

TEACHINGS OF DON FERNANDO

A life and death in the narcotics trade

By Charles Bowden

The man in the coffin wears a gray western suit and white cowboy shirt, and his large hands clutch a rosary. I look hard at the hands, and I can see them as they were three years ago, hoisting a rock for a wall he was building—then pausing as a jolt in his chest marked the revolt of his body. He did not tolerate revolt. He was that thing most unnerving for us: a finished man, complete and at ease with his private universe. A fine Stetson rests on the box, and just over his head gleams a color photograph of him astride his horse. Off to the side on a table, he looks up as a young man in a suit, as an older man getting married, and as an old man dancing with his wife. About four hundred people file past to pay their respects. Most are wearing freshly pressed jeans, clean shirts, and cowboy hats. The parking lot is full of pickups. A newspaper death notice sums it up neatly: "Terrazas, Fernando, 83, miner."

Vases of mums, azaleas, and red roses dot the front of the sanctuary while a mariachi band plays off to the side. I sit next to a young woman who knew Fernando. When she was in college, he would suddenly show up at her door with fresh fruit for her father. He was always courtly, she recalls. But she

found out about his real life only last night.

After the rosary and mass, in the soft light of February that washes over the desert, the men stand outside, smoking and talking. A guy in his late forties ambles over to one cluster of men wearing suits. He is a former Customs agent and spent a part of his career undercover buying dope on the border. He knew Fernando for over fifteen years. They spent time in each other's houses, drinking coffee and talking about life and horses, the usual patter of rural Arizona. He knew Fernando as a miner, a gentleman, a guy who always asked the same question: "You need anything?" But he recognizes this cluster of suits as D.E.A. and so he figures he'll say hello. One agent is up from Guadalajara, evacuated because a cartel has put out a contract on him. Another ran D.E.A. intelligence. He hears them talking of big scores, of multiton busts, of back pages. And on each of these pages looms Fernando.

He suddenly realizes that the man he'd known for years he did not know at all. But then maybe ten people of the four hundred at the funeral mass knew the truth about Fernando Terrazas's life. Hundreds of people in prisons have dreamed for years of seeing him in a coffin and tried for years to put him there. He was that man, the double, trusted but always unknown.

I can hear him making me an offer at this moment. His voice courtly, his face calm, his body singing of ease, I

will trust him completely. And he will destroy me.

I have learned a simple lesson: You can trust no one. But in the end, you must trust someone. And when you are betrayed, and you will be betrayed, the ruin will come from the person you trusted. Fernando always warned me that when a man is saying one thing he is thinking another, and that

I must also hear this other thought.

Fernando came into my life because of my hunger to know informants. He lived a few hours from my house, and so from 1999 until his death in February I'd drop in on him from time to time. I was attracted to the solo nature of the work, to the fact that informants floated free of both the law and the drug merchants. The drug industry had become my prison, in a way: I had set out to do a simple magazine story, which became a book, and the book devoured seven years of my life. For a time, I was obsessed with one figure, Amado Carrillo Fuentes, head of the Juárez cartel. I'd had to trust people, knowing that only the people I trusted could betray me. Fernando was an independent who lived in a realm of self-created freedom. Unlike most informants, he was successful and survived for decades, a black hole moving through the drug galaxy and disappearing loads and people into his vortex, all the while remaining undetected.

I have never had a candid conver-

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sation with a D.E.A. agent when a third party, even another agent, was present. Never. Distrust is a growth industry in our culture, as the tiny microphones and cameras multiply and the strange hands paw through cyberspace, reading our lives. For decades, Fernando would leave his blue-collar job in the mines at least once a month and disappear into the drug world. He hurled hundreds if not thousands into the gulag of our prisons, and his deals without question sent countless others to secret graves along the border. And yet he remained unknown, his name always missing from the newspaper stories about his deals. The drug merchants he ruined were seldom if ever sure Fernando was the traitor who blew up the transaction. He lived

the history of our future.

