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A Juarez drug lord saved my life

Confessions of an accidental narco.

When the Mexican security forces arrest someone involved in drug trafficking, they make sure everyone knows. A news release isn't enough. The press officers hold a special kind of photo-op. All the elements of a good crime story are conveniently placed in one room: the agents, their detainees and the evidence of their crime. One of these press events took place at midnight in the military headquarters of Ciudad Juarez. It was 2009, one of the most violent years of the Mexican drug war.

Five armed soldiers guard two men on top of a platform. The men stand still, handcuffed, squinting at the constant flickering of camera flashes. Dozens of small packets wrapped in brown tape and plastic are lined up in front of them. Below, about 20 reporters await to hear details of the arrest. Minutes later, a military official greets them and reads a news release at loud: Personnel of the Mexican Army arrested two men in Ciudad Juarez, after finding 99 packets of marijuana inside their vehicle, 52 kilos in total, valued at 1.3 million pesos or \$100,000 in the black market. The arrested individuals are Americans Shohn Erich Huckabee, age 22, and Carlos Guillermo Quijas Ruiz, age 36.

It was one more story about drugs in Mexico. By 2009, the military and federal police had apprehended nearly 80,000 people linked to organized crime, mainly drug trafficking. This was the result of an aggressive strategy launched in 2007 by the federal government to combat the powerful cartels, until then practically untouched. "We work hard to prevent drugs from reaching your children," was the government's slogan. News about drug-related murders, shootouts and arrests were common and abundant.

But the case of Huckabee and Quijas, the alleged marijuana smugglers from El Paso, took a different turn when they spoke out a few weeks after their arrest. They told US officials that the soldiers who detained them near the Juarez border bridge had planted marijuana inside their truck and then tortured them in a military camp to keep them quiet. After their arrest, they had been placed in the Ciudad Juarez municipal penitentiary, known to be a hotbed for drug trafficking. The story made international news: two Americans fighting for their freedom in Mexico's broken justice system, amidst a violent drug war.

Most of the media coverage focused on the youngest of the prisoners, Huckabee, a baby-faced blonde with droopy eyes, who didn't speak Spanish and stood out among

the inmates of the prison, most of them convicted murderers and drug gang members. The other American, Carlos Quijas, was usually mentioned in passing, quoted here and there, but was never in the spotlight. Quijas explains the reason: one of his friends at the prison advised him to keep a low profile. "He told me, 'this is not the US, this is Mexico, if you want to get out, don't make too much noise,'" he says.

And that's what he did. He's not sure whether it was helpful, but after two and a half years imprisoned in Mexico, he was transferred to a US jail and then released on probation. Almost five years after his arrest, Quijas tells for the first time the details of his life as a prisoner accused of drug trafficking in Mexico, his experience in one of the country's most dangerous prisons, and his unusual friendship with the leader of his prison ward: a dangerous killer of the Sinaloa Cartel.

II. A quick trip to Juarez

Like many Pasoans, Quijas dreaded the border. He avoided going to Ciudad Juarez at all cost, especially in 2009 when the death toll reached an all-time high, eight murders a day. The Juarez-El Paso border, one of the oldest and most important drug corridors in the Americas, has never been immune to crime. But violence peaked in Juarez since 2007, when former Mexican president Felipe Calderon launched a large-scale attack against drug traffickers in the area. Within a few years, Juarez earned the title of the most dangerous city in the world, followed by Baghdad.

Unfortunately for Quijas, Juarez was also the hometown of his grandmother, who was dying of throat cancer. That December, his grandfather called him to say she didn't have much time left. "I had no idea it was that bad," Quijas says. "I wanted to visit her for a long time, but I didn't dare to go to Juarez." The fear of not saying goodbye to her finally convinced him to take the risk. Luckily for him, his friend and employer, Shohn Huckabee, was planning a trip across the border to get a cheap repair for his Dodge pickup truck. Quijas joined in. Huckabee would drive him to the other side, drop him off near his grandmother's house and meet him later at the border bridge.

They went to Juarez on December 18, 2009. The trip went as planned. Quijas saw his grandmother one last time. He spent all afternoon with her. She was weak and extremely thin. The cancer had devoured her voice, so he did all the talking. Around 5:20 pm, Huckabee picked him up at Lincoln Ave., located a few miles from the Americas-Cordoba Bridge, their route back to El Paso. Quijas was still nervous of being in Juarez. He had read news about Americans being kidnapped, usually those who drove expensive-looking cars. "But I never imagined what was about to happen," he says. "I guess that day, God wanted me to get in trouble."

