



FALKO ERNST

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF A MEXICAN HITMAN

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF A MEXICAN HITMAN

Researching how Mexico can uproot the scourge of organised crime, our Senior Analyst Falko Ernst befriends a doomed hitman on the run from his past. Talking to the sicario in the Michoacán underworld, he learns much about the deadly challenges the new government faces.

► A member of the Fuerza Rural guards a checkpoint. Beyond it lies deep cartel territory, which was never taken over by the *autodefensas*, and from where the Knights Templar have since expanded again. The Fuerza Rural was conjured up by the federal government to suggest the return of state rule, but was still manned by armed vigilantes.

Cover: Grillo by a cross commemorating one of his victims. He took me there during one of our conversations. It lasted much longer than intended, stretching well into the the early hours of the next morning. By the cross, he reenacted how he had killed on that very spot.





▲ Grillo rolls himself a joint in front of a house in his barrio. The apparent message of hope from the children's handprints in paint contrasts starkly with the reality of Grillo's hope denied. Just a stone's throw away, he slept among the rocks, his last hideout.

It's 7pm on a Sunday, and night is falling in this Michoacán town. The heat of the day is past, and there's a pleasant breeze. The first visitors to the park have left for dinner, but many hang around.

Around the park's outer edges, teenagers stroll in two circular currents.

The boys walk with their friends, in teams of two, three or four. The girls do the same, but in the opposite direction. So the circles intersect, inescapably, again and again. Boys and girls trade shy, longing glances. The lucky few get to hold hands or share a bench, words of affection and maybe a kiss. It's a teenage ritual, here and in countless municipal parks across Mexico.

Not for Grillo, though. Not for The Cricket. He's eligible to participate, for he's hardly older than a teen, but he isn't here to flirt.

Grillo is here to kill.

Why? He can't express a reason beyond that he's been given a name and a face. Maybe he doesn't need to explain any further than that. Maybe he just needs to be able to take orders from the *cerro*, the hills overlooking Tierra Caliente, the Hot Land, as this Michoacán region is known. Up on the *cerro*, the crime lords decide life and death for the people below.

Philosophy aside, Grillo kills because he's paid for it, *micha antes, micha después*, half before, half after. It's a performance bonus to complement the base salary of a *sicario*, or hitman, which is close to nothing.

The story I want to tell is Grillo's story, just as he told it to me. We met four times. We smoked together. We walked to where he'd killed. We sat late into the night.

The Cricket – his real narco nickname – taught me a great deal about what Mexico needs to confront if it is to overcome a murder rate that rivals the casualty figures in many of the world's wars. He showed me what this miasma of conflict really feels like: the blurring of lines between state and organised crime, the

“You will have whatever you desire, if you go for it without doubting, if you put your mind to it, if you visualise it.”



A 2015 campaign event for a candidate from the Movement for National Regeneration, MORENA, the brainchild of the victor of Mexico's 2018 presidential campaign, Andrés Manuel López Obrador. López Obrador has promised the end of the drug wars, and to provide youngsters like Grillo with legal opportunities before it is too late.





◀ A member of the Knights Templar cartel, Delfino lets me tag along as he goes on duty. He walks up to a sniper nest from where he scopes out enemy positions. He was part of the Airborne Special Forces Group (GAFE), the Mexican army's cream of the crop, for a decade. Then he joined La Familia Michoacana, the Templars' predecessors.

dissolution of order, both the state's and the cartels', and the mutation of narco-traffickers into warlords. Child soldiers like him are recruited into a system whose roots are sunk deep in Mexico's inequalities. Then they are often trained to become ruthless killers, going from victims to victimisers. Grillo taught me about why, amid the cycles of revenge, it's so hard to get out. He died trying. It is young men like him who will test the moral limits of Mexican society, which is just beginning to debate whether every *sicario* deserves to die or some can be forgiven. Such cases will determine, in the end, whether big ideas like "truth commissions" and "amnesties" flourish or perish.

"You will have whatever you desire, if you go for it without doubting, if you put your mind to it, if you visualise it". Grillo recites his version



of the Law of Attraction, the power of positive thinking hammered into him in crude indoctrination camps up on the *cerro*, an almost mystical place symbolising the *capos'* power. With New Age self-help mantras, La Familia Michoacana, the Michoacán Family, once the undisputed criminal powerhouse in Tierra Caliente, sought to fashion an army with a veneer of spirituality.