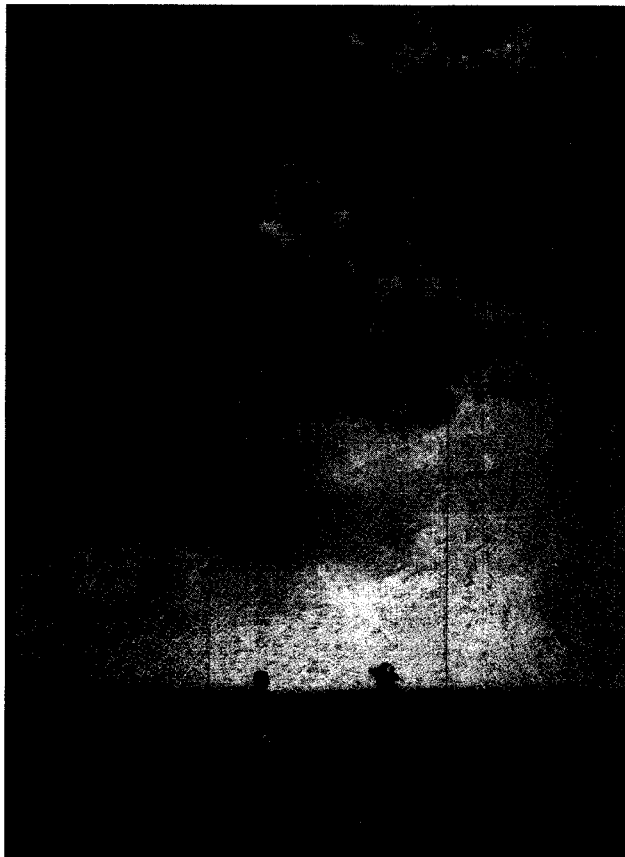
It's May of 1999. The fresh green of spring licks the sierras, and I've been on the road for over a week with Julian Cardona, a Mexican friend. We've plunged down the eastern slope of the Sierra Madre, a green roll of hills, oak, pine, and *narcotraficantes*. More than thirty times we are stopped by armed men, some in uniform, some not, and always they ask: Why are you here? Where are you going? Just north of the city of Durango, around midnight, in the rain, the army pulls us over and searches. We are at the turnoff to a town against the mountains that is functionally a gated community for drug merchants. I remember sitting in a Texas prison with a convict as he circled the place on the map and said, "Go there. You won't believe it, they've got shops like on Rodeo Drive."

A contract on Fernando's life has come from this area, and as I drive people are probing Phoenix trying to pick up the old man's scent. About an hour north of Zacatecas, the federal police pull us over at a checkpoint. They tear my truck apart. A crowd

gathers, and Julian drifts away, and I am alone.

A fat *federale* with a .45 thumps me in the chest and asks, "You mad at me?" He does this again and again as the minutes tick past. I think: They want the truck, they will plant something if I turn my back.

I know if I react, I will lose. I know if they have access to a computer, I



will lose. There is a list, I've been told, and my name is on that list. Julian is standing at the back of the crowd now, and still he is drifting away. All the while big semis pull over for the check and are automatically waved through to the border with a laugh between the cops and the drivers.

Finally, after half an hour or so, they let us go.

Ten minutes down the road, Julian says, "They will call ahead. We are in trouble."

About this time, a retired D.E.A. agent named Phil Jordan calls my home looking for me. He's a friend, but I have not told him about my trip. When he hears where I am, he

explodes to the person who's answered the phone: "Doesn't he know he can't do that anymore? Doesn't he know how fucking dangerous it is? It's not safe for him down there. That's over."

What I think as I drive the eight hundred miles of highway north to the line is this: Julian. He is my friend.

But that's how you go down. That is the velvet wrapped around the betrayal when it comes for you.

I take comfort from the fear in Julian's face. And then I stare through the windshield and wonder if the fear is feigned.

He comes out of the house for that first visit in July of 1999 and I feel the iron of his hand as we shake. He's eighty, but his big frame still intimidates. He's tall and moves like a horseman, body erect, gut tight. The face is warm, inviting, and yet closed. Meeting his eyes is like staring into a mask. Seven doctors keep track of his body, a thing busted up from a lifetime of horses, mines, and heavy equipment. His bones bear the mark of a Caterpillar tractor that rolled over onto him. We sit on the porch, his wife of fifty years serving cold drinks, his grandchildren underfoot. He has

raised two sons and three daughters, and they have given him nine grandchildren and now a great-grandchild. He built the house with his own hands.

"I'm a lying son of a bitch," Fernando says, and beams.

He leans toward me and asks, "You are not going to use my name, are you? Or tell where I live?"

"No. No one will know where you live."

As the afternoon crawls along, clouds begin to spew off the peaks and hint at rain in the valley. Fernando tries to teach me the work.

He would meet a stranger in a town where he himself was unknown.

Fernando would talk, then he would listen, and bit by bit an atmosphere of trust would fill the air. Sometimes this trust would take time. Once, a perfect stranger told Fernando to get into the driver's seat of a car, and then the man climbed into the passenger seat and thrust a gun into Fernando's ribs and said, "I'm going to find out if you're for fucking real." Fernando had no gun. He is of the belief that guns cause trouble.

He tells me, "Assholes never kill you. Anybody who shows you a gun won't kill you, because he is a coward." As he felt the cold metal of the pistol against his side, Fernando decided. He got out of the car and sat on the ground.

He told the stranger, "Shoot me and I'll keep my fucking money and you keep your fucking shit."

Fernando notes, "I got pretty damn cold blood."

"What happened?" I ask.

He looks at me with mild surprise.

"He did the deal."

The late Amado Carrillo Fuentes, head of what was then the biggest drug combine in the world, had a simple rule: to root out all the Fernandos of the world. If a load was lost, everyone connected with the load was killed to ensure that the traitor died. He also often ordered "a dose of milk," some quicklime to be tossed on the corpse to hasten its decomposition.

Fernando speaks English with the formality and cadence of a man whose first language was Spanish. He hands me a heap of clippings and I read, over and over: HEROIN DEALERS TO JAIL.

