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A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

LIVING AND DYING IN CENTRAL AMERICA



ÓSCAR
MARTÍNEZ

AUTHOR OF *THE BEAST*

Foreword by **Jon Lee Anderson**

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Living and Dying in Central America

Óscar Martínez

Translated by
John B. Washington
and
Daniela Ugaz

Foreword by
Jon Lee Anderson



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For Marcela and Maria—for caring for me,
for loving me, for their calming presence,
for staying by my side in this part of the world

“Violence will keep changing in name, but violence will always remain as long as there’s no change at the root, from where all these horrible things are sprouting.”

— Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero, 1977

“They’ve offered me no other way.”

— Kid Hollywood, a little over a year
before his assassination in 2014

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Foreword

by Jon Lee Anderson

In *A History of Violence*, Óscar Martínez befriends a contract killer living in a small Salvadoran town. The killer, the Hollywood Kid, has ratted out numerous former accomplices to police, but, sensing that the government doesn't care enough to protect him, he fretfully awaits his execution at their hands. The Hollywood Kid has a shotgun to defend himself, but when the moment finally comes, he is defenseless, on his way home from his baby daughter's baptism. At the burial, Óscar is accosted by his dead friend's enemies, who appear in the cemetery to gloat and swagger.

One night, a swashbuckling Honduran police official nicknamed El Tigre—The Tiger—with a fearsome notoriety as the leader of a death squad that executes criminal suspects, and who tells Óscar “Everyone knows not to fuck with me,” concedes defeat as the two drive along a lonely rural stretch of the border where the narcos are more powerful than any law he could hope to impose.

Another evening, as a group of terrified families pack up their homes in a slum in the Salvadoran capital to flee a threatened massacre at the hands of a drug gang, Óscar is on the scene. A police official arrives and pleads with the families to stay. But, instead of offering security guarantees, he asks them to put their faith in God, and invites them to join him in a prayer ceremony. One of the men, powerless to alter his family's circumstances, weeps quietly and tells Óscar of the humiliation he feels.

As he prowls the back roads, bars and police precincts of Central America in a stubborn search for truth, Óscar Martínez exhibits the instincts of a detective and the soul of a poet. His sources are window washers, prostitutes, would-be migrants, killers—*sicarios*—good and bad cops, judges and prosecutors. Óscar is a Marlowe in a world that is long on injustice and short on much of anything else.

Óscar's previous book, *The Beast*, was a gritty firsthand chronicle of the dramatic journey undertaken by Central American migrants on their journey northwards through Mexico to the United States.

This book, a collection of fourteen investigative pieces written by Óscar over the past several years from Central America itself, is intended to explain to Americans why it is that Central Americans flee—they don't migrate—from their homelands, due to the violence generated there, year after year, with a great deal of American participation.

Óscar is himself a Salvadoran, and what he sees when he looks at his country, and its immediate neighbors, is a war zone. It has been that way for most of his life. Martínez was born in 1983, three years into a brutal twelve-year civil war, which by the time it ended in an impunity-for-all 1992 peace deal had killed 75,000 people and wrecked the lives of many more. But, in a sense, the conflict, which the US played a preponderant role, never really ended. Along with former guerrillas and ex-soldiers, the offspring of returned war refugees soon formed a crazy quilt of gangs—*Maras*—inspired by the ones in Los Angeles, where many of them had been raised. Today criminal violence has replaced the political violence with levels of bloodshed that comes, at times, chillingly close to those of wartime. Outside of the contemporary killing grounds of Syria and Iraq, in fact, few regions are consistently murderous as is “peacetime” Central America.

One of the main reasons for the violence is the drug trade. Just as Central America's geography once made it a strategic battleground of the Cold War, that same geography today has determined that the region is the ultimate corridor for narcotics shipments from Colombia to the US consumer market.

That fact, together with Central America's chronic poverty and its widespread lawlessness, has turned an astonishing number of people into gangsters. Policemen, judges, and politicians are as likely to be corrupt as to be honest. There are as many as 50,000 Salvadorans directly involved in gangs and up to half a million more, out of a population of 6 million, who are economically dependent on them.

Neighboring Honduras, too, has become the stomping ground for hyper-violent drug gangs and corrupt police—and, accordingly, for the past several years, the country has had the highest murder rates of any country in the world. With El Salvador, Guatemala and Belize close behind.

To give an idea of what this means, consider the fact that the United States, usually regarded as a violent country, has a current average of 4.5 murders per 100,000 inhabitants. Honduras has 90. In 2015, El Salvador's murder rate began to skyrocket, and, by the end of summer, with an average of one murder taking place every hour, and a tally of around 4,000 dead already for the year, it looked ready to edge Honduras out of first place. According to an August 2015 article in the *Guardian*, the latest murder statistics suggest that El Salvador is "twenty times more violent than the United States and ninety times more violent than Great Britain."

Indignation over this state of affairs is partly what motivates Óscar, who runs Sala Negra, a criminal investigations unit for *El Faro*, the groundbreaking investigative Central American online magazine based in El Salvador. A slow-burning outrage about the incapacity of the Central American states to provide protection and justice for its citizens pervades Óscar's pieces assembled in this book.

Reporting on the flight of civilian families from the gang-threatened San Salvador slum, for instance, Óscar writes:

Breaking news this Tuesday, January 20, 2015. There is a live audience, watching as if it were a soccer game: people peeking out from their kitchen windows as they eat lunch. Live and direct: more than a dozen families fleeing their San Valentín condos in the city of Mejicanos. There are also film crews, cops directing traffic, and other idling spectators. The police are offering protection for families who have been threatened by the Barrio 18 gang. Gang members threatened to kill by tonight. The residents of San Valentín, taking the threat seriously, are now fleeing on live national television.

Óscar similarly laments the execution of the Hollywood Kid, but not because he thought he was a nice guy. He wasn't. As he told Óscar, he'd personally killed fifty-four people, including several women. Óscar's lamentation was over the inadequacy of the Salvadoran state, which had failed in its promise to protect its witness, who, despite his criminal past had helped bring numerous other killers to justice. "Without his help, thirty killers would be running loose in El Salvador," writes Óscar.

