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The arrest, in July, 2009, of this La Familia leader provoked a spate of revenge violence, including attacks on federal police stations and

the torture and murder of twelve federal agents.

LETTER FROM MEXICO

SILVER OR LEAD

The drug cartel La Familia gives local officials a choice: Take a bribe or a bullet.

BY WILLIAM FINNEGAN

On the morning before I arrived in Zitácuaro, a beautiful hill town in the western Mexican state of Michoacán, the dismembered body of a young man was left in the middle of the main intersection. It was what people call corpse messaging. Usually it involves a mutilated body—or a pile of bodies, or just a head—and a handwritten sign. "Talked too much." "So that they learn to respect." "You get what you deserve." In the photograph in the Zitácuaro paper, the victim's arms and legs and torso all lay separately, impossibly, in the street. I didn't see a sign, but the message—terror—was clear enough, and everybody knew who left it: La Familia Michoacana, a crime syndicate whose depredations pervade the life of the region. I wanted to ask the police some questions, but I was advised not to let the police know I was in town. They might call *los malosos*—the bad guys—to tell them I was there asking questions.

Mexico's President, Felipe Calderón, declared war—his metaphor—on the country's drug traffickers when he took office, in December, 2006. It was a popular move. Although large-scale trafficking had been around for decades, the violence associated with the drug trade had begun to spiral out of control. Calderón's first act was to send sixty-five hundred soldiers and federal police into Michoacán. Large deployments to other hot spots, including Acapulco and the border cities of Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez, followed. Fifty thousand soldiers and twenty thousand federal police are now in the streets and countryside, but the bloodshed and disorder have grown worse. More than twenty-three thousand people have died in Mexico's drug war since Calderón's declaration—more than three thousand so far this year.

La Inseguridad, as Mexicans call it, has become engulfing, with drugs sliding far down the list of public concerns, below kidnapping, extortion, torture, murder, robbery, corruption, unemployment, and simple fear of leaving the house. The big crime syndicates—known as cartels, although they don't actually collude to set prices—still earn billions from the production, smuggling, and sale of drugs, but they have also diversified profitably. In Michoacán a recent estimate found eighty-five per cent of *legitimate* businesses involved in some way with La Familia. Analysts have begun describing Mexico as a "failed state," which is premature at best, but "state capture" is not too strong a term for the realities of power in an increasing number of places. That was my impression, certainly, in January and February in Michoacán.

"They're a second law," a schoolteacher in Zitácuaro said of La Familia. "Maybe the first law. If you need to collect a debt, you go to them. They'll charge you a fee, but you'll get your money. The police work for them. When they arrest people, they don't take them to police headquarters but to La Familia."

The schoolteacher, who asked me not to use his name, was talking about the local police. People were also afraid of the federal police, he said, and of the Army, and of the Navy. All are deployed in Zitácuaro. But none of these other forces appeared to be working directly for the bad guys. In fact, the local headquarters of the federal police had been attacked in July by La Familia fighters using assault rifles and grenades. I passed that building, which is still bullet-pocked, windowless, scorched, and abandoned, one morning in a taxi. My driver agreed that there had been an attack. He added that two federal officers had been killed.

I asked who the attackers were.

His face went blank. He eventually mumbled, "*Los otros*." The others.

I had seen a video of the attack on YouTube: armored S.U.V.s, commandos firing AK-47s, all in broad daylight. La Familia had been incensed, it was reported, by the arrest of one of its leaders, and then by a bloody, failed attempt to

spring him from jail in Morelia, the state capital. They had attacked federal police stations in eight Michoacán cities. Two days later, it emerged that they had also kidnapped, tortured, and murdered twelve federal agents, leaving the bodies in a pile beside a highway with a handwritten sign: "Come for another. We will be waiting for you here."

Among Mexico's drug-trafficking organizations, La Familia is the big new kid on the block. It first gained national attention in September, 2006, when five severed heads were rolled onto a dance floor at a night club called Sol y Sombra, in Uruapan, Michoacán. The sign left at that scene: "La Familia doesn't kill for money, it doesn't kill women, it doesn't kill innocent people—only those who deserve to die. Everyone should know: this is divine justice."

La Familia's corpse messaging often mentions divine justice. Its soldiers are said to be required to carry Bibles or, alternatively, a self-published volume of epigrams by Nazario Moreno González, one of the gang's leaders, who is also known as El Chayo, or El Más Loco (the Craziest). El Chayo is inspired, in turn, it has been reported, by the muscular Christianity of John Eldredge, an American evangelist whose self-help best-seller "Wild at Heart" is reportedly studied, in Spanish translation, at La Familia training camps.

In addition to their quasi-religious fervor, La Familia's public broadsides often have a political cast. In a paid advertisement published in two statewide newspapers, La Familia posed the question "Who are we?" Its own lengthy answer began, "Workers from the Tierra Caliente region in the state of Michoacán, organized by the need to end the oppression, the humiliation to which we have constantly been subjected by people who have always had power."

Lately, a faction of La Familia has taken to signing the messages left at decapitation scenes "La Resistencia." A senior American official in Mexico City told me, "La Familia is looking more and more like an insurgency and less like a cartel."

But the drug-running unit in La Familia's portfolio remains robust. Its major product lines are marijuana and opium poppy, grown mainly in the Sierra Madre del Sur, mountains in southwest Michoacán; crystal methamphetamine, produced in clandestine laboratories in and around those same lush, rugged mountains; and cocaine. The coke comes mostly from Colombia and Peru by sea, entering Mexico through the many isolated bays and beaches on Michoacán's coast or at its busy industrial port, Lázaro Cárdenas. The great majority of the drugs go north, to the United States, where La Familia has a formidable distribution network. In October, 2009, American law enforcement conducted a two-day sweep against the network that yielded three hundred arrests in nineteen states, more than seven hundred pounds of methamphetamine, sixty-two kilograms of cocaine, nearly a thousand pounds of marijuana, more than a hundred vehicles, a hundred and forty-four weapons, and $3.4 million in U.S. currency. Robert S. Mueller, the director of the F.B.I., said of the sweep, "We have dealt a substantial blow to a group that has polluted our neighborhoods with illicit drugs and has terrorized Mexico with unimaginable violence."

Three months later, in Michoacán, I heard no mention of the big American drug bust. Few people seemed to know of it. None considered it a significant blow to La Familia. Three million dollars was not that much money to them.

As for the insurgency taking place in Michoacán, the violence varies from region to region, and occurs for different reasons. In Tierra Caliente, a swath of remote farming valleys, separated from the coast by the Sierra Madre, La Familia definitely has a social base. The Army and the federal police sent in by Calderón are seen as hated occupiers. In Zitácuaro, at the eastern end of Michoacán, La Familia is the hated occupier.

We were approaching Apatzingán, the main town in Tierra Caliente. Lookouts for La Familia had been noting our passage, calling in our license-plate number, for the past twenty miles, according to my companions, a regional official named Veronica Medina, as I will call her, and Isaac Reyes, a journalist for an online agency. "Luckily, we're with the Queen of the South," Reyes said. He meant Medina. "Queen of the South" is the title of a best-selling Spanish novel about the drug trade in Mexico, and Medina is, among other things, a successful businesswoman from Apatzingán and a well-known politician. She also has a certain leonine glamour and regal impatience. Reyes's little joke meant that he hoped her stature in the region might help us avoid trouble.

