of Venezuela’s notorious president, Hugo Chavez. Not many people ask me about Ramon, when I mention Venezuela, but everyone wants to know about Chavez. So who is this guy Hugo Chavez?

The man who fancies himself the 21<sup>st</sup> century Simon Bolivar was born on July 28, 1954 in the tiny village of Sabaneta in the state of Barinas, close to the border with Columbia, where the Andes Mountains slope down to the vast savannah that has made the city of Barinas the center of Venezuela’s richest agricultural area. Sabaneta consists of a few shacks along a dirt road, typical of so many other tiny towns inhabited by

Venezuela's poor, brown skinned uneducated masses. Chavez came of age amid this mix of grinding rural poverty, racial isolation and political and economic turmoil.

Chavez was the second of six sons, and his parents, living in public housing, decided they could not raise all the children at home. Hugo and his older brother, Adan, were sent to live with their grandmother. This early traumatic experience and sense of rejection by his parents together with the never ending virus of poverty deeply affected young Hugo and created within him what some have called his "messianic inferiority complex."

Chavez is remembered by his teachers as a studious but unruly student. In high school in Barinas, he came under the sway of Jose Esteban Ruiz, an historian, poet and ardent Communist. Ruiz regaled him with stories of Simon Bolivar, Ezequiel Zamora and other revolutionary heroes and their struggle to lead the peasants against the white European elite. Other Ruiz heroes were Fidel Castro and Che Guevara with their struggles against American imperialism. Young Hugo grew up with intense anti-Americanism as well as scorn for the light skinned Venezuelan oligarchy.

Upon graduation from high school, despite poor grades, he was accepted into the Venezuelan Academy of Military Science based on his athletic skills. He later admitted, "Baseball saved me." Again at the Academy he is remembered more for his revolutionary rhetoric and strong anti-American sentiments than his academic accomplishments, and he graduated as a lieutenant in the Venezuelan Army in 1975, last in his class of 67 cadets.

In his years as a young officer his rise was slow as he was moved to various posts around the country. He quietly expanded his circle of ideological accomplices and

became, in effect, a guerilla in uniform. Finally in 1991 he was assigned to a base in Caracas where he sensed opportunity as the fortunes of then President Carlos Andres Perez began to wane. Perez's attempt to reduce domestic oil subsidies in line with IMF guidelines and raise gasoline prices resulted in street riots and chaos. (A gallon of gasoline in Venezuela still costs only about 12 cents today.) On February 4, 1992, Chavez led a bloody and abortive coup attempt that was badly bungled and he ended up in prison charged with treason. His image as a man of the people, rebelling against a corrupt government, however, grew while he was in prison. After President Perez was impeached in 1993, the new President Caldera pardoned Lt. Colonel Hugo Chavez in 1994, and just three years later he announced his candidacy for President.

The appealing campaign narrative spun by Chavez featured a poor, dark skinned former paratrooper who would overcome the odds to defeat a predominately white regime and fight institutionalized government bureaucracies and the evil empire to the north and to end poverty, corruption and racism. It was a populist appeal meant to resonate with the masses but it even attracted many in the middle class who were fed up with the endemic political corruption that was fueled by the enormous wealth flowing into government coffers through the nationalized oil industry. One former Venezuelan oil minister has called oil the curse of the modern world and "the devil's excrement." The truth is that most oil-rich countries have been doomed to a seemingly permanent condition of kleptocracy by a few, poverty for the rest, chronic backwardness and worst of all, the loss of a national soul. Each oil state has found its own way to failure.

By the time the ballots were counted in December 1998, Chavez's populist appeals had worked and he beat out three other candidates, including a former Miss

Universe, with polls showing he had garnered 80% of the vote. Tellingly, before even taking office, Chavez jetted off to Havana to pay his respects to his hero and campaign strategist, Fidel Castro.