The mantras are also a way of making crime bosses appear to be saviours. To many in Michoacán, anyone's promise of order is preferable to the chaos and corruption the government delivers.

◀ Delfino heads back down from the hill toward a village controlled by the Templars. He would have stayed longer, but worried I might get a heatstroke. It was 40 degrees Celsius out, and up on the hill there was no hiding from the sun.

A NAME AND A FACE

On the Saturday before he goes to the park, Grillo is given a name and handed a photo showing a face, as usual. Then he spends the night in a safe house, a non-descript shanty on the outskirts of town, one in a warren of grey brick dwellings, unpainted and unfinished. Here, in the domain of the economically crushed, he's right at home.

Inside, there's just a bare, stained mattress with no sheets. The next day, he putters around until early evening, staring at the no-paint, no-plaster walls, wasting time on Facebook, uploading a post honouring his santita, his little saint, a death dispenser's spiritual partner of choice. *La Santa Muerte*. The Holy Death.

Then he's walking to the park, with a .38 tucked in the back of his pants. He's going to use it on the guy in the photo. He doesn't know who the marked man is, and he doesn't care. The guy will have done something to cross the *capos*. Probably, it's an unpaid debt or a refusal to submit to an extortionate demand that was first masked as a polite request.

► A Templar arranges semi-automatic rifles in a warehouse serving the local cell of ten as a base hidden from any government helicopters. When I entered the building, I was surprised to find a couple of the youngsters on cleaning duty. Here at least, there was iron discipline.





Even at this point in his career, when he's killed many times, Grillo still believes in the Family's values. He believes that when he's called up to the *cerro* and comes back down with a name, those who write down the names have good reasons. He believes that there's logic and necessity and justice behind every death – and that those who die have it coming.

At least he tells himself that. It beats ending up on the *capos'* list himself.

Grillo's got the face's photo, but he needs confirmation. So he says the face's name, when he's just a few arm's lengths away. The man turns around, and that seals his fate. Grillo delivers the death sentence with two shots to the face – always two shots. He's got to be sure.

The face goes down, and Grillo leans over it. It's part of what he does, his custom. He reenacts it for me later in the dimly lit, dusty track on the way up to his *barrio*, his neighbourhood in his birthplace of Apatzingán – a town known

◀ One of the cartel foot soldiers shows off his AK47 Kalashnikov, known as *cuerno de chivo*, or goats' horn, after its curved magazine. The majority of weapons used to kill in Mexico come from the U.S., but the Templars had Kalashnikovs made in former Yugoslavia.

as La A in local narco-parlance – where we sit by the iron cross erected for another of his victims, struck down in exactly the same way.

There's no life coming back to this one.

Grillo walks away, a little faster than before, but not running. He's using the panic that has now enveloped the park to shroud his disappearance. He learned to keep his cool a long time ago.

▶ A Templar waits by the pick-up truck the crew rides on, ready to move out when news about enemy movements come over the two-way radio. The bigger barrel is that of a grenade launcher, here a U.S. military issue. They call them *lanzapapas*, or potato-throwers.



TACOS DE TRIPA

► A man walks by a painting of the Virgen de Guadalupe in a backstreet of Apatzingán. She is the Mexican people's most cherished saint. The Familia leveraged Mexicans' profound religiousness to build a whole cult and ideology around it. The mastermind behind it all, Nazario Moreno, even declared himself a saint.

He's gotten used to it, he says. He's accustomed to all of it except for the smell of blood, which he's never quite managed to ignore. He still feels sick when it's his turn to cut off some tied-up dude's ear. That needs doing, too; it's part of the job. But he's never liked the screams or the penetrating iron stench as the blood rushes out. That's not his style. He likes to kill quick, the honorable way, with two shots to the head. No carving up flesh, no drawing it out, none of that.

Every profession has its pitfalls.

But he's become like a rock. They've trained him to be one, or so he tells me as we sit in a back room of an office building as shabby as the safe house. It's the only neutral ground I could find at the time. There are just two bright-red plastic chairs to punctuate the neon-lit emptiness, the cheap white fan complicit in the 11pm heat. The words bounce off the bare walls.

I can see that he likes the unexpected attention, though he's still a bit bewildered at my outsider's interest in his life story. I try to dodge the triggers, possibly dangerous, that must booby-trap his memory. I don't know what state he's in. The people who introduced us describe him as an exceptional psychopath, whose killings have strangled all compassion within





him. Gradually, my nervousness gives way to a feeling of banal familiarity. The way our worlds now overlap bewilders me, too.