Military roadblocks slowed our progress. Pickup trucks were being searched by government soldiers in black ski masks, glowering motorists frisked and questioned.

"Nobody carrying drugs or arms would use this road," Reyes said.

"They're just taking money," Medina said. "And Lipe can't understand why his forces are not loved."

"Lipe" was Felipe Calderón, the President. Medina removed the "Fe"—which means faith in Spanish—as a kind of evangelical jibe. She's a passionate member of an opposition political party.

A soldier waved us by.

The road ran northwest through fertile bottomland: sorghum, maguey, melons, mangoes, lemons. Commercial agriculture boomed in the valley around Apatzingán in the postwar years, benefitting from government irrigation schemes, attracting investment from the U.S. and thousands of migrant laborers. Then state agricultural policy changed, and the export market for the area's produce collapsed. Its wide fields are littered today with abandoned packing sheds and rusted rail spurs. Like the rest of Michoacán—which, from a population of less than five million, has sent more than a million emigrants to the U.S.—and much of Mexico, Tierra Caliente began exporting labor north.

But the region's excess capacity was also channelled into its next boom industry: drugs. Small farmers in the wild sierra south of Apatzingán had grown marijuana and opium poppy for generations. Their harvests were sold to middlemen in Tierra Caliente. As the drug market in the U.S. grew, many displaced workers became dope farmers or smugglers, and the idled produce trucks found illicit new cargo. Then some of the small drug lords in Michoacán became big drug lords after the main cocaine routes north from South America, which in the nineteen-eighties ran through the Caribbean and south Florida, were shut down by American law enforcement. Coke started flowing through Mexico and Michoacán. Of still greater impact, at

least in Tierra Caliente, was the development of a local methamphetamine-manufacturing sector. The precursor chemicals for *cristal*, as it is called, come from Asia, primarily through the port at Lázaro Cárdenas, and the profit margin on meth is arguably the highest in the trade. Again, a successful crackdown in the U.S., this time on meth labs, gave a major boost to Mexican narcos, who set up labs in anonymous industrial areas and remote rural posts all over the country—including, it is believed, hundreds, if not thousands, of simple, high-yield operations in the rugged valleys of southern Michoacán.

"You see that *auditorio*?" Medina asked. She was pointing at a tall yellow pavilion beside a village primary school. "La Familia built that. Also the volleyball court." She pointed to a bullring on the other side of the road. "They offer the people fiestas in there. Those fiestas are very popular. Or they were. They've stopped giving them now, I think, because of Lipe's campaign."

"Lipe's campaign" was Calderón's war on drug traffickers. According to Medina, it has ruined the economy in Tierra Caliente and shattered the community's social peace. La Familia had provided employment, insured public security, and helped the poor. "If you were sick and had no money, they'd take you to the hospital and pay for medicine. If you couldn't afford tortillas, they'd buy some for you." The heavy deployment of troops and federal police in the area had forced La Familia to lie low. So who would look after the poor now? The *government*? Medina gave me an arch look, daring me to answer the question. No, it would not. La Familia had even been obliged to close a group of rehabilitation centers it ran for alcoholics and drug addicts. Local police were poorly paid and, therefore, incompetent and corrupt. When La Familia was in charge, nobody stepped out of line. You didn't even need to lock your door at night. "If they find you drunk in public, they'll take you off, pull down your pants, and beat you with a long stick with holes in it."

Such violence sounded so benign and neighborly that I felt odd asking about the kind of violence that La Familia is better known for. A few days earlier, six decapitated men had been left on a road just outside Apatzingán. All had large "Z"s carved in their torsos. One report I saw interpreted the "Z"s as evidence that the murders were committed by the Zetas, a much feared gang, with whom La Familia had been feuding. I thought it more likely that the "Z"s meant that La Familia had killed the men because they were Zetas, or at least had wanted to brand them as such in death. An intelligence officer in Morelia who specializes in organized crime also thought that it was a La Familia hit. The Zetas had already been driven out of this area, he said. The killings had probably been part of a factional dispute inside La Familia. They were worrisome, however, he said, because the victims had not been young men. It looked as if the fathers of fighters had been targeted, which could lead to a lot of bloody score-settling.

None of this seemed to interest the Queen of the South. When we arrived at her house in Apatzingán, she showed me a stack of local newspapers, flipping them over to display the back pages. Nearly all Mexican papers carry *la nota roja*—the police news, always heavy on gory photographs—in the back. Bloody carcasses were everywhere, which seemed to be Medina's point: that narco-violence is now a constant. And this doesn't contradict her contention about La Familia and public order. Decapitations were *entre ellos*—among themselves.

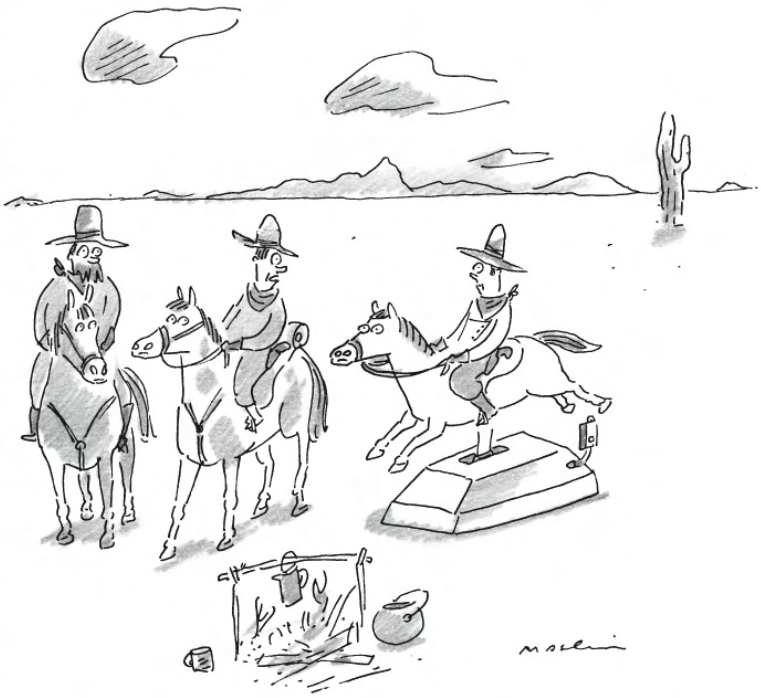
I asked about extortion of business owners.

In Apatzingán it had been a problem, she acknowledged, but that had been when the Zetas were running things. Once La Familia took over, she had talked to the group's local leaders, in her official capacity, and helped them see that forcing small businesses to pay protection would strangle the local economy. Unlike the Zetas, who were mercenary gangsters from outside Michoacán, La Familia had local roots and loyalties. They could take the long view. The extortion stopped. Kidnapping for ransom also stopped.

Both were still going on in Zitácuaro, I said.

Medina frowned, nodded, shrugged. "They are seen as rich there," she said.

Medina's house was spacious and cool, on a pleasant downtown street. We met her mother, who was frail and gracious, and her two grown sons, one of whom was a physician. The other was a lanky hipster. He was taking a break, he said, from college. I asked him about life in Apatzingán, and he said, in English, with a knowing smirk, "Information is money." I gathered he wanted to be paid



"Maybe you're right—maybe you'd best stick around camp."

to talk. His mother, who is divorced, had mentioned that one of her sons was rebellious and that she had taken him to La Familia for disciplining. After his second chat with La Familia, she said, she had no further trouble with him. I guessed she wasn't talking about the doctor.

