THE SICARIO

A Juárez hit man speaks

By Charles Bowden

I am ready for the story of all the dead men who last saw his face.

As I drank coffee and tried to frame questions in my mind, a crime reporter in Juárez was cut down beside his eight-year-old daughter as they sat in his car letting it warm up. This morning as I drove down here, a Toyota passed me with a bumper sticker that read, with a heart symbol, I LOVE LOVE. This morning I tried to remember how I got to this rendezvous.

I was in a distant city and a man told me of the killer and how he had hidden him. He said at first he feared him, but he was so useful. He would clean everything and cook all the time and get on his hands and knees and polish his shoes. I took him on as a favor, he explained.

I said, "I want him. I want to put him on paper."

And so I came.

The man I wait for insists, "You don't know me. No one can forgive me for what I did."

He has pride in his hard work. The good killers make a very tight pattern through the driver's door. They do not spray rounds everywhere in the vehicle, no, they make a tight pattern right through the door and into the driver's chest. The reporter who died received just such a pattern, ten rounds from a 9mm and not a single bullet came near his eight-year-old daughter.

I wait.

I admire craftsmanship.

The first call comes at 9:00 and says to expect the next call at 10:05. So I drive fifty miles and wait. The call at 10:05 says to wait until 11:30. The call at 11:30 does not come, and so I wait and wait. Next door is a game store frequented by men seeking power over a virtual world. Inside the coffee shop, it is all calculated calm and everything is clean.

I am in the safe country. I will not name the city, but it is far from Juárez and it is down by the river. At noon, the next call comes.

We meet in a parking lot, our cars conjoined like cops with driver next to driver. I hand over some photographs. He quickly glances at them and then tells me to go to a pizza parlor. There he says we must find a quiet place because he talks very loudly. I rent a motel room with him. None of this can be arranged ahead of time because that would allow me to set him up.

He glances at the photographs, images never printed in newspapers. He stabs his finger at a guy standing over a half-exposed body in a grave and says, "This picture can get you killed."

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Illustrations by Danijel Zezelj

I show him the photograph of the woman. She is lovely in her white clothes and perfect makeup. Blood trickles from her mouth, and the early-morning light caresses her face. The photograph has a history in my life. Once I placed it in a magazine and the editor there had to field a call from a terrified man, her brother, who asked, "Are you trying to get me killed, to get my family killed?" I remember the editor calling me up and asking me what I thought the guy meant. I answered, "Exactly what he said."

Now the man looks at her and tells me she was the girlfriend of the head of the *sicarios* in Juárez, and the guys in charge of the cartel thought she talked too much. Not that she'd ever given up a load or anything, it was simply the fact that she talked too much. So they told her boyfriend to kill her and he did. Or he would die.

This is ancient ground. The term *sicario* goes back to Roman Palestine, where a Jewish sect, the Sicarii, used concealed daggers (*sicae*) in their murders of Romans and their supporters.

He leans forward. "Amado and Vicente"—the two brothers who have successively headed the Juárez cartel—"could kill you if they even thought you were talking," he says.

These photographs can get you killed. Words can get you killed. And all this will happen and you will die and the sentence will never have a subject, simply an object falling dead to the ground.

I feel myself falling down into some kind of well, some dark place that hums beneath the workaday city, and in this place there is a harder reality and absolute facts. I have been living, I think, in a kind of fantasy world of laws and theories and logical events. Now I am in a country where people are murdered on a whim and a beautiful woman is found in the dirt with blood trickling from her mouth and then she is wrapped with explanations that have no actual connection to what happened.

I have spent years getting to this moment. The killers, well, I have been around them before. Once I partied with two hundred armed killers in a Mexican hotel for five days. But they were not interested in talking about their murders. He is.

We will never see him coming. He is of average height, he dresses like a workman with sturdy boots and a knit cap. If he stood next to you in a checkout line, you would be unable to describe him five minutes later. Nothing about him draws attention. Nothing.

He has very thick fingers and large hands. His face is expressionless. His voice is loud but flat.

He lives beneath notice. That is part of how he kills.

He says, "Juárez is a cemetery. I have dug the graves for 250 bodies."

I nod because I know what he means. The dead, the 250 corpses, are details, people he disappeared and put in holes in death houses. The city is studded with these secret tombs. Just today the authorities discovered a skeleton. From the rotted clothing, the experts peg the bones to be those of a twenty-five-year-old man. He is one of a legion of dead hidden in Juárez.

That is why I am here. I have spent twenty years now waiting for this moment and trying to avoid being buried in some hole. At that party long ago with the two hundred gunmen, a Mexican federal cop wanted to kill me. He was stopped by the host, and so I continued on with my tattered life. But I have come to this room so that I can bring out my dead, the thousands who have been cut down on my watch. I have published two books on the slaughter of the city, reporting there from 1995, when murder in Juárez ran at two to three hundred a year, until 2008, when 1,607 people were killed. And that is only the official tally—no one really keeps track of those who are taken and never heard from again. I am a prisoner of all this killing.