Once in office, Chavez moved quickly to set up a Constituent Assembly to rewrite the Venezuelan Constitution and by declaring judicial and legislative emergencies, he fired over 200 judges and forbade the legislature to meet. Within four months, a new constitution was unveiled that abolished the bicameral legislature, extended the term of president from five years to six and from one term to two, and reset the clock on his term to allow him to stay in office until 2013. When he ran under this new constitution in 2000, he easily won reelection. The opposition blundered by boycotting this election, guaranteeing a legislature made up only of Chavez supporters.

Although after the 2000 election his support among the Venezuelan underclass remained strong, a backlash was building among moderates, students and the worker's unions. On April 11, 2002, close to a million Venezuelans staged a peaceful protest march in Caracas. As the march neared the presidential palace, gunshots from civilian snipers, known as Chavistas, situated on rooftops felled more than 100 marchers, 13 of whom died. On this crucial day, the army refused to shoot peaceful marchers and arrested Chavez for ordering them to do so and it was soon announced that he had agreed to resign. However, protest riots and looting broke out in Caracas and other parts of the country. The military panicked, reversed itself and returned Chavez to power. Far from chastened, he used the incident to blame this coup on the United States, foreign business interests and Venezuelan oligarchs. After this experience, Chavez embarked on a plan to

systematically eliminate all opposing institutions, organizations and individuals in the country.

His primary weapon has been oil and the enormous revenues this produces for his interests since he seized absolute control over Venezuela's national oil company early in his presidency. He has built a strategic military and oil alliance with Iran as well as with Russia and China. He has allied himself with the FARC guerillas in Columbia and their network of terrorists, kidnappers and drug traffickers. Fulfilling Castro's dream, he has funded Communist insurgencies throughout Latin America, effectively annexing Bolivia, Nicaragua and Ecuador as surrogate states. And within Venezuela he has more soldiers on active and reserve duty and more modern weaponry – mostly from Russia and China – than any other nation in Latin America.

To be sure, there is lively opposition to the Chavez regime in Venezuela, but he has effectively used the apparatus of government over which he has near absolute control to stifle the voices he doesn't want heard. Hundreds of private radio stations have been shut down. Only one independent television station still broadcasts but the owner of that station, Globovision was recently imprisoned. Church leaders, business owners and journalists are threatened and intimidated. Opposition political figures have been exiled or arrested under laws that make it a crime to make comments that "criticize the President and his government or that could cause instability or threaten the peace." Ignoring the threat of being devoured by the beast he has created, the Chavez regime has recruited and trained armies of armed vigilantes and club wielding street fighters and professional goons to intimidate ordinary citizens who have the courage to demonstrate and protest. It

is clear that Mr. Chavez poses a threat not only to his own people but a threat close to home for the United States.

It would be easy to spend the remainder of the evening discussing Chavez but let me get back to my story and our Venezuelan journey. After our drive that day from the beaches of the Caribbean coast, across the belly of Venezuela to Barinas, we arrive in town about 5:30 in the evening. The end of the day finds us road weary and hungry so we're ready for an early dinner. Betsy and Ramon suggest a nearby outdoor steakhouse where we dine on prime beef and a selection of other local specialties. We wash it all down with ice cold bottles of cerveza Polar, one of three locally made beers available in the country. Satisfied with our dinner and lulled into a kind of dreamy lethargy by the evening heat, we make our way back to the upscale suburban neighborhood where Betsy and Ramon live. Our son Sean had not joined us for dinner but instead opted to go with his cousin, Ramon Jr. and two of his friends, Carlos and Daniela for hamburgers.

