

As training officer to new recruits, the lieutenant said, Chavez wasn't showing them enough balance to his police work.

"That's not what I do," Chavez told the lieutenant. "I find felons."

He spent his first years on the force learning from a cop named Robert Wallis. Wallis was the department's version of a supercop. He made major arrests all the time. He and his partner were involved in more than a dozen shootings, which to Chavez meant that Wallis was always getting in the way of the worst bad guys. Wallis was a guy he wanted to emulate. Wallis taught him about prison tattoos, and recognizing the look of a guy on the lam in line at a downtown shelter. From Wallis, Chavez learned early on that most crime is connected to illegal drugs, so understanding that world was crucial to good police work.

Heroin particularly interested Chavez. Back then, Mexican American families controlled the trade in Denver. But as Chavez worked them and arrested them, he heard they were being supplied by men from a place in Mexico called Nayarit. The name meant nothing to Chavez, but for years it kept coming up. The Nayarits sold a substance he hadn't seen before. Heroin in Denver up to then had been all light-brown powder. This Nayarit heroin, however, was dark and sticky and looked like Tootsie Rolls or rat feces. They called it black tar and Chavez heard stories they cut it with boiled-down Coca-Cola.

As the years passed, meanwhile, what Dennis Chavez realized he loved most about his job was the deduction of crime. It was the immersion in it, finding the thread of a criminal and his MO. Once, a serial rapist was striking across Denver. Chavez had taken the statement of the last victim, a high school girl, who, in tears, grabbed his hand and made him promise that he would catch the guy. Victims said the rapist held a Buck knife to them as he assaulted them. Chavez charted the rapist's attacks—his times, dates, locations. He staked out the southeast Denver neighborhood where he thought the guy would hit next. One night he saw a man walking down an alley and just knew it was the guy. Then the man jaywalked. Chavez stopped him and arrested him for carrying a concealed Buck knife in his pants. Victims came to the station house that night and identified Chavez's arrestee as their rapist.

A few years into the job, Dennis Chavez woke one morning unable to see, his heart pounding like an overheated piston. His girlfriend took him to the hospital. A doctor told him he was going to have a stroke if he didn't let up.

"You can die young and good-looking, or years from now fat and happy," the doctor said.

Delivered Like Pizza

Denver, Colorado

In 1979, a young man fell into a job at the Denver Police Department. He was new in town, fresh from a broken engagement in his native Pueblo, Colorado.

Dennis Chavez never meant to be a cop. His family traced its roots back to a seventeenth-century Spanish conquistador. Four centuries later, Chavez's father was a steelworker in Pueblo.

Chavez, a big guy, played football at the University of Colorado for a couple years in the 1970s before leaving the school. He worked construction. Then a friend recently hired on at Denver PD told him the work was fun and urged him to take the entrance test. Chavez passed it and within a few months was at the Denver Police Academy.

Early into his first year on patrol, however, a training officer told his friend that Chavez was failing, probably the dumbest in the new recruit class and almost certain to wash out before the year ended. That irked. Chavez put in extra time studying laws and the municipal code, exercising and adding new energy to his street work.

In time, his interest in sports channeled into power weight lifting. He cut his hair in a flattop, with lightning bolts cut into the sides and his badge number on the back of his head. Steroids were legal then. He would buy bodybuilding dope from a doctor who visited the gym where he lifted. Soon he was spending twelve hundred dollars a month on steroids and supplements. He was six feet four, 250 pounds, and muscles bulged from him as if his body were a squeezed balloon. Dennis Chavez was a ferocious cat back then, shaking hands with an iron grip, clubbing friends on the shoulders when he saw them. He arrived at every 911 call like a pit bull, pulling for action. When he barked, "How you doing?" at friends, it sounded like a cross between an interrogation and a command. Even cops tried to avoid him.

He was obsessed with his job, which he took to mean arresting bad guys. A lieutenant once criticized him for not writing enough tickets.

Dennis Chavez opted for the latter. He backed off the steroids and coffee, and stopped power lifting. He took up aikido and long rides into the Colorado mountains on his Harley. Later, he founded a club of officers who rode motorcycles and raised money for charities.

He mellowed. His police work changed, too. His affinity for sleuthing didn't flag. But no longer the pit bull, he had to develop other skills. Among these was the cultivation of snitches and, with that, a personality that other people wanted to be around. Finding informants was not hard, really. He'd arrest a guy and tell him he could work off the case by setting up others. Eventually that could lead to cash payments to the informant. What was hard was managing the relationship, particularly when the informant went from working off his case to making a salary from it. The best snitches were the ones who stayed in it and would do anything for their handlers. These relationships required finesse and a soothing personality that let an informant know that Chavez liked him and would protect him. It meant going against the book from time to time—accepting Christmas presents, for example, and giving them in return.

Informants became particularly important when, in 1995, Dennis Chavez joined the narcotics unit of the Denver Police Department. He was bequeathed his first long-term informant by a sergeant leaving the unit. The sergeant introduced Chavez to a man immersed in Denver's Mexican heroin underworld.

Chavez never had much connection to Mexico. His father had forbidden Spanish in the house so his children wouldn't speak accented English. But Chavez could see the Denver drug world changing. Mexican American dealer families were going to prison, dying, moving away. Mexicans stepped into the void, and when that happened, Chavez began hearing about the state of Nayarit all the time. The heroin in Denver was all black tar now.

In the late 1980s, he saw guys from Nayarit walking around downtown selling heroin to anyone who'd walk up to them. He arrested many of them, and found Nayarit on a map, but it still didn't mean much. He saw them move into cars and drive it around to customers. Mexicans were arrested at the bus station with backpacks and a kilo or two of the drug. But Chavez still had no sense for how this fit together, if it did at all.

Until one day, when his informant said to him, "You know they're all from the same town, right?"

* * *

I MET DENNIS CHAVEZ at a Mexican restaurant in north Denver, where he told me the story of how he began tracking the Nayarit heroin connection. He said he was intrigued by what the informant told him—that all that he was seeing related to heroin in Denver originated in one small town in Mexico. He prodded the man for more.

What Chavez had been seeing on the streets, the informant said—the dealers, the couriers with backpacks of heroin, the drivers with balloons of heroin—all looks very random and scattered, but it's not. It's all connected.

They're all from a town called Xalisco. Ha-LEES-koh—he said, pronouncing the word. Don't confuse it with a state in Mexico pronounced the same way, but spelled with a *j*. The state of Jalisco is one of Mexico's largest and Guadalajara is its capital. This town, he said, spells its name with an *x*. The informant had never been there, but believed it to be a small place.

All these guys running around Denver selling black tar heroin are from this town of Xalisco, or a few small villages near there, the informant told Chavez. Their success is based on a system they've learned. It's a system for selling heroin retail. Their system is a simple thing, really, and relies on cheap, illegal Mexican labor, just the way any fast-food joint does.

From then on, Chavez sat with the informant, at bars and in a truck outside the man's house, as the informant talked on about these guys from Xalisco and their heroin retail system—which was unlike anything the informant had seen in the drug underworld.

Think of it like a fast-food franchise, the informant said, like a pizza delivery service. Each heroin cell or franchise has an owner in Xalisco, Nayarit, who supplies the cell with heroin. The owner doesn't often come to the United States. He communicates only with the cell manager, who lives in Denver and runs the business for him.

Beneath the cell manager is a telephone operator, the informant said. The operator stays in an apartment all day and takes calls. The calls come from addicts, ordering their dope. Under the operator are several drivers, paid a weekly wage and given housing and food. Their job is to drive the city with their mouths full of little uninflated balloons of black tar heroin, twenty-five or thirty at a time in one mouth. They look like chipmunks. They have a bottle of water at the ready so if police pull them over, they swig the water and swallow the balloons. The balloons remain intact in the body and are eliminated in the driver's waste. Apart from the balloons in their mouths, drivers keep another hundred hidden somewhere in the car.