Reyes and I set off for City Hall. Although he lives in Morelia, he once edited a newspaper in Apatzingán, so people recognized and greeted him in the crowded streets. At City Hall, we found a communications official for the municipality, whom I will call Elena Torres. The town's mayor had been arrested last year in a federal sweep during which ten Michoacán mayors (including Zitácuaro's), along with eighteen other officials, were jailed, on suspicion of working for La Familia. Torres, a young woman who also produces a weekly newspaper, greeted Reyes warmly. Her office was jammed with people. On the wall was a portrait of Michoacán's governor, Leonel Godoy, but no sign of President Calderón. Being in government in Michoacán today entails choosing sides. Godoy and Calderón belong to rival parties, and last year's federal sweep through the state was conducted with no heads-up to Godoy, who has called the military campaign in his state "an occupation." Two of his top officials, including the chief adviser to the state attorney general, were among those jailed. Even the Governor's half brother, a congressman, went into hiding. He has yet to surface. (Most of those jailed have since been released.)

Torres led me from her office onto a quiet balcony overlooking Apatzingán's central plaza. "We used to see the leaders of La Familia here all the time," she said, lighting a cigarette and nodding toward the sleepy, shady plaza. "They would come through on horses in the evening. El Chayo rode a Percheron with a braided mane. That horse was worth three million pesos. They threw huge parties, with beautiful floral arrangements. Guest artists. Everybody came and danced. El Chayo is very gallant, very polite. Not too tall. He has a strong presence."

Medina, too, had rhapsodized about El Chayo. (I noticed that they didn't call him El Más Loco.) She and Torres used the same word to describe him: *guapo*. It means "handsome," but in context it meant, I thought, that he was not a brute but a man of honor, not a greedy gangster but a generous, if stern, *comandante*. In the "Wanted" posters I had seen, he had a traditional look, with a wide black mustache. He looked like someone who could have ridden with Zapata. Medina said La Familia disapproved of young men who came back from the U.S. wearing hairnets and huge, low-hanging pants, *cholo* style. "They tell boys to keep their hair short and walk like a man, not a clown." One boy, she said, would not listen, so they killed him. On our way into Apatzingán, we had passed a long, unlovely business strip, redolent of new money—hot-tub showrooms, mini-malls, shiny taverns with names like Hotel Bar Las Vegas and Stefany's Men's Club. "All this is Chayo's," Medina had said. That seemed unlikely as a matter of legal title but, figuratively speaking, probably true. El Chayo is part outlaw, part landlord. He is not the paramount leader of La Familia, which is reputed to be run by a council, but he is the *cacique*—the boss—of much, if not all, of Tierra Caliente. And, in a narco version of an old Mexican revolutionary tradition, he stands against an unpopular government.

Torres drew on her cigarette. "The *federales* have stopped all that now," she said, meaning fiestas in the town center. She looked at me steadily. "But everybody here has sympathy with La Familia Michoacana."

Or, if they didn't, I thought, they probably kept quiet. I asked about the *federales*.

"There was a big group of federal police staying there," she said, pointing at an elegant old hotel across the plaza. "Fifty, sixty guys. They weren't popular. They were always around, with their guns. People were afraid to go near the hotel. Then there was a big attack, in July, when La Familia was attacking the *federales* all over Michoacán. But the gunmen they used here obviously weren't from here. It was nighttime, and they fired probably three hundred rounds, all into the upper floors of the building next door! They had the wrong building. Fortunately, it was empty and there were no casualties. The *federales* left the next day. Now they camp at the airport."

Torres showed me, on her computer, photographs she had taken of a recent demonstration in a nearby town, Nueva Italia. A peaceful-looking crowd was marching on a main street carrying banners denouncing the federal police. "The Government Is to Protect Not to Impose," one sign said. Another: "Enough Already of Federal Police Abuses." She showed me pictures she had taken of a house smashed up and robbed in the course of a police search. That incident—one of many, she said—had triggered the public protest.

Drug traffickers frequently employ a tactic known

La Familia has staged demonstrations against the government's security forces in other parts of Michoacán. A senior gang leader arrested in Morelia last year, Rafael Cedeño Hernández, was reported to be in charge of organizing public protests. Cedeño also ran a string of drug-rehabil-

QUADRATIN/AP

as corpse messaging. The message on the back of this victim says, "To those who don't believe it and don't have loyalty, greetings."

itation clinics called Gratitude. At the time of his arrest, he was carrying a credential identifying him as a "permanent observer" for the State Commission on Human Rights. If only to complete his odd profile, he claimed, according to the police, to have recruited and trained nine thousand La Familia soldiers in 2008.

If people don't trust the police or the courts, crime groups will fill those roles. A single mother who lives in Morelia told me proudly, "I have a number I can call." She meant she knew somebody in La Familia. "It's not El Chayo, but it's his people," she said. "If I have a problem, somebody threatening me, somebody trying to steal my car, I just call, and they send a police officer, a woman. The police work for them." Once, she said, she had a major problem—a man trying to defraud her over a piece of land. She called La Familia, and they sent a team to visit the fraudster. "They told him he had so much time to pay me. He paid, and he won't bother me again." She did not say how she might be called upon to return these favors. But her grateful relief for this protection against thieves and other threats was clear and understandable.

In Tierra Caliente, the dependence on La Familia extends, for many people, to employment. The Army claims to have destroyed more than four hundred methamphetamine labs in the region. If that figure is correct, that's a lot of jobs lost. People know, of course, that *cristal* is illegal. They also know that it's addictive and destructive. In fact, La Familia first made its name locally as a fierce opponent of meth use in Michoacán, hounding addicts and executing dealers. That the organization later became Mexico's largest producer of *cristal* is one of its more vivid self-contradictions, and an irony lost on no one. The gang's claim that all meth production today is for export may not parse ethically, but well-paid jobs in labs and smuggling will always be prized in a poor region.

The Mexican military is fighting a dirty war, not only in Michoacán but

"I have just one more question—will it make me happy?"

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throughout the country. Soldiers are not trained to do police work—to investigate and gather evidence—and the Army has proved ineffective against determined, adaptive criminals. The Army's relatively good institutional reputation has been tattered, moreover, by its deepening involvement in the murky, multisided war against—and among—the cartels. Even in Juárez, the bloodiest drug battlefield in Mexico, residents have been calling for the Army's withdrawal. Human-rights abuses have multiplied inexorably. Mexico's National Human Rights Commission has received nearly four thousand complaints of Army abuses since Calderón took office. There is no way of knowing what percentage of the Army's alleged victims were even involved in narco-trafficking. This bloodletting is not *entre ellos*. The impunity is general.

The overwhelming growth of organized crime in Mexico in the past decade is often blamed on multiparty democracy. From 1929 until 2000, the country was basically a one-party state, under the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Drug trafficking flourished, but its practitioners enjoyed stable relations with officialdom. As George W. Grayson, an academic expert on the Mexican drug trade, writes, "Drug dealers behaved discreetly, showed deference to public figures, spurned kidnapping, appeared with governors at their children's weddings, and, although often allergic to politics, helped the hegemonic PRI discredit its opponents by linking them to narco-trafficking." Anti-drug campaigns were periodically conducted, usually at the behest of the United States, but the penetration of government, including law enforcement, by organized crime made these campaigns farcical. Even the director of the National Institute to Combat Drugs (the Mexican D.E.A.), an Army general whom Washington's then drug czar, General Barry McCaffrey, called "a guy of absolute, unquestioned integrity," turned out to be working for the Juárez cartel. But the deep symbiosis of organized crime and an oppressively powerful state limited the independence of the gangsters and made it unnecessary to settle every difference with violence.