"All you gotta be," he calmly explains, "is be quiet. Don't tell. It's not the business of anyone else. My children didn't know. My wife knew, I had no secrets from my wife. To do this kind of job you have to be a liar and don't forget what you say. It's easy, it's easy: Don't tell.

"The only way you can do the big cases is: I'm the dumb one. I don't know anything about drugs. I buy, you sell, we make money. That's it. Never be smarter than the other guy, even if you're just selling a pickup. When you talk, don't tell them anything you don't know or anything

they don't need to know. Don't open your mouth if you're not supposed to.

Be nice, buy drinks, go out to eat. Never lose control."

It begins in the early days of the Great Society, in 1964, and feels as casual as having a cold beer after a hard day in the mines. In his mid-forties, Fernando thinks he'd like to own a bar. At a joint in rural Arizona he sees someone plant a bag of marijuana in the car of the man who owns the place. He and the owner are friends, so Fernando tells him what he has seen. Later, they pitch the bag into the river. Fernando goes to the state police and offers to inform on drug guys if the cops will help him get a liquor license. They turn him down, as do federal agents.

But he becomes a phone number in a file, and a year later the feds call him up. There is an old man peddling heroin near Phoenix whom they can never nail. After making a deal, the buyer must walk alone eight miles into the desert to a tree where the product is waiting. The old man stays clear of the stuff. Fernando talks and talks with the old man, draws him in until finally he is offered a partnership. The trap is set. The old man goes away for what is the rest of his life.

Fernando discovers he is a natural and that he loves the work.

A man tells me to check the back room at the restaurant. And he tells me about the parties at the mansion. This is in 1992, before the drug business seriously entered my life, a time when I still trusted without thought. The guy, who owned the restaurant and the mansion, did big real-estate deals and got big loans without a blink. He was rumored to hire whores and have coke parties in the back room. They were secretly videotaped. The same for the parties at his house. I'm deep into a book on Charles Keating, the poster boy for the savings-and-loan crisis of the eighties. The tip has nothing to do with Keating himself but does connect with people involved in his deals. Soon I find a man who had been to such a party.

In the midst of this research, I get a call. A woman I visited six hundred miles away has been hounded by guys pounding at her door late at night, de-

manding to know about me. So have her neighbors.

I start moving, buy a gun, use pay phones, travel to unknown addresses.

But first I warn the guy who told me of the parties. Then I tell a lawyer looking into the financial case. The lawyer blows me off. A few weeks later the F.B.I. intercepts a contract coming out of Miami aimed at the lawyer's children.

I never found out who was doing it, though I'm certain Keating himself was not involved. Nor could I figure out where I had slipped up, or if I had simply been betrayed. You always have to trust someone.

I became very close to the man who first told me about the coke parties and whores. Then we drifted apart. I was busy, things to do. One Father's Day, about two years later, he sat alone and put a round through his skull. The bone and flesh must have taken a toll on the bullet because when it hit the window, its force was spent, and it fell to the floor like a pebble.

I thought, I should have called. I thought I had betrayed something I could not quite name. I put that suicide behind me but still I would think about it, a memory floating like lace, so delicate in still air, a memory with a savage rent in it where I had clumsily torn it with my hand. He had trusted me, told me things I'm sure he never told his wife. I had won his trust slowly but surely. I had made my sale. But I'd been busy. He was part of a story I had finished, and now I'd moved on to new stuff. I'm a writer. I listen, I win trust, I pour coffee and cook dinners. I lean close until I disappear inside their hearts and fears and dreams. And then I tell. It was a small thing, a sliver really of the world in which Fernando lived and thrived. To this day I picture that bullet spilling off the glass and falling to the floor. I remember the man telling me the lessons of his youth, how in the summer of his fifteenth year he broke horses in Kentucky and created the bankroll that got him out into the greater world. I know that I lack what it takes to close the deal, to really do people. But I wear a feeling of betrayal.

"If you really want to buy something," Fernando advises, "you need

good jewelry." He goes to the back room and returns with a small cloth bag. He shows me his \$1,800 gold bracelet, the gold watch swaddled in what look like diamonds, \$400 cowboy boots, the finely stitched cowboy shirts, gold rings with rubies, a \$350 Stetson. His wife forbids him to wear these things where they live. She thinks they make him look like a criminal.

I handle the heavy bracelet while he watches to make sure I understand the importance of its weight. A small pile of rings grows as he empties his sack. One by one he holds them up to the light with his big hand. He fingers the fabrics of his drug wardrobe and outlines the cut and quality. The closet in his home is lined with boots of the very finest leather. A man without pride cannot do the deal.

And then he plunges again into the life. He tells me about entering a cantina in San Luis, Sonora, across the border. At the time, this little town of dust was a major crossing point for drugs. The stranger is beside him and Fernando says, "I need something good."

The man delivers a sampler of kilos

so they can be tested for quality. In the beginning Fernando did kilo deals, but soon he sought greater weight and deals had to be in tons. The samples prove to be low-grade.