We sit with a translator at a round wooden table, drapes closed.

He says, "Everything I say stays in this room."

I nod and continue making notes.

That is how it begins: nothing is to leave the room, even though I am making notes and he knows I will publish what he says because I tell him that. We are entering a place neither of us knows. I can never repeat what he tells me even though I tell him I will repeat it. Nothing must leave the room even though he watches me write his words down in a black notebook. I do not even know his name, nor can I verify the particulars of what he tells me. But this killer has come to me with a pedigree, established through the hands that delivered him to me: a man who once used him, a former cartel member and leading state policeman who now has produced him as a favor.

He tells me to feel the tricep on his right arm. It hangs down like a tire. Now, he says, feel my left arm. There is nothing there.

He stands, puts a chokehold on me. He can snap my neck like a twig.

Then he sits down again.

I ask him how much he would charge to kill me.

He gives me a cool appraisal and says, "At the most, $5,000, probably less. You are powerless and you have no connections to power. No one would come after me if I killed you."

We are ready to begin.

I ask him how he became a killer.

He smiles and says, "My arm grew."

He takes a sheet of paper, draws five vertical lines, and writes in the spaces in black ink: CHILDHOOD, POLICE, NARCO, GOD. The four phases of his life. Then he scratches out what he has written until there is nothing but solid ink on the page.

He cannot leave tracks. He cannot quite give up the habits of a lifetime.

I reach for the paper but he snatches it back. And laughs. I think at both of us.

"When I believed in the Lord," he says, "I ran from the dead."

"I had a normal childhood," he insists. He will not tolerate the easy explanation that he is the product of abuse.

"We were very poor, very needy," he continues. "We came to the border from the south to survive. My people went into the *maquilas*. I went to a university. I didn't have a father who treated me badly. My father worked, a working man. He started at the *maquila* at 6:00 P.M. and worked until 6:00 A.M., six days a week. The rest of the time he was sleeping. My mother had to be both father and mother. She cleaned

houses in El Paso three days a week. There were twelve children to feed."

He pauses here to see if I understand. He will not be a victim, not of poverty, not of parents. He became a killer because it was a way to live, not because of trauma. His eyes are clear and intelligent. And cold.

"Once," he says, "my father took me and three of my brothers to the circus. We brought our own chilis and cookies so we did not have to spend

money. That was the happiest day of my life. And the only time I went somewhere with my father."

But now we turn to the time he worked for the devil.

He is in high school when the state police recruit him and his friends. They get $50 to drive cars across the bridge to El Paso, where they park them and walk away. They never know what is in the cars, nor do they ever ask. After the delivery, they are taken to a motel where cocaine and women are always available.

He drops out of the university because he has no money. And then the police dip into his set of friends who have been moving drugs for them to El Paso. And send them to the police academy. In his own case, because he is only seventeen, the mayor of Juárez has to intervene to get him into the academy.

"We were paid about a hundred and fifty pesos a month as cadets," he says, "but we got a bonus of $1,000 a month that came from El Paso. Every day, liquor and drugs came to the academy for parties. Each weekend, we bribed the guards and went to El Paso. I was sent to the FBI school in the United States and taught how to detect drugs, guns, and stolen vehicles. The training was very good."

After graduation, no one in the various departments really wanted him because he was too young, but U.S. law enforcement insisted he be given a command position. And so he was.

"I commanded eight people," he continues. "Two were honest and good. The other six were into drugs and kidnapping."

Two units of the State Police in Juárez specialized in kidnapping, and his was one such unit. The official assignment of both units was to stop kidnapping. In reality, one unit would kidnap the person and then hand the victim over to the other unit to be killed, a procedure less time-consuming than guarding the victim until the ransom was paid. Sometimes they would feign discovering the body a few days after the abduction.

That was the orderly Juárez he once knew. Then in July 1997, Amado Carrillo Fuentes, the head of the Juárez cartel, died. This was an

"earthquake." Order broke down. The payments to the State Police from an account in the United States ended. And each unit had to fend for itself.

"I have no real idea how and when I became a *sicario*," he says. "At first, I picked up people and handed them over to killers. And then my arm began to grow because I strangled people. I could earn $20,000 a killing."

Before Carrillo's death, cocaine was not easy for him to get in Juárez because "if you cut open a kilo, you died." So he and his crew would cross the bridge to El Paso and score. He is by now running a crew of kidnappers and killers, he is working for a cartel that stores tons of cocaine in Juárez warehouses, and he must enter the United States to get his drugs.

That changed after Carrillo's death. Soon he was deep into cocaine, amphetamines, and liquor and would stay up for a week. He also acquired his skill set: strangulation, killing with a knife, killing with a gun, car-to-car barrages, torture, kidnapping, and simply disappearing people and burying them in holes.

He mentions the case of Victor Manuel Oropeza, a doctor who wrote a column for the newspaper. He linked the police and the drug world. He was knifed to death in his office in 1991.

"The people who killed him taught me. *Sicarios* are not born, they are made."

He became a new man in a new world.