Then, in 2000, Vicente Fox, of the opposition National Action Party (PAN), defeated the PRI candidate for the Presidency. An unprecedented democratic transition took place, but an enormous power vacuum developed as venerable patronage networks dissolved throughout Mexico. Organized crime filled that vacuum. Politicians, adrift in the new multiparty sea, now needed campaign funds. The drug lords were happy to help. Gang conflicts over territory and trade routes, no longer refereed by the PRI, became more lethal and frequent. The Pax Mafiosa, such as it was, collapsed. The Fox administration arrested many narco soldiers and a couple of kingpins. It also lost a kingpin, Joaquín (El Chapo) Guzmán Loera, the leader of the Sinaloa cartel, who escaped from a maximum-security prison in 2001. (Guzmán, who continues to run Sinaloa, made *Forbes's* most recent list of the "World's Most Powerful People," ranking forty-first, above Nicolas Sarkozy and Hugo Chávez.) But the post-PRI state was a jumble of unmeshed parts, and the government just lost ground.

Fernando Gómez Mont, the Interior Minister, runs the political side of Calderón's war on drugs. He believes that organized crime only became more visible with the fall of the PRI. "It's the same as the Soviet Union," he told me. "Under the authoritarian regime, many hidden interests were managed." (People often liken the Fox years in Mexico to the Yeltsin years in Russia.) The great surge in violence across Mexico is a result, he said, of criminals' "losing institutional cover." Now, he said, "they have to arbitrate their own differences with their rivals."

But Gómez Mont, who was a wealthy lawyer before entering public service, sees the government's basic task as "reversing a process of the weakening of institutions"—the judiciary, the police, the countless opaque bureaucracies that have always had their price. And the fact that he and his colleagues talk incessantly about "rebuilding" suggests that they know how deeply damaged the government has been in recent years. He also sees the Army's deployment as essential to this task: "The armed forces have the strength to give us the space and time." He is dismissive of complaints about the military's treatment of civilians. "The armed forces are involved in a profound modernization process," he said. "They are trained in human-rights theory."

In truth, nearly everyone understands that the military is too blunt an instrument for law enforcement. "But drug trafficking and drug traffickers are a challenge to the national security of Mexico,"

Arturo Sarukhan, the Mexican Ambassador to the U.S., told me. "We need to transit from this being a national-security problem to it being a law-and-order problem, the way it is here in the U.S.," he said. "We're not there yet." Gómez Mont interprets the fact that La Familia is killing federal police officers in Michoacán as an indication of increased police honesty. "It's cheaper to corrupt than to kill. So why are they killing? Because the corruption process is not going the way they want it to." He attributes the popularity of La Familia in regions such as Tierra Caliente to a mass "Stockholm syndrome."

The Mexican public does not believe that the government is winning the war against the cartels. In a recent poll, fifty-nine per cent said the narcos were winning; only twenty-one per cent thought the government was making progress. The narcos use jets and helicopters, speedboats, and even submarines. The wealth and weaponry of the drug gangs dwarf the resources of the state.

While most people don't seem to blame President Calderón personally for *La Inseguridad*, they are punishing him politically. In congressional elections last year, Calderón's PAN was beaten badly by the PRI, which now controls the federal legislature and may well take back the Presidency in 2012. Would the return of the PRI mean a return to relative peace, as many people seem to hope? It's possible, but not because the old comprehensive pyramid of PRI power—what Mario Vargas Llosa once called "the perfect dictatorship"—can be restored. It cannot. But neither is one-party rule the most effective form of government for controlling organized crime. Indeed, the countries that have had the most success in controlling or reducing it (including the U.S.) have all been vigorous democracies.

Edgardo Buscaglia, a professor of law and economics at Columbia University, specializes in organized crime, and has advised the United Nations and the World Bank. For the past several years, he has been working in Mexico, and he thinks that the Calderón government is on the wrong track. "It's not how many troops you deploy or capos you kill," he told me. "It's the assets. Businesses confiscated. Civil and criminal asset forfeiture. You can detain fifty-three thousand people, as they have since 2003, but if you still have corrupt judges and prosecutors—a captured state—you aren't doing anything. The conviction rate is 1.8 per cent."

Organized crime depends on extensive public-sector corruption, and, with its wealth, insures it. The only anti-crime measures known to be effective attack both that wealth and that corruption. Mexico has not made a serious start on either front, according to Buscaglia. Prosecutors lack nearly everything—resources, laws, training, financial intelligence, judicial independence—that they need to begin. "To declare war on organized crime" in Mexico's situation, Buscaglia says, "you need to declare war on your own society." A frontal military assault on organized crime, unsupported by a financial strategy and an assault against political corruption, never succeeds, according to Buscaglia, because of what he calls "the paradox of expected punishment." Organized-crime groups under such assault simply devote more of their resources to arms, violence, and the expansion of their defensive ring of public corruption. Jailed or slain leaders are quickly replaced, usually after a sanguinary round of jockeying among the second tier. Replacing jailed or slain street soldiers is never a problem in a country like Mexico, where an estimated seven million young people, known as Los Ni Ni—because they don't go to school or have jobs (*ni estudia ni trabaja*)—are considered ripe for recruitment into the lower ranks. Indeed, the outlaw appeal of defiant narcos among young people generally cannot be discounted, given the long-term popularity of *narcocorridos*—danceable pop songs glorifying the exploits of Mexico's "Most Wanted."

The lineup of Mexican cartels is fluid. Sinaloa, with its base in the eponymous Pacific Coast state and operations throughout Mexico and beyond, is the largest and probably the most stable. It is always looking to expand its territory—the phenomenal level of recent violence in Juárez is largely attributable to a Sinaloa takeover attempt, but drug lords have been operating out of Sinaloa for generations. On Mexico's east coast, the Gulf cartel has ruled for nearly as long. Two powerful groups, based in Tijuana and Juárez, dominate the two busiest border-crossing regions in the north. Then, there is the Beltrán Leyva group, which has a sprawling, non-contiguous territory. Its longtime leader, Arturo Beltrán Leyva, was killed by the military in December, and other groups are now trying to grab some of the "plazas" that Beltrán Leyva has traditionally controlled. La Familia, for instance, appears to be making a move on Acapulco.

The Zetas are a special case. They started out as high-end bodyguards—U.S.-trained Special Forces commandos enticed to desert in the late nineties by Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, who was then the leader of the Gulf cartel. (He is now in a U.S. prison.) The Zetas brought military expertise to narco-trafficking. They earned a reputation for savage violence and efficiency, and their early recruitment was boldly public, with banners hung over highways, complete with a number to call, urging soldiers to defect and receive "a good salary, food, and medical care for your families." They offered loans and life insurance, and an end to mistreatment and rations of ramen. Those who joined were paid on a scale unimaginable in their previous lives. The Zetas eventually outgrew their role as the Gulf cartel's armed wing. They went to work with other groups, as trainers or freelance mercenaries, and then for themselves. They are now a major criminal group, at war with various old allies, including La Familia and the Gulf cartel. They are also working closely with the 'Ndrangheta, Italy's formidable Mafia, according to "Contacto en Italia," a recent best-seller by Cynthia Rodríguez.

