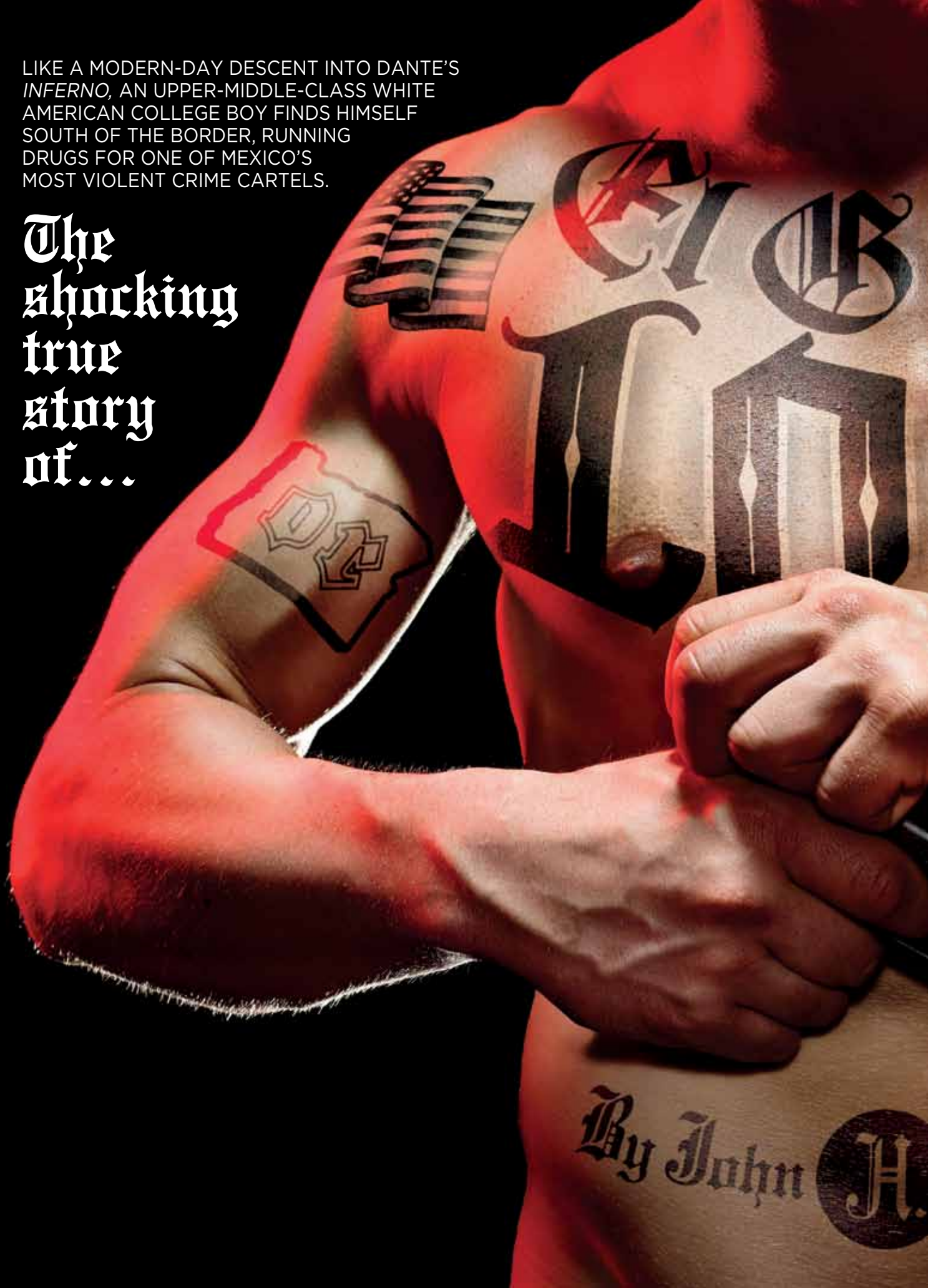


LIKE A MODERN-DAY DESCENT INTO DANTE'S *INFERNO*, AN UPPER-MIDDLE-CLASS WHITE AMERICAN COLLEGE BOY FINDS HIMSELF SOUTH OF THE BORDER, RUNNING DRUGS FOR ONE OF MEXICO'S MOST VIOLENT CRIME CARTELS.

The
shocking
true
story
of...