This is what Quijas and Huckabee said happened next. Huckabee merged into the long car line heading to the border checkpoint, still a couple miles away. The traffic from Juarez to El Paso grows heavier and moves slower during Christmas season. Quijas

noticed four open military vans approaching the lane. Four or five soldiers stood on each van, carrying rifles, wearing bulky bulletproof vests over their olive-green uniforms. Black goggles and ski masks covered their faces. As the vans drove slowly next to the car line, Quijas saw a man inside an old white Nissan Altima parked across the street. He lifted his arm out the window and pointed at Huckabee's truck. Within seconds, they were surrounded by soldiers.

One of them ordered Huckabee to roll down his window. He asked him in Spanish what was he carrying inside the truck. Quijas told the soldier his friend couldn't understand him. "*No te hagas pendejo, contéstame*" (don't play dumb, answer the question), the soldier shouted. Quijas insisted that Huckabee didn't speak Spanish, and that they were only carrying tools and some paperwork. The soldiers dragged them out of the truck, pulled their sweaters over their heads and searched them. They took their wallets, money and Huckabee's wedding ring, which he never got back.

Quijas remembers a soldier yelling, "*Ahora sí se los cargó la chingada*" (now you're really fucked) before they were taken inside a military van. They were forced to lie on the floor, face down. As the van drove away from the border, a soldier pressed his boot against Quijas right cheek. Quijas' sweater had slipped down and he was able to see Huckabee next to him, still and quiet. "I was amazed at how calmed he was," Quijas recalls. "I whispered to him, 'They're probably going to kill us, we might not make it.'" He replied with a weak "OK."

After about 20 minutes, the van arrived to a military base. Quijas and Huckabee were taken to separate rooms. Quijas couldn't stop trembling; maybe it was the adrenaline or the temperature, which had dropped to almost 32 degrees FAHRENHEIT? . The soldiers stripped him down and blindfolded him with gauze bandage. The smell is his most vivid memory of that room, a nauseating mixture of feces and pine cleaner. A few minutes later the interrogation began.

Quijas heard a crisp, slow male voice: "Help yourself by helping us." The voice paused for a few seconds. "We need to know the location of El Siete." Months later, Quijas learned that Siete (seven) was a killer for the Juarez Cartel, who murdered 20 high school students in Juarez in 2010. But that night, Quijas says, he had never heard of him. That's what he told the soldiers over and over again, sometimes in Spanish, sometimes in English. His Spanish was not very good at the time. Either way, his interrogator was not pleased with his answer. The volume of his diplomatic voice grew slightly higher: "I'm going to have to ask these gentlemen here to help me get the information I need."

Quijas was dragged to another room. His hands and feet were bound with zip ties. There, he received several blows to the head, ribs and legs. The soldiers splashed a cold, putrid-smelling liquid over his head. Shortly afterwards, he felt the first electric shock in his lower back, then in his chest, his legs, his testicles, his rectum. The session might have lasted 30 minutes. The floor was slippery and cold. The stench intensified. After a while, the interrogation continued. Quijas could barely speak. Three hours,

maybe four had passed. "I couldn't move," Quijas says. "All I wanted was for them to kill me."

He begged for his death. "I just asked the soldiers not to behead me," he says. "I didn't want my mother to see me that way." He sensed movement around him, crackling voices over a walkie-talkie, incomprehensible mumbling. A few minutes later he heard another voice, this one sounded older and raspy: "We're not going to kill you." They picked him up, untied him and washed him with a hose. He looked at the white-tile floor through a narrow opening between his cheekbone and the blindfold. Blood was everywhere, but it was not his own. He realized that had been the liquid the soldiers threw at him. They dressed him with a soiled oversized sweatshirt and white pants with bloodstains. Quijas believed they belonged to a recently dead man.

He was back inside the military van. The engine started. Every few minutes, a cell phone played Motorola's "Hello Motto" ringtone. The soldiers spoke in code. They laughed. Quijas still thought they would kill him. The van stopped, the soldiers guided him to another room. Still blindfolded, Quijas heard a loud chatter. He could sense camera flashes around him. They took the blindfold off. He was on a platform, dozens of reporters and photographers stood below. Huckabee stood next to him. He had an empty look. Quijas wasn't sure if he had been tortured as well. It was almost midnight. The press conference was about to start.

The story ran in several local and national newspapers the next morning. One of the headlines read: "Americans arrested in Juarez for smuggling."