In Michoacán, at the end of the PRI era, organized crime was dominated by a midsized group known as El Milenio, which was allied with Sinaloa, and did extremely well in the early methamphetamine period. The Gulf cartel, leading with its spearpoint, the Zetas, invaded Michoacán around 2001. In one version, the Gulf leadership had been approached by restive ex-Milenio lieutenants, including future La Familia leaders like El Chayo, who invited the Gulf group to Michoacán to help them overthrow their former leaders. In another version, it was a Gulf-cartel initiative, a westward business expansion merely abetted by the restless lieutenants in Michoacán. In any event, El Milenio was defeated by the Zetas, who began running Michoacán,

in their brutal way, on the Gulf cartel's behalf.

La Familia arose from various sources. The main element was the ex-Milenio group, which had been schooled by its allies, the Zetas, in unconventional warfare, and later turned against them. There were also home-guard units and local vigilantes—farmers and workers in Tierra Caliente—who resented the oppressive reign of the Zetas. A rising tide of *cristal* addiction, as the Zetas cultivated an internal market for their most profitable product, increased their local unpopularity. La Familia stepped from the shadows in 2006, declared war on outsiders, and by 2008 had driven the Zetas from most of the valuable plazas in Michoacán. The group's broadsides even denounced Chapo Guzmán and Sinaloa, whose leaders answered with threats to annihilate the upstart La Familia.

In reality, all the main crime groups had to share the booming Michoacán container-port city of Lázaro Cárdenas, a plaza too valuable for any one group to hold exclusively. La Familia, despite its nativist, *puro michoacano* self-defense rhetoric, had vast amounts of drugs it needed to move to the U.S., which meant negotiating passage rights through the territories of groups to the north. Seizing plazas from the Zetas was such a success, moreover, that stopping at the Michoacán border proved impossible. La Familia moved into the nearby states of Guerrero, Morelos, Guanajuato, Colima, Querétaro, Jalisco, and Mexico, evicting other crime groups, and established a presence in Mexico City, which no single syndicate can control but where every self-respecting cartel must be represented.

La Familia's evangelical fervor, weird self-righteous piety, and penchant for insane violence turned out to be a potent combination far beyond its provincial base. In May, 2009, the Mexican attorney general called the group the most dangerous cartel in the country, citing its exceptional cruelty, its success at corrupting officials, and its leading role in the production of synthetic drugs. La Familia was by then in business with Chapo Guzmán in areas of shared interest. Ramón Pequeño García, the anti-drug chief of the federal police, told me that La Familia has developed profitable contacts in China, India, Bulgaria, and Holland for both methamphetamine production and distribution. President Obama has named La Familia a significant foreign narcotics trafficker, which makes it illegal for American citizens to have any contact with the group, and in February, 2010, the Treasury Department formally identified seven La Familia leaders, including El Chayo, as drug kingpins, increasing the criminal penalties for Americans caught associating with them.

Although still derided in some circles as hicks ("the hillbilly-hero moonshiners of Mexico's Appalachia," as one senior American diplomat in Mexico put it to me), La Familia and its exploits—hanging anti-Zetas banners over the roads in eighteen cities in four states in one night; running a nationwide new-car theft ring that hijacks whole bulk shipments—seemed to be front-page news nearly every day after I arrived in Mexico City, in January. But Pequeño García, of the federal police, told me that La Familia was actually getting desperate, that the cartel was losing the war on the ground in Michoacán. He recited a long list of capos who had been arrested, including El Chayo's first cousin. "The police presence there has drastically restricted their freedom of movement," he said. "It's much more difficult for them to move drugs on the highways now or to travel in armed convoys."

The Bush Administration warmly supported the Calderón government's Army-first approach to confronting narco power, and President Obama's policy has essentially been the same. (Obama has hailed Calderón as a "hero" for his anti-drug efforts.) The United States has an obvious, first-order interest in the stability of Mexico, and in the struggle there against narco-trafficking. Ninety per cent of the cocaine sold in the U.S. comes through Mexico. Tens of billions of dollars in drug money is believed to cross the border heading south each year, much of it in bulk cash shipments. More than eighty per cent of the weapons that have been seized in Mexico and that could be traced originated in the U.S. The outrage of many Mexicans over this avalanche of military-grade firearms is matched only by their impotent anger over the bottomless U.S. demand for illegal drugs. Our appetites, our wealth, our laws seem to be conspiring to destroy their country.

Mexico was traditionally never a major recipient of U.S. foreign aid, but that changed in 2008, with the passage of the Mérida Initiative, a multiyear $1.4-billion program to help Mexico and some of its neighbors fight transnational crime. Under Mérida, the U.S. is sending equipment, including Black Hawk helicopters and high-tech border-inspection gear, to Mexico and, in a broad effort to help modernize and professionalize Mexican law enforcement, providing training to thousands of police officers, customs officials, prosecutors, judges, prison guards, and other public-security personnel.

Extraditions of criminals to the U.S., once a politically sensitive subject in Mexico, have been rising fast. In 2009, there were a hundred and seven. The real test of trust and coöperation between the two countries' security institutions, though, is intelligence-sharing. Many American officials are wary of it. Some have been burned in the past. For all the American security agencies working in Mexico today—besides the D.E.A., the F.B.I., and the C.I.A., the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives is now fully engaged, trying to teach modern gun-tracing—no American officer has arrest power in Mexico, and direct military assistance remains unthinkable. As the crisis deepens, though, so does U.S. involvement.

In Juárez, where the violence keeps hitting new peaks, the latest plan is to embed American intelligence agents in Mexican federal police units. This would have seemed too dangerous to try until recently, but the massacre of fifteen people, including ten teen-agers, at a birthday party in late January, and then the murder of three people connected to the U.S. Consulate there in March, got the attention of top officials in both countries. President Obama expressed outrage at the killings. President Calderón made several trips to Juárez, promising new forms of aid. And ten days after the Consulate killings, Hillary Clinton led a delegation to Mexico City that included Robert Gates, the Defense Secretary; Janet Napolitano, the Secretary of Homeland Security; Dennis Blair, the director of National Intelligence; and Admiral Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. They met with Calderón and promised more aid.

Calderón, on a visit to Juárez the previous week, had been confronted by

demonstrators. In a city where more than twenty-six hundred people were killed in drug-related violence last year, and where more than nine hundred have already died this year, the demonstrators were not protesting against the cartels and their ubiquitous hit men. They were demanding the withdrawal of the Army.

To check out La Familia's claim to be driving *cristal* addiction from Michoacán, I went to Zamora, a midsized city in the northwestern corner of the state. La Familia was doing some vivid social messaging there. Two days before my arrival, and some weeks earlier, groups of flagellants had appeared on the roads around Zamora—men with their shirts pulled up or off and their backs whipped raw. The men chanted and carried placards denouncing themselves as thieves and rapists. Some of the placards were signed "La Familia." In the past, the corpses of methamphetamine dealers had been left around Zamora with signs condemning the *cristal* trade and invoking "divine justice."