By John H.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY

Austin Snipez

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he mirror crashes to the floor and Rigo is in the doorway with his nine in his hand—*We're at war! We're at war!*

The Gringo bolts from his bed. He's been in the cartel seven months, a college-educated American kid from the suburbs of Portland with a shaved head and the massive shoulders of the offensive tackle he once was. It started out pure fun, easy money, gorgeous women and the camaraderie of soldiers. They called him La Flama Blanca, the white flame, which somehow inspired a series of *Talladega Nights* jokes. *We know how*

to shake and bake Flama Blanca style! And man, did they party. But lately the Gringo's been getting paranoid. That's why he put the mirror against his door, the only alarm system that still works after Rigo freaked out and smashed all the alarms, thinking they were spy cameras.

We're at war! Rigo shouts again.

As usual, Rigo's out of his mind on coke and ecstasy and massive quantities of booze. He's 30, skinny and good-looking, with the vaged-out sweetness of someone nursing many inner wounds. His uncle gave him a job cleaning meth when he was 13. When he was 15 he watched his grandfather stab a man to death. When he was 18 he stabbed a man and then spent five years in prison. In the past few months he's become the Gringo's best friend.

Calm down, the Gringo says. Tell me what happened.

What happened is Rigo went to the projects to score coke and some guy sold him a \$10 bag that seemed light, so they had words and Rigo punched him in the face. According to the narco code, the

“We killed his whole family, just walked into the house and started shooting.”

guy is going to have to come back hard. The alternatives are ostracism or death.

They're coming for us, Rigo says. We're fucking at war right now.

Then Rigo sits down on his bed and starts to pass out. Thinking there's a gang of killers on the way, the Gringo says, *Motherfucker, what the fuck?*

Rigo wakes up for a second. *I just need some milk and cookies, Mom.*

After that, nothing will rouse him. So the Gringo takes his gun and stands watch all night, (continued on page 116)



1

1. Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, head of the Sinaloa cartel, has been ranked by *Forbes* as one of the richest men in the world. El Gringo Loco was running drugs for El Chapo's cartel. 2. Soldiers on the hunt for cartel leaders stumbled on this stash—\$26 million in cash. 3. Marines stand guard over a seized shipment of cocaine in Manzanillo, a Pacific coastal town where El Gringo Loco worked the streets and clubs, dealing. 4. More than 55,000 people have been killed in drug violence in Mexico since 2006. Would El Gringo Loco be added to the list?



2



3



4

GRINGO LOCO

(continued from page 60)

hoping this nightmare will dissipate in the light of morning.

No such luck. In the light of morning, Rigo still wants to kill the guy. He calls his cousin Demente, a hit man who shows up with an extra Glock. Rigo says, *I'll talk to the guy, but I'll probably shoot him.* And Demente holds out the gun to the Gringo.

This is it, the point of no return. If the Gringo doesn't take the gun, his brief, improbable career as a white American in a Mexican cartel is over.

Let's do it, he says.

The Gringo from Portland is going to war.

Before he went to Mexico, the Gringo was an athletic kid from a prosperous American family with two beach houses. Life was good until he was 11, when his parents divorced and his mother married a much younger man, leaving the Gringo with a fatherless ache that lasted all through his teen years. But he poured his energy into sports and never took illegal drugs till he was 23. He made all-state in high school and got a football scholarship to Portland State, where he picked up a bachelor's degree in communication and a painkiller habit. His biggest rebellion was a taste for Latin American revolutionary history. After college he found work as a high school football coach.

He's telling this story at his mother's house in Portland. He's been back from Mexico for two and a half months, found a job doing telemarketing from a sterile cubicle and taking shit from a snotty boss, and he's trying to sort out his feelings. Should he go straight? Should he go back to the cartel? *You get burned if you stand by the fire,* he says, *but who wants to be cold?*

His dilemma began soon after he graduated from college, when he started selling painkillers to pay for his habit. He started to think of himself as an "illegalist," his term for a revolutionary without a revolution. He read Mao and Castro and Chomsky and Kropotkin, cultivating a rage against a society that is created to keep us from thought and from being happy.

Three years later everything fell apart. *One of my friends is in a mental institution, one got addicted to heroin, and I introduced them to pills.* He felt so bad, he stopped caring if he lived or died and did reckless things that attracted the attention of the police. So when his mom saw an ad for English teachers in Guadalajara, he jumped at the chance to escape. Emiliano Zapata! Pancho Villa! What better place to clean up than sunny Mexico?