The operator's phone number is circulated among heroin addicts, who call with their orders. The operator's job, the informant said, is to tell them where to meet the driver: some suburban shopping center parking lot—a McDonald's, a Wendy's, a CVS pharmacy. The operators relay the message to the driver, the informant said.

The driver swings by the parking lot and the addict pulls out to follow him, usually down side streets. Then the driver stops. The addict jumps into the driver's car. There, in broken English and broken Spanish, a cross-cultural heroin deal is accomplished, with the driver spitting out the balloons the addict needs and taking his cash.

Drivers do this all day, the guy said. Business hours—eight A.M. to eight P.M. usually. A cell of drivers at first can quickly gross five thousand dollars a day; within a year, that cell can be clearing fifteen thousand dollars daily.

The system operates on certain principles, the informant said, and the Nayarit traffickers don't violate them. The cells compete with each other, but competing drivers know each other from back home, so they're never violent. They never carry guns. They work hard at blending in. They don't party where they live. They drive sedans that are several years old. None of the workers use the drug. Drivers spend a few months in a city and then the bosses send them home or to a cell in another town. The cells switch cars about as often as they switch drivers. New drivers are coming up all the time, usually farm boys from Xalisco County. The cell owners like young drivers because they're less likely to steal from them; the more experienced a driver becomes, the more likely he knows how to steal from the boss. The informant assumed there were thousands of these kids back in Nayarit aching to come north and drive some U.S. city with their mouths packed with heroin balloons.

To a degree unlike any other narcotics operation, he said, Xalisco cells run like small businesses. The cell owner pays each driver a salary—\$1,200 a week was the going rate in Denver at the time. The cell owner holds each driver to exact expenses, demanding receipts for how much each spent for lunch, or for a hooker. Drivers are encouraged to offer special deals to addicts to drum up business: fifteen dollars per balloon or seven for a hundred dollars. A free balloon on Sunday to an addict who buys Monday through Saturday. Selling heroin a tenth of a gram at a time is their one and only, full-time, seven-days-a-week job, and that includes Christmas Day. Heroin addicts need their dope every day.

Cell profits were based on the markup inherent in retail. Their customers were strung-out, desperate junkies who couldn't afford a half

a kilo of heroin. Anyone looking for a large amount of heroin was probably a cop aiming for a case that would land the dealer in prison for years. Ask to buy a large quantity of dope, the informant said, and they'll shut down their phones. You'll never hear from them again. That really startled the informant. He knew of no other Mexican trafficking group that preferred to sell tiny quantities.

Moreover, the Xalisco cells never deal with African Americans. They don't sell to black people; nor do they buy from blacks, who they fear will rob them. They sell almost exclusively to whites.

What the informant described, Chavez could see, amounted to a major innovation in the U.S. drug underworld. These innovations had every bit the impact of those in the legitimate business world. When, for example, someone discovered that cocaine cooked with water and baking soda became rock hard, the smokable cocaine known as crack was born. Crack was a more effective delivery mechanism for cocaine—sending it straight to the brain.

The Xalisco traffickers' innovation was literally a delivery mechanism as well. Guys from Xalisco had figured out that what white people—especially middle-class white kids—want most is service, convenience. They didn't want to go to skid row or some seedy dope house to buy their drugs. Now they didn't need to. The guys from Xalisco would deliver it to them.

So the system spread. By the mid-1990s, Chavez's informant counted a dozen major metro areas in the western United States where cells from tiny Xalisco, Nayarit, operated. In Denver by then he could count eight or ten cells, each with three or four drivers, working daily.

As I listened to Chavez, it seemed to me that the guys from Xalisco were fired by the impulse that, in fact, moved so many Mexican immigrants. Most Mexican immigrants spent years in the United States not melting in but imagining instead the day when they would go home for good. This was their American Dream: to return to Mexico better off than they had left it and show everyone back home that that's how it was. They called home and sent money constantly. They were usually far more involved in, say, the digging of a new well in the rancho than in the workings of the school their children attended in the United States. They returned home for the village's annual fiesta and spent money they couldn't afford on barbecues, weddings, and quinceañeras. To that end, as they worked the toughest jobs in America, they assiduously built houses in the rancho back home that stood as monuments to their desire to return for good one day. These houses took a decade

to finish. Immigrants added to their houses each time they returned. They invariably extended rebar from the top of the houses' first floors. Rebar was a promise that as soon as he got the money together, the owner was adding a second story. Rods of rebar, standing at attention, became part of the skyline of literally thousands of Mexican immigrant villages and ranchos.

The finished houses of migrant Mexico often had wrought-iron gates, modern plumbing, and marble floors. These towns slowly improved as they emptied of people whose dream was to build their houses, too. Over the years, the towns became dreamlands, as empty as movie sets, where immigrants went briefly to relax at Christmas or during the annual fiesta, and imagine their lives as wealthy retirees back home again one day. The great irony was that work, mortgages, and U.S.-born children kept most migrants from ever returning to Mexico to live permanently in those houses they built with such sacrifice.

But the Xalisco heroin traffickers did it all the time. Their story was about immigration and what moves a poor Mexican to migrate as much as it was a tale of drug trafficking. Those Xalisco traffickers who didn't end up in prison went back to live in those houses. They put down no roots in this country; they spent as little money in America as they could, in fact. Jamaicans, Russians, Italians, even other Mexican traffickers, all bought property and broadcasted their wealth in the United States. The Xalisco traffickers were the only immigrant narcotics mafia Chavez knew of that aimed to just go home, and with nary a shot fired.

Denver became a Xalisco hub as their operations expanded, and probably no cop in America learned more about them than Dennis Chavez. By the time I met him, hundreds of arrests and sweeping federal indictments had not stopped them. They had spread like a virus, quietly and unrecognized by many in law enforcement, who often mistook Xalisco franchises for isolated groups of small-time dealers.

"I call them the Xalisco Boys," Chavez said. "They're nationwide."

Enrique Alone

Tijuana, Mexico

Chaotic Tijuana was the biggest city Enrique had ever seen. Thousands of people flowed like a river through the central bus station before crossing into the United States. The station roiled with humble, hungry folks from ranchos like his. Boys darted in and out of traffic, washing windshields for change. Men who'd tried to cross and were turned back had fallen into alcohol. They reminded Enrique of the drunks in the rancho.

Enrique slept on the bus terminal's chairs and wandered the city streets during the day. He found a coyote and asked the price to the place called Canoga Park. When he told the man he had no address for his uncles, but figured he'd just ask around, the coyote laughed.

"Canoga Park is huge. It's not like your rancho."

Still, he hung on in Tijuana, fearing to return home a failure. He washed in the bus station bathroom, every morning looking more like a Tijuana urchin. Finally, famished, his prized clothes filthy and stinking and his money almost gone, he dialed the village's telephone in tears. His departure was the talk of the rancho. Aunts and uncles crowded around the phone. On a second call, his hysterical mother answered. She gave him a number for uncles in Los Angeles who were coming for him. They arrived and arranged for him to cross the border posing as the son of a man with papers. Two mornings later, Enrique was sitting in an uncle's apartment in Canoga Park in the San Fernando Valley.

"Now," the uncle said, "I'll give you a thousand dollars and a suitcase and you'll go home."

"No, what I want from life you can't buy with a thousand dollars."

His uncles took him to eat and then to another apartment. One uncle opened a closet and there, like a glorious revelation, were dozens of pairs of Levi's 501s, with labels and price tags attached.

"Take what you want."

With that, the boy who had never had more than two threadbare pairs of pants now had his first new, tough dark-blue 501s. 501s marked his time up north. Much later he would remember the first time he bought a pair for himself in America, and then the first time he came home wearing 501s.