In an article published in July 2015, Óscar and two of his Sala Negra colleagues, Daniel Valencia Caravantes and Roberto Valencia, reported the explosive results of their inquiry into a supposed March shootout between gangsters and police, in which eight Maras, including a young woman, were killed. They revealed that what the police had alleged was untrue, and that the Maras, as well as a couple of innocent bystanders, were murdered in cold blood. It had been a massacre, and there had been a cover-up. Even before this story broke, the Sala Negra team had received death threats, and on the day before publication, Óscar and his two coauthors left San Salvador, to be on the safe side.

On their return, the death threats continued. Óscar carried on with his reporting, but his daily routine now involved a host of new security precautions. In an email message he sent me on September 18, he promised, "I've taken the decision to leave the country for a period, to give my family a break from this, and some peace of mind. For me, it will be a pause in the combat." The pause was shortlived, and it was not long before Óscar was back reporting on what for him, clearly, has become a kind of war of his own.

One senses that, in the end, what Óscar Martínez is fighting for is a reality where families like his and those of the people he reports on, can finally live in peace, without fear of being murdered, in Central America where its citizens do not have to leave in order to survive.

Preface

Since October 2013 I've traveled to many cities presenting *The Beast*, the book I wrote about the migrant trail from Central America to the United States. In these talks and presentations I've come to understand—or at least I believe I have—that those of you outside of Latin America are very rational when it comes to reacting to these types of stories. In Latin America, the questions I most heard were along the lines of “Was I scared to be riding the train?” Or “Did anything bad ever happen to me?” Or “Which story affected me most?” Outside of the region, the most common question was “What’s your solution?”

It made me realize how infrequently journalists ask themselves this. What can I propose to bring an end to these terrifying stories? It's a deceptive question, because there is no real answer. There is nothing I can suggest that will prevent women being raped on the Mexican migrant trails tomorrow, nor is there anything I can do so that the young Salvadoran boy fleeing his country for yours turns around. I can't make him go back. I definitely can't bring safety or dignity to the place he has abandoned. Journalism only has one method of boring into reality, and it is the same method that the sea uses against the coast: the constant lapping of the waves, whether they are gentle or turbulent.

So, what is my reply to this insistent question? My response is that you should realize what is happening, that you should know more, that you should understand what these people are living through. I want you to be transported by your reading to a barrio ruled by Central American gangs. You need to listen to an indigenous man from the Petén jungle and confront the mother of a boy murdered by Los Zetas. My suggestion is that you realize what happened to a woman who was sold into sex slavery as she tried to reach your borders—or, depending on how you want to see it, as she tried to flee from my country. My proposal is that you know what is going on. Because I believe that knowing is different from not knowing. I believe that knowing, especially with people like yours, who know how to wield politics, is the beginning of a solution. I believe, sticking with the metaphor of the sea and the rock, that knowing is what moves the waves. You can be one of the waves.

Having got that straight, I want to respond to a question I expect to hear when I present this new book somewhere near you: Why should people read this? Here is my reply.

First, I think you should read it because it is about people who surround you. This book isn't about Martians. It doesn't chronicle the tragic life stories of distant, faraway people living in the wilderness without the Internet, eating nothing but millet. It doesn't discuss people you will never see up close, see only on television. This book is about the lives of people who serve you coffee every morning. It tells the stories of people who cut your lawn and fix your plumbing. These lives are very similar to the lives of about 6 million people living in your midst. It tells the story of the more than 1,000 human beings who every day leave the three northern Central American countries to try to enter, without permission, the United States and other countries of the North.

Second, you should read this book because the broken puppet that we are as a region was most cruelly armed by American politicians. This is a book about the most murderous corner of the world. In Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador we have suffered an epidemic of violence for years. It has been established that if a country suffers from a disease that affects ten out of every 100,000 inhabitants, this country is experiencing an epidemic. By that standard, Central America is gravely sick. In the last five years not one of these three countries has averaged fewer than thirty-two murders for every 100,000 inhabitants. In El Salvador, the ratio is more than eighty. This month, the epidemic has been

particularly bad, raging in a country of only 13,000 square miles, home to 6.2 million people, and averaging twenty-three murders a day. By comparison, during the sixteen-year Civil War, which ended in 1992, the average murder rate was sixteen. Today's violence makes nonsense of the words "war" and "peace."

Our society is a cauldron of oppressive military governance, the result of a failed peace process. We're living with government corruption and incompetent politicians. We are living with violence with death always close at hand: in a traffic accident, a soccer brawl, or in defense of our families. We are ignorant of peace. We haven't had the chance to get to know it. We are a corridor for the transit of drugs. We are also their consumers. We are a poor society, and poorly educated, with public schools that flood and hospitals that induce nausea. We are a society with a minimum monthly wage you could earn working a single day as a day laborer in Los Angeles. We are unequal: There are families in Central America, though very few, that could live with the rich and famous of Miami; and there are families, tens of thousands of them, that can't always put food on the table. There are families, you can count them on one hand, who have their own private jets; and there are families, tens of thousands of them, that don't have electricity or running water. We are all of this. And we are also something more.

We are also the product of certain American politicians who tried to settle the Cold War in this small part of the world. I don't need to elaborate—the evidence abounds. But whoever doesn't believe me should type into Google the words "School of the Americas." Or "Iran-Contra Affair." Or "Miami Six." Or "Ronald Reagan Central American Millions Military Aid." There's a lot you can type in to get the same result. We didn't just live through our own war here. We lived through your war. Or at least your politicians' war.

We are also the product of your politics of deportation and national security. In May 2015, El Salvador was hemorrhaging, straight from the aorta: that month was the deadliest of this century, and this June is on track to outdo the 635 murders recorded in May. The response of the authorities is that this is the result of the recrudescence of the war between rival gangs, or between the gangs and the state. For most of us, these gangs are part of our everyday life. That's why we don't ask anymore how this started, why they are growing so quickly. We only ask how to survive. And it's understood that survival takes precedence over anything else.