The oversized nightwatchman slams the iron front door, again and again. It's his way of making clear that he wishes the *sicario* wasn't here.

I don't blame him. Grillo has a reputation in this part of town. And even if he didn't, most folks wouldn't want his type around. The crystal meth has gotten the better of him, his eyes beginning to retreat into his skull, his naturally dark skin fading to an ashen grey, paper-thin, precariously suspended over protruding cheekbones, threatening to rupture at any moment. His malnourished body, at barely 24 years old, is arched into a hunchback. He's come to resemble *su Santita*, the tattoo that consumes his entire back. This tribute to

La Santa Muerte is an amateurishly scribbled rendering of this Mexican version of the grim reaper, in an assemblage of frayed, thick black lines.

We get along, even so. I buy him a Coke. He brings the stories.

His killing in the park accomplished, Grillo says, he crosses a nearby avenue, busy at this time of day. He follows the traffic for a bit, but he is still in sight of the murder scene when he pulls up a plastic stool at a taco stand. A single bulb dangling from a bare wire attached to the metal frame, its light reflecting off the plastic tarp,

“We get along, even so. I buy him a Coke. He brings the stories.”

bathes the space in a shady reddishness. The *taquero*, the taco maker, wears an expression as serious as a spinal surgeon's as he pulls at the mass of intestines bubbling away in a deep metal bowl of fat. He chops them up with an instrument more machete than kitchen knife.

Grillo orders *cinco de tripa*, five tripe tacos. He orders them with *todo*, so the vendor throws the cilantro-onion mixture on top. Grillo finishes the assembly off with spoonfuls of red-hot chili sauce, then squirts of lime. 150m or so away, the night air fills with the sirens of patrol cars and ambulances, their lights oscillating, red and blue.

Grillo stuffs his face, pays up and, as good manners dictate, wishes *provecho*, or bon appetit, to the other patrons. They are observing the ruckus down the road, unaware that it's because of him.

He walks over to a nearby 7-11 for dessert, a strawberry-flavoured yoghurt drink.

It's the end of his shift.

◀ A Templar has handmade tortillas for breakfast. Locals cater for the narco platoon stationed in their village, complementing their income when they can't make ends meet with small-time agriculture. There's only one table set up for guests, giving me opportunities to start conversations.

CLEANING UP SOCIETY, ONE MURDER AT A TIME

► Street signs riddled with bullets provide testimony of back-to-back battles over a nearby bridge. Controlling a bridge over a river is a crown jewel in any local armed group's territory.



Grillo works the kill list one by one. As the latest iteration of Mexico's drug war worsens, the bosses up on the *cerro* keep updating the list. It's just the bad guys, they say, necessary sacrifices to the gods of order and social peace. But then again, it's also those who haven't paid up. Examples have to be made. And then they add more names, more and more, for this or that transgression or perceived instance of disrespect. It can be as little as a word out of context, or out of order, that reaches the wrong ears.

Or if you don't make your way up the hill when they send for you. *Cuando te mandan llamar, vas o vas*. When you're called on to come, you can either go, or you can go. It's common knowledge.

Way back when, a younger Grillo got in trouble before he'd escaped across the line to El Norte, the U.S. But the *gringos* didn't appreciate someone running with gangs and sent him back.

He picks up the story again: he's still a fresh-faced nineteen-year-old when the Family snatches him up. They know of his earlier days of knife-wielding robberies, and give him a choice: run with us or become the next item on our list.

**“El Dragón told the boss:
‘most of them aren’t any
good. It’s clear that the
only *chingón* is Grillo”.
The only real badass.”**

The Cricket starts out with the Family when business is booming.

The Family is riding high on its values, and everybody has to know about it. The bodies are billboards for the Family’s claim to absolute power.

It works. The message spreads. People are scared witless, locally, nationally and abroad. Academics tell their students they’ll would get killed if they so much as set foot in Tierra Caliente. The international media are fascinated: a narco-sect going at it like Charles Manson. It’s how the Family establishes a brand name, unlike anything Mexican narco-surrealism has churned out before or since.

But in Apatzingán, in Michoacán, there are sighs of relief, too. Finally, ordinary folks can leave their doors open again. The Family isn’t stupid. Neither is Grillo. He joins them, and he makes a living killing in the name of Family values.