I found a drug-rehabilitation center in a scruffy neighborhood. My appearance caused a stir in the street, partly because I arrived in a police cruiser. I had gone to the city police after failing to find a rehab clinic through other sources, including local journalists, and although the cops seemed astonished when I walked into their station, they had agreed to help me. The sergeant who was acting as my guide studied the crowd outside the clinic, frowned, and said that they could not leave me in this *barrio*. They would wait.

The clinic was like a cut-rate private jail. It was one big gloomy locked room, with maybe a hundred beds and extremely stale air. I got a tour from a trusty, Raymond Ramírez. He had a shaved head heavily tattooed with gang signs that I recognized from California. He had lived, he told me, in the Salinas Valley for sixteen years. "There's a lot of gang-related around Zamora," he said, in English. Ramírez, who said he was an addict himself, had been delivered to the clinic by his aunt, which was typical—families checked in their addicted members, who were forbidden to leave the locked room for a minimum of three months. I could see, in the shadows, desperate-looking men, some of whom were watching me closely. I asked Ramírez about his habit.

"I was smoking weed," he said. "Sometimes I used to fuck with crack. The most popular drugs here are coke and crack."

I asked about *cristal*.

"They took away the meth," he said. "Couple years ago."

"Who did? The police?"

Ramírez shook his head, looking half amused. "No," he said. "Not the police."

(The clinic's director disagrees. He says there is still a meth problem.)

I asked my police escort to take me to a nearby town, Jacona, where I had heard there was another clinic. It was a low-roofed place on a hillside. Inside, I found a beefy, watchful, fair-haired man, who said his name was Armando. He was the clinic director. He took me into a tiny office. There was a small black-and-white monitor in one corner showing a large, noisy meeting in progress. It was the patients, Armando said, having one of their three mandatory daily meetings. I could hear shouting, both from somewhere down the hill and, more tinnily, from the monitor, which Armando kept an eye on.

"We work with tolerance," he told me. "Not with beatings or mistreatment. We don't destroy their personalities."

I hadn't asked about mistreatment. But I had heard that there were very tough rehab centers in Michoacán, including some run by La Familia, which specialized in destroying personalities and then in recruiting obedient, religious, fiercely sober gang soldiers from among them.

"We can't solve problems alone," Armando said. "We need help from God. The patients have a three-day encounter with God. We use a twelve-step program. It's the fourth and fifth step."

I asked about the most common addictions.

"Alcohol," he said. "I'm an alcoholic. Drugs. Rock. Glue-sniffing. Meth."

Was methamphetamine, then, a problem?

"No. Not now. The meth problem has disappeared. *Los narcos* won't allow it."

I was distracted by a gaudy crucifix he

"Who told the quartet to play 'Highway to Hell'?"

was wearing. I had been told that one way to recognize La Familia members was by their self-ornamentation. Their standard gear included such a crucifix and a bracelet made from a rosary. I glanced at Armando's wrist. There was the rosary bracelet. He denied any connection with La Familia.

Before I got to Zitácuaro, I had a certain idea of how organized crime took over towns, provided me by Lázaro Cárdenas Batel, who was governor of Michoacán from 2002 to 2008—the period when La Familia rose to dominance. I met him in Washington, D.C., where he now lives. "There were these incredible scenes in small towns all over Michoacán," he said. "I would get a call afterward from the mayor. Ten pickup trucks full of armed men had arrived at the municipality. The local police could do nothing. They were outgunned. But the criminals were very respectful. They would tell the mayor, 'We want to work here. There will be no trouble, no crime, no drunkenness, nothing.' Then they would take over the town, and enforce their rules. If a boy hit his mother, they would punish him and dump him in the plaza for people to see. If he did it again, they would kill him. It was a strategy to gain popular sympathy, and it worked." Mayors are typically paid for their hospitality. It is *plata o plomo*—silver or lead. You take the money or we shoot you and your family.

This composite sketch described a very small town, though, and it left out a lot. In Zitácuaro, a municipality of a hundred and forty thousand, there are many more moving parts than a mayor, some frightened cops, and a band of outlaws rolling up in Chevrolet Suburbans. There is a substantial business class, a banking sector, old money, new money—all there to be milked, but each in its own way. Loansharking was widespread in Zitácuaro. La Familia promised to put a stop to that, and did. Forestry is a regional industry, poorly regulated. La Familia confronted loggers, legal and illegal, and "fined" them for deforestation. The mobsters were suddenly environmentalists. "La Familia is very adept at collecting taxes," one of the former governor's advisers told me. "Much better than the Treasury is."

But the first thing to do was impress the right locals that La Familia was serious. There was a prominent family, the Orihuelas, active in business and politics in Zitácuaro. Juan Antonio Ixtláhuac Orihuela, a boyish prodigy known simply as Tonio, was elected mayor of Zitácuaro at twenty-seven. One of Tonio's uncles is said to have employed a young man named Noé Ayala García. He was from a poor family. He was bright and ambitious, and, some say, involved in illegal activity. La Familia cut off his head. The head was placed, along with the head of another young man, in front of Tonio's uncle's car dealership. The message to the Orihuelas was clear.

Last year, Tonio was arrested, on suspicion that he worked for La Familia. But he was released in March, after ten months in prison and a successful appeal, and he is now back in office as mayor.

For straight extortion, the best targets were the town's nouveau riche. People called them *los fresas*, the strawberries. There were enough of them in Zitácuaro to constitute a new class, *la fresada*. They drove new cars, wore flashy clothes, did elaborate home renovations. They were easy to kidnap, and usually able to pay well to get their sons and brothers back alive. They learned eventually to keep their Mercedeses out of sight. But if they had successful businesses there was really nowhere to hide. The family who owned the main local camera shop and film-developing franchise—known behind their backs as *los Kodak*—were hit hard, I was told. It was impossible to know for sure, however, since nobody who had been kidnapped and had survived would talk to me. And almost nobody, it seemed, ever went to the police. In Mexico, ninety-six per cent of kidnappings are never reported, according to a recent study by a risk-consulting firm. It is a matter, people believe, best handled privately, as the kidnappers prefer. The police might be involved on the other side.

Everyone I talked to in Zitácuaro seemed to know someone who had been kidnapped. I interviewed two teachers, at different schools. Both had had family members kidnapped. The pattern, in Zitácuaro, seems to be that, once a ransom demand is met, the victim is released,

ROANOKE PASTORALE

Cardinal, goldfinch, titmouse, turkey buzzard—
dear companions of my afternoons—
above this field, high clouds dream of blizzards

to snow me in till spring ends my solitude.
Sober's my binge now, nature my saloon.
Wren, mourning dove, house finch, turkey buzzard—

for your entertainment, I sing the words
of old fifties songs, use baby talk, croon
as I walk the field beneath great blizzard-

dreaming clouds. You gaudy pretties, sweet birds
of my senior years—my later's my soon.
Catbirds flit through cedars in the graveyard,

turkey buzzards swirl their patterns overhead,
across the mountainside sunlight bows a tune
rising to blue eternity but heard

by the heron fishing the creek, wizard
of stillness, creature designed by the moon.
Bluebird, jay, chipping sparrow, turkey buzzard,
clouds, and field—I dream this life, walk this world.

—David Huddle

more or less unharmed. "But first, before they let you go, they might ask you for another name," one of the teachers said, his face pinched with disgust. "Somebody you know whose family has some money, who would be good to kidnap."

Were there precautions one could take?