In the eyes of the U.S. government, the Mexican drug industry is very organized, its cartels structured like corporations, perhaps with periodic meetings. But on the ground with the *sicario*, there is no structure. He kills all over Mexico, he works with various groups, but he never knows how things are linked, he never meets the people in charge, and he never asks any questions. And so he visits the various outposts of this underground empire, but does so without any map and with no directory of the management. He is in a cell and can betray only the handful of people in his cell. He will never even be certain which cartel organization pays him.

He tells me of a leader—a deputy of Vicente Carrillo Fuentes, the current head of the Juárez cartel—"a man full of hate, a man who even hates his own family. He would cut up a baby in front of the father in order to make the father talk."

He says the man is a beast. He is drifting now, going back in time to a place he has left, the killing ground where he would slaughter and then drop five grand in a single evening. He remembers when outsiders would try to move into Juárez and commandeer the plaza, the crossing. For a while, the organization killed them and hung them upside down. Then, for a spell, they offered Colombian neckties, the throat cut, tongue dangling through the slit. There was a spate of necklacing, the burned body found with a charred stub where the head had been, the metal cords of the tire simply blackened hoops embracing the corpse.

He has lived like a god and been the destroyer of worlds. The room is still, so very still, the television a blank eye, the walls sedated with beige, the exhaust fan purring. His arms at rest on the wood table, everything solid and calm.

But his face is fear. Not fear of me but of something neither of us can define, a death machine with no apparent driver. There is no headquarters for him to avoid, no boss to keep an eye peeled for. He has been green-lighted, and now anyone who knows of the contract can kill him on sight and collect the money. The name of his killer is legion.

He can hide, but that only buys a little time, and he is allowed only one serious mistake and then he is dead. His hunters can be patient. He is like a winning lottery ticket, and one day they will collect. The death machine careens through the streets, guns at the ready, always rolling, no real route, randomly prowling and looking for fresh blood. The day comes and goes, and ten die. Or more. No one can really keep count any longer, and besides, some of the bodies simply vanish and cannot be tallied.

He stares at me.

He says, "I want to talk about God."

I say, "We'll get to that."

He is the killer and he does not know who is in charge. Just as he usually did not know the reason for the murders he committed. He will die.

Someone will kill him. No one will really notice.

No place is safe, he knows that fact. A family in the States owed some money on a deal, so a fourteen-year-old son and his friend were snatched and taken back over. The man killed them with a broken bottle, then drank a glass of their blood. He knows things like that. Because of what he has done. He knows that crossing the bridge is easy because he has crossed it so many times. He knows all the searches and all the security claims at the border are a joke because he has moved with his weapons back and forth. He knows that everything has been penetrated, that nothing can be trusted, not even the solid feel of the wooden table.

The rough edge of burning wood fires at those shacks of the poor, the acrid smell of burned powder flowing from a spent brass cartridge, an old copper kettle with oil boiling and fresh pork swirling into the crispness of *carnitas*, the caravan of cars passing in the night, windows tinted, and then the entire procession turns and comes by again and you look but do not stare because if they pause, however briefly, they will take you with them to the death that waits, the holes being dug each morning in the brown dirt of the Campo Santo, the graves a guess and a promise gaping up like hungry mouths for the kills of the morning and afternoon and evening, and four people sit outside their house at night and the cars come by, the bullets bark, two die soon after the barrage, and the other two are scooped up by family who drive them from hospital to hospital through the dark houses because no healers will take them in. The killers have a way of following their prey into the emergency rooms in order to finish the work.

His arms are on the wooden table as Juárez wafts across our faces, and we do not speak of this fact.

I cannot explain the draw of the city that gives death but makes everyone feel life. Nor can he. So we do

not speak but simply note this fact with our silence. We are both trying to return to some person we imagine we once were, the person before the killings, before the torture, before the fear. He wants to live without the power of life and death, and wonders if he can endure being without the money. I want to obliterate memory, to be in a world where I do not know of *sicarios* and think of dinner and not of fresh corpses decorating the *calles*. We have followed different paths and wound up in the same plaza, and now we sit and talk and wonder how we will ever get home.

I crossed the river about twenty years ago—I can't be exact about the date because I am still not sure what crossing really means except that you never come back. I just know I crossed and now I stumble on some distant shore. It is like killing. I ask him, "Tell me about your first killing," and he says he can't remember, and I know that he is not telling the truth and I know that he is not lying. Sometimes you cannot reach it. You open that drawer, and your hand is paralyzed and you cannot reach it. It is right in front of you but still you cannot reach it, and so you say you don't remember.

He has a green pen, a notebook. He has printouts from the Internet, mainly things about me. He has spent ten hours researching me, he says. Like so many pilgrims, he is in the market for a witness who can understand his life. He has decided I will suffice. He is at ease now. Before, his body was hunched over, shoulders looming, those trained and talented hands. He wore a skullcap that hid his hair and he seldom smiled.

Now he is a different person, a man who laughs, his body almost fluid, his eyes no longer dead black coals but beaming and dancing as he speaks.

