Chapter 1

Deadly Playground

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It wasn't always this way. Just a few years ago, El Paso and Juárez were like one big city, the border more a formality than anything else to most people. "You'd go to Juárez for a good time; we'd go pretty much every weekend," said Tim McNeill, an El Paso resident who hasn't been across the border in five years. "It was fun; you could drink and have a good time, buy things that weren't allowed over here ... it was where you went to blow off steam." El Paso was the nice, but straight-laced neighborhood, and Juárez was the poorer, more religious, maybe a little more dangerous cousin where residents from either side of the border could let their hair down and enjoy themselves.

But times changed. Economic challenges have deeply impoverished the Mexican side, especially compared to their neighbors just a few yards to the north. Mexicans have long been poorer than Texans, but failures in the economy at the end of the 20th century made the distinction even sharper. That economic hardship has sent literally millions of Mexicans north, looking for better lives. Because the United States is a very difficult country for foreigners to live and work in legally, most of the Mexicans who have moved

there are undocumented—what are referred to for the purposes of this book as illegal immigrants. Unprotected by many of the laws U.S. citizens and legal immigrants take for granted, illegal immigrants lead a shadow life, aware at any moment they can be deported back to Mexico. Many of these people feel betrayed by the Mexican government and ignored by the American government.

Other factors have changed the landscape. Drugs, both legal and illegal, have long been a reason for Americans to cross over into Juárez. You can buy many popular prescription drugs (Viagra is a favorite) over the counter without a prescription in most of Mexico, which has long been drawing Americans and American dollars over the border. And although the laws on recreational drugs like marijuana had largely been the same in Texas and Mexico until recently, they have long been much more tolerated in Juárez, where the police rarely ever got in anyone's way. Not surprisingly, Juárez and other border cities have become funnels for drugs being shipped into the U.S.

It is a situation both countries basically tolerated, if not officially approved. The drug trade—which was illegal, but largely peaceful—flourished in Juárez and other border cities for decades. Then Richard Nixon declared a War on Drugs in 1972, working to intercept drugs coming into the country. Using sophisticated detection methods and applying harsh penalties, the Americans drove the drug trade farther underground. The increase in danger led to an increase in rewards as drug users paid higher prices for smaller quantities. The new rewards attracted organized crime, and the tougher border led them to employ illegal immigrants. A new equilibrium was established as drug traffickers got rich and the drug trade became a much bigger part of the economy. *Narcocorridas*—danceable songs celebrating the exploits of drug traffickers—became popular. Kids started emulating the drug runners and their gangster bosses.

Then it changed again. When the Mexican government cracked down on the drug cartels—the crime organizations that had evolved from street gangs acting as mules, ferrying product between drug lords in Colombia and retailers in the U.S. and

Canada—in 2006, they fought back. In the few years since, thousands of people have been killed, much of Mexico is considered too dangerous for North Americans to enter and the nation itself is said by experts (including the U.S. State Department) of being in danger of absolute collapse.

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In the old days, there were signs everywhere hawking products to North Americans the moment you entered Juárez. And as soon as you crossed the border, a *taxista* would offer you a ride or a hawker would appear hoping to sell something—oranges, prescription drugs, or maybe just a free ticket to the kind of strip show you'd never see north of the Rio Grande. That's all gone now. The signs are almost all graffiti now, some hailing Che Guevara and other champions of anti-imperialism, others exhorting the locals in Spanish to go to church and read their bibles. Nobody approaches the visitors from the north anymore. Instead, the first thing you see is the military, soldiers wearing masks so the cartels can't identify them and threaten their families. They're everywhere in Juárez, doing their best to keep the peace.