III. "This is not the guy"

The soldiers who arrested Quijas and Huckabee told a different story of what happened that December afternoon. According to their official reports, while patrolling the streets of Juarez, they saw Huckabee's truck parked in front of a convenient store, near the border bridge. They noticed the passengers were acting extremely nervous as the military vans approached the area. When the soldiers searched the truck they found two green bags with marijuana under the back seat. "It's ridiculous," Quijas says. "If we were to walk drugs to El Paso, we wouldn't keep them in the back seat for everyone to see." Neither he nor Huckabee saw the soldiers search the vehicle, he adds.

During their trial, which began a few months after their arrest, they told the prosecutors the soldiers had planted marijuana inside the truck shortly after they were detained. They produced three witnesses who stated in court they had seen soldiers taking two bags from their vans and placing them inside the Dodge Ram. The Mexican Army denied this. One of the witnesses, José Antonio Bujanda, was murdered by an unknown assailant on July 2, 2010, five months after testifying, according to news accounts. The other two went into hiding shortly after Bujanda's death. The Juarez police have not released any information related to the murder.

The true reasons and circumstances of Huckabee and Quijas' detention remain unknown. Before their arrest in Juarez neither had a criminal record related to drug trafficking or organized crime in the US (Huckabee got a few speeding tickets and was fined for illegal dumping). Fingerprint tests on the marijuana bags and packets came out negative for both, according to court records. None of the files produced by the Mexican Army or the Mexican Attorney's office (PGR) mention any links between the two men with a drug trafficking organization.

Quijas offers one theory to why the soldiers arrested him: They might have confused him with a distant cousin, who has a similar name, Guillermo Quijas. Relatives in Juarez have told him Guillermo is involved in the drug trade in Mexico. Quijas based this conclusion on two events. During the interrogation at the military base, he says he remembers someone uttering, "Éste no es el cabrón" (This is not the guy). Afterwards, in the Juarez prison, some of the inmates called him Guillermo, even before he introduced himself. "I didn't put the pieces together until later," he says. "In that moment I couldn't think straight." Guillermo was never mentioned during the trial or the police investigation. Quijas says he had no reason to bring his name up in court. "It's not his fault this happened to me."

Gustavo de la Rosa, a former human rights commissioner in Chihuahua State who represented Quijas and Huckabee in their habeas corpus petition (known as *amparo* in Mexico), says this is the most logical explanation to the case. "It's highly probable that the soldiers were indeed looking for a suspect," he says. "And then they found out they'd got the wrong cousin." The lawyer adds that after interrogating and torturing Quijas for four hours, the soldiers couldn't just let him go. "They would have had to do a lot of explaining," he says.

During the trial, the soldiers stated the arrest happened around 9:45 pm and that about half an hour later, they questioned the men briefly at the military base and then took them to the PGR SPELL OUT IN ENGLISH office PGR in Juarez to be booked. De la Rosa says that under Mexico's penal code, the soldiers should have taken Quijas and Huckabee directly to PGR. "The offices are practically 10 minutes away from where they were arrested," he adds. "Instead they drove to the other side of town to do the questioning."

The Mexican Army denied any use of torture during the interrogation. The day of the arrest, a military medical examiner reported that the suspects didn't present any injuries or evidence of torture, court records show. But a second examination, by a medic at PGR, indicated in a report that Quijas had bruises on his face, chest and legs. The military didn't issue any response.

Complaints of misconduct and human rights abuses against Mexican security forces were not unusual, especially in Ciudad Juarez. The Chihuahua State Human Right Commission has filed around 1,250 complaints of human rights abuses committed by the Mexican Army in Ciudad Juarez since 2007. None of them have resulted in

convictions, despite pressure from international human rights organizations and the US government.

De la Rosa, known as one of the feistiest human right defenders in Ciudad Juarez, was forced to leave the country in 2009 after receiving anonymous death threats. He came back to Juarez in 2010. The lawyer says he has no authority to deny or confirm Quijas and Huckabee's innocence. "That's not my job," he adds. Yet, he says there's no substantial evidence that Quijas and Huckabee were transporting marijuana across the border, but the same cannot be said about military misconduct and impunity in Juarez. "During that time, the military ruled the city," he adds. "It was practically a coup d'état."

IV. The golfer from El Paso

Before his arrest, Quijas had only fond memories of Ciudad Juarez. Although born in El Paso, he spent most of his adolescence living across the border with his extended family. He enjoyed the big dinners at his grandfather's house, the last place he visited before his encounter with the Mexican soldiers. His grandfather, Guillermo Quijas Cruz, was a federal congressman in the 70s for the Institutional Revolutionary Party (abbreviated PRI), one of the most powerful political parties in Mexico. He later became one of the top PRI members in Ciudad Juarez. Guillermo's political career gave the Quijas family a high social and financial status in the city. The young Quijas lived with his family in an upper-middle class neighborhood where he discovered one of his greatest passions: golf.