He arrived in October and got a job teaching English at a factory, waking up at 6:30 and catching the train, a period he now thinks of as *the time I was trying to pretend to be a normal person.* But one night, he and another teacher were in a club and a

guy came up with a tray of free beer, said he was a hit man from Michoacán who had decided to protect them—and lifted his shirt to flash his gun. The Gringo was fascinated. In the circles he was running in, narcos were Robin Hoods who battled the corrupt government and refused to abide by social norms. Ballads memorialized narcos' deaths. What could be cooler?

That November, the same teacher took him to a party in a big house on a tree-lined street near the Expo Guadalajara. The host was a skinny young guy who spoke perfect English. *Call me Rigo,* he said, launching into the fantastic story of his life as a fourth-generation narco. One of his first memories was his dad kicking a hole in the wall and digging out two cases of money and a shotgun. He was eight. Next time they met, he was 16 and his dad gave him an ounce of cocaine for a Christmas present.

Another night in another club, one of the Gringo's friends bought some ecstasy from a guy whose boss then came up to their table. He was in his 30s, a good-looking, relaxed dude, six feet tall, big for a Mexican, with the Buddha belly of a man who loves to drink and party. *Call me Cuz,* he said.

Cuz and the Gringo hit it off. Cuz was funny, an outgoing party guy everybody instantly liked. He grew up in Juárez and loved Americans, was a huge music fan and rave promoter. Soon they were exchanging stories about their backgrounds, and it was amazing because they were both the black sheep of wealthy families with elder brothers who were the favorite. They both loved *Scarface* and *Pulp Fiction* and *American Gangster*. They talked about the bad things they had done and the lives they were destined to live. *You can correct yourself all you want,* Cuz said, *but you're still going to be that person, the person you are.*

That night, Cuz made out like he was a little guy who sold a few pills at raves. *You hang out with these teachers; you could sell to these teachers,* he said, giving the Gringo half an X to try. *Remember, call me tomorrow. Don't forget.*

The Gringo did as he was told.

A week later, Cuz called back. *Let's get some beers and go to this little party.* So they gathered some of the Gringo's friends and hopped in a cab and drove till they were 40 miles out of town and starting to get nervous. Suddenly, at the top of a hill, a squad of *federales* appeared. They searched everybody but Cuz, who walked right past them as if he were invisible. The Gringo and his friends followed him over a ridge onto a mountaintop lit up like a nightclub with 5,000 people dancing. A line of gunmen in ski masks stood guard around the perimeter with AR-15s. The Gringo turned to Cuz. *Are those more federales?*

No, those are our dudes.

The Gringo was starting to realize that Cuz was connected in a big way. He

walked from one hug and high-five to the next. He seemed to know everybody. He led the Gringo to a tent with heat lamps and black leather couches and beautiful women who all seemed to be wearing big fat gold men's watches—the sign of a narco princess, as the Gringo would soon learn. *You see one of those watches on a girl, you steer clear.*

They were in the narco tent. Famous DJs from Europe chatted nervously with the gangsters, who tended to fall into categories denoted by the drugs they sold—the coke guys were the scariest, dancing like maniacs and giving you that cold coke stare. But the Gringo was oblivious, bopping up to the most dangerous guys and babbling like a goofball. He had a way of twisting his face into comic expressions that contradicted his football body and made him hard to pigeonhole: Was he a thug or an idiot? Not always in a friendly way, the narcos asked, *Who is this guy?*

Cuz wanted them all to take acid. The Gringo had never done hallucinogens before but found it hard to say no. Cuz just laughed at everything. There was no darkness in him, no judgment. Nothing was true, so everything was permitted, as the old Russian anarchists used to say. *Fuck it,* the Gringo said. *Let's do it.* So the sun came up as the acid came on and they were in this beautiful Mexican countryside where everything seemed to fall into place and Cuz seemed like a prophet. The world was divided into good and evil and light and dark, he said, but all divisions were profitable to somebody and it was the same with the cartels dividing the world into families, raising prices in collusion with the cartel of the U.S. government. But some day the world would be one, and all the countries and cartels would go away. That's why Cuz didn't use hit men or deal heroin or speed or crack, because that ruined people's lives. If it was his destiny to be a criminal, he could at least improve his karma by sticking to softer drugs.