But these gangs—La Mara Salvatrucha, Barrio 18, Mirada Lokotes 13—weren't born in Guatemala or Honduras or El Salvador. They came from the United States, Southern California to be precise. They began with migrants fleeing a US-sponsored war. And, in fleeing, some of these young men found themselves living in an ecosystem of gangs already established in California. And so they came together to defend themselves, and they established a name, and now this name is what we call our fear: Mara Salvatrucha, Barrio 18. By the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the '90s, a few experts, a member of Congress, and a president came up with a stupendous idea about how to get rid of these problematic gangs. With the logic of an ape, they decided the problem could simply be booted to the other side of the border. They acted like a scared child who closes his eyes in the hope that what frightens him will simply disappear. It was in these years that about 4,000 gang members, all with criminal records, were deported. They were sent to countries at war. Those 4,000 are now 60,000, just in El Salvador. The experts, the congressman, that president didn't have a clue what circular migration was. They spat straight up into the sky. Today these gangs are thriving both in Central America and in the United States.

Everything that is happening to us is tangled up with the United States. We can't untie ourselves. Some of the stories in this book show just how knottily we're tied together.

This book is divided into three parts: Emptiness (or the absence or disinterest of the state); Madness

(what is festering in the emptiness); and Fleeing (the only option for many desperate people). With these three sections are the fourteen chronicles that, working as a journalist for elfaro.net, I researched and wrote from 2011 to 2015, all set in the northern triangle of Central America, this terrifying little corner of the world.

Last, I believe you should read this book for one simple reason: for the sake of humanity. I want you to understand what thousands of Central Americans are forced to live through. Then you can understand why they keep coming, and will continue to come, despite having to leave their families behind, despite having to cross Mexico, despite the wall and the Border Patrol, despite the crazy hunters of men who stalk the borderlands, and despite the difficult life waiting for them as undocumented people.

There are probably other hooks I could use to get a reader's attention. I could, for example, tell you to read this book because every one of the fourteen chapters mentions, multiple times, the United States. I could explain that a few of the stories discuss California and Texas. But I prefer to simply say that my response to the question "What is the solution?" is the following: It's up to you. The solution is up to you. The crisis will be solved when people understand, and worsens when they don't. It's that simple. And it's that complicated.

Oscar Martín
September 2015

Guatemala departamentos	El Salvador departamentos
1 Retalhuleu	1 Ahuachapán
2 Quetzaltenango	2 Santa Ana
3 Totonicapán	3 Sonsonate
4 Sololá	4 Chalatenango
5 Suchitepéquez	5 La Libertad
6 Escuintla	6 San Salvador
7 Chimaltenango	7 Cuscatlán
8 Sacatepéquez	8 Cabañas
9 Guatemala	9 La Paz
10 El Progreso	10 San Vicente
11 Jalapa	11 Usulután
12 Santa Rosa	12 San Miguel
13 Jutiapa	13 Morazán
14 Chiquimula	14 La Unión
15 Zacapa	



Part 1. Emptiness

Here live the nobodies. When the authorities leave or don't do their jobs, the nobodies remain, living alone and according to laws up by those filling the power vacuum, the laws of the blade and the bullet.

The State Against Chepe Furia

March 2013

This is the story of a veteran Mara Salvatrucha gangster who raised his own private army. A man, blacklisted by the United States Treasury Department, whom the Salvadoran authorities refused to call a marero, insisting instead on calling him the Mafioso, the Brain, the Intellectual, or, simply, Don José. These are the traces left behind of a criminal who penetrated deep into a state that was often his principal accomplice. To win the fight against Chepe Furia, the state had to take up arms against itself.

The Chief Inspector of the police investigation branch of El Refugio received a judicial order at the beginning of March 2011: You need to capture José Antonio Terán, better known as Chepe Furia. The Inspector, furious, thought to himself, “You got to be fucking kidding me.”

Just a year previously the Inspector first arrived in Ahuachapán, a Salvadoran state that runs along the border of Guatemala. He’s an old-school cop, with nearly twenty years of experience as an agent for the Centers for Police and Penitentiary Intelligence where he developed a strong network of street informants. The Inspector became a sort of expert in the Mara Salvatrucha gang (MS). Perhaps his interest was seeded in the two years he spent researching the hierarchy of the jailed gang members, surveilling their conversations and flipping informants. He discovered that the MS was far more organized and had a far more complex leadership system than its rival gang, Barrio 18.

The Inspector is obsessed with organizing his subjects: taking multiple photographs of each gang member, scanning them, arranging them, shifting the head shots around on his old desktop computer according to rank, clique, founder and *ranflero* (a gang-specific term meaning something like lieutenant). He pins even more photographs onto maps on his walls. He can’t stand it when his intricate puzzles are missing a piece, missing a head shot.

It was because of his obsession with the complicated structure of gangs that he knew exactly who he’d been asked to capture. José Antonio Terán, aka Chepe Furia, a forty-six-year-old man described as looking like an “Apache,” was one of the most frequent faces to turn up in the Inspector’s puzzle. Chepe, from the Hollywood Locos Salvatrucha clique, was part of the Mara Salvatrucha gang, and the Inspector had placed Chepe Furia’s face at the top of his maps, next to the words “leader” and “veteran.”

The Hollywood clique has a fierce reputation within the Mara Salvatrucha. Formed in Los Angeles near MacArthur Park, in the early 1980s, it’s the clique that gave birth to the national leader of the MS, Borrromeo Henríquez, El Diablito de Hollywood.

The Inspector knows he isn’t researching just any ordinary gangbanger. Chepe Furia wasn’t a triggerman, a soldier, or any of the other ranks listed under most of the faces in his catalogs: beardless young men with just a murder or two to their names. In fact, the entire reason the Inspector had moved to El Refugio was because of Chepe Furia. He thought that by escaping to a more rural town he’d be outside of Chepe’s sphere of influence, far from any of the gangster’s collaborators in the Atiquizaya police force.

He didn’t understand how the same judge, Tomás Salinas, a short and mannerly man who seemed to speak only in juridical terms, could release Chepe Furia from prison for the second time. How could this judge, who knew so much about organized crime, have believed that Chepe Furia, the king of spades in the card deck of Salvadoran gangsters, would not run upon being released on a \$25,000 bail?