One of his neighbors invited him and his father to an exclusive country club. At the first swing of the club, Quijas was hooked. "It's a beautiful sport," he says. "I love the peace of the golf course." Soon he was playing regularly. He participated in tournaments across Mexico and the US and won a few trophies. At age 19, he married his first wife, Nancy, and two years later, they moved to El Paso to escape his financial struggles in Mexico. A few years later his parents and siblings moved to the border city for the same reason. They could no longer rely on Guillermo's wealth. He had lost most of it after supporting a failed Chihuahua governor's election campaign.

Quijas opened a cell phone store and later he went into selling second-hand kitchen equipment for restaurants. He also worked as a golf instructor at country clubs in El Paso. He soon realized it was not a profitable career. "Not a lot of people play golf here," he says. "It was really hard to make ends meet. He went into the construction business a few years later. His brother-in-law, a topographer, showed him the ropes of the industry. He got a job at a friend's construction firm. Quijas worked there until he got a better job offer, from his friend Shohn Huckabee.

He met Huckabee through a common friend in 2006. Since then and despite the age difference (19 and 32) they hanged out with the same people at the same bars and house parties. They shared a love for golf, which they played every other Friday. Both

worked at construction companies. Huckabee has just started his own, Site Solutions. By then, Quijas had good connections with local entrepreneurs and engineers, which Huckabee found valuable, Quijas says. His friend offered him a job as a manager in his company with a better salary than his previous job. He accepted immediately.

Huckabee did not respond to my interview requests. *El Paso Times* reporter Diana Washington-Valdez, the last journalist to interview him in 2012, said he is no longer talking to the press. Under his probation terms, Quijas can no longer be in contact with him.

Quijas divorced his first wife in 2004. In 2008, during his hangouts with Huckabee and his friends, he met Ana Hegeman. He was 35. She was 18. Ana (now Ana Quijas) says they grew close right away. She says she didn't have any real friends and she spent most of her time partying and drinking. "Charlie was the only person who said to me 'I think what you're doing is wrong,'" she says. "He was the only person who was willing to protect me." They dated for a few months. In the summer of 2009, Ana found out she was pregnant. She went to France to live with her half-sister for two months. When she went back to El Paso, she called and met with Quijas regularly, against her parents' wishes. One month before giving birth to her son, Liam, Ana received a text message from a friend. It contained a link to a news story about Quijas' arrest. "It was hyperventilating, but not crying yet," she says. "My mind was not registering what was happening."

V. The Juarez prison

Quijas and Huckabee spent their first night in the Juarez municipal penitentiary on December 21, 2009. They were escorted through a hallway with faint lights. Quijas noticed graffiti of naked women and swear words in Spanish on the creviced concrete walls. Inmates covered their cell gates with thick wool blankets to contain the radiation from their small electric heaters. The cells were tiny, with two beds in one corner, a toilet and a sink. Quijas saw cells with up to 12 inmates crammed inside. He remembers most of them looked like typical *cholos*: close-cropped, with tattoos all over their bodies and baggy jeans. None of them gave him a nasty look, but some of them threw kisses at him.

He paid 100 dollars to a prison guard to put him and Huckabee in a less crowded cell. He says: "I had never been in prison, but I knew how things worked." They shared a cell with two other men. One had been charged with kidnapping, the other for murder, but they were courteous to their new cellmates. They told Quijas they had seen his arrest on Channel 44, Juarez local news channel, dubbed the "tragedy network" by the locals.

The situation remained calmed for the rest of the night, but Quijas still thought he wouldn't survive much longer there. "I knew from the news that the situation at the jail was extreme," he says. "We had no protection." He worried about Huckabee. "It's not easy to be the only *anglo* at the prison and he was only a kid."

Quijas says that thanks to his family connections with the Mexican government his luck turned around. One of his cousins, Rene Franco Ruiz, a congressman in the state of Chihuahua, also for the PRI party, learned about his arrest and called a local official, a direct supervisor of the prison's director, Gerardo Ortiz. A dark, chubby middle-aged man with a large nose and a thick, black moustache, Ortiz was nicknamed "El Monstruo," the monster. He was known in Juarez for being ruthless with those who defied him as well as for having alleged connections with organized crime. He and his son were shot to death while driving on a highway in Chihuahua City in November 2010. Reasons for his murder remain unknown.

A few days after the phone call, Ortiz asked Quijas parents to meet him at his office. "Don't worry ma'am we're going to take care of him," he said to Quijas' mother, Elizabeth. "He will be living among the right people." Later, both had to give Ortiz a \$500 one-time payment for their new placement. Huckabee also mentioned this during an interview with El Paso Times in 2010.