If we're dealing coke to a girl, he said, *what will she do? Break into her parents' room and steal money out of her dad's wallet. If she's on X, she sneaks into her dad's room to give him a hug.*

Oh, how they laughed! In the Gringo's mind, it all made perfect sense, as if his whole life had been leading up to this moment. Stuck between being a bad son and a good son, he could make up for the sins of selling those horrible painkillers and getting his friends addicted and still follow his illegalist destiny. He could have a stretch of lawlessness in a place where lawlessness still exists. In his added mind, it was a strange kind of self-improvement program that might finally purge his suicidal impulses. His Che Guevara quote tattoo said it all: *We cannot be sure of having anything to live for unless we're willing to die for it.*

Still, the good son had to teach the next day. So Cuz walked him down to a little mom-and-pop stand to catch the bus back to Guadalajara. While they waited,

Cuz turned his wild-eyed grin on the cashier. *I'm on acid right now*, he said.

The cashier smiled. *The 1970s are back—nice.*

Cuz started him off at a high price, \$7 a pill, supplying acid, X and molly, which is X so pure you can snort it or put it under your tongue. The molly sold for \$15 each. The Gringo could make \$400 in a single night, almost as much as he earned for a whole month of teaching. He also started hanging out with Cuz a couple of days a week, helping him sort and package pills and move money from place to place.

Soon after, his mom came down for the holidays, and Cuz took them out to lunch at a fancy Argentine steak place. She asked, *Is Mexico safe?* Cuz said, *Oh, don't worry; we're just getting rid of all the dirt balls, rapists and killers to make a better society.* They hit it off, even became Facebook friends, and that helped seal the Gringo's bond with Cuz, because Mexico is all about family. He didn't tell his mom that 18 headless bodies had just been found a mile from her hotel.

By January he had stopped teaching altogether. He worked parties and gay clubs and hung out with hot French girls. He was their peek into the glamorous narco

lifestyle—a *dancing bear*, as he puts it.

But more and more, he found himself hanging out with Rigo. Talk about an illegalist! Rigo would walk out of a club and shoot his gun in the air. He would fire off a couple of rounds at the front door instead of ringing the doorbell. He had been a meth addict, a heroin addict, a professional killer who took payment in cars. He never judged and never criticized, accepting the craziest behavior with a laugh and a shrug. *I always like having people around who are crazier than I am.* More important, he was the dauphin of a powerful cartel family, and as long as he was around, nobody would touch them—as the Gringo learned one night when he got into a club dispute with a thug who threatened to slit his throat. He went straight home and called Rigo.

This fucking guy from Sinaloa threatened to kill me, he said.

Don't worry, Rigo said. They'd have to get permission to hit a white guy and his uncle would hear about it. *I'll put the word out; nothing will happen.*

And nothing did.

Around March, the Gringo moved in with Rigo. Their housemates included a Satanist

death-metal fan who had been arrested for manslaughter, the burned-out son of another powerful family and a hot-dog salesman who doubled as muscle in dangerous times. There were bullet holes in the palm trees and rumors of bodies buried in the backyard, left by a former owner who led one of the cartels. They called it the House of Pain, and the Gringo made it his mission to turn it into the Happy House. To Rigo, he was a minty blast of American optimism.

For the first month, they did a lot of coke. People would come by, drink a beer, buy some pills. Or they'd go to one of the nightclubs Rigo's uncle owned, hanging out in a private lounge with bottles of champagne and Johnnie Walker Black, the narcos' favorite drink. Rigo's uncle would come by with his fancy watch and \$300 shoes and give them a big bag of *lavada*, the narco drug of choice, coke double-washed to clean out the chemicals. It had no bite and didn't make you hunger for more, just lifted you up on a waft of soft air and deposited you in a fluffy cloud—and it smelled like strawberries.

Hour after hour Rigo would explain the business. Somebody always runs the plaza, which is sometimes an actual plaza and sometimes just a part of town. Rigo knew

Dirty Duck by Bobby London



how much things cost, how to move things, how things worked in the U.S. and what groups you needed to make alliances with. He taught the Gringo how to recognize other narcos, the flashy ones who wore designer sunglasses and glittery shirts and the kind who looked like skate punks. Almost always they carried three phones: one for the boss, one for the customers and one for the family. And you have to know your history, he said. The narcos get offended when you don't know the history of Mexico or the cartels.

The management of violence had a single rigid rule: If they lay their hands on you, come back tenfold. That's how Rigo's cousin was killed. He set up a meeting between two guys who were fighting, and one of the guys slapped the other guy. The guy who was slapped killed the guy who slapped him and then killed Rigo's cousin just for setting up the meeting. So Rigo and his hit-man cousin Demente had no choice. They burst into the man's home and killed him along with his entire family.