The four of us settle into the cozy family room. Ramon sits at his computer and I am able for the first time in days to get an internet connection for my laptop to check my e-mails. Leslie and Betsy sit nearby, going through the many photos of the wedding in Caracas that we had all taken with our digital cameras. By 10 o'clock the day's drive, the big dinner and that last bottle of beer are making it difficult for me to concentrate so I excuse myself to go to our bedroom. Leslie joins me shortly later. I lie on my side, turned away from the light of her lamp as she reads for a bit. As I begin to doze off, I hear loud voices coming from the main part of the single level home. Just Ramon Jr. and Sean and their friends I think, returning from their evening out. Within moments our bedroom door slams open against the wall and an agitated unfamiliar male voice is

shouting angrily. I open my eyes, prop myself up on my elbows and see an unshaven stranger in a tattered red tee shirt and dirty blue jeans in our bedroom, pointing a gun directly at Leslie and me.

What I don't know at that point is that Sean and Ramon and their friends had returned from their dinner some 15 minutes earlier and were sitting on the front porch chatting about differences between Venezuela and the U.S. Two men suddenly rush across the front lawn, waving pistols and screaming that this is a hold up. Both assailants are muscular, dark and stocky and appear to be in their early 30's. One is rude, loud and aggressive; the other tight-lipped and almost passive.

They demand to know who lives here and force Ramon to open the door. Then they herd the four into the house, demand their money, watches and jewelry and command them to lie on their stomachs on the floor. Ramon Sr. hears the commotion and he enters the room to check; he is robbed and forced to the floor also, where, knowing the mortal danger they are in, he begins to pray aloud. Sean is convinced they are about to be shot.

The loud and aggressive one keeps shouting, "Don't look at us!" but Sean says his eyes were fixed on the gun, imagining what it will sound like as the trigger is pulled. They recognize that Sean is a foreigner and speculate he's Italian or an Arab. Demanding to know where he's from, Sean confesses he's American. This seems to enrage the more volatile one who screams, "Oh, we have a stinking Yankee here!" He pulls Sean up roughly and demands to see his passport. Marching him at gunpoint back to his bedroom, he examines the passport, spits on it and throws it to the floor. He grabs Sean's iPod and \$200 in cash from his nightstand and takes him back to the living room floor.

At that point the angry aggressive one decides to explore the rest of the house and bursts into the bedroom where Leslie and I are. He's shouting "Give me money! Give me dollars! Don't look at me," while he waves his pistol in our faces. Leslie, the instinctive extravert immediately tries to engage him. "Don't hurt us! Take what you want." The intruder is shouting, "SHUT UP, LADY, SHUT UP!" And I, the innately reserved one, try to pretend I'm not looking, to quiet Leslie and to whisper to her not to look at him. The guy is agitated and nervous and his eyes have a chilling glaze. I'm wondering if he's high on cocaine since Barinas is a major transit point for illegal drugs smuggled by Columbian guerillas across the nearby border.

He grabs \$500 in Venezuelan and U.S. cash off my night table and jerks the watch off my arm. He begins ransacking the room, pulling out drawers, and dumping our suitcases on the floor. Unnoticed by him is a black cloth wallet in my suitcase containing almost \$3000 in U.S. currency. We travel with dollars because the government currency controls and artificial exchange rate make the value of Venezuelan currency ridiculously high, so family and friends there trade bolivares for dollars at twice the official rate.

After spending what seems like eternity with this screaming madman in our room, the other assailant with a gun at their backs marches Betsy, whom he discovered in another bedroom, together with Ramon, Sean and Ramon Jr. and Carlos and Daniela into our bedroom and forces them all to kneel on the floor around our bed. He quickly disappears leaving the eight of us alone with this high strung and malevolent miscreant. We later surmise the second guy went to collect the loot that by now includes 3 laptop computers, 3 digital cameras, jewelry, 4 watches, 3 cell phones, 2 iPods and almost \$1000 in cash.