He had killed a protected witness, he had infiltrated the police department, he had somehow finagled a letter of good conduct from the mayor of Atiquizaya, and he'd been singled out by the ex-minister of security and justice, Manuel Melgar, as having transcended the ranking of "gangster" and secured the title of "mobster."

"You got to be fucking kidding," the Inspector thought to himself.

In early 2010, in a poor neighborhood on the outskirts of Atiquizaya, a twenty-seven-year-old leans against the door of his tiny shack and smokes his fifth crack rock of the day. The door secures with a metal hasp lock, but he doesn't have it in place. As he takes a big hit into his lungs, he hears the creaking of the door opening behind him. He holds the smoke in and hears the cocking of a pistol. Reaching both hands for his belt, he pulls out a .40-caliber with his right hand and a .357 with his left.

"Hey, cool it. I know you're armed."

El Niño recognizes the calm voice of Detective Pozo, from the office at El Refugio.

"I've been smoking," El Niño says.

"I just want to talk."

"I'm pretty blazed."

"Son of a bitch. So you don't think we can talk?"

Detective Pozo decides to try his luck. He doesn't fire when El Niño, still holding a pistol in each hand, stands up. Locking eyes with the detective, El Niño walks past him and outside the shack. Without putting down a weapon he gets in the back of the pickup and says, "Let's roll."

The detective holsters his pistol and, his heart in his hands, drives the empty streets back toward his office, an armed assassin from the Hollywood Locos Salvatrucha seated behind him.

Detective Pozo has finally found a high-ranking member of the clique founded by Chepe Furia who will at least consider becoming a protected witness.

Meet El Niño from the Hollywood Locos Salvatrucha, the Hollywood Kid.

El Niño was a successful assassin for the MS, rising to third in the ranks of the local Atiquizaya clique. Some people might think that revealing his nickname is a risk for him. Whoever thinks that doesn't understand how deeply the MS, especially Chepe Furia, has infiltrated the state, or how poor the state can protect its witnesses. El Niño had already received calls from gang leaders inside the Ciudad Barrios prison, where only MS members are detained, telling him that sooner or later he would be killed. "You'll be leaving here smelling like pine," they told him.

"They don't make coffins out of pine around here," he responded. "They make them out of mango and conacaste trees."

It wasn't the first time that investigators from El Refugio (who've asked to remain anonymous) had tried to get El Niño to collaborate. The Inspector is an expert in both sowing friction and harvesting protected witnesses. He's threatened several gang members with dropping them off in enemy territory after they claimed they didn't belong to any gang. He's used his cell phone to film them denying they are part of the MS and then later, after their interrogation, sobbing. In just a year of intelligence gathering he was able to complete the puzzle of the clique's leadership. Since then, in late 2009, he dedicated himself to flipping one witness after another, getting them to reveal names. It wasn't until he figured out that El Niño was connected to the murder of a fifteen-year-old girl that he started getting close to Chepe Furia. The Inspector told Detective Pozo to do whatever he had to do to make sure El Niño talked. Pozo made El Niño a simple offer: You talk or you pay for your murders.

Now that he's become a plea-bargain witness (a *testigo criteriado* in El Salvador is a witness who was involved in a crime and agrees to testify in exchange for a reduced sentence) in a court case against forty-two members of Chepe Furia's gang, El Niño lives in a small shack close to the police

station. After more than twenty hours of conversation and at least fifteen visits with El Niño, I've come to understand that he's so much more than a witness. He is a living testimony as to how a clique is born, as to how kids as young as thirteen, who once sought out trouble by roughhousing with each other, become members of one of the most dangerous and powerful gangs in the country. He is living testimony as to how a man deported from Los Angeles, California, changed the life of these scrappy young boys. That man was Chepe Furia.

"It's 'cause we were such idiots, man. Then he showed up talking all different and flashing his good his truck, living like a king. And we, the gang here, we were his business."

El Niño speaks in broken sentences, sucking in and expelling clouds of smoke, then quick-sucking the smoke back in, holding his breath, moving his lips like a fish. He's getting high while his girlfriend, eighteen years old, coos over their newborn daughter and his police guard dozes in the new shack over. The only place you can catch a glimpse of the movie-like glamour of living as a protected witness in El Salvador is in the movies.

The story of El Niño begins in 1994, when he was already a young gangster. The names of the gangs he talks about, however, sound like play groups. He was part of a gang called Mara Gauchos Locos 13 (the Crazy Cowboy 13 Gang), who fought against other neighborhood gangs: Los Valerios, Los Me 33 (the Twins 33), Los Chanquetas (the Sandals) and Los Uvas (the Grapes). Most of their adventures consisted in going to the town's parties en masse and roughing up a few other kids. If, by chance, somebody had a bat, or one of them pulled a knife, he was hailed as the hero of the moment, and then it was over.

The playground of the young gangsters in Atiquizaya extended to the parties of El Refugio and Turín, but never to the neighboring city of Chalchuapa. The kids knew that only the big boys played there, a group of teenagers who called themselves Barrio 18 and were run by a twenty-year-old who had—a rarity in the first years after the war—an actual gun. The leader's name was Moncho Garrapata.

For most people living in that region, the word "criminal" meant a member of a group that robbed trucks, stole cattle or maybe kidnapped people. From those circles of criminals, El Niño explained to me, the names of a few—the most dangerous—stuck out: Nando Vulva, the brothers Víctor and Pedro Maraca, and Henry Méndez. Also, a twenty-six-year-old who had served with the National Guard during the war and had recently returned to Atiquizaya from California: Chepe Furia.

According to police records, Chepe Furia was deported from the United States on October 15, 2003. From 1994 to 2003 he lived and moved between the two countries. It was in Southern California that he became a founder of one of the most powerful MS cliques in the country: the Fulton Locos Salvatrucha. I confirmed this with two other sources, one of whom was kicked out of the gang by Chepe himself and wished to remain anonymous; the other was Ernesto Deras, better known by his nickname, Satan. He was also an ex-Salvadoran soldier who migrated to the United States and was *palabrero* (leader) for the Fulton Locos in Los Angeles, where he still lives. Satan told me that José Antonio Terán was "known as El Veneno [the Poison] and had people's respect," but then "disappeared" from LA around 1995.