Back home, villagers, and Enrique himself, had always assumed his uncles were working hard in some honorable trade up in the great El Norte, one that paid enough to fund bountiful gifts every time they returned. Now they sat him down. One uncle pulled out a shoebox filled with golf-ball-sized chunks of a dark, sticky substance and balloons of every color.

"What's that?" Enrique asked.

"*Chirra*," his uncle said. Goat, the Mexican slang term for black tar heroin. "This is how we make our money."

Cora Indian campesinos grew the poppies in the mountains above Xalisco. They harvested the opium goo from the flowers and sold it to cooks whom Enrique's uncles knew. A newly cooked kilo of vinegary, sticky chiva would head north in a boom box or a backpack within a couple days, virtually uncut, and often hit L.A. streets only a week after the goo was drawn from the poppy.

As Enrique's uncle spoke, he rolled little pieces of the gunk into balls the size of BBs. He put each one in a tiny balloon and tied each balloon. Finally, he wrapped the telephone in a towel to muffle the ring. As Enrique was wondering why, the uncle plugged in the phone and the calls started coming and never stopped.

These are customers, his uncle explained over the ringing. We have guys out there driving around all day with these balloons. We give each caller a different intersection to meet a driver. Then we beep a driver the code for the intersection where that customer will be. We do this all day long.

"We wouldn't have told you had you not showed up," his uncle said. "But now that you're here . . ."

Enrique saw his chance. He begged to work for them. You're too young, said one uncle. You need to go to school. Or we send you home. But Enrique pleaded and finally the uncles relented. They put him to work driving the place most Angelinos refer to simply as the Valley.

The San Fernando Valley comprises 260 square miles, larger than Chicago, and contains the sprawling northern chunk of Los Angeles. At its west end is Canoga Park, a district of sixty thousand people, bisected by boulevards with palm trees. Classic, modest suburban ranch-style houses made of stucco line its residential streets.

For years after it emerged from citrus groves in the 1950s, Canoga Park and the Valley had been famously white, with only small islands of Mexican American barrios. But the mass migration of Mexicans to Southern California and the end of the Cold War changed the area. Defense contractors departed; so did many white people. Soon, districts of Los Angeles such as Van Nuys, Reseda, North Hollywood, and Canoga Park were largely Mexican. Those changes were beginning as Enrique arrived.

Though fourteen, Enrique was tall enough not to arouse suspicion behind the wheel. He drove the streets of the San Fernando Valley with his mouth full of tiny balloons, following beeps from his uncles. He learned where Canoga Park ended and West Hills began. He trolled those palm-tree-lined boulevards—Sherman Way, Roscoe, and Sepulveda—that were wider than the highways back home.

Those first weeks he remembered like a fairy tale, as if everything he had heard about America were true: money, clothes, and good food seemed as plentiful as the sunshine. At the apartment, he turned on a VCR and a porno film leaped to life. His uncles ate often at El Tapatio and Pocos, a seafood restaurant. They drank at the Majestic, a bar that Nayarit immigrants frequented; as long as Enrique was with them the waitresses served him beer. His idea of becoming a state trooper evaporated, as did any thought of school.

After a few months, the uncles installed Enrique in an apartment on De Soto Avenue and gave him the keys to two cars. He would run the business—roll the heroin into balloons, take calls, direct drivers on the street. The phone rang all day until he shut it down at eight P.M. As he turned fifteen, he was taking orders for five thousand dollars' worth of heroin a day. The apartment's closets filled with stolen 501s and VCRs and porno films that addicts exchanged for dope. Enrique no longer had to worry about his jeans fading when he washed them. There were always more. He showered with fragrant shampoo, and exchanged the village pond for the swimming pool at an uncle's house in a neighborhood full of Americans. His clients were nurses and lawyers—one of his best clients was a wealthy lawyer—prostitutes, former soldiers who'd been to Vietnam, old junkies from the barrio, and young cholas.

One day he was at an uncle's house and the phone rang. A caller from home. His uncle's face clouded.

"*Problemas*," he said, his hand over the mouthpiece.

Problemas—problems—the word seemed so nondescript. But in the ranchos of Mexico, it is a euphemism for tangled webs of murder and

lawlessness. Problemas were shootings and feuds that grew from a chance word, a property dispute, the theft of a sister for marriage. Problemas kept rancheros poor and fleeing north to the United States. Some great amount of the migration to the United States was due more to problems—escaping murder, fleeing feuds—than to simple economics and poverty. Problemas could empty a rancho in less than a generation. Sometimes a village would see the problemas die out only to be reignited by a chance meeting of old enemies on a bus or a street corner years later. Rancho dances in particular bred problemas. At dances, people drank, and sex and machismo roiled just beneath the surface. In some towns, the saying was “*Baile el viernes; cuerpo el sábado*” (“Dance Friday night, body Saturday morning”). A shooting at a dance could embitter a family against another for years. Keeping track of the bewildering history of conflicts became an essential rancho survival skill.

Something like this had divided the family of Enrique’s mother. Enrique never knew the cause of the feud between the two sides of his mother’s family, nor why his grandparents had married if the problemas were so serious. But the feud would come and go like bad weather. The phone call that morning in Canoga Park brought news that it had come again. A mass shooting in the village. Two were dead, fifteen wounded. One side of his mother’s family was to blame; the victims were mostly from the other side.

News of the shootings mainly served to remind Enrique of why he was in Canoga Park selling drugs. Back home, drug users were the moral equivalents of pedophiles. But drug sales were his pathway out of problemas. He saw dayworkers on Sherman Way, exploited, sometimes not paid—yet that wasn’t treated as a crime. They tried to work the right way and look what happened. He wasn’t forcing anyone to buy his dope. With that thought, and the problemas he was escaping, he felt peace. And the 501s didn’t hurt either.

For seven months he worked for his uncles in Canoga Park. Finally, they packed him a suitcase and gave him two thousand dollars for all his labor and sent him home. He thought he was due more, but the rancho’s ethos of poverty reigned, even in the San Fernando Valley. They could exploit him, so they did and he couldn’t object. Heroin had not changed that. In fact, he thought his uncles remained cautious villagers in many ways. They had been in the San Fernando Valley for almost a decade. Yet they still ran their business for a few months, made some money, and shut it down, less afraid of the police than of what people back home would say.

Dozens of villagers welcomed Enrique home to his isolated rancho and the Toad, a few miles outside the town of Xalisco, Nayarit. The poor kid from the Toad was now admired as the only village boy to cross the border alone. He gave his money to his mother, keeping two hundred dollars. He bought a bottle of Cazadores tequila and the party that night was big. Older folks besieged him with questions. A few friends took him aside and asked for help finding the kind of work he was doing. He put them off, but saw that apparently word had spread more than his uncles had realized. He wanted to get back to California himself in a few months.

He was only fifteen and people were coming to *him* for favors. It was a luxurious feeling and he bathed in it. As the night mingled with tequila and took the edge off the stifling heat, the stereo played his favorite corrido, “El Numero Uno,” by Los Incomparables de Tijuana.

Enrique pulled his Beretta 9mm and howled as he held it high and fired it into the air.

The Poppy

The story of the opium poppy is almost as old as man.

Opium was likely our first drug as agricultural civilizations formed near rivers. Mesopotamians grew the poppy at the Tigris and Euphrates. The Assyrians invented the method, still widely used today, of slicing and draining the poppy's pod of the goo containing opium. "The Sumerians, the world's first civilization and agriculturists, used the ideograms *hul* and *gil* for the poppy, translating it as the 'joy plant,'" wrote Martin Booth, in his classic *Opium: A History*.

The ancient Egyptians first produced opium as a drug. Thebaine, an opium derivative, is named for Thebes, the Egyptian city that was the first great center of opium-poppy production. Indians also grew the poppy and used opium. So did the Greeks. Homer and Virgil mention opium, and potions derived from it. The expanding Arab empire and later the Venetians, both inveterate traders, helped spread the drug.