Fernando returns to the cantina and snaps at the man, "You give me shit. You embarrass me before my people."

Apologies fill the air. The real shipment is high-grade. The stranger wants to win over this new soul in his life named Fernando. The man goes down.

In almost three decades Fernando never fails, not once.

In the mid-sixties, Fernando teams up with Phil Jordan, a Mexican American out of El Paso, who became a federal agent in 1965. Jordan is in his early twenties and fresh off a university basketball career. He treats Fernando as an equal. This is rare in the work, since most Cooperating Individuals, C.I.s (typically, flipped felons nabbed doing drug deals), are disdained as snitches. Fernando is an independent operator, and when anyone treats him like a doper or a lesser being he bridles. He has more street smarts than most of the agents, and so, in his reserved way,

he holds them in contempt as clumsy instruments he must use for his special work. Jordan is a product of the barrio and knows how to treat a man with proper respect. Fernando becomes his mentor, and their work makes Jordan's career. They make three to four hundred cases over the years. Their families socialize. The woman at Fernando's funeral who has just learned what Fernando really did, she is Phil Jordan's daughter and has known Fernando since childhood.

In the early seventies, Fernando returns to San Luis. He crosses the border and within four hours makes a deal in a cantina. His probing has brought him inside a cell that will become the school for almost all the major cartel leaders of the eighties and nineties. Pedro Aviles Perez heads the organization, and his young underlings include Rafael Caro Quintero, who will later torture and slaughter D.E.A. agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena; Amado Carrillo Fuentes, who will become the biggest drug merchant on earth; Amado's uncle Don Neto Carrillo and Felix Gallardo, both of whom will help to create the Guadalajara cartel; and



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many other drug dealers who in a few years will be handling hundreds of millions and then billions of dollars' worth of dope.

Some of Aviles's lieutenants are lured to the United States in 1973 and taken down right next door, as it happens, to a fund-raiser for Senator Barry Goldwater. A joint raid with Mexicans in Sonora bags ten tons of marijuana. One of the raiders, a young Mexican *federale*, rises in the ranks through the years. He becomes the *federale* that the U.S. agents lean on, the one who is different. Years later he kills a cartel leader and becomes a kind of hero in the F.B.I. And years after that the U.S. agencies discover he did the killing only because Amado Carrillo paid him \$1 million for the hit. Carrillo had been very close to the dead man and used to freebase with him. When the dead man was cut down he was wearing a fine gold watch given to him by Carrillo. You have to trust, in the end.

Fernando leans toward me as he recounts this episode and says, "The only reason you are here is because of Phil."

He asks again if I am going to use his name, reveal his location. And then he smiles, because he already knows.

I am in his home because another man gave his word. And that is all that is necessary. If I am a traitor, the other man is responsible.

Fernando tells me with pride of his marksmanship with a .45.

"I trust Phil like a brother," he continues.

I remember the feel of the cartel's breath on my neck. I'd been looking into a murder in Juárez in August of 1995. It was officially listed as a drowning, but I had asked questions. I was naive. I remember drinking in a bar with a Mexican and asking about Amado Carrillo. The man winced, instantly crouched down, and searched the room for faces and ears. Later, I learned Carrillo drank in that bar.

On the U.S. side I'd been dealing with the D.E.A. at EPIC (El Paso Intelligence Center), and that is where I met Phil Jordan, who headed it. He gave me leads. Then one day, one of the Juárez dailies came out with a story about an American writer looking into a drowning and claiming it was

murder. The story gave the city where I lived. I knew the paper was controlled by the cartel.

I called up the D.E.A. and asked why they had burned me. They denied it. Jordan's aide said, "We would never do that."

I slowly calmed down. It is so much easier to trust. It is a beckoning drug.

I kept looking, coming and going unannounced, changing where I stayed. In the fall of 1996, I found out that someone very close to Phil Jordan and his family, someone he trusted, had parted with the cartel leaders in Juárez. And knew Carrillo.

So I disappeared with a .9mm, boxes of notes, and some black coffee. Later, I learned Phil Jordan had been calling, trying to find me. Eventually, we became friends.

He told me he would never do that, put me in play.

But I'd had a taste. You think betrayal is something covered by those cheatin' songs in the country bars. You think it is the co-worker who burns you with the boss, or even that business partner who tries to sell you out. I've had all of those and more. But they are something else, they call for some weaker word. They lack the surprise of the knife going into your guts. The floor falls away, you are spinning, and you are absolutely alone. And no one can hear you, no one can help you. And the only trace of trust you have is acid on your tongue. Phil Jordan had that person close to him who was dirty. There was that story in the Mexican newspaper that came out of nowhere and bothered to mention where I lived.

But still I came in from the cold after a few weeks. You have to trust someone. That is the rub. You have to make your deals. It is a fact of life.

"When I see a drunkard," Fernando says, "I turn away." Those who use drugs are also to be despised. Fernando lives off control. His childhood in southern Chihuahua meant almost no schooling—he made it to maybe the second grade—and endless hours of ranch work. Toiling alone at age fourteen, he planted and brought in, with the help of horses, an eighty-ton crop of pinto beans.