Recently returned to El Salvador, Chepe approached the scrappy gangs of boys and started preaching to them about a much bigger gang, the big family, the Mara Salvatrucha. Little by little, winning over the youngsters, his groups began to meet regularly in the San Antonio neighborhood of Atiquizaya.

El Niño remembers Chepe in the old days: "He converted us [literally 'ganged' us]. Cruising around in his double cabin ride, all armored up and rolling in cash."

Chepe Furia brought the kids together like a wise old man imparting wisdom to the youth of the tribe. He explained the meaning of words and told them stories of battles against the great enemy, Barrio 18. One night, El Niño told me, Chepe told the tale of the murder of Brenda Paz, one of the MS's most celebrated murders, carried out in the United States. Brenda Paz was a young Honduran woman, four months pregnant, who testified to the FBI and was later stabbed to death on the banks of Virginia's Shenandoah River. "Traitors smell worse than shit," Chepe Furia would tell his disciples.

For nights on end groups of ten or fifteen young men would gather in abandoned houses in the San Antonio neighborhood, forced to beat the hell out of each other. After the fights were over, Chepe would say to them, "Welcome to the Mara." He preached loyalty and courage above all else. He was sculpting his boys.

When he had about twenty-five of them under his command, Chepe Furia showed them his arsenal which at the time consisted of two .22 pistols and one 9 millimeter. Around that time, in the late '90s, the leader of Barrio 18, Moncho Garrapata, was in prison, and Chepe Furia decided to wage an offensive against the rival gang. He named the offensive "Mission Hollywood." The once-young neighborhood rebels premiered as a deadly group of assassins.

El Niño told me he'd tried to impress Chepe Furia by killing Paletín, a baker and member of Barrio 18 who had just returned from Mexico after a failed attempt to cross into the United States. He took one of the clique's .22s and, together with Chepe, he walked to the outskirts of the village of San Zapote, where Chepe left him on his own. When Paletín showed up on his bicycle El Niño tried to shoot him, but the gun jammed. By the time he finally pulled a shot off, Paletín had started running toward him to take the gun away. El Niño pulled the trigger again and the bullet tore through Paletín's chest.

"Then I grabbed his head," El Niño remembered, "and finished him off with a knife so, since the boss said he was a witch, he wouldn't come back. And then I got out of there and went to El Naranjo, where I was living then."

As a reward, Chepe Furia sent him an ounce of marijuana, which El Niño accompanied with shots of Four Aces rum. He was fifteen years old. Chepe's boys were starting to pick fights with their rivals, and with pretty much anybody they came across.

Meanwhile, Chepe Furia worked his gang politics, bringing two more cliques into his fold: the Parvis de Turín and Los Ángeles de Ahuachapán, neither of which had a single firearm at that point. (The word *Parvis* comes from Parkview, the street in MacArthur Park in Los Angeles where some of the early members of the MS lived. The Salvadoran accent turns the word Parkview into *Parvis*). By this time the entire San Antonio neighborhood belonged to Chepe Furia, including the first house at the neighborhood's entrance, which a member known as El Cuto used as a lookout to make sure the police weren't snooping around. A block from the soccer field, which Chepe had paid to re-sod, was his two-story house with a two-car driveway. It was where assassins came to party, smoke pot and drink. Some of the assassins would show up at the house still wearing their school uniforms. As the boys were molting into killers, Chepe continued to recruit them into his own private army.

As evening settled into the sky above his small hut, El Niño explained to me that a lot of his boss's operations didn't have anything to do with the war against Barrio 18; nobody but Chepe knew the reasons behind the violence.

"He'd get in epic fights with important people I didn't know, political people, people from some drug cartel. He'd get paid to do a hit on somebody, but he'd get one of us to do it for him. So you'd do the hit and he'd get the money. You got cred from the boys, but he kept the bills. We were idiots, man. He'd be going to Guatemala, to San Miguel [on the western fringe of El Salvador], working these big shakedowns, making money. He was already the Boss around here."

The congressman shuffles hurriedly into his office. Inside, his seven staff members are all near suffocating in the heat. As soon as they see their boss, the staffers pretend to be hard at work. One of them frowns at a sheet on the desk in front of him. It's a blank piece of paper. The congressman tells everybody to leave, that he wants to be alone. In less than three minutes the office is empty. He closes the metal door that leads out to the street and throws the lock. Then he opens the metal blinds so his bodyguard can hear his order: "Stand by the door until I come out," he yells.

He sits down at his desk, looks at me and says, "Alright, so what do you want to know about Chepe Furia?"

It was early 2012 in Ahuachapán, the biggest city of the state with the same name. The congressman, who spoke to me on the condition of anonymity, talked to me of Chepe Furia's power of his friendships with lawyers and prosecutors, police and criminals, customs agents and truck drivers. He spoke about his reputation as a benefactor of communities, of fixing potholes, repairing soccer fields, building fences. And yet what was most revealing that afternoon had nothing to do with anything the congressman said. It was that even in the emptied room, with the metal door locked and an armed officer standing guard outside, a national politician was convinced that in order to mention the name of Chepe Furia it was necessary to hide his own name.

"We're not talking about just any gangster," the congressman says to me. "He's a mafioso with tentacles in every part of the state. And one day I won't be in Congress anymore." He means that he won't be protected. In 2009 Chepe Furia was already the head of a powerful clique. The times of sloppy murders were over. He had led his boys into a long war with Barrio 18, fighting gun battles in the enemy territory of Chalchuapita. El Niño remembers that in the past nine years Chepe Furia left the region at least three times, for periods lasting at least a year. He'd leave when the fighting got close enough to home and wouldn't return until things calmed down. Whenever he came back he had weapons to hand out to his soldiers like souvenirs: .357 pistols, SAF submachine guns, a G3 rifle and once, a "9 millimeter Beretta that he supposedly stole from a cop," El Niño told me.

Through various arrests of members of the Atiquizaya clique, including one arrest resulting from an attack on a police car, officers decommissioned three police-issued weapons. Two of the weapons, including a machine gun, were reportedly stolen from an officer, Subinspector Delgado Juárez, who was working on the other side of the country in San Miguel. Delgado, who had already reported his 9 millimeter pistol as stolen, said that he'd left the machine gun in the trunk of his car, parked in front of his house, when it was stolen.