Early civilizations saw opium as an antidote to the burdens of life—to sorrow and to pain—and as an effective sleep inducer. They also knew it as lethally poisonous and intensely habit-forming. But its benefits made the risks easy to overlook.

In the early 1800s, a German pharmacist's apprentice named Friedrich Sertürner isolated the sleep-inducing element in opium and named it morphine for Morpheus, the Greek god of sleep and dreams. Morphine was more potent than simple opium and killed more pain.

War spread the morphine molecule through the nineteenth century. More than 330 wars broke out, forcing countries to learn to produce morphine. The U.S. Civil War prompted the planting of opium poppies in Virginia, Georgia, and South Carolina for the first time, and bequeathed the country thousands of morphine-addicted soldiers. Two nineteenth-century wars were over the morphine molecule itself, and whether China could prevent the sale on her own soil of India-grown

opium. The drug provided huge revenues essential to the British Empire and was one of their few products for which the self-sufficient Chinese showed an appetite. That it lost two of these Opium Wars to the British explains China's infamous and widespread opium problem in 1900 where only moderate numbers of addicts existed in 1840.

In 1853, meanwhile, an Edinburgh doctor named Alexander Wood invented the hypodermic needle, a delivery system superior to both eating the pills and the then-popular anal suppositories. Needles allowed more accurate dosing. Wood and other doctors also believed needles would literally remove the patient's appetite for the drug, which no longer had to be eaten. This proved incorrect. Wood's wife became the first recorded overdose death from an injected opiate.

In the United States, more opium came with (newly addicted) Chinese immigrants, who smoked it in back-alley dens within Chinatowns in San Francisco and elsewhere. Opium dens were outlawed, and after Chinese immigration was made illegal, the practice of smoking opium eventually declined, too. Morphine replaced it.

Patent medicines with morphine and opium, meanwhile, were sold as miracle cures. These elixirs were branded with names evoking quaint home remedies. Opium was the active ingredient in, for example, Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup, which was used to pacify children. These remedies were marketed aggressively in newspapers and popular media. Patent medicines sales exploded, rising from \$3.5 million in 1859 to almost \$75 million by the twentieth century.

In London in 1874, Dr. Alder Wright was attempting to find a nonaddictive form of morphine when he synthesized a drug that he called diacetylmorphine—a terrific painkiller. In 1898, a Bayer Laboratory chemist in Germany, Heinrich Dreser, reproduced Wright's diacetylmorphine and called it heroin—for *heroisch*, German for "heroic," the word that Bayer workers used to describe how it made them feel when Dreser tested it on them.

Heroin was first believed to be nonaddictive. Heroin pills were marketed as a remedy for coughs and respiratory ailments. With tuberculosis a public health threat, this was no small point. As junkies ever since have discovered, heroin is an effective constipator and was thus marketed as an antidiarrheal. Women used it, on doctor's orders, for menstrual cramps and respiratory problems. Doctors didn't have much else to prescribe for pain or disease. Thus addiction exploded—to a drug that people believed was safe because doctors said so.

This aroused U.S. public opinion, which forced the passage of the

Harrison Narcotics Tax Act of 1914. The law taxed and regulated opiates and coca-leaf products, while allowing doctors to use them in the practice of medicine. But it was transformed into America's first prohibition statute when police started arresting doctors for prescribing opiates to addicts. Addiction was not yet considered a disease, so an addict technically wasn't a medical patient.

Physicians soon stopped prescribing the drugs. People with real pain were left to endure. Addicts, meanwhile, turned to crime. "[Because the addict] is denied the medical care he urgently needs," one medical journal reported, "he is driven to the underworld where he can get his drug . . . The most depraved criminals are often the dispensers of these habit-forming drugs."

A government campaign demonizing "dope fiends" followed, aided by a compliant media. The addict was a deviant, a crime-prone, weak-willed moral failure. This idea stuck and informed the view of junkies for decades. The mythic figure of the heroin pusher also emerged. He supposedly lurked around schoolyards and candy stores, giving youths habit-forming dope, hoping for future customers.

With slight medical benefits compared to its high addiction risk, heroin ought to have passed into history. Instead, heroin replaced morphine on the streets. It thrived because it was tailor-made for dope traffickers. Heroin was easy to make, and cheaper than morphine. It was also more concentrated, and thus easier to hide and more profitable to dilute. The highs, and the lows, too, were quicker and more intense than those of other opiates. An addict craved heroin several times a day, and physically had to have it to function; so he was a terrific customer.

Traffickers and mafias made heroin's career. New York established itself as the country's heroin center in part because the drug's early manufacturers were located there. Once heroin was made illegal, it came clandestinely through the city's port from Europe and Asia. New York's immigrants sold it on the street: Chinese and European Jews, among them, and much later, Puerto Ricans, Colombians, and Dominicans. The logic of heroin distribution allowed New York to remain the nation's principal heroin hub through most of the twentieth century. While the drug came mostly from Asia, the Middle East, or Colombia, the drug was taken in at New York's port, distributed by endlessly replenished immigrant or black gangs, and from there sent up and down the East Coast and into the Midwest.

Marijuana, like wine, has been hybridized into endless varieties. But heroin is a commodity, like sugar, and usually varies only in how much

it's been cut—that is, diluted—or how well it's been processed and refined. Thus, to differentiate their product, dealers learned to market aggressively, and New York City is where they learned to do it first.

Italians apparently led the way. In the 1930s, "an aggressive new generation of Italian gangsters began infiltrating the drug traffic, replacing other groups, notably the Jews," wrote historian David Courtwright in *Dark Paradise*, his history of opiate addiction in America. "Not only did the price increase, but the level of adulteration as well."

New York's Italians pioneered heroin pushing, giving free samples to new customers. Their weak dope made injecting it popular. Injecting heroin sent what little heroin was in the dose directly to the brain, maximizing euphoria. Injecting begot nasty public health problems—among them, later, ferocious rates of hepatitis C and HIV. (Mexican black tar added to them. Because tar is a semiprocessed, less-filtered form of heroin, the impurities that remain in the drug clogged addicts' veins when injected. Unable to find veins, addicts shoot it into muscles, "Muscling" black tar heroin, in turn, leads to infections, rotting skin, botulism, even gangrene.)

In the 1970s, East Coast heroin dealers, mostly blacks by then, began printing brands on glassine bags broadcasting the supposed potency of the drug inside, or the headlines of the day: brands like Hell Date, Toxic Waste, Knockout, NFL, Obamacare, Government Shutdown.

Over the decade the drug that square America despised became the choice drug of despised America: urban outcasts, wandering con men, homosexuals, pickpockets, artists, and jazz musicians populated the early heroin world. Underground classics such as William Burroughs's *Junky* described its nonconformist denizens, and mesmerized later generations intent on rebellion.

But heroin was never about the romantic subversion of societal norms. It was instead about the squarest of American things: business—dull, cold commerce. Heroin lent itself to structured underworld businesses. Addicts had no free will to choose one day *not* to buy the product. They were slaves to a take-no-prisoners molecule. Dealers could thus organize heroin distribution almost according to principles taught in business schools, providing they didn't use the product. And providing they marketed.

Stories about selling opiates quickly became tales of business models and the search for new markets.

on the banks of the Ohio River in Huntington, West Virginia, had turned into an obsession with the rancheros from this one small town of Xalisco, Nayarit. Thousands of Americans from this one small town heroin the Xalisco Boys sold that netted millions of dollars a month. I found nothing written about them, yet I could see they were changing drug use in many parts of the country. I wondered how they wound up in so many places: Memphis, Omaha, Myrtle Beach, Nashville, Indianapolis, and Minneapolis.