After that, Rigo went out of control. His uncle was dropping off kilos of crystal and Rigo was such a good cleaner he could save a tenth of the product, which he smoked. He got so paranoid he spent half his time in his room with his gun. He cheated on his wife and she left with their three kids. Finally his uncle came to him and said, *You're skinny; you don't look so good. I hate to see you like this. I'm not going to do business with you till you clean up.*

Rigo got a job as a bellhop, got fired and got another job and got fired again. And another. And another. Finally his uncle called and said, *What are you planning on doing?*

I want to do whatever you want me to do and gain your trust back, Rigo answered.

That's why Rigo was so obsessed with the rules he was always breaking. Under his training, the Gringo felt militarized. They were soldiers in a war, brothers in arms, and nothing in his white-bread American life had ever felt so real.

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All that winter the Gringo continued to work as Cuz's sidekick. Sometimes Cuz would say, *You want to make some money, just drive this down the street.* One time he drove 15,000 pills to a guy's house. Once, Cuz came out with a black bag the size of a loaf of bread, a million pesos in small bills. Cuz made it all seem like a rolling party, blasting his beats on the car radio. *You hear this part? You hear this part?*

One day Cuz was flipping through a magazine called *Proceso* and he came to a picture of Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, leader of the Sinaloa cartel and a billionaire who has appeared on *Forbes* magazine's list of the world's richest men. He asked, *What do you think about this guy?*

I don't know what to think, the Gringo said.

He'll fuck you over, but he has a big heart, Cuz said. *He'll fuck you over if you need to be fucked over.*

That was the first hint that the Gringo's chain of command ultimately stopped with El Chapo himself. The next hint came from another regular at Rigo's house, a volatile

39-year-old gangster named Roberto who dated an Argentinean stripper and loved to talk about killing people. *If I was having lunch with your mom,* he said with an evil grin, *I would tell her, "He's with Chapo now."*

So the Gringo was working for the Sinaloa cartel, the most powerful drug-trafficking organization in the world. So be it, he thought. He had come to see everything through the eyes of his friends, whom he loved for their loyalty and straightforward, no-bullshit way of living. The other cartels were the dickheads. Worst of all were Los Zetas, a cartel from southern Mexico that was making a big push on Guadalajara and the north. *They use a lot of poor people to do their shit, guys from the projects, Central American guys, guys who are willing to kill for nothing.* Chapo ran the good cartel. *He buys things for people and helps with public works projects and stuff.* To this day, the Gringo always calls Cuz "my boss," and it's hard not to hear an echo of the fatherless son in his voice.

But the sane part of him, the part that wanted to live, started to live in fear. At one of the mountain parties, he saw a guy hit on one of the narco princesses and get dragged out into the night by two big guys, never to be seen again. At another Cuz was in the narco tent, chatting with a former MMA fighter, when the Gringo looked too long at his girlfriend and made a joke about his fighting skills. *Are you challenging me?* the MMA fighter asked. The tension lasted all through the long night. And Rigo's house kept getting crazier. One guy named Manuel was so out of control they'd put Xanax in his drink to calm him down. One time he opened the refrigerator and pissed in one of the drawers, so they beat him up and threw him in the street. An hour later he came stumbling back. Rigo said, *I'm sorry I hit you, but you can't piss in the fridge.*

Manuel looked confused. *I pissed in the fridge?*

By the night the mirror came crashing down, when Rigo roared his war cry and the Gringo made his decision to take the gun, all this seemed almost normal. They prepared for the gunfight by doing coke and listening to heavy metal for 10 hours. That made perfect sense too. When they finally got to the projects, it was three in the morning and the Gringo was so wired he pissed on a gang sign and shouted, *Come out, motherfuckers. We're here.*

The coke dealer appeared with 10 buddies. They fanned out behind him as Rigo walked up to the guy, his nine in his back pocket. The Gringo moved his hand over his piece, ready to draw.

For a long moment life and death hung in the balance.

Finally the dealer stepped forward and held out his right hand. *I'm so sorry,* he said.

He had discovered who Rigo's uncle was, and he was scared to the point of shaking. That's when the Gringo finally had a flash of sanity. *What the fuck am I doing here? How did I get into this?* But it passed quickly as they left in triumph, Rigo and Demente laughing at the crazy Gringo pissing on the gang sign. *El Gringo es loco,* said Demente—

high praise from a guy whose nickname translates as “insane.”