In those years, Chepe could count on a hierarchically organized gang. He had become the veteran founder and absolute leader of the clique of the Hollywood Locos Salvatrucha of Atiquizaya. He delegated the second-in-command position to a thirty-year-old gangster named José Guillermo Solís Escobar, known as El Extraño (the Stranger) who had just left prison after serving a two-year term for aggravated assault. Under the Stranger, serving as subchief was another thirty-year-old, Jorge Alberto González Navarrete, who had just been deported from the United States, also after being convicted for aggravated assault. González had numerous skull tattoos and was known in Maryland, where he had lived in the United States, as Baby Yorker, and in El Salvador as Liro Joker (*Liro* being the phonetic Spanish spelling of *Little*). "A real heavy son of a bitch, a killer," is how El Niño described Liro Joker to me. The treasurer of the Hollywood Locos was a skinny, pale, fine-featured thirty-eight-year-old man with a friendly face named Fredy Crespín Morán, known by fellow gangsters as El Maniático (the Maniac). El Maniático was a licensed electrician and an integral part of Chepe Furia's organization. Until he was captured in 2010 by a team led by the Chief Inspector, he was also a hired spokesman for the mayor of Atiquizaya, who belonged to the right-wing Arena Party. El Maniático would tour various communities throughout the region with a group of young assassins from the Hollywood

Locos, official city business the perfect alibi for committing crimes.

Chepe Furia had established a system of trading assassins with the Normandie clique (another reference to a Los Angeles street name: Normandie Avenue, where the gang was born, thousands of miles away from these warm Central American border towns), which hustled out of the coastal state of Sonsonate. Los Normandies were headed by a member of the MS whom the ex-minister of security referred to in a 2011 interview as a narcotrafficking gangster. His name was Moris Bercián Manchón, though he was known as Barney. He was once arrested with a stash of cocaine valued at \$160 million and yet he managed to avoid prison time. He slipped sentencing in another case as well, where he was linked to fifty different homicides, some of which involved dismembered bodies left in plastic bags on the streets.

Thanks to collaboration with Manchón, as well as other treaties, the Hollywood Locos had recruited one of the best assassins in the country: an ex-cop from Sonsonate known as Loco Trece (Crazy 13), who, back when he was still wearing blue, was named Edgardo Geovanni Morán. A loud and spirited man, he was short but intimidating. In late 2012 Loco Trece was the last gangster of the Chepe Furia generation to be captured. Earlier, he was nearly caught by two policemen in Atiquizaya, but he struggled out of their grasp, leaving them with nothing but his T-shirt.

The clique alliance caused the Inspector numerous headaches. He struggled with finding where the newly arrived assassins from Sonsonate—men who had no history in Atiquizaya but had long records on the coast—fit into his puzzle. With a growing infrastructure underneath him, Chepe Furia started turning himself into a businessman. By now his relation with the mayor's office had been formalized. He bought a dump truck that he loaned out for city trash collection. His first white Isuzu truck made him \$2,500 a month.

In the middle of 2012 when I asked Atiquizaya Mayor Ana Luisa Rodríguez de González how it was possible that she had such a high-profile gangster in her administration, she told me that she had never heard of Chepe Furia, that she only knew “Mr. José Terán, president of the San Antonio Neighborhood Association.” She also told me she'd already been through these questions when a few detectives from the Central Division of Police Investigation came to talk to her. And her responses hadn't changed. She didn't know anyone named Chepe Furia; Mr. José Terán had signed a standard garbage collection contract; he was the friendly head of a neighborhood association; he actively participated in cleaning up his neighborhood; she'd never heard of El Maniático; she knew Mr. Fredy, who came recommended by the ex-councilman Doctor Avilés; she honestly didn't know what they were into; and she really missed them when they were captured and accused of “all those horrible things.”

Months later, when I asked Mario Martínez Jacobo, the chief prosecutor of all of Ahuachapán state, if he thought it was believable that someone in Atiquizaya didn't know who Chepe Furia was, he told me: “No, I don't think it's believable.” The money Chepe was making on his trash collection was a pittance compared to what he was making from his illicit businesses.

El Niño told me about a time, in 2010, when Chepe Furia ordered him and two other members to buy a Toyota SUV. It didn't make sense to El Niño. The gang didn't usually burn such fancy cars. He explained his confusion: “‘If the owner owes so much to Chepe, why doesn't he just send me to kill him?’ was how I was thinking in my hit man's mind.” He later pieced it together: Torching the SUV had to do with an extortion Chepe was running with a businessman known as El Viejo Oso (the Old Bear) who hadn't paid Chepe his half of the \$80,000 they had made together, “but was forking it over bit by bit, seven grand and then another seven grand.” Chepe Furia wasn't pleased. El Niño was there when El Viejo Oso came to the store in San Antonio where Chepe was passing the day in various meetings and told him: “Look, Chepito, someone burned my ride.” Chepe consoled El Viejo Oso, telling him that if he paid what he owed, he himself would lend him money to buy another car. Chepe

it turned out, knew more tricks than just how to pull the trigger.

Despite the fact that working with the mayor was not his main source of income, he knew he needed to be on good terms with the city government, that the relationship would serve him well. At the beginning of 2012 a cop working under the Inspector introduced me to one of the mayor's staff members. If I was surprised about the congressman taking so many precautions in meeting with me, I found the staff member's dance to border on the ridiculous. The first time we met was on a corner five blocks from Atiquizaya's Central Park. He saw me, shook my hand, slipped me a phone number and then split. I called him afterward and he arranged to have our interview on the outskirts of Atiquizaya, on an almost empty plot of land next to an industrial motor that was running loud enough that nobody else could have heard a word we said to each other. It seemed that he had years of practice having conversations like this. He started talking to me in a deep, gravelly voice that sounded like it was coming from somewhere beyond the grave. I asked him what had happened to him and he told me that he was distorting his voice on purpose. After I assured him that nobody would hear the recording, he conceded to use his normal voice. What he told me was scattered, like teenager's gossip and I had to piece it back together afterward. "He [Chepe Furia] has a tight relationship with City Council. He has special privileges, he meets with managers and bosses in City Hall, arranges to work with transport and that kind of thing because it helps him with his other businesses." The man looked over his shoulder, then leaned in closer to my ear. "He's got them all working for him, but they only work in MS zones, and they all work with official licenses ... El Maniático is the promoter and works on recruiting new people into the gang."