They reminded me, in fact, of another group I'd heard of—the Herreras. The Herreras were Mexico's first vast drug-trafficking ranchero family in the United States. They lived in and around a rancho known, aptly, as Los Herreras, an isolated, roadless place in the mountains of Durango, founded in the late 1600s and accessible for centuries only on horseback. Like so many from the ranchos of Mexico, they were actually a clan, made up of numerous intermarried families: Nevarez, Medina, Diaz, Villanueva, and Venegas were other last names. They intermarried with the Corral family from the rancho Los Corrales. Law enforcement estimated the clan comprised a thousand people, spreading across several ranchos in Durango, all involved in producing, transporting, or selling heroin.

The first Herreras appear to have intended to work legitimately when they arrived in Chicago sometime in the 1950s. But poppies grew well in the mountains of Durango. In time, they moved to heroin.

Much of the U.S. market was then supplied by Turkey, Afghanistan, and Southeast Asia half a world away, their dope coming through New York City. But after police dismantled the Turkish and European heroin network known as the French Connection in 1972, the Herrera clan grew into the most important source of heroin in much of the country, annually importing seven and a half tons of the brown powder known as Mexican Mud.

The Herreras were "not really a cartel per se. It was an old-time organized crime family," said Leo Arreguin, a retired DEA agent I tracked down who infiltrated the clan in the early 1980s. Most Herreras looked like auto mechanics, scruffy and unassuming, driving beater cars, he said. Arreguin used to buy from one Herrera who'd drive to the McDonald's meeting spot in a car so worn-out that it burned oil and left a smoke cloud behind. One of the clan, Baltazar Nevarez-Herrera, owned a beef slaughterhouse in Chicago. For a while, the clan shipped its heroin in small metal tubes they fed to cows in Mexico. When the cows reached Chicago, they were slaughtered and the tubes retrieved, Arreguin said.

Easier than Sugarcane

Xalisco, Nayarit

One afternoon in April 1996, a funeral procession left the village of Aquiles Serdán, in the state of Nayarit, Mexico.

Dozens of people trudged uphill, heading north to the town of Xalisco, the county seat, blocking traffic on the highway that also led south down to the beach resort of Puerto Vallarta. A banda—a brass band of trumpets, clarinets, bass and snare drums, and a massive tuba—serenaded the marchers with "Te Vas Angel Mio" ("You're Leaving, My Angel"). Men fired guns in the air and took turns shouldering the casket that contained the corpse of a man named David Tejeda.

He grew up a ranchero kid, better off than some by rural Mexican standards. But by the time he died, his Andalusians and quarter horses were the finest animals in the county. He was also a master horse dancer. Horse dancing is a popular pastime among northwest Mexican rancheros. It involves spurring and prodding the horse to prance and hop in time to a banda's staccato beat. At the county's annual Feria del Elote (Corn Fair), following the traditional horse parade that winds through Xalisco, David Tejeda would display his horse-dancing prowess to the admiration and envy of all.

Now, as the men from his family carried Tejeda's body to be buried, they also led his favorite animal—a white quarter horse named Palomo, saddled and riderless—and prodded it to dance as the banda played. For an hour, the procession moved up the highway, then over cobblestone streets to the Xalisco cemetery.

David Tejeda was among the first from Xalisco County to sell heroin in the San Fernando Valley. Just as important, he was among the first to publicly display what black tar heroin could do for a ranchero kid. He built stables and attached them to the large new houses he also built for his family.

I heard about David Tejeda well after I began piecing together the story of the Xalisco Boys. By then, what began on the day that I stood

The clan moved to Denver, Detroit, Dallas, Oklahoma City, Los Angeles, and many other towns. Each clan member was an independent entrepreneur, buying the family heroin. A Chicago police investigation into the Herreras estimated it took sixty million dollars in profits out of that town alone, funneling all that to Durango through shady currency exchange shops around South Chicago. The clan used its money, in part, to build parks and roads and other stuff that tends to endear villagers to narcos in the mountains of northwest Mexico.

Directing the clan was its patriarch, Don Jaime Herrera-Nevarez, a former police officer, who never left Mexico. It's said that he had something to do with the reason that a Mexican ounce of heroin—known as a *pedaza*, or piece—is actually twenty-five grams, and not twenty-eight, which is the normal measure of an ounce. (This difference has caused many disputes among buyers who, unaware of the difference, feel they're getting ripped off.) Legend has it that Don Jaime had a large spoon holding twenty-five grams that he used to scoop heroin. That became a standard ounce in the Mexican heroin world. I never learned whether this legend, recounted by several older DEA agents who tracked the Herreras, was true.

In 1985, Don Jaime, several brothers and cousins, and his son, Jaimeito, along with dozens of other relatives, were busted. Many went to prison. That didn't end the clan's activities, but they didn't have quite the same power.

The shorter distances from Latin America to the United States, which allowed the region to remain more competitive in many agricultural commodities, eventually pushed out the Turkish and Asian heroin. Colombians began introducing their brown powder in the eastern half of the United States in the 1980s, along with their more famous cocaine. It was much cheaper than the white powder from Asia. Other Mexicans, especially the Sinaloans, began sending black tar heroin north to the western United States in the early 1980s, replacing the Mexican Mud. Even as the Herreras played a reduced supply role, heroin's price in America trended downward.

Black tar, the most rudimentary form of heroin, was especially cheap to make. With Mexico so close by, tar's price could keep dropping. This, as I found out, was crucial to the story I came upon as I discovered the Xalisco Boys' networks.

The Xalisco Boys seemed like a modern version of the Herreras, and as hard to get a handle on. I sifted through shards of information

about their hazy underworld that came to me from indictments and interviews with addicts and cops, with prosecutors, DEA and FBI agents, and imprisoned Xalisco traffickers. Slowly a picture emerged of how a small town of sugarcane farmers grew by the early twenty-first century into the most proficient group of drug traffickers America has ever seen.

The first migrants from Xalisco settled in the San Fernando Valley—in Van Nuys, Panorama City, and Canoga Park. Many Xalisco migrants were there illegally, but worked legitimate jobs in construction, landscaping, and restaurants. However, by the early 1980s, a few families set to selling black tar heroin on Valley streets and in parks. The opium poppy grew bountifully in the mountains above Xalisco, and these families had relatives who mastered the folkcraft of cooking opium goo into black tar. Tar had the advantage of being moldable, like clay, and thus easy to shape into, say, the battery compartment of a boom box. Their tar was also potent and very condensed, and, as it was heroin, which addicts needed every day, it lent itself to retail, where the real profit was. The quantities needed were relatively small. A courier could take across a kilo in a purse, or strapped under clothing. Xalisco families living in Tijuana hired themselves out as these couriers.

The first Xalisco heroin traffickers mostly hailed from a single clan, many of whose members bore the last name Tejeda. Back in Xalisco County, the Tejeda clan spread across several ranchos in webs of cousins, sisters, uncles, brothers, and in-laws. The last names also included Sánchez, Díaz, Ibarra, Lizama, López, Navarro, Cienfuegos, Lerma, Bernal, García, Hernández, and others knitted together through blood, marriage, and rancho life—the children of farmers, who also raised sugarcane, coffee, corn, and cattle.

They were not the poorest of Xalisco's peon farmworkers. On the contrary, "they were people who had access to enough money to get up north, pay a coyote, and look for new kinds of work," said a Tepic professional I spoke with, who is from Xalisco. "Xalisquillo had many well-known sugarcane families. They were why Xalisco was first in production of sugarcane in the state of Nayarit. Their sons were the ones who started this [heroin business] in the eighties and nineties. These parents tried to teach the sons agriculture. The sons worked in the fields. It's really hard work. They didn't want to keep on doing what their dads did. They saw that [heroin] was a good business and so they began to leave. It's easier to make money in the business than to continue working in sugarcane."

In the early 1980s, before cell phones or beepers, these Tejedas would stand on the street or in some San Fernando Valley park. Buyers approached and the dealer would cut off a piece of heroin with a small knife.