At fifteen, someone shot at him. He walked home to the ranch, got a rifle, walked back, and shot his assailant in the neck.

He leans forward and asks, "Could you kill someone?"

I answer, "I don't know."

He waits a minute and says, "I can."

He falls silent for a moment and adds, "I did pretty good. I'm alive."

"What protected you?" I ask.

He smiles and points toward the sky.

There is a tiny window into Fernando's soul. It's the early eighties, and Fernando is in Dallas. The D.E.A. puts him and a bodyguard up in a business hotel while they wait for the pieces to fall into place.

The bodyguard is a young cop, on the edge of his undercover career. He picks Fernando up at the airport and he's stunned at first because he thinks this old man shouldn't be doing this work. After an hour or so in the hotel room, Fernando asks the guy to get him a bottle of Jack Daniel's. He tells him he does not smoke but to get him some cigarettes also.

They sit up that night drinking the whiskey straight, the butts growing in the ashtray. And Fernando shifts into that voice he uses with me, that voice that teaches the facts of a different level of life.

Fernando explains, "I don't need to do this for the money. I don't need the money."

The cop listens. Fernando tells him that at the heart of the deal, what the other person senses is strength. That is the key, that they smell the strength in you. They want you because they want your strength. They have money and they have power, but it is not enough. That is their weakness. Nothing is enough, because they do not really know what they want. They do not really know who they are. And so they must keep doing deals, expanding, reaching out, Fernando continues, for this thing they cannot name.

But you, if you have strength, you know who you are and what you need, and so you pull them into you, and then you are in control.

Years later, the cop, now seasoned, now a man living undercover, still remembers one thing Fernando pound-

ed into his head that night as they drank the whiskey and the man who did not drink and did not smoke lit cigarette after cigarette.

Fernando put it this way: "No matter what you do, never forget, you are always alone. No one can save you or help you. Alone."

In the late sixties one of Fernando's sons comes out into the yard and sees his father's pink Cadillac gleaming in the sunlight. The boy is about eight, and he goes around to the driver's side and finds seven bullet holes in the door. He looks at his father, who smiles, but the boy says nothing. Finally, years later when he is in college, he figures out what his father has been up to all those years. He comes to him and asks, "Did you get caught with a load? Did they turn you? Is that why you are doing this?"

Fernando looks at his boy and says, "No, son, it is not like that."

He tells his son that drugs are a cancer and they are killing their people and that his son must stay "on the right side of the law."

Nothing more is explained. The work stays in a sealed world. Because there are fresh holes waiting in the desert, gray masking tape across the mouth, bullets through the head, a splash of quicklime. And so Fernando's life goes on, unexplained even to his sons and daughters.

Once, in 1971, he followed up on an invitation to visit a drug laboratory in Chihuahua. A ton of heroin was in the offing, but the D.E.A. would not put up the money for the visit. So he and Jordan went in with no backup, no communications system, no permission from the agency, and, of course, no money. Fernando pulled the car off into the desert of Chihuahua, opened the trunk, and brought out an arsenal. He gave Jordan a .357 magnum and kept a .44 magnum for himself. He said to Jordan, "We must now practice. They will fear such guns." And Jordan complied, because he realized that he was in Fernando's house, in the culture and throb of Chihuahua.

"Phil was nervous," Fernando remembers with a smile. They were pack-

ing guns in violation of Mexican law and U.S. agency regulations. And Jordan had another good reason to be nervous, since in Mexico a D.E.A. agent is despised by every man, woman, and child as a foreign police agent operating on their soil.

They kept in touch with the agency by using Mexican pay phones. At the drug lab there were *pistoleros*, huge black dogs, and, of course, lots of dope. At such places in the sierra a man dies and no one cares or even hears the cries. The deal collapsed because it eventually meant tons of heroin, and the D.E.A. balked at fronting the necessary money.

Fernando received good chunks of money for his work, with one payment over a hundred thousand dollars, but he waited until he turned sixty-five to leave his brutal job at the mines. He did not understand life without work. He came from a world of toil and never let the D.E.A. money or the gold chains of the drug merchants he ruined touch his own rock-hard core.

Once he went to Los Angeles and took down ten tons of hashish. The agency gagged on the percentage he deserved for such a haul. Finally, they cut a check for a piddling amount, a few hundred dollars. Jordan came to Fernando's house and gave him the check. Fernando looked at it and said, "Give it back to them and tell them to shove it up their ass."

But he did not quit. He said, "I would work for Phil for nothing." And sometimes he did just that. He wasn't doing it for the money, or at least not only for the money. Nor do I think he did it because of a deep hatred of drugs. I think he did it because he could, and the rest of us cannot.

I've known Fernando for about a year, and we are sitting on the porch. A storm is growing off the mountains, and black clouds start to float over the hills around his home. His old frame comes alive as he tells me how to cut the deal. Never, he tells me, taste the product. Tell them it is a business and you don't want to mess up your mind. You have to drink, but don't drink much, just some beer and water.