"We are not monsters," he explains. "We have education, we have feelings. I would leave torturing someone, go home and have dinner with my family, and then return. You shut off parts of your mind. It is a kind of work, you follow orders."

For some time, his past life has been dead to him, something he shut off. But now it is back. He thinks God has sent me to convey his lessons to others. Like all of us, he wants his life to have meaning, and I am to write it down and send it out into the world. Of course, he must be careful. When he left the life two years ago, the organization put a $250,000 contract on his life. He does not know what the contract currently is, but it is unlikely to be lower. At the moment, God is protecting him and his family, he knows this, but still he must be careful.

"I don't do bad things anymore," he says, "but I can't stop being careful. It is a habit I have. That's how I ensure security for myself. They killed me twice, you know."

And he lifts his shirt to show me two groupings of bullet holes in his belly from separate times when he took rounds from an AK-47.

"I was in a coma for a while," he continues. "I weighed 290 pounds when I went into the hospital, a narco hospital, and I shrank to 120 pounds."

It was all a mistake. The organization believed he had leaked information on the killing of a newspaper columnist, but it turned out the actual informant had been the guy paid to tap phones. So he was killed and "they apologized to me and paid for a month's vacation in Mazatlán with women, drugs, and liquor. I was about twenty-four then."

He sips his coffee. He is ready to begin.

He notes that when I asked him earlier about his first killing, he said he couldn't really remember because he used so much cocaine and drank so much alcohol back then. That was a lie. He remembers quite well.

"The first person I killed, well, we were state policemen doing a patrol," he says. "They called my partner on his cell phone and told him the person we were looking for was in a mall. So we went and got him and put him in the car."

Two guys get in the car, identify the target, and leave. They are people paying for the murder.

He and his partner use the police code for a homicide: when the number 39 is spoken, it means to kill the person.

The guy they have picked up has lost ten kilos of cocaine, drugs that belong to the other two men.

His partner drives, and he gets in back with the victim.

The target says that he gave the drugs to someone else. At that moment his partner says, "Thirty-nine," and so he instantly kills him.

"It was like automatic," he explains.

They drive around for hours with the body and they drink. Finally, they go to an industrial park, pry off a manhole, and throw the body in the sewer. For his work, he gets an ounce of coke, a bottle of whiskey, and $1,000.

"They told me I had passed the test. I was eighteen."

He checks into a hotel and does cocaine and drinks for four days.

"The state police didn't care if you were drunk. If you really wanted to be left alone, you gave the dispatcher a hundred pesos and then they would not call you at all."

After this baptism, he moves into kidnapping and enters a new world. Soon he is traveling all over Mexico. He is working for the police, but whenever an assignment comes up he simply gets leave.

A few of the kidnappings he participates in are merely snatches for ransom. But hundreds of others have a different goal.

"They would say, 'Take this guy. He lost 200 kilos of marijuana and didn't pay.' I would pick him up in my police car, I would drop him off at a safe house. A few hours later, I would get a call that said there is a dead body to get rid of.

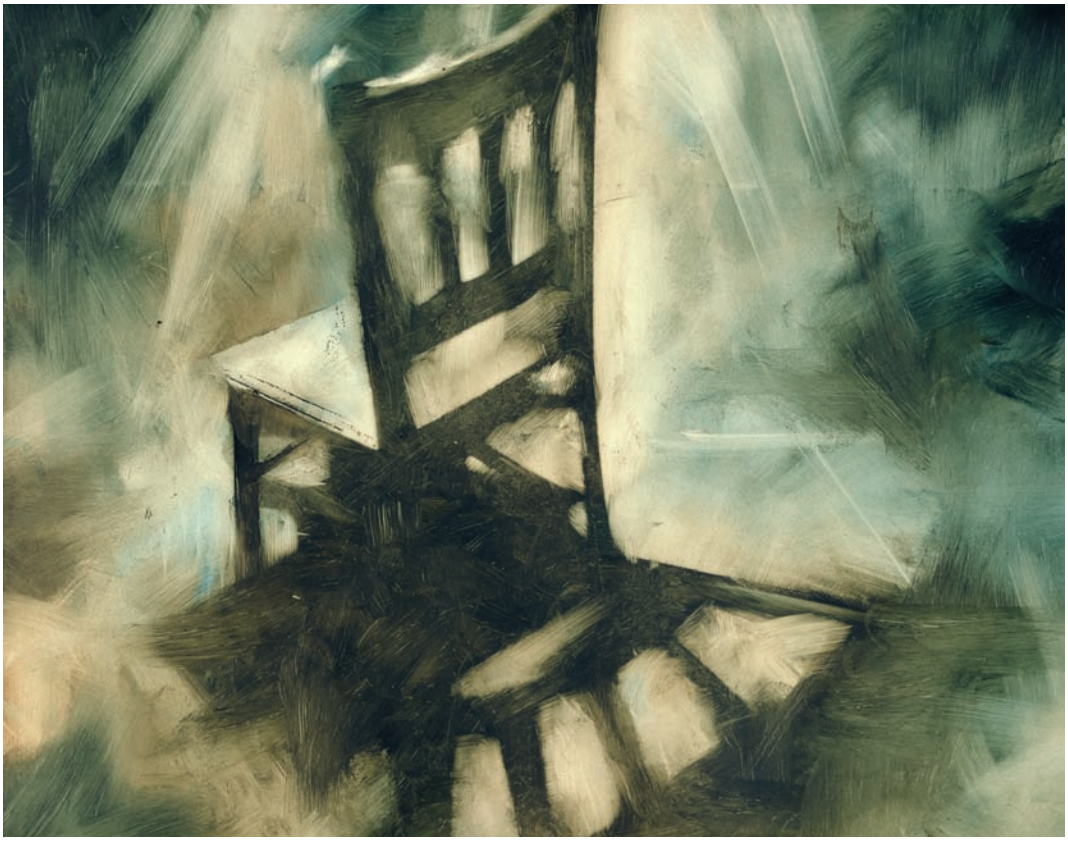
"This was at the start of my career, after I passed my test. For about three years I traveled all over Mexico. Once I even went to Quintana Roo. I always had an official police car. Sometimes we used planes, but usually we drove. We got through military checkpoints by showing an official document that said we were transporting a prisoner. The document would have a fake case number."