He believes in them, too, maybe for lack of an actual family of his own. Somewhere in the city, there’s a grandmother barely able to stand the sight of him. She knows well enough the depths he’s sunk to.

There’s an aunt somewhere, too, but she’s killed in front of her place. Two shots, point blank – his style, pretty much. She hasn’t paid up, either. In the faceless cases, death provokes



▲ A local peasant has hung a goat from a tree branch. Amid haunting screams, he slit its throat and let it bleed out before skinning and gutting it. It will help feed two dozen guests at a community celebration. Local narco-royalty are also invited. ▲ A shepherd boy runs after his flock of goats. He and his dogs lead them through dry bushland to patches of green grass 10km away. Round his head is his slingshot, which he uses with great skill to hunt small birds and iguanas. ▲ Boys splash water on the ground to pack down the dust in preparation for a birthday party later in the day.



Street scene in a village held by the Templar cartel. Late at night, locals told ghost stories. Soldiers who were hanged in the trees a hundred years ago, they said, sometimes reappear.

from Grillo nothing more than a shrug. But this time, he rushes to the scene to find the body still lying there.

And so, the Family becomes family, for a while at least, a substitute for belonging. It's enough belonging for him to get the numerical code signifying La Familia Michoacán tattooed on his right forearm.

They see something in him, Grillo says proudly. He isn't just a regular assassin, but one who will rise through the ranks to become middle management, with luck even a *patrón*. They get to him with the promise of power, glory and the good life.

The reality is otherwise, he continues. He and the other *muchachos* sleep among the rocks. It rains until their bones are wet, the scorpions come out and they all come down with Chinkungunya or Zika or whatever's current, virologically, in Tierra Caliente. And they get paid, as rookies, 350 bucks a month. They can't even spend it on booze and female company, since the commanders don't respect weekends, when they could show off what little they've made.

In fact, it's a minor miracle that these *muchachos*, these wafer-thin boys who look like silhouettes in their skinny jeans, can make war with heavy made-in-Yugoslavia Kalashnikovs rather than, say, simply collapse and call it a day.

But Grillo hasn't realised any of that yet. He excels.

“El Dragón told the boss: ‘most of them aren't any good. It's clear that the only *chingón* is Grillo”. The only real badass.

The Dragon isn't just anybody. He's a former elite soldier, brought up from Guatemala, where he and his brothers-in-arms, the bastard kids of U.S. counter-insurgency operations, slaughtered indigenous villagers and anyone else thought to be susceptible to communism.

Then came peace accords, demobilisation and unemployment. The Dragon has skills not being put to use. It's a shameful inefficiency.



- ◀ A Templar shows off a .50 caliber round, as wide as his entire hand. Used in a U.S.-made Barrett sniper rifle, they will reliably hit targets from almost 2km away. Each Templar crew I saw had one, and in the past they have been used to shoot down helicopters.
- ◀ Delfino, the former elite soldier turned Familia sniper, tells me about religious faith. He was happy to speak to me as he considered his role in the conflict as part of God's plan.
- ▶ Saturday evening entertainment outside Apatzingán. Local youngsters have invited me along to target practice, and light beer. They said they had done a couple of favours for a “cartel”, but managed to find their way out of it. They were lucky not to get in nearly as deep as Grillo.



The market doesn't let them go to waste. The Family sends envoys south, bringing back whomever they can find, free agents, hunters, jungle trackers, mountain stalkers, village burners or throat slashers.

The Family brings them to do their thing in Michoacán – but mostly to teach Grillo and the others to be a bit like them.

The Dragon becomes Grillo's father in this new Family of his. "He had faith in me". He teaches The Cricket *a caminar*, how to walk, and the right way to use those *juguetes*, those special toys. "He pulled me in. He taught me strategic movements, close combat. I became professional with weapons. They trained me as a sniper, in handling grenades, explosives".

He makes it to be a full-bore *pistolero*, a gunman, at just nineteen. "I loved it, getting to know it all, how we were advancing. And the way we had so much influence in the *barrios*". He moves up in the organisation to lead cells of fifteen fighters in confrontations with rival criminals and state forces. An elite *sicario* in the making, he gets to guard high-level Family *capos* and to work on the kill list for extra pay.

Death is in demand. Life is golden, until it isn't.

"They see something in him, Grillo says proudly. He isn't just a regular assassin, but one who will rise through the ranks to become middle management, with luck even a *patrón*."