With terror in their eyes, Sean and Ramon are bravely whispering for us to stay calm and cooperate while the enraged intruder continues to shout and wave his gun at us. With half closed eyes I stare at this maniac. I feel my heart pounding as I think how totally preposterous this is to be looking into the barrel of a gun while in the assumed shelter of my bed in the quiet of a family home. I squeeze Leslie's hand beneath the sheet and look at my son and family and friends, on their knees around my bed, and I know with terrible certainty that this may end very badly for us all. Will we all be shot? Will Leslie or Sean or I be kidnapped with outrageous demands for our release? Will I be driven to half a dozen bank automatic teller machines, forced to withdraw cash until the machines refuse more and then be shot in some dark and desolate spot? This is not fantasy. It happens with frightening regularity in Venezuela.

Suddenly a phone rings. It's the bad guy's cell phone. He answers with irritation, while keeping his gun leveled at us. "I'm busy! Don't bother me now! I'll be there later!" He shouts into the phone. A few minutes later his confederate enters the room behind him and says "Let's go! I have everything. Let's get out of here!" Then he adds, "They're decent people. Leave them alone." A few seconds hesitation. Both turn, slam the door and are gone.

As suddenly as the whole incident had started, it was over. For a few moments the eight of us in that room became like figures in a full scale diorama. We are frozen in place. All heads turned and all eyes on the door. Will they return? No sounds but the hum of the air conditioner. Finally young Ramon cracks the door and peers out. The front door is wide open. They're gone. There are some tears – there are smiles. We hug one another, but sort of tentatively, not really sure our nightmare is over.

A call by Ramon to the police brings a squad car some 45 minutes later. The two officers are friendly and chatty but only mildly interested in what had just happened to us. To them a routine call. They jot down a few notes, take our list of the stolen items, but don't even get out of their cruiser to inspect the crime scene. The unfortunate fact is that the police in Venezuela are not trusted and are widely believed to be in league with criminal elements and corrupted by the drug trade that is facilitated by the government. The police leave. We need to talk and retell our experiences, but finally we retire again for a restless night.

In the morning, Ramon Sr. and Junior and I head downtown to police headquarters to get a copy of the officers' report of the crime so I will have documents to submit to my insurance company. We are told there is no written report. I explain I need something in writing, listing the items stolen from me. The desk officer counters that I will need purchase receipts for all the items I claim were taken before he can write up a report. Pleas from Ramon finally persuade him to type up my list which I had brought with me on official Ministry of Justice letterhead which, on my return, was accepted without question by my Ohio Casualty Home Owner's insurance policy.

We wrapped up the final few days of our trip, not in a euphoria of having survived a perilous situation but in a heightened awareness of our vulnerability and a kind of post traumatic melancholy. On reflection I have wondered if we had been specifically targeted that evening or had we simply been random but not isolated victims in a place where lawlessness and violence have become commonplace. Was our experience a consequence of the racial and class conflict that the Chavez regime promotes in its populist propaganda? We'll never know. A sad fact is that within two weeks of our

experience, a nearby neighbor of Ramon and Betsy was murdered as he resisted an assailant intent on stealing his car as he left for work one morning. Tragically this beautiful country of warm and exuberant people living in what could be a tropical paradise are no longer safe and secure in their own land. The melting pot, or café con leche society, developed over the centuries, that Venezuelans have considered one of their strengths, is being spoiled and exploited to exacerbate racial, social, class and economic differences for political purposes. Although the Chavez government once enjoyed an 80% approval rating, its support now is below 40% largely because of wide deterioration of the quality of life for average Venezuelans, including soaring crime. Luckily for Leslie, Sean and me, we could simply pack our bags and leave – and we did.

We arrive early at Maiquetia Airport in Caracas on Sunday morning, August 17, for our 8:15 Delta flight to Atlanta and on to Cincinnati. We clear check-in and immigration smoothly and settle into a booth at a coffee shop near our departure gate. The friendly waiter asks with a smile, “Quieres un café, Señor?” Would you like a coffee, sir?” “Si, por favor,” I answer, “un café con leche, pero maroncito. Yes, please, a coffee with milk, but on the dark side.”