He becomes a tour guide to an alternate Mexico, a place where citizens are transported from safe house to safe house without any records left for courts and agencies. When he arrives someplace, the person has already been kidnapped. He simply picks him up for shipment.

Controlling them was easy because they were terrified.

"When they saw that it was an official car and when I said, 'Don't worry, everything will be fine. You'll be back with your family. If you don't cooperate, we'll drug you and put you in the trunk and I can't guarantee then that you'll see the end of the journey.'"

The drive is fueled by coke. He and his partner always dress well for



such work—they get five or six new suits from the organization every few months. They are seldom home but seem to live in various safe houses and are supplied with food and drugs. But no women. This is all business.

They hardly ever do police work; they are working full-time for narcos. This is his real home for almost twenty years, a second Mexico that does not exist officially and that coexists seamlessly with the government. In his many transports of human beings to bondage, torture, and death, he is never interfered with by the authorities. He is part of the government, the state policeman with eight men under his command. But his key employer is the organization, which he assumes is the Juárez cartel, but he never asks since questions can be fatal. They give him a salary, a house, a car. And standing.

He estimates that 85 percent of the police worked for the organization. But, even on a clear day, he could barely glimpse the cartel that employed him. He is in a cell, and above him is a boss, and above that boss is a region of power he never visits or knows. He also estimates that out of every hundred human beings he transports maybe two make it back to their former lives. The rest die. Slowly, very slowly.

In each safe house, there would be anywhere from five to fifteen kidnap victims. They wore blindfolds all the time, and if their blindfolds slipped they were killed. At times, they would be put in a chair facing a television, their eyes would be briefly uncovered, and they would watch videos of their children going to school, their wives shopping, the family at church. They would see the world they had left behind, and they would know this world would vanish, be destroyed, if they did not come through with the money. The neighbors never complained about the safe houses. They would see all the police cars parked in front and remain silent.

They might owe a million, but when the work was finished they would pay everything, their entire fortunes, and maybe, just maybe, the wife would be left with a house and a car. People would be held for up to two years. They were beaten after they were fed, and so they learned to associate food with pain. Once in a great while, the order would come down to release a prisoner. They would be taken to a park blindfolded, told to count to fifty before they opened their eyes. Even at this moment of freedom, they would weep because they no longer believed it possible for them to be released and still expected to be murdered.

"Sometimes," he says, "prisoners who had been held for months would be allowed to remove the blindfolds so they could clean the safe house. After a while, they began to think they were part of the organization, and they identified with the guards who beat them. They would even make up songs about their experiences as prisoners, and they would tell us of all the fine things they would make sure we got when they were released. Sometimes after beating them badly, we would send their families videos of them and they would be pleading, saying, 'Give them everything.' And then the order would come down and they would be killed."

Payment to the organization would always be made in a different city from where the prisoner was held. Every-

thing in the organization was compartmentalized. Often he would stay in a safe house for weeks and never speak to a prisoner or know who they were. It did not matter. They were products and he was a worker following orders. No matter how much the family paid, the prisoner almost always died. When the family had been sucked dry of money, the prisoner had no value. And besides, he could betray the organization. So death was logical and inevitable.

He pauses in his account. He wants it understood that he is now similar to the prisoners he tortured and killed. He is outside the organization, he is a threat to the organization, and "everyone who is no longer of use to the boss dies."

He is now the floating man remembering when he was firmly anchored in his world.

"I want it understood," he says, "that I had feelings when I was in the torture houses and people would be lying in their vomit and blood. I was not permitted to help them."

He is calm as he says this. He alternates between asserting his humanity and explaining how he maintained a professional demeanor while he kidnapped, tortured, and killed people. He says he is feared now because he believes in God. Then he says he could make a good grouping on the target with his AK-47 at 800 yards. He would practice at military bases and police academies. He could get in using his police badge.