Two days later, Quijas and Huckabee were escorted once more through the dark hallways. This time they would be taken to a much brighter place. Loud music, barbeque smoke, women laughing, children running. "It looked more like a middle class neighborhood than a prison," Quijas says. "I said to myself, 'Man, what is this place?'"

Quijas describes the cells in the area as spacious, with tile floors, kitchens, furniture, queen-size beds and exercise machines. Soon Quijas realized inmates had little to no restrictions. They could wear their own clothes, use cellphones and have visitors almost all the time. The prison guards or the soldiers at the watchtowers were not necessarily in charge. "He who owns money, owns the place," he says.

In early 2010, while Quijas awaited his sentence, news stories published in Mexico and the U.S. hinted at the lax rules and surreal environment of the Juarez municipal penitentiary. That April, female inmates competed in a beauty pageant entitled "Belleza Cautiva" (captive beauty). Young women walked through a runway swinging their hips, while family members cheered and held signs with their names. Twenty-two year old Cecilia Juarez took the crown. She had been charged for drug trafficking and just like Quijas, she was awaiting her sentence. A few months later, prison manager Ortiz organized a summer camp for the inmates' children. News broadcasts show them splashing their feet in a swimming pool and painting on cardboards in the prison's common areas.

Local newspapers ran photos of what reporters called "luxury cells." Austere and deteriorated spaces had been transformed into quasi-apartments, like the one Quijas describes. Inmates replaced rusty gates with faux wood and metallic doors with custom-made locks. "The prison guards didn't have keys to those doors," says Jorge Chairez, spokesperson for the penal affairs at the Chihuahua State prosecutor's office.

Chairez says criminals practically ran the Juarez prison in 2009 and 2010. "They plotted kidnappings, killings and attacks from inside the prison," he says. "They established

their own system and everybody had to follow through. There was no control." This has been a problem in prisons across the country. According to a report by Mexico's National Human Rights Commission, 60 percent of them are controlled by prisoners, thanks mainly to their ability to bribe corrupt employees.

Inmates' almost unlimited access to weapons and money also creates an extremely dangerous environment inside the prison, says Martin Orquiz, editor and reporter for *El Diario*, one of Juarez most-read newspapers. "Big riots were constantly erupting," he says. "There were dead bodies everywhere, they hanged some of them from the roofs. The scenes were horrific, out of a Stephen King novel." The root of violence, Ortiz says, is the rivalry between the local drug gangs. On one side are *Barrio Azteca* or *Los Aztecas*, one the most dangerous gangs operating in the border, and *La Línea*, the hit men for the Juarez cartel. On the other is *Artistas Asesinos* or *Los Doble A*, the army of the Sinaloa Cartel in Juarez.

Quijas says other inmates explained the divisions in the Juarez prison, what gangs operated in what sections. Since the prisoners of the VIP area were allied to the Sinaloa Cartel, they advised Quijas not to cross paths with the Aztecas. They would also inform him when it was safe to go out to the common areas and when it was better to stay inside. Quijas says he constantly heard gunshots in the distance and he saw dozens of dead bodies taken out of the jail by the police and the military. "Most of the time I felt safe, but I had to be in a constant state of alert," he says.

He took precautions. During an interview, Quijas shows me a photo in his cell phone. It's a snapshot of him sat on a wooden stool, behind him there's a cupboard with books stacked on top. He's wearing glasses, a white polo shirt and jeans. He is smiling. I look closely at the photo, I noticed he had something tucked into the waist of his jeans. "You had a gun?" I ask. He nods and later replies: "My friend gave it to me."

VI. EI M

During their first week at the prison, Quijas and Huckabee received a visit from two US Consulate officials, who told them they had a chance to return their country. Under a Mexico-US treaty, American citizens convicted in Mexico can serve time in a US prison, but they had to be sentenced by the Mexican government first. Quijas didn't want to have a drug trafficking record in the US, so he decided to fight for his acquittal at the Juarez district court. "I knew the jail was dangerous but I decided to take the risk anyway," he says.

But the odds were not in his favor. In March 2010, he and Huckabee were sentenced to five years in prison for marijuana possession with the intent to sell. They appealed twice but lost. The court dismissed their complaint of human rights abuses and the testimonies of the witnesses who saw the soldiers planting bags inside their truck. Human rights lawyer Gustavo de la Rosa says during that time, the courts would never challenge the military. "Judges publicly stated they were supporting the Army in its fight against drug cartels," he says. "If the military said someone was guilty, he was guilty."