That they lived in the San Fernando Valley, I suspected, made their story possible. They were far from the Sinaloans. Sinaloa is the state in Mexico where drug trafficking began. Sinaloans tend to be brash, brazen, violent. Other Mexicans hold them in something like awe. Sinaloans came to dominate the east side of Los Angeles County in the 1980s. The tiny suburbs southeast of Los Angeles—Paramount, Huntington Park, Bell Gardens, South Gate, and others—began as bedroom communities for ex-GIs from World War II, but by the 1980s these cities were solidly Mexican, and Sinaloan in particular. When that happened, these towns also became distribution terminals for Sinaloan drugs to cities across the United States. But the San Fernando Valley is far away, across hills in the northwest part of Los Angeles, and out there Sinaloans aren't as numerous. Other traffickers had room to expand.

Among the first Xalisco Boys to do so was David Tejeda. He was the oldest of six sons of a wealthy sugarcane farmer in the rancho of Aquiles Serdán. Wealthy by local standards, anyway. His family had land, cattle, horses, and houses, even before he went north to sell dope. David Tejeda was a light-skinned guy with a fondness for white cowboy hats and leather jackets with epaulets, in the style of the slain narco-balladeer Chalino Sánchez. Tejeda lived in Canoga Park and drank at the Majestic, the Van Nuys bar that was a favorite of Xalisco dealers like Enrique's uncles. He fought a lot, had a lot of girlfriends, and made a few enemies that way. But he gave jobs in the San Fernando Valley to poor kids from back home. A lot of people respected him for that.

"We all dreamed of coming up here to work for him," said one Xalisco trafficker I talked to in a U.S. prison. "I went to him and asked for work. I was like thirteen or fourteen. He said no, that I was too young. Many kids came and knocked on his door with the same request. I have cousins and friends who came and did work with him."

Los Angeles was a hive of gang activity during the late 1980s and early 1990s. In some neighborhoods, a different gang controlled every few blocks. Crack was big. Mobs of young men sold it by standing on L.A. streets. Gangs began levying taxes on these street dealers. About this time, the Xalisco Boys took their heroin trade off the street, out of the parks, and went to cars. Addicts were given a phone number to call. When they called, they were told where to meet a driver; the driver was

directed to waiting clients by codes sent to them via beepers. Cars and beepers allowed a heroin crew access to a broader client base, and made the Xalisco Boys less obvious to police. In cars, dealers avoided gang taxation and the violence that accompanied the street crack trade.

With the rudimentary delivery model in place, business boomed. Word of the business spread around Xalisco. More young men arrived from the town. They copied the system. They called their new businesses *tienditas*—little stores. Owning a business was a narcotic itself for young rancho kids who had nothing. Some drivers learned the business with an established cell, then went out and opened their own. Each cell was an independent business, competing with others. Shootouts were unthinkable. Violence brought police attention; guns earned long prison time. Plus everyone knew each other from Xalisco, so violence would have created repercussions back home. A sell-and-let-sell ethos took hold and by the early 1990s, Xalisco heroin *tienditas* quietly crawled all over the Valley. As more people entered the business, profits dwindled. Police wised up and arrested several dealers.

About that time, in 1990 or maybe a year or two later, it appears, David Tejeda discovered Hawaii. He'd been selling to addicts who came over from Hawaii. Now he moved a crew of drivers there, and used those addict customers as guides to this new market where heroin fetched triple the price.

Slowly, others followed his lead and Xalisco dealers expanded. Before long, they also were in Pomona, San Diego, and Portland. Then in Las Vegas. Tejeda "was okay with others starting up their own *tienditas*. There's plenty for everybody, he thought," said another trafficker.

But that wasn't always true. Most cities then had a small universe of heroin addicts, who were usually old and poor. A crew new to town had to steal customers from the crews who were already there. The zero-sum game that ensued taught the Xalisco Boys the importance of branding and marketing. To keep customers, they learned to emphasize customer service, discounts, the convenience and safety of delivery. They had to ensure their dope was always good quality—meaning uncut and potent.

The competition for a limited number of addicts also kept them moving on through the 1990s in search of new, less-saturated markets. When they did this, they defied the norms of Mexican drug trafficking.

Most Mexican traffickers naturally followed the immigrants from their home states. This was astute and common sense, for no immigrant

group has settled in such numbers in so many parts of America as Mexicans had by the end of the 1990s. Mexican immigrants were in rural areas where local police were often monolingual and understaffed. Those areas had cash-only businesses—Mexican restaurants and money-wiring services—that could be used to launder cash. By the 1990s, small towns and communities in rural Colorado, Georgia, and Arkansas, where Mexicans worked in meat plants, became major hubs for traffickers, places where they divided the dope loads they'd brought in and with which they supplied much larger towns. Mexican traffickers did this by following the immigrants. Thus by the 1990s, for example, it was possible for Sinaloan traffickers to find drug markets in many parts of America using Sinaloan immigrant communities as their point of contact and place to blend in. Michoacan traffickers did the same in the many U.S. regions where Michoacan immigrants became essential parts of the local economy.

But Nayarit is Mexico's fifth-smallest state, with barely a million people. Its migrants are few and have congregated mainly in Los Angeles and Reno. To find new heroin markets, the Xalisco Boys would have to move where they had no natural family or rancho connection. That's exactly what they did. Like Spanish conquistadors, venturing beyond the comfortable hometown networks became part of the Xalisco Boys' DNA.

To do this, though, they needed guides. Spaniards relied on Indians who hated the Aztecs to guide them across the New World to Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztec Empire, now Mexico City. Junkies did the same for the Xalisco Boys. The Xalisco Boys supplied these junkies' habits in exchange for help in moving into a new area, and in renting apartments, in registering cellular phones, and buying cars.

"You get one person to show you around and pass around the [phone] number and it's like bees to a hive," one imprisoned Xalisco Boy told me. "They all know each other. It's like having a scout. That's what happened in Las Vegas. A female addict there told some of the families, 'I know people in Tennessee.' So they went with her to Memphis. It became one of the biggest markets for a while."

They went to towns with large Mexican populations, where the Boys could blend in, and where no gang or mafia controlled the drug trade. But junkies got them there and found them their first customers. Junkies allowed the Xalisco Boys to expand far beyond where they might have had they only relied on Nayarit immigrant connections.

With faith in the addictive power of their dope, the Xalisco Boys harnessed these junkies who led them to rich new markets where almost no Nayarits lived, but where thousands of middle-class white kids were beginning to dope up on prescription opiate painkillers.

Junkies could track the telltale signs through the streets of a new city to the hidden customers that the Xalisco Boys might never find otherwise. Junkies knew the slang and could read looks of desperation.

Most important of all—and crucial to the expansion of the Xalisco Boys—was that junkies could navigate America's methadone clinics.

THE PAINKILLER KNOWN AS methadone was synthesized by German scientists in the effort to make Nazi Germany medicinally self-reliant as it prepared for war. The Allies took the patent after the war, and Eli Lilly Company introduced the drug in the United States in 1947. U.S. doctors identified it as a potential aide to heroin addicts.

That idea was taken up by Dr. Vincent Dole, an addiction specialist at the Rockefeller Institute in New York City. Methadone, Dole found, was the only opiate whose addicts did not demand increasing doses every few hours. Instead, they were happy with the same dose once a day, which could carry them through the next twenty-four hours. Methadone addicts could actually discuss topics unrelated to dope. This was not true of heroin addicts, whom Dole found tediously single-minded in their focus on the drug. Dole believed addicts could be maintained on methadone indefinitely, and that with one dose a day they could function as normal human beings. In 1970 in New York City, he opened the first methadone clinic for heroin addicts.