As a reward for his service, Rigo revealed his real last name. *From now on, bro, you are family.* “La Flama Blanca” was no longer enough. The crazy white boy from Portland deserved a new name: El Gringo Loco.

All that summer, protected by Rigo’s name, El Gringo Loco worked a circuit of three beach towns—Manzanillo, Puerto Vallarta and Sayulita. By now he was paying \$4 a pill and selling them for \$25 each. He quit drinking and cut back on X and even looked into a job selling time-shares at inflated prices but decided it was too dishonest. *You get a pill from me and it’s a good pill and you pay the same price everyone is paying. Taking money from people in a fraud, I couldn’t fucking do it.*

That’s the paradox he still can’t get over. In Portland he might have done it. But in this world where violence settled disputes, the Bob Dylan rule applied: To live outside the law you must be honest.

But the paranoia got worse. At night his mind would go to the worst thoughts—torture, death, dismemberment, dishonor. One night in Sayulita he was selling in a bar and a guy with a pit bull took him into a back room, where a group of men were waiting for him. The boss pointed a finger at him and pulled an imaginary trigger. *You need to leave—you need to leave now.* Another night in Puerto Vallarta a Zeta chieftain cornered him in a restaurant. *I know where your fucking pills come from, man. You shouldn’t be working here. This is past your border.* Another night he was at a party, and Roberto announced, *This is the boss from the dragonflies. This is the distributor.* He was pointing at the Gringo. The problem was, dragonflies were a superior brand of X controlled by another cartel. The Gringo wasn’t supposed to be selling them.

Shut the fuck up, he told Roberto. *You’re going to get me killed.*

Roberto gave him the cold eye. *You’re lucky you’re my friend.*

The beautiful girl who gave blow jobs for X was no consolation. To get his mind off his troubles the Gringo started to write poetry. *I need to get the crazy out of my life,* he thought.

Instead, he moved back into Rigo’s house for the three craziest months of his life, partying his way into narco legend.

In November it all came crashing down. Cuz sent him to Mexico City with 10 kilos of weed and he came back with 50,000 pesos in his pocket, and no sooner did he arrive back at Rigo’s house than he ran into a phalanx of cops. *Hey, gringo, we need to see ID.*

A year had passed since he started the narco life. The cops searched him and found the money. *What the fuck is this?* He put on an innocent face. *That’s my rent.* The cops searched further and found an X. *What the fuck is this?* He said, *Guys, these aren’t my jeans.* They cuffed him and put him in the car. From the backseat he tried to make a deal. *Take half the money and we call it a day.*

No deal.

Still afraid to give his real name, he pretended to be German and demanded a translator. That pissed the cops off so much, they sent him to one of the most notorious prisons in Mexico, Puente Grande. On the bus another prisoner warned him, *Gringo, you better get ready. These guys don’t play.*

Walking in, he was shaking inside. They put him in a tiny cell with six other men. The showers didn’t work; you had to pay for your food, phone calls, weed—that’s all they did in prison, smoke weed. He found his way to a neutral area called Beverly Hills and made friends with some cholos, who saved his ass when he got into a fight with another narco. Finally Rigo called his mom, and his mom found Cuz on Facebook and they hired a lawyer, who got him transferred to an immigration prison to wait for his papers. It took 17 days. One day a guy

from Honduras brought up the Zetas, and El Gringo Loco couldn’t help repeating the Sinaloa line: *Their own mothers don’t love them.*

Yo soy los Zetas, the Honduran said. After a tense moment, the Gringo twisted his face into one of his goofy expressions and cracked a joke. *Oh, but I don’t know any from Honduras.*

Laughter saved him once again. The next day he was on a plane back to Portland.

Now he’s going back to Mexico. It has been 10 weeks since he was deported, and he’s already sick of his cubicle job. He’s sitting in his mother’s elegant suburban house, skimming the internet for news about Guadalajara, where a cartel prince called El Changel just got wounded in a gun battle with police, unleashing violence all over western Mexico. Still, he thinks it’s a fine time to slip back down for one more taste of the narco life. The complication is, he’s bringing a reporter who looks alarmingly like a DEA agent—me. Hopefully his friends won’t think he got turned in prison.

The night before he leaves he sends me this message:

I feel nervous, good and excited, mostly nervous. I mean, I trust my people, but these are killers—if I was not nervous then I suppose I would need to check my pulse. I did not sleep well last night, I have to get my war face on. In the end I am a soldier and I have trained myself for this. I have said good-bye to my friends, and if I go then it has been a hell of a ride. I get to go from being a normal white guy who works a nine-to-five and stands in line at the grocery store to a man who is feared, respected and loved. I look forward to it with an absurd amount of excitement. In the end I would rather die on my feet than live on my knees.