The work, he insists, is not for amateurs. Take torture—you must know just how far to go. Even if you intend to kill the person in the end, you must proceed carefully in order to get the necessary information.

"They are so afraid," he explains, "they are usually cooperative. Sometimes when they realize what is going to happen to them, they become aggressive. Then you take their shoes away, soak their clothes, and put a hot wire to each foot for fifteen seconds. Then they understand that you are in charge and that you are going to get the information. You can't beat them too much because then they become insensitive to pain. I have seen people beaten so badly that you could pull out their fingernails with pliers and they wouldn't feel it.

"You handcuff them behind their backs, sit them in a chair facing a hundred-watt bulb, and you ask them questions about their jobs, number and age of children, all things you have researched and know the answer to. Every time they lie, you give them a jolt from an electric cattle prod. Once they realize they can't lie, you start asking them the real questions—how many loads have they moved to the U.S., who do they work for, and if they are not paying your boss, well, why?

"They will try by this point to answer everything. Then we beat them and let them rest. We show them those videos of their family. At this point, they will give up anything we ask for and even more. Now you have the advantage, and you use this new information to hit warehouses and steal loads, to round up other people they work with, and then you video their families and begin the process again. You know the families will not likely go to the police because they know the guy is in a bad business. But if they do tell the police, we instantly know because we work with the police. We're part of the anti-kidnapping unit. Sometimes the people kidnapped are killed instantly because, after we take their jewelry and cars, they are worthless. Such goods are divided up within the unit, among five to eight people. The hardest thing is when you kill them because then you must dig a hole to bury them. There are two mistakes most people make. They don't pay whoever controls the plaza, the city. Or they dreamed of being bigger than the boss."

But none of this really matters because he never asks why people are kidnapped, nor who they really are. They are simply product and he is simply a worker. Their screams are simply the background noise to the task at hand. Just as calming them or transporting them is simply part of the job.

There is a second category of kidnapping, one he finds almost embarrassing. Someone's wife is having an affair with her personal trainer, so you pick up the trainer and kill him. Or a guy has a hot woman and some other guy wants her, so you kill the boyfriend to get the woman for him.

"I received my orders," he says, "and I had to kill them. The bosses didn't know what the limits were. If they want a woman, they get her. If they want a car, they get it. They have no limits."

He resents people who like to kill. They are not professional. Real *sicarios* kill for money. But there are people who kill for fun.

"People will say, 'I haven't killed anyone for a week.' So they'll go out and kill someone. This kind of person does not belong in organized crime. They're crazy. If you discover such a person in your unit, you kill him. The people you really want to recruit are police or ex-police—trained killers."

All this is a sore point for him. The slaughter now going on in Juárez offends him because too many of the killings are done by amateurs, by kids imitating *sicarios*. He is appalled by the number of bullets used in a single execution. It shows a lack of training and skill. In a real hit, the burst goes right where the lock is on the door because such rounds will penetrate the driver's torso with a killing shot. Twice he was stymied by armored vehicles, but the solution is a burst of full-jacketed rounds in a tight pattern—this will gouge through the armor. A hit should take no more than a minute. Even his hardest jobs against armored cars took under three minutes.

A real *sicario*, he notes, does not kill women or children. Unless the women are informants for the DEA or the FBI.

Here, he must show me. A proper execution requires planning. First, the Eyes study the target for days, usually at least a week. His schedule at home is noted, when he gets up, when he leaves for work, when he comes home, everything about his routines in his domestic life is recorded by the Eyes. Then the Mind takes over. He studies the man's habits in the city itself: his day at work, where he lunches, where he drinks, how often he visits his mistress and where she lives and what her habits are. Between the

Eyes and the Mind a portrait is possible. Now there is a meeting of the crew, which is six to eight people. There will be two police cars with officers and two other cars with *sicarios*. A street will be selected for the hit, one that can easily be blocked off. Timing will be carefully worked out, and the hit will take place within a half dozen blocks of a safe house—an easy matter since there are so many in the city.

He picks up a pen and starts drawing. The lead car will be police. Then will come a car full of *sicarios*. Then the car driven by the target. This is followed by another car of *sicarios*. And then, bringing up the rear, another police car.

During the execution, the Eyes will watch and the Mind will man the radios.

When the target enters the block selected for the murder, the lead police car will pivot and block the street, the first *sicario* will slow, the second car of *sicarios* behind the target will pull up beside him and shoot him, the final police car will block the end of the street.

All this should take less than thirty seconds. One man will get out and give a *coup de grâce* to the bullet-riddled victim. Then all will disperse.

The car with the killers will go to the safe house and leave their vehicle in a garage. It will be taken to a garage owned by the organization, repainted, and then sold on one of the organization's lots. The killers themselves will pick up a clean car at the safe house, and often they return to the scene of the murder to see that everything has gone well.