"Everybody has to vary their routines, all the time," he said. I found it hard to picture how a schoolteacher could significantly vary his or her daily routine. "You just have to," he insisted. "They're watching."

The other teacher, an extremely polite older man, told me about the kidnapping of his nephews—first one, whom the abductors held for two weeks, and then his brother, grabbed when he came to pay the ransom. The second nephew was held for a month. Their father borrowed money all over town to ransom his sons. "Those bad people have more arms and the courage to do anything," the older teacher said. He refused to let his nephews talk to me. Some people could not raise ransom money and saved themselves by going to work for La Familia, he said.

Then, there were all those who simply never returned. The older teacher had heard about a gruesome recent discovery in a nearby reservoir: fifty bodies with rocks tied to them. "They were people whose families didn't pay." He was afraid that his niece's brother—a lawyer who had disappeared after a conflict with La Familia—might be among them.

I was unable to confirm this reservoir story. It struck me as the sort of worst-case rumor that gains traction in an atmosphere of extreme uncertainty and mistrust. I hoped that was the case.

Both teachers talked about La Familia's recruitment of their older students. "They're looking for two kinds of people," the first teacher said. "Rough, violent kids from broken families, that's one. The other is good students, especially those who are good at computer work. They are thinking about the future. They want to be able to research properly the assets of the people and the businesses they extort. That's the new model."

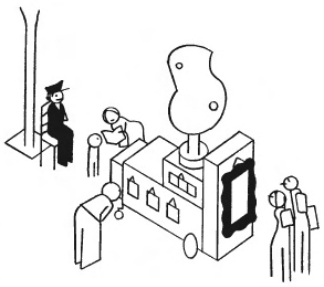
Recruiting young people into gangs has been made easier by the Great Recession, which has hit Mexico harder than it has the United States. Remittances from family members in the U.S. have fallen sharply. Indeed, fewer immigrants are coming to the United States, putting demographic pressure on a society and an economy that have, for at least two generations, been able to direct much of the country's unemployed youth northward.

A student in Zitácuaro, talking about kids at his school who become involved with La Familia, told me, "*Los narcos* have nice trucks, nice houses, pretty girls, money, power. People fear them. Everybody wants what they have."

La Familia also has its secret-society mystique, which all crime groups have to some degree, but which is exaggerated by the macabre spiritualism espoused by El Chayo and his ilk. La Familia cells reportedly have regular retreats, cultlike motivational seminars in which they seek to indoctrinate and inspire new members. (I found no one in Zitácuaro who considered the aggressive Christianity of La Familia to be sincere. That was all just "propaganda," people said.)

"But moralism is also part of their recruitment," the older teacher said. "They tell young people, mostly boys, but also girls, that their intention is to stop crime. They say, 'We are the authorities now, and we're going to teach you to live together.' The hypocrisy is incredible. But some of my students have gone to work for La Familia, in desk jobs. Now that the criminals are over the government, they can assign government jobs. I have an ex-student who is with them now *and* has a good government job."

A few Zitacuarenses are making their way up through the cartel ranks, and townspeople like to gossip about who's doing well on the dark side. Another way the gang is threading itself into the fabric of Zitácuaro, I heard, was through marriage. Eligible young gangsters were courting the daughters of some of the city's leading families, creating valuable new alliances. Public-sector contracting in Michoacán is widely seen as controlled and directed by La Familia. People in Zitácuaro told me that it has become hard to make a living without mob connections.



I finally found someone in Zitácuaro who had been kidnapped and was willing to tell me about it. I'll call him Enrique Delacruz. Wiry, sociable, in his early thirties, he worked as an ecology officer for the municipality. He was kidnapped from a restaurant on the outskirts of the city.

"I was having lunch with three colleagues," he said. "Four guys marched in, with pistols in their belts. They didn't try to hide it at all. One got behind me and stuck a gun in my back. They ordered us to leave with them. I don't know what the other people in the restaurant thought. They had three pickup trucks waiting outside. They drove us to an isolated area, somebody's land, and their leader, a guy we call Lagrimita, started shouting at me and hitting me."

Lagrimita means "little teardrop." Lagrimita's beef with Delacruz concerned some land near Zitácuaro's reservoir. It seemed that a local developer wanted to build there, and had hired La Familia to help him acquire the property. The particular project seemed far-fetched—the local topography is hilly and unsuitable for development—but nobody was interested in Delacruz's land-management ideas. They wanted him to stop responding to the complaints of smallholders in the area that their crops were being destroyed and their trees cut down. The mobsters had seen Delacruz out there, in his official capacity, taking photographs of the damage. What was more, his grandparents owned a plot near the reservoir which they were refusing to sell. He should tell them to sell.

It turned into a long, harrowing afternoon. At some point, Delacruz managed to call the most powerful person he knew in La Familia, a guy from Zitácuaro called El Tapa (the Lid). El Tapa did not answer, so Delacruz left a very brief message—"They're going to kill me"—before the last five pesos of credit on his phone card ran out.

Delacruz and I and two of his friends were working on a bottle of whiskey in Delacruz's parents' finished basement, a room he called his "bunker." We drank a round to Carlos Slim. Slim, who was recently named the world's richest man, owns most of Mexico's telecommunications network. The privatization of phone

service, which was supposed to lead to market competition, led instead to Slim's virtual monopoly. His company, América Móvil, charges some of the highest cell-phone rates among developing countries. My credit seemed to run out daily, no matter how much money I put on my phone, and people always had something rueful to say about how we were all working just to line Carlos Slim's pockets.

That afternoon with the mobsters, Delacruz told Lagrimita that he could not help him. In that case, Lagrimita said, he was a dead man. At dusk, the convoy headed back to Zitácuaro. They went to an old railway bridge on the edge of town. The bridge crosses a deep, dark, narrow barranca. It is a notorious execution spot. Delacruz's colleagues were kept in the trucks while he was marched out onto the bridge. Lagrimita went to tie Delacruz's hands behind his back, handing his pistol to an associate. Delacruz, who is a Tae Kwon Do enthusiast, wrapped Lagrimita in a bear hug. They struggled at the precipice, with Delacruz screaming that if he was going off the bridge Lagrimita was going with him. Now, at the moment of high drama, the cell phone of one of Lagrimita's gunsels rang, with El Tapa's custom ring tone, and the gunsel answered. It seemed that the *comandante* had listened to Delacruz's message and had deduced who his assailants were. El Tapa wanted to speak to Lagrimita. Lagrimita, released by the hysterical Delacruz, went to the phone. He was told to desist. The gang were exceeding their orders. The developer wasn't paying them enough for this.

"Then you know what they did?" Delacruz asked me. "They let us all go, but first they took me to a supermarket. They said I should buy my wife a present, because she had been calling all day and I never answered. So I bought her some flowers." Delacruz's wife was relieved to see him. "But I started crying," Delacruz said. "And I couldn't stop kissing our baby."

It wasn't a typical kidnapping story. There may, of course, be no such thing. And it occurred to me only much later that there was anything odd about Delacruz's having had El Tapa's phone number. Yes, he was a government official, and El Tapa was a capo in La Familia, and having "links" with organized crime was illegal for everyone, let alone government officials. But Delacruz and El Tapa had gone to school together. In Zitácuaro practically everyone their age knew El Tapa. And it was clearly prudent to stay in touch, in case something ever came up. I know I'd keep him on my Christmas-card list. Welcome to state capture.