THE MONKEY AND THE SAINT

Affairs in the Family go sour, with a nasty divorce splitting it in half. The smaller half remains loyal to El Chango, The Monkey. He is one of the *apás*, the Dads, the Family's original brand label. Then the chubby-cheeked co-founder is betrayed.

Or so his *madrina*, his godmother, tells me when I track her down. She's struggling to keep tears from flowing, and doesn't touch the Nescafé in front of her. Her voice, almost inaudible even at normal times, is drowned out by the pickup trucks driving by underneath the balcony where we sit. She doesn't blame the other *apá* – The Craziest One, the self-declared Saint Nazario – as much as she does the man who sometimes goes by the name of El Profe, The Teacher. (Later, I meet him, too. He is also known as La Tuta, which has no meaning. He just says: "Call me what you like".) It was, after all, The Teacher who chose the side of The Saint, tilting the power balance and chasing The Monkey off his throne.

President Felipe Calderón's first round of operations to clean out the *michoacanos* fails, spectacularly. Now it's 2010, and he's making a last desperate attempt. U.S.-supplied Black Hawks hover over organised crime's heartland south of the river, its last line of defence. The Family's forces take major losses. While the

state scorches Tierra Caliente, and while The Saint is up against the wall, The Monkey makes a grab for the empire.

To many, it's treason, plain and simple, of the kind that would rip any family to shreds.

The Monkey's *madrina*, of course, says it's all a pretext, a disguised power play by The Saint. It's plain and simple geopolitics: a battle for control of resources, human, natural and otherwise, by any means necessary. That may be the bird's eye view.

Down in the dirt, it's sons against sons, *línea* against *línea*, lineage of loyalty against splintered lineage. Grillo joins the The Saint, Nazario, who has rebranded his *línea* the Knights Templar – no relation to the Crusaders, of course. He does this before he can even consider getting rid of the La Familia tattoo on his forearm, which had only been there for a few months.

► A soldier strikes a pose on a Humvee guarding a checkpoint close to Apatzingán. The military had stopped our vehicle, but didn't mind me taking photos while soldiers searched it. The checkpoints do little to interrupt organised crime operations, as a mosaic of backroads provides plenty of ways around them.





► A Templar shows off his *cuerno de chivo*, his AK47. Masks like his are also part of a cartel foot soldier's basic gear. They are meant to provide anonymity, and to look frightening, evoking death.

A week before, The Saint's *muchachos* are *echando copas*, tossing back a few, and maybe getting in a fight with one of The Monkey's guys who was cheating at poker. But nothing more. They'd still come out as brothers.

Now they're trying to blow the other guys' brains out, staging a night raid on a mountain safe house. Their former brothers don't see it coming, and they're asleep when the attack starts. The Cricket and his crew kill fourteen of The Monkey's men. Grillo doesn't know them. They're faceless still as he watches a pyre of wood, fuelled by gasoline, consume their bodies.

He and his fellow gunmen camp out that night, close to the site of the carnage. They eat hand-made tortillas, with scrambled eggs and green chili, and joke it all away. "With that much death around you, you don't feel anything anymore. If I did, it would make me weak".



Then he sees twenty of his new Templar brothers get killed in a four-hour mountain battle for territory. Their bodies, too, are burned and dumped in a river, not by their brothers-become-enemies, but by their own commander. “They didn’t even get a funeral. We weren’t worth anything. We were fighting without recognition, for a cause that nobody understood”.

And The Cricket keeps telling me what he was thinking: “Hey. All that shit about the good life, about a family, about us mattering, fighting for a cause? Where’s that now? Before we were fighting for something. Afterward, it was only because The Monkey, The Saint or The Teacher wanted to fuck each other up. But we were the ones providing the dead”.

The up-and-coming *sicario* is about to come crashing down.

“Their bodies, too, are burned and dumped in a river, not by their brothers-become-enemies, but by their own commander.”

A ROCKY REFUGE



Grillo makes a run for it, back to La A. His death is now demanded. It can't be any other way. The automatic penalty for desertion is capital punishment. He knows that. He's even sworn a blood oath on it.

But he rules out running farther away. "This is my land. My grandparents and uncles are buried here. This is where I will die".

Rocks become Grillo's refuge. He sleeps among them, way up on the highest point of his *barrio*, a neighbourhood looking down on the lights in the valley below. He thinks it will keep him safe, that the view will give him time to react, that the neighbours in the street below will give him a heads-up if a stranger appears. The runaway *sicario* counts on solidarity. "They are my people".