He sketches this with exactness, each rectangle neatly drawn to delineate a car, and the target's car is filled in and blooms on the page with green ink. Arrows indicate how each vehicle will move. It is like an equation on a chalkboard.

He leans back from his toil and on his face is almost the look of a job well done. This is how a real *sicario* performs his work. In the ideal hit, no target is left alive. Should any in the group be injured, they go to one of the organization's hospitals—"If you can buy a governor, you can buy a hospital."

"I never knew the names of the people I was involved with," he continues. "There was a person who directed our group and he knew everything. But if your job is to execute people, that is all you do. You don't know the reasons or names. I would be in a safe house with the kidnapped for a month and never speak to them. Then, if I was told to kill them, I would. We would take them to the place where they would be killed, take off their clothes. We would kill them exactly the way we were ordered—a bullet to the neck, acid on the bodies. There would be cases where you would be killing someone, strangling them, and they would stop breathing, and you would get a call—'Don't kill them'—and so you would have to know how to resuscitate them or we would be killed because the boss never makes a mistake."

Everything is contained and sealed. For a while they used crazy kids to steal cars for the work, but the kids, about forty of them, got too arrogant, talking and selling drugs in the nightclubs. This violated an agreement with the governor of Chihuahua to keep the city quiet. So one night around ten years ago, fifty police, and one hundred and fifty guys from the organization who were to ensure the job was done, rounded up all the kids on Avenida Juárez. They were not tortured. They were killed with a single head shot and buried in one hole.

"No." He smiles at me. "I will not tell you where that hole is."

He has trouble remembering some things.

"I would get up in the morning and do a line," he explains, "then have a glass of whiskey. Then I would go to lunch. I would never sleep more than a few hours, little naps. It is hard to sleep during a time of war. Even if my eyes were closed, I was alert. I slept with a loaded AK-47 on one side, a .38 on the other. The safeties were always off.

Do I know of the death houses, he asks. "It would take a book to do the death houses. After all, I know where six hundred bodies are buried in safe houses in Juárez. There is one death house they have never revealed that I know has fifty-six bodies. Just as there is a rancho where the officials say they

found two bodies but I know that rancho has thirty-two corpses. If the police really investigated they would find bodies. But obviously, you cannot trust the police."

He especially wants to know what I know about the two death houses uncovered last winter. I say one had nine bodies, the other thirty-six.

No, no, he insists, the second one had thirty-eight, two of them women.

He carefully draws me the layout of this second death house. One of the women, he notes, was killed for speaking too much. The other was a mistake. These do happen, though the bosses never admit to it.

But he keeps returning to the death house with the thirty-eight bodies. It has memories for him.

I remember standing on the quiet dirt street as the authorities made a show of digging up the dead. Half a mile away was a hospital where some machine-gunned people were taken that spring, but the killers followed and killed them in the emergency room. Shot their kinfolk in the waiting room also.

"The narcos," he wants me to understand, "have informants in the DEA and the FBI. They work until they are useless. Then they are killed."

As for those who inform *to* the FBI and DEA, they "die ugly."

He explains.

"They were brought handcuffed behind the back to the death house where they found thirty-six bodies," he rolls on. "A T-shirt was soaked with gasoline and put on their backs, lit, and then after a while pulled from their backs. The skin came off with it. Both men made sounds like cattle being killed. They were injected with a drug so they would not lose consciousness. Then they put alcohol on their testicles and lit them. They jumped so high—they were handcuffed and still I never saw people jump so high."

We are slipping now, all the masks have fallen to the floor. The veteran, the professional *sicario,* is walking me through a key assignment he completed.

"Their backs were like leather and did not bleed. They put plastic bags on their heads to smother them and then revived them with alcohol under their noses.

"All they ever said to us was, 'We will see you in hell.'

"This went on for three days. They smelled terrible because of the burns. They brought in a doctor to keep reviving them. They wanted them to live one more day. After a while they defecated blood. They shoved broomsticks up their asses.

"The second day a person came and told them, 'I warned you this was going to happen.'

"They said, 'Kill us.'

"The guys lived three days. The doctor kept injecting them to keep them alive and he had to work hard. Eventually they died of the torture.

"They never asked God for help. They just kept saying, 'We will see you in hell.'

"I buried them with their faces down and poured on a whole lot of lime."

He is excited. It is all back.

He can feel the shovel in his hand.

He is calm now. He is revisiting this evil time, he says, simply for my benefit. He takes his various drawings—how to do a hit, where some people were buried in a death house—looks at the green schematics he has created, and then slowly tears them into little squares until the torn heap can never be reconstructed.

Until late 2006, he worked all over Mexico for different groups, and the various organizations generally got along. There were small moments, such as when others tried to take over Juárez and it was necessary to necklace them. But his life in the main was calm. So calm he did not need to know who he really worked for.

"I received orders from two people. They ran me. I never knew which cartel I worked for. Now there is Vicente Carrillo against Chapo Guzmán"—that is, Joaquin Guzmán Loera, head of Mexico's largest cartel. "But I never met any bosses, so when the war started around 2006, I did not know which one I did the killing for. And orders could cross from one group to another. I am living in a cell and I simply take orders. In thirty minutes in Juárez, sixty well-trained and heavily armed men can assemble in thirty cars and circulate as a show of force.