I ask about the contract killers

looking for him. Just a few months earlier, they had been stirring in a nearby city, sniffing the wind for him. One had called his son asking for him.

He offers this thought: "When they come, there will be only two of us. And one will be dead."

I ask him to explain. But there is no more detail: When the man comes, either he will die or Fernando will die.

He enters the El Camino Real, the old hotel in El Paso near the bridge into Juárez. It is 1989 and Fernando, seventy, has come to test himself against a legend. The Herreras operate a drug business that stretches from the Mexican state of Durango to Chicago. The organization is the family—around 3,000 blood members and several thousand more associates. They hail from a village in the Sierra Madre called Las Herreras, their own company town surrounded by their own fields lush with their own dope. Starting right after World War II, the founder, Don Jaime Herrera Nevares, set up heroin labs. No one can penetrate deeply into their organization except by marriage. And no one can cross them without facing 3,000 blood-related enemies scattered from Mexico to the American heartland. The Herreras often carry badges of various Mexican police agencies, a commonplace in the drug world. They spend money on parks, streetlights, and other Robin Hood touches to buy the complicity of the poor.

At the El Paso hotel, a father and son, one sixty-three, the other thirty-four, await Fernando. This is a coup in itself, this wooing of the Herreras to cross the line and discuss business in the United States. The D.E.A. has gotten the deal this far but can go no further without Fernando. The Herreras and Fernando go to the coffee shop, and they talk for three hours. His talks with the Herreras go on for two to three weeks, as he slowly reels in his prey. Years later, when he recounts this last deal—the big one—he relishes each little moment of their conversations.

The older Herrera is very bright and asks many questions of Fernando.

"What do you do?"

"Oh, I buy things and then sell things."

"Where do you live?"

"Oh, that hardly matters. I am here to buy something good, not to talk about my house."

The older Herrera keeps trying to get Fernando off balance. "Pancho," the older Herrera will say, or "Arturo," or "Paco," or "Chuy." He keeps talking and then tossing out these different names to see if Fernando will react, to see if he can catch him off guard.

Fernando is at ease. This is the part he loves, the reeling in of the stranger. He talks of horses, thoroughbred horses, of how he loves to race his horses in Baltimore. The old man listens: the Herreras with their millions are into thoroughbred stock.

And then suddenly another name pops out. Fernando does not flinch and continues to ignore the probe. He is feeling better and better, but the older Herrera is the smartest stranger he has ever met.

They get into real matters, money. Fernando says he is looking at, say, a \$2 million deal as a way of launching their relationship and testing its future. He represents some very large people, and they do not wish to do little things.

"Ah, that is no problem," the older Herrera replies. "We can get any amount of goods and deliver it. Where do you live? We will fly it to you, our planes will go right under the American radar, it is no problem."

"No, no," Fernando says, "my people prefer to handle their own shipments."

"No, Señor," the older man replies, "let us. It is easy. We have tons warehoused right here, just across the river in Juárez."

"That is very kind," Fernando says, "but we handle our own deliveries. You just get it to El Paso."

"But the money," he says, "we want you to bring the money to Juárez."

"No, Señor," Fernando says, smiling, "I am not going into Juárez with my money. That would not be the act of a wise man."

This goes on for hours, this probing, this testing.

And they agree to talk some more later.

Fernando has become the closer, the man they bring in on deals that are there, right there, but just out of reach, cases that the D.E.A. has been building but cannot finish because there the agency leaves its own scent in the air. So Fernando flies to San Francisco, Dallas, Los Angeles, wherever. He is never Mr. Big, he is the man who represents Mr. Big. And he has lots of money. He will be there for an hour, a day, a week, and then the deal goes down. He never fails, not once. And when the deal goes down, he wants out. He insists, always, on being taken immediately to the airport and returned to his family.

The Herreras try to find him. They call a dummy number he has given them, a line controlled by the D.E.A. When he comes to the second meeting at the El Camino Real hotel, they sit in the bar, a place legend says was once visited by Pancho Villa. The bar has a Tiffany-style dome above its circular black marble top. Splashes of green and blue play across the faces as the sun streams through the stained glass overhead. The room is full of soft chairs and sofas. They sit there for hours.

"Where were you?" the older Herrera asks. "We called and you were not there."

"Oh, I had some business in Las Vegas."

"How did it go?"

"Very well, Señor."

Fernando can feel him relaxing, feel it getting closer. Fernando tells jokes, many jokes, and the older Herrera never laughs, but Fernando can sense he is rising to the bait.

The older Herrera says, "Look, why don't you come to Mexico with me, we will go to Durango, to my village, Las Herreras. We have just built a public park there for the people, everyone there works for us. It will be easy. We will send a plane for you."

"No, Señor, I cannot do that. This is business, and I do not mix pleasure with business. Surely you understand."

Hours of this, hours. And then the older Herrera says, "We will do a deal. For over two million. No problem."