My hotel kicked me out, because it was butterfly season. Zitácuaro is in monarch country—the small patch of mountains in south-central Mexico where hundreds of millions of monarch butterflies migrate each winter from the United States and Canada, blanketing whole areas of fir forest. Tourists from Mexico City and Guadalajara had apparently booked the entire hotel for the weekend. I found another hotel.

Ambling through Zitácuaro's manicured nineteenth-century plaza on a cool, sunny morning, your first thought would not be "Reign of terror." A small blond girl, trailing her parents, is driving happily past elegant cast-iron benches on a miniature plastic Jeep Wrangler. A well-dressed gentleman with a big gray mustache sits, arms folded, white Stetson in place, at one of the stands set back under shade trees, placidly having his boots shined.

But an old green Volkswagen Beetle inches past the plaza, a loudspeaker roaring scratchily from its roof. The woman's voice shouting on the tape loop has the tenor of angry political protest, but actually she is selling newspapers, chanting headlines without inflection, with no hint of comprehension. "Cuerpo Descuartizado"—carved-up body—is one of the items in her spiel.

Kidnapping and murder are ordinarily state crimes, not federal crimes, which means that, in a captured city like Zitácuaro, they are often not investigated. If La Familia wants something done about a killing, it will take care of it. If La Familia takes an interest in public security—the way people say it did formerly in Apatzingán—then the streets may be made safe. But there is no indication that the group takes such an interest in Zitácuaro.

I heard a story from a man in his early thirties. He was walking home one night, he said, through the quiet streets of the old town center. From inside a parked van, he heard a woman screaming. There were angry male shouts. Someone was obviously being beaten. He stopped, unsure what to do. Then the van's door flew open, and he could see two men pummelling a young woman. He hurried away. Half a block along, he heard the van's engine start. It drove past him, then pulled across the sidewalk. The men got out. They swore at him. He told them that he had seen nothing, that there was no problem. There was a problem, they said. They started beating him. They broke his ribs. They clubbed him in the face with a gun. They left him unable to walk.

That was last September. By the time I met him, the man said he was fine. All healed, he said, physically and psychologically. He indicated a scar under his left eye. "My souvenir," he said, with a small smile. I didn't believe he was fine. He was an arts-minded son of Zitácuaro—soft-spoken, modest, ridiculously good-looking. He had been a local rock star in his youth, and was now working on a book of photographs of the city. He had begun his story by telling me, "It's not our town anymore." He also didn't strike me as the type of person who, in a world not turned upside down, would walk away from a young woman who was being beaten.

One more Zitácuaro story:

A brother and sister came to own a piece of family land. It was wide, sloping pasture and some woods, a little *rancho* with a view of Zitácuaro. From the land, the city looked like an Italian Renaissance painting, on its hilltop with its church towers. There were cattle that came with the property. The brother got the half with the farmhouse. The sister's half was reached by a dirt road that ran down past the old railway bridge that the narcos sometimes threw people off. Her husband, whom I will call Don Miguel, took more interest in the *rancho* than she did.

Don Miguel was a retired schoolteacher who, late in life, had gone to law school. He came from a poor rural background, but he had managed, in the nineteen-sixties, to get a good education at a school for future teachers. Some of his

classmates and friends became leftist guerrillas, taking up arms against the PRI government in a revolution that never went anywhere. Don Miguel found his vocation in teaching the children of campesinos. By the time he became a lawyer, in his fifties, he was a respectable bourgeois townsman. But much of his law practice was pro bono. His clients included indigenous communities in and around Zitácuaro, people who haven't caught a break since the Spaniards arrived in Michoacán.

He spent as much time as possible at the *rancho*. He raised lambs and built sheds, fishponds, and even a primitive swimming pool, for his kids and grandkids and the children and grandchildren of his friends. He scooped tilapia from the ponds, cleaned them in the grass, and grilled them for his guests over an open fire. He and his friends, some of them neighboring subsistence farmers, always had some project going. Don Miguel decided to build a tree house for the *quinceañera,* the fifteenth birthday, of his eldest granddaughter, who lived with her mother in another city. His vision of the tree house, which was going to be a surprise, grew more and more ambitious. By the time I saw it, it had indoor plumbing, and it was still not finished.

But things had gone sour with the brother-in-law. His marriage was in trouble, and he had started behaving erratically. Without discussion, he sold all the cattle one day. Don Miguel and his wife let it pass. But then her brother resolved that the entire *rancho* should be his. He filed suit in a local magistrate's court. His suit had no legal basis, and was annulled. But the brother-in-law was now in a fury. He stopped coming to the *rancho*. He let the house on his side fall into disrepair. His half of the pasture filled with thistles. Mediation attempts failed.

Meanwhile, La Familia had come to Zitácuaro.

One day, a convoy of three gleaming new pickup trucks appeared at the *rancho*. Don Miguel and a friend were working on his granddaughter's tree house. The convoy drove straight across the pasture to where the two old men were working. Don Miguel could see his brother-in-law in one of the trucks, riding next to a man whom everyone knew as El Gato (the Cat). His real name was Hilario López Morales. He was La Familia's plaza boss for Zitácuaro. The other trucks were full of men with rifles. El Gato and his men climbed out. El Gato approached alone.

"I can squeeze you in between my public apology and my book deal."

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The brother-in-law had, of course, hired La Familia to help him get his sister's half of the *rancho*. El Gato, a middle-aged man with a severe manner, asked Don Miguel, using a respectful form of address, for his side of the story. Don Miguel gave it to him. From the truck, the brother-in-law could hear Don Miguel's narrative. After a few minutes, he leaped from the truck to raise an objection. El Gato turned to him and said, "I told you to stay in the truck." El Gato was clearly, Don Miguel thought, a former soldier. He asked Don Miguel to resume. He listened closely. The brother-in-law, unable to contain himself, jumped out of the truck again. El Gato turned. Now, in a low voice, he said, "I won't tell you again." Don Miguel took that as a death threat. The brother-in-law got back in the truck. Don Miguel has a formidable authority when he speaks. El Gato heard him out. Then his gaze ranged across the *rancho*—the fishponds, the tree house, the thistle-filled pasture, the collapsing farmhouse. He seemed to make a decision. He thanked Don Miguel for his time. He and his convoy left.

Don Miguel and his family have heard nothing more. They tried to contact El Gato, through a lawyer who has worked with him, to make sure that the property dispute is settled, at least as far as La Familia is concerned. They were unable to reach him. Then, in mid-April, there were news reports that El Gato had been arrested in Mexico City. So he was no longer running Zitácuaro. But will a new *jefe* honor, or even know about, his predecessor's judgments? It seems unlikely.

Nothing violent happened in the matter of the *rancho*. But the family rift is now permanent. The brother-in-law went too far. If anything does happen to Don Miguel, his sons will avenge him. They know they can't fight La Familia. But they can, if it comes to that, kill their uncle.

A group of us made the most of a sunny winter afternoon. The children chased butterflies. Don Miguel caught and grilled fish, tossing bits to his dogs. *Banda* music played from a car radio, the door thrown open. The beer was cold. A gnarled, silent neighbor came by to eat with us at a rough plank table. Don Miguel called him *Profesor*. One of Don Miguel's grown sons danced quietly in the sun, his thoughts clearly far away. The granddaughter's tree house, they said, was almost finished, which was good, since she would be fifteen very soon. ♦

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William Finnegan talks about La Familia.