By the time Quijas and Huckabee were sentenced, US and Mexican media had been following their case closely. Kevin Huckabee, Shohn's father, spearheaded a campaign to get his son out of jail. He wrote petitions, seconded by the Quijas family, to El Paso City Council. Councilmember Susie Byrd was one of their main supporters. She says the US government showed reluctance to intervene in the situation. "Nobody in the US government particularly those invested in the drug war wanted to admit that their allies were not acting in any manner to protect either civil or human rights," she says. The families of the prisoners also sought U.S. Senator from Texas, Kay Bailey Hutchison. By 2011, had been covered by major US and Mexican news outlets. In May 11 of that year, Hutchison sent a letter to then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in which she asked her to examine Quijas and Huckabee's case. In the letter she stated: "The allegations of torture and the denial of basic due process to United States citizens, Shohn Huckabee and Carlos Quijas, are very troubling."

Two months later, Wall Street Journal reporter Nicholas Casey interviewed Quijas and Huckabee in the Juarez prison. One of prisoners, a short man in his 30s, asked him about the visitor. Quijas explained he was a reporter working on an article on him that would help him get out of jail. The man advised him not to give any more interviews, to be discreet and not to anger people at the Mexican government.

Quijas asked me not to reveal the name of this man. We'll call him M. He describes him as a short man in his 30s, with dark skin and no visible neck. He wore jeans and polo shirts. M was not just any inmate, Quijas says, he was the boss. Other prisoners would greet him when he walked by the hallways of the jail. Everybody called him "señor."

M and Quijas met one month after his transfer to the VIP area of the prison. M's second in command and personal cook went to Quijas and Huckabee's cell to inform them his boss expected them for dinner. Quijas knew they couldn't reject the invitation. They chatted over *flautas* and beer. M offered his help and support for whatever they needed. In an interview with El Paso Times, Huckabee said the "inmate leader in his area of the prison took a liking to him" for reasons he couldn't explain. "I don't think there are other Americans who have been accepted into the circle of friends of the bosses," Shohn Huckabee said to the local newspaper.

M felt sorry for them, according to Quijas. "He saw us as a couple of poor *gringo* kids," he says. For the next few weeks, Quijas and M were just acquaintances. But their relationship grew stronger when they realized both were Jehovah's Witnesses. Quijas had practiced the religion since a very young age, M discovered it in prison. "He tested me," Quijas says. "He asked me questions only someone devout could answer." Quijas passed the test. Since then, they met regularly to discuss about religion. They talked about the consequences of Cain's slaying of Abel and the true meaning of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. "There were moments of great intellectual exchange," Quijas says. "He is extremely bright."

Soon the conversation became more personal. M talked about his life as a killer and drug smuggler for the Sinaloa Cartel. He told Quijas he was the main lieutenant of the cartel in Ciudad Juarez and took direct orders from high-rank members of the Sinaloa criminal organization, led by Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, whose name once appeared in the Forbes' world's wealthiest list and was named the most powerful drug lord in the world by the Treasury Department.

Quijas declined to reveal M's real name. He says it would be too dangerous for him, his friend and even for me. But he assures me M is who he says he is. "What if he lied to you?" I ask. "Not a chance," he snaps. He says he was there when M instructed his men to attack certain people and places in Juarez. The attacks made the news on Channel 44 and later worldwide. Quijas admits M asked for his opinion for a few strategic plans, but he declines to provide any details, he just says: "When you're there, your mind runs wild, you don't realize the consequences of what you say." Quijas says members of the military and federal police visited M at his cell to seek his advice him on how to deal with rival cartels. After a long pause, he says: "In the drug business, you have to tell truth, you have to back up your stories. If you're a liar sooner or later people find out, and you're dead."

El Diario reporter Martin Ortiz, who has covered drug cartels in Juarez for 15 years, says the descriptions sound familiar but he can't recall hearing about any high-profile drug trafficker who operated inside the Juarez prison. None of the reports of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) on the Sinaloa Cartel mention a member of the organization with his name or nickname. Quijas has an explanation: M has more than one name and one nickname.

In her article on the Juarez prisons, Texas Tribune reporter Melissa Del Bosque mentions a leader in the "Sinaloa wing" not known as M but as "The Assassin," who, according to inmates, he had killed more than 200 men. Del Bosque wrote: "With so many enemies on the outside, The Assassin is seldom seen roaming the prison. Bodyguards keep a close watch over the floor where he lives. The Assassin runs his section of the jail like a small-town mayor." Quijas declined to confirm if M and The Assassin are the same person or provide more details about his friend.