Huddled with me next to that industrial motor, he ranted on for an hour. A lot of what he said clarified some of the other info I'd been getting. The man explained, for example, how Chepe Furia established a relationship, through a third-party ex-prosecutor who also ran a car dealership, with Public Administrator José Mario Mirasol. According to public records, Chepe Furia had been detained more than once while driving his double-cab pickup truck. There were even photographs of Chepe posing in front of the tinted windows of his ride, the license plates of which were registered to Álvaro Iván Retana. Retana, better known as El Diablo, was a lawyer from Chalchuapa who served as public prosecutor in the vehicle theft division. According to a police report, El Diablo was also the owner of the dealership Auto Repuestos Iván in Santa Ana, of which "Chepe Furia was a partner who would bring in trucks of suspicious origins with Guatemalan plates to dismantle and sell off in parts." Chepe seemed to have various friends in the world of stripping or junking cars. In 2010 Chepe crossed into Guatemala at Anguiatú in a car whose plates, according to the police registry, belonged to Dilmar Giovanni Ascencio, the son of the ex-congressman Antonio Ascencio, of the National Conciliatory Party, who together with his father owned an auto parts store in Santa Ana.

The informant said that Chepe Furia met with the mayor as often as he wanted, without even having to set up an appointment. Another city employee, speaking to me on similar conditions of anonymity, had told me the same. It was Chepe who paid for the entire bar tab at the mayor's 2011 New Year celebration at the El Jícaro restaurant, when he and the mayor chatted away most of the night. Once the second informant told me, Chepe came to pacify a city employee strike. "He showed up [to the strike] with this arrogant attitude, but since all his men were armed, he was able to persuade the strikers. He told them, 'Let's go back to work, so the people aren't left without services.' And, just like that, the strike was over."

According to both sources, every September 15, Election Day in El Salvador, Chepe would loan his vehicles to the mayor's office to help transport voters. An official police report was even more specific: "For the 2004 presidential elections [Chepe Furia] coordinated the transportation of persons to voting polls for the Arena Party."

Don Chepito came and went out of the mayor's office when he pleased, maintaining and building a powerful and diverse network of contacts. El Niño told me about a judge Chepe would sometimes take to. He remembers hearing him once tell the judge: "I heard that a couple crazy kids got picked up for racketeering. Do you think you could let them out for me by Monday morning, please?" When the boys were released that Monday morning, Chepe told them to stay off the streets for a while. His machinery was running smoothly, and at a low cost. His many hit men kept him out of danger. El Niño explains: "He paid us three pistols to kill some guy, when he got paid \$25,000."

The corporate-like infrastructure of the Hollywood Locos Salvatrucha was made up of a tremendous network of legal businesses, quasi-legal businesses and outright criminal businesses, and was far larger than the network of the greater Mara Salvatrucha gang. Chepe kept the monthly dues of \$7 per gang member going to the national gang, but besides that pittance, everything else went into his own pocket. The Inspector explained that it was clear that the near total control Chepe had established in San Antonio allowed him the luxury of dismantling cars and storing shipments of drugs right in his own neighborhood.

By the end of 2011, even before Chepe Furia was captured, El Niño figured his boss had it coming to him: "He's making money with the gang's name, and he's not dishing out any [to the greater national gang, the MS]. That's going to come back and haunt him."

Subdirector of Police in Atiquizaya Mauricio Ramírez Landaverde told me that by early 2012 the Hollywood Locos Salvatrucha clique was an "example of a gang that had reached the status of an organized crime group. They are organized to deal in contraband, drugs, assassinations and the trafficking of persons." He explained that to become so well organized it's key that a clique have an ambitious leader who understands how to deal with bloodthirsty youth. This guarantees that any other ambitious criminals in the area have to come to terms with them.

Chepe was making alliances in every direction, including at a national level. At the Santa Ana festivals in July 2011, police officers started following Roberto "El Burro" Herrera, who is currently detained at a maximum-security prison and has been identified as the leader of the Taxis Cartel. The chase led them to the Drive Inn restaurant, where Herrera was seated in a private room with Maniático and Chepe Furia.

What Chepe didn't know at that point was that the Inspector had finished piecing together his puzzle, that El Niño had told all his secrets, that Chepe's fight with the state was about to begin, and that there were in fact two different states he was going to have to deal with: a friendly state and an enemy state.

More than 500 policemen were deployed to the cavalry regiment of San Juan Opico, about an hour away from Atiquizaya. It was October 2010. The cops had received orders to conduct seventy different raids on houses belonging to members of Chepe Furia's Hollywood Locos clique. In caravans of buses, they arrived in Atiquizaya's Central Park, regrouped and then were sent off on their mission. Atiquizaya has a population of a little more than 30,000 people, with many of its streets still stone and dirt. The Inspector led a team of fifty agents directly toward the San Antonio neighborhood. There were seven different targets in the area, but the Inspector was only interested in one: taking down the king of spades, Chepe Furia himself.

It's well known that the network of influence Chepe Furia has spun extends from police to garbage collectors to contacts far outside of the city. One of the detectives participating in the raid was Sergeant José Wilfredo Tejada, a man who would later be accused of turning over an informant for Chepe Furia to torture and kill. What was odd about the raid was that it seemed that the police expected to find Chepe at home, asleep and completely unaware of the heavy troop movement around

him.

When the brigade first crossed into San Antonio, the gangs cut the electricity of the whole neighborhood. Perhaps as a joke, the only gang member found in the neighborhood was El Cuto, son of the tortilla man who kept an eye on the neighborhood entrance. The chief prosecutor for western El Salvador, Mario Martínez Jacobo, later traveled to San Antonio to interview some of the residents who told him that Chepe had been whisked away to safety in a car about ten minutes before the police arrived. In the following days, however, the police did round up twenty-five other gangsters, who would later be tried for eleven known murders. Another thirty members, including Chepe Furia, were charged in absentia, for racketeering.