Dole believed that rehabilitation was dependent on human relationships—group therapy, 12-step meetings, and the like. But as a last resort for those who defied all efforts to kick the habit, methadone, Dole believed, could be a crutch, helping them through life.

President Richard Nixon permitted methadone as a treatment for heroin addiction, which plagued many soldiers returning from the Vietnam War. By the late 1970s, federally regulated methadone clinics were popping up around the country. These clinics quietly showed how a narcotic might be dispensed legally in a safe, crime-free environment. Methadone stabilized an addict and allowed him to find a job and repair damaged relationships. There were also no dirty needles, no crime, and addicts knew they couldn't be robbed at the clinics. What's more,

methadone undercut and replaced the street heroin dealers' trade with a clean, well-lit place for opiates; everyone was better off.

Methadone clinics opened before sunrise. One reason for this was that many addicts, looking for trades easy to enter, had become construction workers, carpenters, painters. They had to get to these jobs early. Methadone users were like ghosts, showing up early in the morning for years on end, drinking their dose, and silently going about their lives. In time, though, methadone became a battlefield between those who thought it should be used to wean addicts off opiates, and those, like Vincent Dole, who saw it as a lifelong drug, like insulin for diabetics.

One strategy or the other might well have worked. But the worst of both emerged at many clinics. Methadone was often dispensed as if the goal was kicking the habit, with small doses. But as methadone clinics became for-profit affairs, many cut the counseling and therapy that might help patients kick opiates altogether. Critics could be forgiven for seeing some clinic owners as drug dealers, stringing patients out for years, and charging twenty and thirty times what the drug actually cost, which was about fifty cents a dose. In 1990, the U.S. General Accounting Office reported that half the clinics were poorly managed, unaccountable, and provided little counseling or aftercare.

The result was that many methadone clinics maintained core populations of opiate addicts in cities all across the country, but on doses that were too small, and usually without much therapeutic support. Addicts who weren't given high enough doses craved another opiate later in the afternoon, after the clinics closed. They had to find their dope elsewhere, usually on the street, and thus remained tied to the heroin underworld. At clinics that combined low doses and insufficient rehab therapy, addicts took to using methadone and heroin interchangeably.

Methadone was a better alternative to weak powder heroin, which was more expensive and available only in dangerous housing projects or skid rows. But maintaining large numbers of people on any kind of opiate, particularly on low doses, made them easy prey for someone with a more efficient and convenient opiate delivery system. For years, though, no one could conceive of such a thing: a system of retailing street heroin that was cheaper than, as safe as, and more convenient than a methadone clinic.

But in the mid-1990s, that's exactly what the Xalisco Boys brought to towns across America. They discovered that methadone clinics were, in effect, game preserves.

METHADONE CLINICS GAVE XALISCO Boys the footholds in the first western U.S. cities as they expanded beyond the San Fernando Valley in the early 1990s. Every new cell learned to find the methadone clinic and give away free samples to the addicts.

One Xalisco Boy in Portland told authorities of a training that his cell put new drivers through. They were taught, he said, to lurk near methadone clinics, spot an addict, and follow him. Then they'd tap him on the shoulder and ask directions to someplace. Then they'd then spit out a few balloons. Along with the balloons, they'd give the addict a piece of paper with a phone number on it.

"Call us if we can help you out."

The value of each Xalisco heroin tienda was in its list of customers. "This is how they would build and maintain it," said Steve Mygrant, a Portland-area prosecutor. "It was an ongoing recruiting practice, in the same way a corporate business would identify customers. They'd lose people along the way. So they were constantly engaged in this."

In time, most cells developed addicts they could trust, and some of these, in turn, helped tienda owners expand to new cities in exchange for dope. Some of their junkie guides became legend down in Xalisco. In Cincinnati, I spoke with a girl in the Lower Price Hill neighborhood, home to transplanted Appalachians and overrun with heroin. She had been rustling up business for a series of Xalisco dealers intent on shaping a customer list as they came and went over the years. This girl was, in her own words, "a known quantity" down in Xalisco, a town she had never visited. Xalisco Boys who were just getting started in Cincinnati asked for her, looked her up, and pushed dope in her face wanting her help in establishing heroin routes throughout the Cincinnati metro area. It made kicking the habit almost impossible.

"They can't even say my name. But they tell them down there, 'Ask somebody for White Girl. Lower Price Hill.' One guy even came with a note with my name on it. Somebody had written my name and misspelled it," she said. "Over these years, I get out [of jail or rehab] and they're there looking for me. People will say, 'How do you always got this connection?' I don't know. It's not like I call Mexico and say can you send me a guy? But it's always there."

One prolific addict turned guide was a woman named Tracy Jefferson. Jefferson was a longtime drug user and manic depressive from Salem, Oregon. She hooked up with Luis Padilla-Peña, a Xalisco dealer in

Reno, Nevada, in 1993. Padilla-Peña had come to the United States in 1990 and found work in Las Vegas with the heroin crew run by a friend from the Tejeda-Sánchez clan. From there, he went off on his own. His big break was meeting Jefferson. Over the next two years, she helped Padilla-Peña and his family carve out heroin markets in Salem, Denver, Seattle, Colorado Springs, Oklahoma City, and Omaha—usually by enrolling herself in methadone clinics and giving away free black tar to the clinics' clients she met.

From Omaha, Jefferson said when she testified in federal court, she and the family were scouting Kansas City, St. Louis, and Des Moines. They would drop a town that didn't generate at least two thousand dollars in daily profit. For this reason, she testified, they passed on Cheyenne, Wyoming, and Yakima and Vancouver, Washington.

Another such guide was a kid from Mexico who grew up in Reseda. He didn't use drugs, but he had something else the Xalisco Boys needed. He was bilingual. He was from Mexico but was raised in the San Fernando Valley. In Reseda he met many Xalisco immigrants. In 1995, he was seventeen when a new cell leader hired him to work in Maui, Hawaii.

"None of them spoke English. That's why I was important to them," he said. "There were a lot of things they couldn't do. When I got there, I helped them expand."

By then, Hawaii had two Xalisco cells: one owned by David Tejeda, the other by a man named Toño Raices, who was from the small rancho of El Malinal in the hills near Xalisco.

Back in Xalisco, people say that Toño Raices aimed to be somebody in the drug world. Some say he envied David Tejeda. The story goes that Tejeda was owed four hundred thousand dollars for product by a man from the rancho of Pantanal who didn't want to pay. This man was backed up by Toño Raices.

One day in 1996, outside a Xalisco dance club, Tejeda met with his rivals. From there, they moved to a coffee warehouse Raices owned and, in a dispute over money, Tejeda was shot to death by Raices' men under a guayabo tree. No one was arrested. Vaqueros Musical, a local band, recounted Tejeda's death this way in a corrido:

He got a call, they say from a cellular.

David, come to the Magueyes Bar and here I'll pay you . . .

Thursday, 4th of April, 1996, they got him when he wasn't expecting it.

They shot him point-blank with AK-47s.

Three years later, Toño Raices was shot to death at the cemetery where Tejeda was buried. The way I heard the story, his enemies killed a boy who worked for him. At the boy's funeral, mourners paid city police to let them shoot guns in the air at the cemetery. But during the ceremony, state police arrived, presumably allied with the Tejedas. A shootout erupted between state police and armed mourners. A commandant died. So did Toño Raices. Vaqueros Musical recorded another corrido.

But David Tejeda's murder was the important one in the story of the Xalisco Boys and black tar heroin in America. His extended family had hundreds of relatives. He'd shown poor families they, too, could rise by selling heroin retail in the United States. Younger guys naturally went to him for advice. He supplied many of them as they expanded beyond the San Fernando Valley.

Tejeda's death had a strangely liberating effect on his extended family and other Xalisco crews. When he was alive, "a lot of people depended on him because he had everything going for him," said the kid from Reseda. "They didn't have to figure out how to do things for themselves. But once he was killed, they had to start doing things on their own. They didn't have nobody to depend on."