Quijas' wife, Ana, says she saw him once or twice when he visited Quijas at the prison. She remembers the first time she saw M he was sat on a chair watching TV. "He looked like most of the people there," she says. "Nothing special." She adds: "To be honest, I never paid much attention to what was happening in the jail, I was always focused on Charlie."

Carlos Sr., Quijas father, who visited several times at the prison says M was a very wise man. "You wouldn't guessed it by his appearance", he says. "But he was very eloquent, very intelligent." M was very kind to Quijas and his family, Carlos Sr. says. "We're very grateful for all the things he did for my son." When Quijas asks his mother Elizabeth to talk about M, she replies: "He's a man who's trying to do a lot of changes in his life, he's trying really hard, no doubt about that."

VIII. Notes from prison

Quijas says M not only protected him in the Juarez prison, he also taught him all there is to know about the Mexican drug trade during their long conversations at his luxury cell. Quijas asked his friend if he could take notes. He told him he wanted to write a book about his teachings and experiences of his life as a drug trafficker. Writing had never been a hobby for him, but after having spent almost a year in prison, Quijas decided to give it a try. What better subject than M and his teachings. His friend was hesitant at first, Quijas says. After asking permission from his bosses, he finally accepted. M dictated, Quijas wrote.

They met almost every day at M's cell. They called their secret meetings "bible discussions." Quijas would give his notes to his parents hidden inside his laundry so the prison guards on the Azteca's payroll would not confiscate them. The meetings went on for six months, Quijas says, but they were constantly interrupted by riots and shootouts, which increased during his last days at the Juarez prison. "It was hell," Quijas says.

In June 2011, the Mexican a group of federal police agents arrived to his ward. They detained hundreds of inmates, including Quijas. They were taken to the Ciudad Juarez International Airport. Quijas thought he would be finally transferred to a US prison. By then, the US government had certified Quijas and Huckabee's human rights abuses and officials were processing their transfer. Quijas was escorted inside a federal police airplane, but it was not destined for the US. Instead, it took Quijas and hundreds of inmates to a high-security prison located in Islas Marias, a string of islands on the Mexican Pacific coast.

The prison management told the Quijas family he was being transferred due to inmate overpopulation, but it seemed that wasn't the only reason so many prisoners were taken away. Shortly after Quijas' transfer, the Mexican federal police and the Chihuahua State government began a "cleanse" in the Juarez prison. Chihuahua penal affairs spokesperson Jorge Chairez says the police seized thousands of weapons, money, drugs and grenades. "You wouldn't imagine the things we found," he adds. The then director of the Juarez prison, Lucio Cuevas Sanchez, was arrested for alleged connections with organized crime. In September 2011, the Juarez penitentiary was officially taken over by the Chihuahua State government. Chairez says inmates with organized crime or other federal offenses are no longer placed in the prison. He adds that the violence has gone down since. "But it's far from being a model prison," he says.

Quijas spent six months in the Islas Marias prison. He describes it as "the worst place on Earth." His living situation changed completely. There were not cells in the prison, instead hundreds of inmates were locked in warehouses. Quijas describes his warehouse as the filthiest place he has ever been. Trash and excrement were everywhere. Rats scuttled around piles of garbage. Fresh food wouldn't last under the

extreme hot weather. The only available water was infested with worms. "You have to drink it, even if you get sick, or you won't survive," he says.

In December 2011, US officials informed the Quijas family they had finished their negotiations with the Mexican government to arrange Quijas transfer to a US prison. Huckabee had been transferred in July 2011. A few weeks later, Quijas was arrived at La Tuna prison in Anthony, Texas. He spent three months there, writing.

IX. The Mexican Mario Puzo

When I met Quijas, in July 2012, he told me he was writing a novel based on his notes from the prison, a book that would reveal the secrets of the drug trade in Mexico. "That's what Mario Puzo did with *The Godfather*," he said during our first meeting. "Uncover the secrets of the mafia in a novel." Quijas believes Puzo couldn't have come up with such a great storyline on his own. "To write a novel like that you have to know someone in the business, be an insider," he said. Writing a novel as opposed to a non-fiction book, he said, would protect him, and just like the readers of *The Godfather*, his readers would still know his book is based on true events.

A few months later, he showed me the notes he wrote in the Juarez prison: about 75 white pages written on both sides with black and blue ballpoint pens. Some of them have fold marks, but most of them are clean and crisp. The handwriting is small but legible. Quijas asked me not to reveal their content, but let me provide the subjects. They contain a description of how drugs are moved across the border and distributed in the U.S. and how drug money is laundered in South America and Europe. Quijas wrote about government corruption and the involvement of Mexican officials in the drug trade. The notes include the story of a drug trafficker working for the Sinaloa Cartel who operated in a major US city. At M's request, all names and places were changed. "That was his one demand," he said.