And they go into the fine restau-

rant of the hotel and eat thick steaks.

"He was ready to go. It was already made," Fernando says.

There are always surprises. That is part of the art of the deal. Sure, control—control is necessary, and being alert and careful and at ease. But no matter how much planning and thought go into the work, there will be surprises. Once, in the eighties, Fernando is at a family funeral in an isolated hamlet deep in Chihuahua when a man walks in. Years before, Fernando did a deal, and the man went down hard and spent years in prison.

He sees Fernando and comes over. Fernando turns to the man and says, "You fool, remember that deal? I told you not to come to the meeting, I could sense something, no? But you came and look what happened to you, you fool." The man is cowed, he is on the defensive. Control. That is what it takes if you are to come out of these deals alive.

The final meeting is in the hotel coffee shop. Here is the arrangement: The older Herrera sits with Fernando, and they talk. Across the street is a parking lot where the car with the kilos of heroin is to be delivered right before their eyes. Then one of Fernando's men will take the car away and test the load for quality. At the same moment, the younger Herrera will be in a nearby bar where he will be paid for the load. Fernando and the older Herrera will not get near the load.

So they sit and drink coffee and wait.

They look out the window and see a man approach the car and then drive it away. *Perfecto*. Fernando, full of coffee, tells the older Herrera that he must use the bathroom. As he leaves, the agents move in and take the man down. When Fernando comes back from the bathroom, the waiter comes over and says, "What is going on? The police came and took your friend away."

Fernando shakes his head and says, "I don't know, I hardly know the guy."

And then the police come and hand-

cuff Fernando to give him cover. They take him to the D.E.A. office, and then he goes to the airport and home.

The Herreras get twelve to twenty years, and this time Fernando testifies. He likes the experience of testifying. Normally, a deal is structured so that no one can be certain who was the traitor. The matter is further clouded by bringing in several agents toward the end to give cover to the Fernandos of the world. But when you testify, then they know.

As he recounts the trial to me, he pauses and says with a smile, "I wanted him to know I did him."

In this case, Fernando's last big case, there is a special satisfaction. The Herreras have been stung, and this is something that never happens, and it feels good. The heroin, it turns out, is Colombian, from the Medellín cartel, and that gives even more satisfaction. But there is an extra bonus: the man brokering the heroin for the Colombians is a baron, the infamous Frog One, who escapes at the end of the film *The French Connection*. This time he does not escape.

In the thieves' market of Tepito, men come up to me and ask if I want heroin. I can feel eyes pawing my back as I walk through this fabled warren of Mexico City. I have come here tracking Amado Carrillo, the head of the Juárez cartel, for a project of mine. It is the spring of 1997. I have not let Phil Jordan know of my journey.

I stay in a hotel owned by the Juárez cartel. I look at a cartel bank when I drink at the rooftop bar. I visit with Mexican reporters who spread word that I am C.I.A. or D.E.A. I go to the restaurant where a hit was attempted on Amado Carrillo, and when I leave, after drinking and making notes, men from the restaurant follow me. I have been living this way for months, and I feel a clock ticking, and I do not believe time is on my side.

When I finally get home, I learn from a friend that he dined at the American embassy in Mexico City while I was down there looking for traces of Amado Carrillo. He sat next to the D.E.A. head of station, and when he mentioned where he

lived in the States the man asked if he knew me. He said, "Tell him there is a contract on him." I will never know if this was true or if the information was ever shared with Phil Jordan. Or if he knew and for his own reasons did not tell me. But it's not what you can or cannot know; it's that you cannot ever completely trust anyone. I will know only one thing for certain, what Fernando taught that bodyguard, and me: You are always alone.

What I knew as I looked for these details was that my story on Amado Carrillo was in type, that I was only phoning in little changes, and that no matter what happened to me nothing could stop this story. I knew I had won. I had done him, I would make him famous, and in the drug industry fame leads to death. He had kept his name out of the Mexican media, he had managed to be almost entirely ignored by the U.S. media. In Juárez, a city he virtually ran, his name never appeared in print. Even the *corridos*, the folk songs of Mexican popular music that commonly celebrate major drug figures, never mentioned his name. And I think I felt exactly what Fernando felt again and again as the stranger finally said yes and gave Fernando that trust that made the stranger's doom possible.

About ninety days after my story on Carrillo ran in GQ, and after I appeared on the *Today* show, publicizing his power, he was dead.

Fernando tells me, you have to hug. Always hug. Embrace the stranger, pull him to you, say, Amigo, and hug him. That way you can feel if he is armed.

I like Fernando. I respect him. But I cannot be him. Not because I am better than he or even believe I am as moral as he. But because I lack something he possesses. In *The Shootist*, John Wayne's last film, a boy asks him why he is a famous gunfighter when he has just demonstrated in target practice that he is only an average shot. "Because I was willing," Wayne says, "and most men are not."

I ask Fernando if he was ever frightened.

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He smiles and looks at me and is silent.

I ask him if he worries about the men who still hunt him.