"Then, at my level, we began to get orders to kill each other."

He is kidnapped but let go after an hour. This unsettles him, and he begins to think about escaping his life. But that is not a simple matter, since if you leave you are murdered. As the war escalates, he begins to distance himself from people he knows and works with. He tries to fade away. By this time, a third of the people he knows have been killed—"they were seen as useless and then killed."

He doesn't know the boss, he is still not even sure who his boss is. He drinks at home. The streets are too dangerous. New people arrive and he does not know them. He is not safe.

So he flees.

He confides in a friend. Who betrays him.

He pauses at this point. He knows he is guilty of a fatal error. He has violated a fundamental rule: you can be betrayed only by someone you trust. So you survive by trusting no one. Still, there is this shred of humanity in all of us, and in the end we feel the need to trust someone, to call someone friend, to share feelings with others. And this need is fatal. It is the very need he has exploited for years, the need he used when he put people in the police car and told them they would be all right if they cooperated, would be back with their families in no time if they were calm. And by God, they did trust him and rode across Mexico, went through checkpoints and said nothing, never told a single soul they had been kidnapped. They would trust him as they were tortured in the safe houses. They would help mop the floors, clean up the vomit and blood. They would compose songs. They would trust him right up to that instant when he strangled them.

So his friend gives him up. He is taken at 10:00 P.M., and this time he is held until 3:00 A.M.

But something has changed within him. And some things have not changed. Four men take him to a safe house. They remove all of his clothing but his shorts. They take pool balls in their hands and beat him.

But he can tell they are amateurs. They do not even handcuff him, and this is disturbing to him. He is the captive of third-raters. As they beat him,

he prays and prays and prays. He also laughs because he is appalled by their incompetence. They have not bound him and their blows do not disable him. He sizes them up and in his mind plans how he will kill them, one, two, three, four, just like that.

And at the same moment, he is praying to God to help him so that he will not kill them, so that he can stop his life of murder. As he sits in the room, sipping coffee and recalling this moment, his face comes alive. He is passionate now. He is approaching the very moment of his salvation. Some people pretend to accept Christ, he says, but at that moment he could feel total acceptance fill his body. He could feel peace.

They point rifles at him. He cannot stop laughing.

"I was afraid," he explains. "I realized I would have to kill them all."

Two of the armed men left. One other guy went to the bathroom. He looks at the remaining captor.

"The guy says, 'I don't have a problem with you. Once, you told me to be careful or they would kill me. You did me a favor.'

"So, I am praying to God, help me! I don't want to kill these people. And I know I can do it rapidly.

"The guy turns his back on me and says, 'Get out, go.'

He opens the door and runs without his shoes or clothes.

His face is stern now. He has come to the place, the very moment that has permitted him to recount the kidnappings, the tortures, the killings. He is selling and what he is selling is God. He is believing, and what he believes based on his own life is that anyone can be redeemed. And that it is possible to leave the organization and survive.

His thoughts are a jumble as he speaks. He is telling of his salvation, and yet he feels the tug of his killings. He feels the pride in being feared. Back at the beginning, when he first started with the state police, that was when Oropeza, the doctor and newspaper columnist, was killed. And Oropeza's killers, he now recalls, were his mentors, his teachers. He remembers that after the murder, the state government announced a big investigation to get the killers. And one of them, a fellow cop, stayed at his own police station until the noise quieted and the charade ended.

He is excited now; he is living in his past.

"The only reason I am here is God saved me. I repented. After all these years I am talking to you. I am having to relive things that are dead to me. I don't want to be part of this life. I don't want to know the news. You must write this so that other *sicarios* know it is possible to leave. They must know God can help them. They are not monsters. They have been trained like special forces in the Army. But they never realize they have been trained to serve the devil.

"Imagine being nineteen and being able to call up a plane. I liked the power. I never realized until God talked to me that I could get out. Still, when God frees me, I remain a wolf. I can't become a lamb. I remain a terrible person, but now I have God on my side.

He stares at me as I write in a black notebook.

His body seems to loom over the table.

This is the point in all stories where everyone discovers who they really are.

He says, "I have now relived something I should never have opened up. Are you the medium to reach others? I prayed to God asking what I should do. And you are the answer. You are going to write this story because God has a purpose in you writing this story.

"God has given you this mission.

"No one will understand this story except those who have been in the life. And God will tell you how to write this story."

Then we embrace and pray. I can feel his hand on my shoulder probing, seeking the power of the Lord in me.

I have my work to do now.

And so we go our separate ways.

In the parking lot he moves with ease, in a state of grace. The sun blazes, the sky aches blue. Life feels good. His eyes relax and he laughs. And then I see him memorize my license plate in a quick and practiced glance. He has told me he is bathed in the blood of the lamb, but his eyes remain those of the wolf. ■