After his plane lands, the Gringo meets me in a hotel lobby. *I can’t believe I’m back here,* he says. *It’s definitely not a world I want to come back to.*

But he’s going to go see Cuz tonight to get some acid and X and do a few little deals. And Rigo is coming over in a few minutes—in fact, there he is now, just as the Gringo described him, a skinny, good-looking guy who looks about 25, if 25 were as sad as 70. He’s tweaked out on something, fanning his neck and impatient to go see a hostess who used to be a narco wife—yes, she has a gold watch. *A nice one,* the Gringo says.

Rigo doesn’t care. He’s supposed to meet her in eight minutes. No, seven minutes. And man, what an ass she has. *She’s sitting on it.*

They drain their beers and go.

The scariest part is the anticipation of meeting Cuz for the first time. The cartels *really* don’t like journalists—according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, they’ve beheaded, tortured and shot at least 45 of them in the past seven years. Many more have disappeared.

The next afternoon the Gringo takes me to Rigo’s house. This too is just as he described it, a two-story place on a pretty, tree-lined street. Inside it’s just raw walls and a couple of sofas around a glass coffee table, some weights against a wall, a brown lawn out back. Rigo points out a big hole



“I hate to tell you this, but you’ve got a peanut allergy.”

where a friend shot the wall. The doors have all been kicked in; not a single one closes properly. Out back they show off the bullet holes in the trees.

Odd as it may be, Rigo really does seem like a sweet guy, eager to like and be liked. Maybe that's why he starts telling his back-story, his teen years cleaning meth and the lessons his father taught him: *It's better to have a gun and not use it than to need a gun and not have it*, for example. Each story has sub-stories and punch lines to illustrate the ridiculous glory of narco life. Over and over he insists the narcos are good people and kill only people who need to be killed—except the Zetas, of course.

When we part that night, Rigo pushes a button on his dashboard and then another button to release a secret compartment—in some narco cars you have to tune the radio to a certain station before you push the buttons. Inside is a space that spans the width of the car, big enough for 40 kilos. He takes out a bag of X and hands it to the Gringo—to El Gringo Loco.

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Saturday, Rigo and the Gringo head downtown for some six-peso tacos. Rigo's already on his second or third beer of the day. Every few minutes he spots some hot girl. *Look at that ass. She's sitting on it!* Walking toward the city's big open-air market, they stop for Cuban cigars and some gifts for the Gringo's nieces. At the taco stand Rigo brings up the guy who shot his cousin. *We killed his whole family, just walked into the house and started shooting.*

In the same detached voice, he says he killed one of them from about as far away as those poles across the street. *It's not like the movies. You pull the trigger and he falls down. There's no blood.*

How does he carry that around? *No problem, he answers. I had nightmares for a couple of weeks, but they were about my cousin dying alone in the street. I don't have any remorse.*

Cuz calls and the Gringo is already laughing by the time he picks up the phone. They make plans to meet at a steakhouse so he can introduce me. Before the Gringo hangs up, he asks, *Do you have any wash?* Meaning *lavada*, the double-washed strawberry cocaine of the narcos. *Great, bring me some. Yeah, I got the money.*

A few more hours, a few more beers, and it's time to meet the boss. At the steakhouse they get a table in the back and shoot the shit until he shows up—a big guy with a small forehead and a Fred Flintstone jaw darkened by a five-o'clock shadow. His girlfriend is a green-eyed beauty with major cleavage and skintight leatherette pants. After some teasing about Cuz's Polish soccer jersey—I just bought it to go with my shoes; I didn't even look at the logo—the Gringo asks if he brought the wash. Cuz hands over a little plastic bag filled with white powder, and the Gringo turns aside to take a quick snort off the tip of Rigo's ignition key. *Nobody saw me, did they?* Cuz says, *Yes, they saw you.* He thinks it's funny.