But nobody's coming yet.

◀ A street in Apatzingán. The city today is part and parcel of the micro-geopolitical game-playing in Tierra Caliente, or Hot Land, that surrounds it. Different armed groups hold different barrios and streets, and fighting takes place on the fault lines between the patchwork of territories.

The death sentence has been suspended. Below, the *capos'* angry divorce has mutated into a full-throttle civil war. And while Grillo might be in a tough corner, the Templars are getting their heads smashed in. Those, that is, who aren't joining the *autodefensas*, vigilante groups claiming to fight the good fight to end cartel tyranny, pulling on the white shirts that signal innocence, reform and a flimsy promise of state protection. Bloody intra-family butchery being what it is, for the time being nobody has the time to worry about treasonous small fry like him.

Strange alliances are forged in the strife. *Autodefensas*, former Templars now wearing the new white *autodefensas* shirts, olive-shirted *guachos*, the soldiers, and blue-shirted *federales*, the police, are all combing Tierra Caliente for Templars still on active duty. Bullets are flying everywhere.

All the gunfights fill the valley air with dust so thick that it almost conceals Grillo and his treason. Almost.

For Grillo, there's no escaping the vortex. The *guachos* pick him up. A local newspaper garnishes its piece on the arrest with a full-colour photograph of his misery, handcuffed, huddled on a sidewalk, his face turned from the camera, given up by "his people".

He's just another Templar off the streets, another Templar up for grabs. The *guachos* have no use for him. But someone else sure does: the Viagras.

The Viagras' branding captures the essence of their business model. *Puro adelante*, always on the move, they go from being Zeta *matones*, or enforcers, to Family *matones* to Templar *matones*. It's quite the career, and it hints at an aspiration to one day become *la mera verga*, the biggest stick around.

Conditions are ideal. The government has already failed twice to defeat the *michoacanos* with frontal assaults, spilling rivers of police blood. With the world's eye focused on the hot hinterlands once again, they need something else. The new strategy: "If you can't beat them, break them up into inobtrusive pieces". That, they hope, might make that public relations problem go away.



◀ In a district of Apatzingán, Grillo participates in a protest against the detention of *autodefensas*, militias claiming to fight cartel tyranny. This was when supporting the *autodefensas* got him some protection. The sign he holds reads: “They are innocent, not criminals”. He and his commander smirked when I asked if this was true.

In this narco-world turned upside down, it turns out that everybody, including the federal government, needs the *puros adelante*. The Viagras are just the guys to get it done: they’ve got the guns, the vehicles, the intelligence and the operational support. And so the *federales* get Templars to kill Templars, to weaken each other, without bearing much of the cost. And the government has less media trouble, because it’s good against evil, and for once the *federales* are (sort of) on the right side.

Playing his small part, Grillo finds himself tied up in the back of a military transporter, being taken to what he assumes will be a base, a jail or some other state facility. But when the doors open up and his eyes adjust to the bright light, he’s staring at a not-too-official-looking patio filled with a handful of not-too-official-looking men with guns. They lead him into a back room.

▶ A peasant leads me toward the place where the bodies of a family of thirteen were exhumed. Everybody knew they had been taken from their home one night in a revenge raid. But nobody spoke up until after *autodefensas* had “liberated” the area. Greener plants springing up from the turned soil still marked the outlines of the burial site.

The room has grey, featureless walls, with no paint and no plaster. Only this time, he's on the receiving end.

He gets tied to a chair and left alone for a bit in the twilight. He knows what's coming.

The beating starts, two men circling him, spitting words and saliva. Then they bring out the cigarettes and the cable. It lasts for hours.

None of it's even necessary at this point. Grillo's ready to give it all up, the loyalty beaten out of him for good. It's been gone ever since they slew El Dragón, another consequence of the paranoia that reigns over narco life and death, but to him, an unforgivable sin. Ever since they dumped those bodies into the river. Ever since he realised the cause was nothing but a self-serving hoax.

So he agrees.

From there on out, it's easy going, by his standards. A snake of pick-up trucks winds its way through the *cerro* in the hunt for The Teacher, the last *apá* still standing. Grillo is shot at a couple of times. But he has sufficient leisure to pose for photos – he still keeps them on his cellphone – with old buddies carrying new guns and wearing new shirts in navy blue, the colour of the *Fuerza Rural*, the Rural Force, conjured by someone to suggest the return of state rule.