Chepe didn't show his face in Atiquizaya for another two months. Finally, on December 24, 2011, soldiers identified and arrested Chepe in one of his stores. The kingpin had been relaxing alongside his dad, greeting visitors. As soon as the Inspector heard that Chepe was back in town he convinced a deputy judge to sign another arrest warrant so he himself could go to San Antonio and snag his prey. Circuit Judge Tomás Salinas, however, who was on vacation at the time, supposedly didn't buy the story against Chepe and refused to issue a new arrest warrant after the last failed raid. This was despite the fact that a month previously, the Special Prosecuting Office Against Organized Crime had assured Judge Salinas that there was indeed sufficient evidence against Chepe for leading an organized crime group and had recommended he issue the warrant.

The Inspector knew that Chepe Furia's own lawyer was "pulling out his hair in fear." Why, he asked himself, would a deputy judge be willing to sign the arrest order, while a circuit judge refused? Chepe Furia, meanwhile, calmly watched the scene unfolding before him.

Chepe, who refused to self-identify as a gang member, was soon transferred to the Apanteos prison in Santa Ana. Chepe seemed to realize what El Niño had said about him long before, that he "had been coming" for not paying his dues to the national leaders of the MS. The prison warden says that on Chepe's first day of being in the "civilian" prison wing, where non-gang-affiliated inmates are placed, three different inmates asked for a visit with him. All three of them asked the warden, "Don't you know who you've put in the civilian wing?" One of them referred to Chepe as "Don Chepe, the mafia mayor of the West." In the end, the warden decided to move Chepe to "the Island," an isolated cell block for problem inmates. Chepe didn't seem to make any friends there either. After a couple of nights living with two leaders of La Raza, a prison gang, and another gangster from La Mirada Local (the Crazy Look), Chepe admitted that he was a member of the MS, signing a paper that identified his rank and clique. He was then transferred to the MS wing, where he did his best to keep a low profile.

But he didn't stay in jail for long. Circuit Court Judge Salinas came back from vacation and immediately approved Chepe's lawyer's petition, granting an appeal of the case just thirty-eight days after his initial arrest. The judge would go on to determine that, "just because a policeman and a plea bargain witness" say so, it doesn't mean a man is a gang leader. The judge explained that Chepe Furia wasn't being charged with murder, but with "fulfilling the role of [gang] leader, [which requires] proof that the person was the author of various murders." He reiterated that he was "not going to penalize someone on account of what the media or a prosecutor claims." Plus, the judge continued, "this person has a contractual position with the municipal mayor's office of Atiquizaya," so it would be unlikely that he would attempt to escape. Nonetheless, he set a \$25,000 bail, which Chepe financed through two mortgages. He was asked for his passport and was told to present himself every Friday at a police office in Atiquizaya. And then he walked free. For the second time in two years the same judge ordered the door to his prison cell opened.

The following Friday Chepe didn't show at the police station. He didn't show up the next Friday either, nor a single Friday for the rest of the year. Thanks to the leniency of Circuit Court Judge

Salinas, Chepe had disappeared.

Prosecutors scrambled to ask the court to reconsider the judge's "poor decision," since it was based on the same arguments he had used once before to undermine Chepe's arrest, and which the court had ultimately ordered the judge to reverse. The court ruled, again, that the judge's decision was "incomplete and invalid ... and completely erroneous." It determined that evidence, including a letter from the mayor explaining Chepe's contract in collecting the city's trash, the birth certificate of his child, a testimony of a doctor claiming to know Chepe, four house titles, along with water and power bills made out to another person's name were not sufficient to conclude that the gangster would not skip town. The only thing the documents did prove, the court went on to explain, was that the accused had "a considerable amount of property," one of which was two stories and larger than any other house in San Antonio. Taking away his passport to try to keep him in the country was another absurd notion given that "he can [cross] with another form of ID or at nonofficial points of entry."

The court ruled that Judge Salinas had committed a "summarily grave" error. Salinas had not applied for a "suspended effect," as he and other judges typically did, which would have given prosecutors the opportunity to appeal before the accused was released on bail. It's a common procedure, taken to avoid exactly what happened: that the accused slips out of the state's grasp.

I asked the chief prosecutor of western El Salvador if he thought the judge tried his best to let Chepe Furia out.

"That's exactly what he did," he responded.

For two months I called and left messages for Judge Salinas. He never responded. But then, at the beginning of 2012, we met face to face. He was obviously frustrated when I asked him about the Chepe Furia case and his extraordinary decision to free a man who had failed to fulfill his parole requirements once before. The judge assured me that he had his reasons and insisted we talk about something else. I was never able to get him to comment on his Chepe decision.

Nonetheless, the court had by then ordered Chepe recaptured. The story started all over again.

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In March of 2011, the Inspector received a judicial order for the arrest of José Antonio Terán, better known as Chepe Furia. The first thing he thought was, "You got to be fucking kidding me."

It took a year of grueling work just to get close to the "King of Atiquizaya," and now the new arrest orders were demanding that the Inspector capture him (once again) in just seven days. And it wasn't as if Chepe was working alone; he had a network of minions that were doing all they could to protect him. The Inspector's men picked up on his scent a number of times when their informants told them that Chepe was moving back and forth across the Guatemalan border, pushing drugs. One of the informants asked for \$300 in exchange for a license plate number and a signal whenever Chepe came back to Santa Ana. The police decided not to take the offer.

On March 10, 2012, police officers noticed a man acting suspiciously in Bella Santa Ana, an upper middle-class neighborhood. When the man saw the officers, he ran inside a house. The officers followed, detaining the suspect who they were surprised to find out was none other than Chepe Furia. After searching the house they discovered a .30-30 carbine with seventeen cartridges, two 12-gauge shotguns and ammo for a .25-caliber pistol.

When he heard of the detention, the western regional police chief, Douglas Omar García Funes, better known as Carabinero (Carabineer), went to the prison just to see the catch with his own eyes.

"It's incredible how sharp he is," García Funes told me later. "When you hear him talk he almost convinces you that he's just a businessman. He is always polite, steering the conversation where he wants. He told me that we were colleagues, that he had once been a National Policeman."

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