After lunch we walk out of the restaurant with beers in our hands. A waitress stops us, so we chug down in the doorway and head for the car. Another bump off the

ignition key for everyone and we're off, following Cuz's black SUV—leaving the safety of a public place, putting our lives in his hands. Adrenaline mixes with the cocaine, and every nerve is thrumming with a heightened sense of being alive. *There's the club where I shot off the gun*, Rigo says. *There's the doorway where my cousin got killed.*

Cuz leads us to a house in a suburban neighborhood with a pool and a bunch of attractive people drinking, an oddly domestic scene with a little kid running around the pool and five narcos huddling across the yard. There's a mountain party tonight, and they're partying here until it starts. The narcos slip outside to smoke a little dope, slip into the bathroom to snort the *lavada*. Cuz wants everyone to stay cool so they can make it to the mountain party tonight.

Standing behind his boss, the Gringo shakes his head—*Please, God, no*. Cuz always wants to hang out in the narco tent, and you're stuck out there in the middle of nowhere with all those guns—no thanks. But he doesn't say this to his boss.

Cuz doesn't take anything too seriously. His family is so rich, he says, that his older brother, the chosen one, is one of the five biggest landowners in Mexico. When Cuz's

*"In the end I am a soldier
and I have trained myself for
this," says El Gringo Loco.
"I have said good-bye to my
friends, and if I go then it
has been a hell of a ride."*

father dies, he'll inherit a fortune. So he keeps his business low-key, running the pill market in Guadalajara and on the coast. As long as he sticks to pills and avoids the cocaine and meth other families control, he's all right.

And El Gringo Loco? Why him? Was it his white skin? His brains? His twisted sense of humor?

He's my little brother, Cuz says.

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After a couple of hours the Gringo, brimming with relief, says good-bye. Bro-hugs all around, plus promises to stay relatively straight and rise at dawn for the second phase of the mountain party—Cuz is a hard guy to say no to.

Now the real party begins. We head downtown to the club district, and man, is it hopping. The streets are jammed with sexy young women tottering by in high heels and short, tight skirts. Rigo leads the way into an American-style bar, and the shaggy young bartender spots the Gringo, comes around the bar to greet him with open arms. *Where the fuck have you been?* He gives them free beers and shots and after a while takes the Gringo into the bathroom to do a little deal. The Gringo loves the action, it is clear, loves

being the American all the Mexicans want to see. He says he's thinking of doing six months in the U.S. and six months down here. *You should come down for spring break*, Rigo says. *Yeah, that's when the six months would start.*

There's a stubborn core deep in that skinny body of Rigo's that just doesn't give a shit about living. It's oddly endearing. He wants to get healthy and be good but deep down can't believe that he deserves it, so he protects and punishes himself with booze and drugs and lays his neck bare to the knife of existence—which is, when you think about it, pretty much how you'd want a man who has killed 15 people to feel.

Outside, the Gringo sighs. *You see how he is.*

Never mind. The night goes on. Another cerveza. Another snort. The true El Gringo Loco is coming out now, sliding free in the haze of intoxicants. On the great avenue of trees and fountains called Lopez Mateos there's a street party with a reggae band, and the crowd is like Times Square on New Year's Eve. One of Rigo's girls shows up—very pretty and sweet—and then it's on to a rock club called Barramericano, where a good band is playing the Strokes note for note, then on to his uncle's club with the pretty girl driving.

Here we are at one of the best clubs in Guadalajara. *Do you want to go through the front door or the narco door?* Rigo asks.

The narco door, of course. It's black steel with a little speakeasy barred window and opens wide for Rigo. Everyone's so happy to see him. Inside the club is huge and packed with beautiful women and sharp men and spinning lights and a sound system as fancy and expensive—Rigo says it cost a million bucks—as ones in the best clubs in New York.

Ah, Mexico. El Gringo Loco is in his element now, hitting on the prettiest women. With his massive shoulders and goofy animated face, he is the dancing bear, and you can't help but laugh when he shimmies into yet another gaggle of beautiful women. And now Rigo is hitting on a stunning little thing in a skintight micromini while his date waits at the table. *Dude, you already got a hottie right there!* He laughs. *Yeah, but look at that ass. She's sitting on it!*

This goes on till five in the morning. Then Rigo takes his hottie home and drops another X. *Good times*, he says.

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Two days later El Gringo Loco flies back to Portland and his telemarketing cubicle. In the morning he writes this note:

For now, I will try the "normal" life and see how it fits. I will try to laugh at the guy who talks shit to me at the club, listen to my boss belittle me in front of my employees and remember this is not Mexico and I can't just call one of my friends to teach him his final lesson. The days of El Gringo Loco are done....

Then, thinking again of Mexico, glorious tragic Mexico, where the women are beautiful and life is sweetened by the presence of death, he adds a final line:

But never say never....

Names have been changed to protect the reporter.