A USEFUL PSYCHOPATH

I meet Grillo in the twilight of his career. Because of what he's done, his life is hanging by a thread. I spot and worry an AK-47 bullet out of the wall, a mark of yearned-for revenge.

Everybody knows. But he does, too.

The scars across his back say so, medium-rare lines, two dozen of them visible still. The electric cable cut through his skin, into his flesh. Right into *La Santa Muerte*. They were pounding on him for hours and burning holes into him with cigarettes.

Su Santita can still protect him. But only so much, and only for a while longer.

He resumes his tale once more: when the Fuerza Royal is done with him, they throw him back into the water. He gets picked up again by the *autodefensas* of La A, in part of the state's experiment in getting a grip on the general disorder.

"Anywhere else in the world, psychopaths are a problem. But here, they're an asset", an adviser to the group tells me. Grillo is valuable to them – a psychopath perhaps, but a useful one. They keep him on a tight leash, unarmed and under control. He gives them the basic map of the

► I catch a ride with a local. To make it out of the village and back to Apatzingán, we have to wade through a river, cross orchards, and take a series of dirt roads. The "contras", which is how enemy groups are referred to, control the only asphalted road. They have been trying to smoke the Templars out, cutting off supply lines and threatening travellers.



Templar universe, and gets to live in exchange. That's the deal, and the only protection he's got.

For the time being, La A's *autodefensa* council lends precarious cohesion to the plethora of actors carving out roles for themselves in the post-Templar Tierra Caliente. But internal feuds are tearing away at consensus. The debate is centered on permissible ways of financing, driven by an acute economic crisis, a shortage of funds for fuel and wages.

"All of them are still narcos at heart", says the adviser. Grillo concurs. But within that spectrum a culture war is going down: *trabajar contra robar*, working vs. stealing. There is no reason, the *puros adelantes* argue, to vacate a field already being filled, inevitably, by other actors, such as agents of the federal state attorney's office.

There comes a day, in the council, when guns replace words. Placed on the table, the guns announce the return of what came before, of *más de lo mismo*, more of the same. It's the end of dialogue, the end of the structure.

There's a new reshuffling of the armed landscape, everything up for grabs again. Low-intensity narco-warfare has been interrupted for the blink of an eye only to roar back with a vengeance. It brings a new kill list, a fresh cycle of death, still spinning as I write – and the end of Grillo's protection.

He retreats to the rocks above La A.

He invites me to tag along, leading the way, past the iron cross, up to his last refuge. We chat for a while longer. Then smoke rises from the light bulb he uses as a makeshift meth pipe, his back turned toward me, the spectator.

His mind fades into nothingness, but I linger, making my can of beer last. I puncture the silence with questions, hoping to elicit conversation, a few extra details at least. But it feels strange now, with me clear-headed and him gone. Intervals drag on eternally. I say I need to go, and I get a strange look. Taxis – as I should've known – avoid the area, especially at 3am. One reason is Grillo's buddies, whom we bump into as I push us down to where the

pavement begins. They used to do what he used to do, Grillo tells me, but they have gone freelance now. Their motorcycles are the new emblem of insecurity in La A. It is the *motosicarios* who take me out.

Grillo stays behind. "This is my land. My grandparents and uncles are buried here. This is where I will die".

He does die, six months later, struck down on a street corner, all light brown dust but for the dark red blood pooling under his head. It's one shot, a clean kill. He would have approved. There's no carving up, no drawing it out. He's killed the honorable way.

I read the news in a Mexican paper at my desk, incomprehensibly far away, gazing at English rain. The tabloid dedicates a photo to The Cricket – a photo and eight lines of text. But there's whisky at a convenience store. I take that walk.

"There's no carving up, no drawing it out. He's killed the honorable way."



A gravedigger on Apatzingán's cemetery. The past years' killings have seen the cemetery eating into nearby land as more space is needed. Some bodies are never claimed, either because there is no family, or money. These get buried in anonymous mass graves on the cemetery's fringes. Grillo lies in one of them.



Preventing War. Shaping Peace.



This article was originally published by the International Crisis Group on 17 October 2018 as part of the series “Our Journeys”. These first-person narratives give behind the scenes access to Crisis Group analysts around the world working to prevent, mitigate or resolve deadly conflict. For more information, please visit www.crisisgroup.org.