Forced now to become more intrepid, "everybody scattered everywhere."

Just a Phone Call Away

Portland, Oregon

In his forties, Alan Levine lost both legs to frostbite when he fell asleep drunk under an overpass in an Illinois snowstorm. Somehow he survived this and in time he migrated west, ending up in Portland, Oregon.

He was already a longtime heroin addict. Levine first used heroin at age twenty in New York and that first shot made him feel the way he wanted to feel the rest of his life—like the King of the World and the President of Everything.

All his life, Alan Levine loved drugs and the charge they gave him. But his lack of legs got in the way. He shuffled around on prosthetics. Usually, he procured dope from some house where he had a connection, or by wandering around the Old Town Chinatown neighborhood north of Portland's downtown, an arduous trek repeated three or four times a day. Levine hobbled along, driven by his addiction. Each time, he never knew what he was getting, or whether he would be robbed or arrested. He'd make it back to his motel, fix, and zone out until it was time to go look for more, surviving on panhandling and a monthly disability check.

In 1993, Levine returned to Portland after a year away. He heard that dealers had come to town who now delivered dope if you called in an order. Somehow Levine got their business card, though years later he couldn't remember precisely how. He had never known of a heroin dealer with a business card and a convenient number you could call.

With that card, well, Alan Levine might've just died and gone to heaven.

WAYNE BALDASSARE, MEANWHILE, WAS SURE he was entering hell.

Baldassare was a cop who loved dope work. He'd been on the Portland Police Drugs and Vice Division since 1982. He loved the creativity the job required, that he had to use and care for informants. Each day was different: an undercover buy in the morning, a

search warrant in the afternoon. The job required imagination, because the dealers were themselves endlessly creative.

For years, heroin was the easiest drug to work because it was sold out of houses. You arrested a junkie. Terrified of withdrawing in jail, he'd tell you how a dope house worked. The junkie would bring an undercover officer to the dealer. Then you busted the place.

But in about 1991, Baldassare saw all that change. Young Mexican guys, clean-cut, courteous, and looking quite out of their element, were driving the town in old cars, delivering heroin. "All of a sudden you got a dispatch center taking orders and calling these delivery guys," he said. "It made it very hard to get a good case. You were looking at hours of surveillance for five or six small bags of dope."

The delivery drivers did tours of six months and then left. If they were arrested they were deported, not prosecuted, because they never carried large amounts of dope. The cases were always light. Baldassare first figured they were small-timers. Later he realized that, quite to the contrary, they had learned how drug investigations worked: prosecutors prized cases with large quantities of drugs. Crack and methamphetamine were the priorities then, each measured in kilos. As camouflage, these Mexican heroin guys used just-in-time supplying, like any global corporation, to ensure they had only tiny quantities in their cars or apartments. This, too, was sophistication Baldassare didn't see in the heroin underworld.

Soon these delivery drivers crowded into Portland. Heroin prices dropped and Baldassare watched the drivers get wise. They drove in circles to lose the officers following them. It took four or five officers to tail one car. Up to then, Portland hadn't much of an aerial police service. One officer owned a four-seat Cessna and charged the city for gas when he used it for police work, which wasn't often. Now the airplane was pressed into regular service, with a pilot and an observer watching the heroin delivery car on the street below. Baldassare was the observer. Peering through binoculars from above, he radioed locations to his colleagues on the ground.

It was grueling work and went on for hours. Baldassare was one of the few officers who could peer through binoculars from the plane, as it went around in circles, without getting airsick. As the drivers tooled around Portland all day making deliveries, Baldassare spent ten, twelve hours a day in the plane, watching from twenty-five hundred feet in the air, stopping only to refuel. This was before GPS; nor were there cell phones to track.

"It was line of sight," he said. "If you looked away, you could lose them. So you picked your times to look away. If your neck was getting a kink in it, you had to choose when to massage it."

Above downtown, Baldassare could follow a heroin car for a half circle of the plane, then lose it behind a building as the Cessna completed its circle, hoping to pick up on a new go-round. Cars easily got lost under Portland's dense canopy of trees.

Before long, the department had to expand its air force. An air force was a luxury most police departments the size of Portland's can't afford, but which this new heroin system made necessary. The city hired another two pilots. Finally, the department bought a new plane with full-length windows for easier surveillance.

THEIR BUSINESS CARD WAS yellow. It had a phone number and an eagle with a snake in its talons, the emblem on the flag of Mexico. That was all. No names. No slogan. Call anytime, Alan Levine was told. One night, he did.

Give us twenty minutes, said the guy on the end of the line. To Levine's immense surprise, within fifteen minutes, a Mexican kid was knocking at his motel door. He was young and nervous and clean-cut. He looked like a farm boy. He spoke no English. But he had sixty dollars' worth of black tar heroin.

Levine had never forgotten the first rapturous feeling he got from heroin back in the 1960s. But through the years that followed, he also never felt that high again. Until, that is, he shot up black tar heroin that night. Levine called the number three times a day after that. The delivery guys changed often and he called them all Pedro. They were reliable. They arrived quickly. Now, instead of having to brave Old Town on his two fake legs, Alan Levine could sit in his motel room, aware that he was "just a phone call away from getting loaded."

The Mexicans were the only dealers Levine had encountered who never ran out of dope. In time, prices dropped to as little as five dollars a hit as these crews brought huge supplies of high-quality tar heroin to Portland and competed against each other. Yet he noticed that they never feuded. They gave him credit. They often gave him a little extra, avid to keep him as a customer.

One night, one of these kids, a driver as Alan Levine remembers it, tried to scam him, offering eighteen balloons for a hundred dollars when the deal, already long established, was twenty-five balloons.

Levine objected. Let's see what the boss says, the boy said. Levine got in his car and followed the driver across Portland. They came to a house. Out came a man Levine years later determined to be Enrique Tejeda-Cienfuegos, but whom he came to know then as El Gato.

Tejeda-Cienfuegos was from the village of Aquiles Serdán, a few miles south of Xalisco. He and his four brothers ran a heroin franchise in Portland. Levine knew nothing of this. He only knew that the delivery kid was trying to screw him and he explained this to El Gato that night. The boy now produced the twenty-five bags of heroin, saving in Spanish that this is what he offered Levine the whole time and there'd been some misunderstanding. El Gato was apologetic and gave Levine those twenty-five bags of heroin for free. Levine never saw that driver again.

El Gato "was evidently powerful," Levine remembered, when I spoke with him in a motel room near downtown Portland one night many years later. I tracked Levine down through his ex-wife because by then I realized the history of heroin was best told by addicts, the older the better. I sat in a chair while he, legless, sat in his bed, smoking constantly. Cigarettes gave his voice a growl as grizzled as his face and a strange chop to his jaws that sounded, when he spoke, as if he were chomping on a juicy steak. Sure enough, he knew the story of the Xalisco Boys' arrival in Portland as well as anybody, even if he knew them only as a rotating series of Mexicans he called Pedro. When I showed him a mug shot, he definitely remembered El Gato.

"When he spoke, they acted," he said. "He had some status. He took a liking to me because I paid on time. After that, they'd come and say, 'Gato said to give you this; Gato said to give you that.' They called me Liver because I told them I had hepatitis C and I didn't want to share needles."

El Gato later gave Levine a Buck knife, perhaps feeling he could use some protection. Levine realized he was worlds away now from how heroin had operated for so long.

"You didn't have to leave your house. Dealing with those people was paradise. You could nickel-and-dime them, too, when they got there. They were eager for the green money."

Levine had never known any dealer to give away free drugs to get people hooked, or to keep addicts from getting clean—the kind of mythical pushers the government and the media had invented amid the "dope fiend" scare. Until he met the Xalisco Boys.

"This marketing technique *was* about that. They knew what they were doing. They were marketers."