"Why do you think he agreed to do this?" I asked. Quijas looked up at the ceiling and sighed. "I guess he wanted to deliver a message, to tell his side of the story" he replied. "Everyone wants their story to be told."

Quijas said that his conversations with M were no different from some of the interviews of Mexican journalists to members of organized crime. He mentioned the notorious interview of Julio Scherer, the editor of *Proceso*, one of the most influential political magazines in Mexico, with Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada, one of the founders of the Sinaloa Cartel. According to *Proceso*, In April 2010, Zambada sent a letter to the magazine's offices requesting to be interviewed by Scherer. He provided specific instructions for the journalist on how to meet for the interview. In his article, Scherer described being picked up by a mysterious man at an unknown location and then drove to the El Mayo's location, a piece of information for which both Mexican and US agencies offer a substantial reward. Scherer was blindfolded during the whole trip.

The interview was brief and revealed little information about El Mayo or the Sinaloa Cartel. Yet, it prompted great controversy in Mexico. “When journalists interview drug lords, they are taking the risk of becoming their spokesperson,” wrote Mexican journalist Denise Maerker in her column for daily *El Universal*. But Quijas said he’s not acting as a public relations agent for drug traffickers. “I’m writing from my own perspective,” he added. “Nobody told me to write the book. That was my idea.”

I asked him about his motivation for writing the book. He mused. “I want people to know the truth,” he replied. “The truth about corruption, how everyone’s involved in the drug business, everyone wants a share, it’s a pigsty.” After a second pause, he added: “I think I deserve to tell that story, because I saw it first-hand, I went through it.”

Before the interview concluded, Quijas leaned toward me and whispered: “You’ll never know anyone who knows as much about the drug trade as me...no one who has been that close to these people.”

X. Zombie night

In January 2013, Quijas invited me to parents’ home in West El Paso, a high-roof house decorated with Chippendale furniture and Turkish carpets. He has lived there since his release in April 2012. Under court orders, he can’t live anywhere else.

A few weeks before my visit, he told me he had good news: Two movie producers have contacted him after reading an article about him in the Wall Street Journal. They want to make a movie about his experience in Juarez.

“Who would you want to play you?” I ask during a hamburger dinner with his family. “Norman Reedus,” he replies immediately. The name doesn’t ring a bell. “Have you watch *Walking Death*?” he asks. I haven’t. “That’s why,” he says. His younger brother hands me his cell phone. Reedus’ photo and bio appear on the screen. “Don’t they look alike?” his brother asks. There’s a resemblance. Both have narrow eyes, fit physique and messy and spiky hair. Reedus plays Daryl Dixon on the popular show on AMC about a zombie apocalypse. Dixon is a fearless zombie killer, who takes orders from no one, and always manages to survive. He’s not one of the main characters but he’s a fan favorite.

The *Walking Death* is the favorite TV show in the Quijas home. “Every Friday night, is zombie night here,” says Ana. She and Quijas got married a few weeks before my visit to his parents’ house. Their son Liam, who was born during Quijas’ time in the Juarez prison and is now three years old. He doesn’t live with them. Both decline to talk about their son on the record.

Quijas says he is excited about the movie project but his book is his priority. His plans have changed since we first met in July. He's no longer writing a novel, he wants to write an autobiography, detailing his time in the Juarez prison. "I don't think people would have been that interested anyway," he says. "They wouldn't know what really happened and what's made up. It's not worth it."

I ask him once more his reasons for writing a book. I get a different answer: "To be honest, I want to make money out of it." Quijas says life after prison has not been easy. Although the US government acknowledged he was a victim of torture in Mexico, the drug trafficking charges he received there now on his criminal record. He is officially a convicted marijuana trafficker. "That's a problem," he says. "It's hard to earn people's trust, especially employers." He currently works at a construction company owned by one of his closest friends. "If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't have a job," he says. But still his salary is not enough to support his family.

The problems with his criminal record go beyond the work-related arena. "There's a lot of hostility," he says. "The people who I thought were my friends are not talking to me anymore." But he says he's better off anyway. "My family is all I care about."

Quijas says he hasn't heard from M in a while. He heard rumors that he left the Juarez prison, but it was not an escape, he simply finished serving his sentence. I ask him if he'll include M's teachings in his autobiography. He replies: "I'll save those for my second book."

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Diana Washington-Valdez, El Paso Times reporter.

Martín Orquí, El Diario de Juarez reporter.

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