He remains silent. And serene. My questions are beneath contempt. They hail from a world he left long ago, shortly after birth, somewhere in that hard childhood.

As he eats his chili and beans, the Herreras are still hunting him; he knows this, the D.E.A. has picked up their probes. No matter. He himself has fielded phone calls from hunters. Once he picked up the phone and a voice asked, "Does Fernando Terrazas live there?" and he calmly answered, "No, no one of that name lives here. I'm sorry but you have the wrong number." He keeps a .45 loaded and he practices with it. There will be two men, he knows, him and the other man. One man will die.

I ask his wife if she worried about him when he would go off to do deals.

"Yes," she says. "I wondered if he would come back alive."

So I ask him once again, Why did you risk your life? And he gives the same answers: He hates drugs, he liked the money, he liked the work. But this time he keeps talking, talking about a long time ago. He came up as a teenager from Mexico, he rode the rails, worked the fields—damn hard work for little money.

Once his two sons came to him and said they did not want to go to college. He thought about it. Then he took them to California for the summer, put them in a tent, and had them work in the fields. They said the work was too hard. He said, "You better get used to it. Because if you do not go to college, you will work like this the rest of your life." They went to college. Years later, one of his sons had a chance at a bigger and better job. He told his father he did not know if he would take it. His father said, "You can go up there. If you don't like it, you can always come back down. But you have the chance to go up there." So his son went up there.

Fernando went up there, up with the big guys and their gold chains and millions, up there with the agents and their college degrees and badges. He did not come back down.

Theoretically, of course, Fernando has his Achilles' heel: he trusted me. While he was alive, he had to trust that I would hide his home and change his name. What intrigues me is that he had to trust someone. I know the feeling, the unease later when I sit there and wonder if I am being set up. I know what it is like to drive from a meeting and watch the rearview mirror because, well, because I have trusted and could be betrayed and in some instances betrayal would mean no one would ever know what happened to me. Still, knowing all this, I trust. It is a need. This need made Fernando's career. And this need has now placed his safety in my hands.

We are all, I believe, prisoners of this desire.

Phil Jordan has flown in from Dallas for Fernando's rosary and funeral. He has come for the burial of the other half of his own identity. He sees the same flock of four hundred mourners I see and knows they do not know. He has felt the blows of Fernando's world. He has a murdered brother, the subject of the book that had dragged me for seven years into the drug world. The case has never been solved. He once talked to Fernando about it, and the old man listened and said, There, there is the traitor. And he pointed to a person close to the core of Jordan's own blood. But the murder is filed away in Jordan's head at the moment and kept safe for a while from his thoughts.

He has come here to close the books on a friend and to keep things wrapped up and tidy. Fernando Terrazas was the partner that made his career, the friend who taught him rules in a world free of rules. He was the liar who was always the honorable man. I would have trusted Fernando with my life without a second's thought.

I look out at the full church, scan the faces of his children and their children. I talk to a son who is now a federal agent, the same son who as a boy found the bullet holes in Fernando's car, and I ask him if he ever saw his father have too much to drink. He thinks and says, yes, once or twice he saw him kind of light up from alcohol. I remember years ago meeting this son in a border bar. He sat with

his back to the corner of the room, a black bag with his gun on the table between us. I did not mention his father and he never mentioned such a father existed. This silence is part of that world. Never trust. And yet you wind up trusting, just as the son did when he met me in the bar with his pistol and his back to the wall. The son asks me not to mention where his father lived. When I ask why, he says, "It never stops."

Phil Jordan comes over to the son and asks if he can pin a D.E.A. badge on his father's lapel. The son nods agreement. I watch Jordan delicately pin on the badge, then stand back and look almost with love into Fernando's cold face.

I want to say more. I want to say that Fernando Terrazas was a very fine man. And he was. I want to say, Never forget you are alone, always alone, that there is no backup. And you are. But I want to live somewhere else, someplace safe from the cold truths of Fernando.

Now the old man has been properly filed. Now he has been made safe for all of us. And we can feel comfortable in our worlds and our words. We can forget what we have learned. ■

Answers to the May Quiz, "Business As Usual"

1 John Locke; 2 The Court ruled that corporations share the rights of "natural persons" under the Fourteenth Amendment; 3 AT&T; 4 Ida Tarbell's series for McClure's magazine on the Standard Oil Company led to the breakup of John D. Rockefeller's monopoly in 1911. In 2000, she was posthumously inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame; 5 An independent oil refiner, complaining about Standard Oil; 6 Cornelius "Commodore" Vanderbilt; 7 His son, the Prince of Wales; 8 Women who played the stock market; 9 Modern-day Mississippi; 10 Arabic numerals; 11 The flag of the East India Tea Company, founded 359 years before Hawaii became a state; 12 Hyundai; 13 The company conspired with the C.I.A. to orchestrate a successful coup; 14 Benito Mussolini.

In question number 3 of the April Quiz, the relationship between Ferdinand von Richthofen and his descendant, Manfred von Richthofen, was incorrect. Manfred was the nephew of Ferdinand, not his grandson.