Two blocks south of the bridge over the Rio Grande—at the corner of Juárez and Azucenas—you can see vestiges of what Juárez used to be like. On one corner is a massive, windowless bar called Tequila Derby, across from it the Centro Juarez Liquor Center and on the other side is the Juarez Race & Sports Book, a gambling franchise. Next to it is Drug Discount Pharmacy—with the slogan "The Best Price in Town"—offering all kinds of medicines over the counter. Many of the other shops, like discount opticians and dentists, are also clearly aimed at Americans. All the signs are in English, with prices given in dollars as well as pesos. Many of the shops are now shuttered and there's little traffic, either walking or driving. There are a few juice and shaved-ice vendors, but everywhere you look there are collections of men, mostly young, just hanging around, apparently with nothing better to do. On almost every pole, there is a sign taped up, appealing for information about a missing woman.

On the next block there is a collection of bars catering to American customers. From the outside, the Kentucky Club doesn't look like much. It's just a one-level storefront between a fancy restaurant and a pharmacy selling Viagra and Cialis by the pill. The building is painted light green and it has a dark green awning to shade the front windows from the desert sun. On the awning there is orange and yellow art deco script reading "World Famous Kentucky Club Since 1920." Above that is an old red, white and blue sign sponsored by Tecate, a popular beer brewed in another Mexican border city.

Its exterior plainness belies its rich history. The bar claims that it is the birthplace of the margarita, although that's been widely disputed. In its heyday during the 1950s and '60s, it was incredibly popular with famous Americans: Ronald Reagan is said to have enjoyed drinking there, as did John Wayne. Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor were semi-regulars there, and both Jim Morrison and Bob Dylan dropped by the Kentucky Club when they were searching for some lyrical inspiration. Most famously, Marilyn Monroe bought a round of drinks for the whole bar to celebrate her divorce from Arthur Miller.

Inside, it's lavish in a retro-fancy way. The ceiling is white with black beams and hanging metal chandeliers, the bar is wooden and majestic and all of the staff are required to wear white shirts, ties and vests.

But for all its style and romance, the mood inside the Kentucky Club is somber these days. The phone has been disconnected (most downtown businesses have gotten rid of their phones because the only calls they get anymore are extortion threats), and business has decreased as both Americans and Mexicans alike are afraid to walk the streets of Juárez after dark. It's hard to blame them, the murder rate of the city of just over 1 million is higher than that of Baghdad and Kandahar combined.

But unlike so many other establishments in the area, the Kentucky Club has been free of violence. "In a way, I feel calm because we pay the *cuota* [protection] not to have problems," said a doorman who goes by the name Raul. "Many businesses have

been burned and shot up. But here, they protect us and the customer—because we pay."

And, although it is forced to close early now, and is usually surrounded by masked soldiers with assault rifles, the staff of the Kentucky Club wants Americans to know that it's still open for business. "We want to remind our customers that just like Juárez doesn't give up, neither will we," said waiter Arturo Sanchez Ontiveros. "We will stand with our city as long as we can."

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It's bold talk, my Mexican friends and contacts tell me, but few think the Kentucky Club or Juárez itself can hold up to the beating they are taking for that much longer. They are a collection of journalists, former journalists and others who have been directly related to the violence in Mexico. One of them has been kidnapped, most of them have been shot at, all of them have been threatened. It's a hard place and a hard time to be a journalist.

In many parts of Mexico, drug-related killings are not reported upon because journalists have been killed for what the cartels have called "collaborating" with authorities. Juárez has been the hardest hit. It has become so dangerous, in fact, that the front page of the September 19, 2010 edition of *El Diario*, the city's largest circulation daily newspaper, was devoted entirely to an open letter to the cartels. In it, the editors of *El Diario* asked the drug cartels what they were allowed to write. "We do not want more deaths," it said. "We do not want more injuries or even more intimidation. It is impossible to exercise our role in these conditions. Tell us, then, what do you expect of us as a medium?" After the murders of two of their reporters in one week, the editors had no choice but to admit who was boss. "You are, at present, the de facto authorities in this city," the letter read, "because the legal institutions have not been able to keep our colleagues from dying."

I ask the Mexicans where to start. How can I tell North Americans what's going on in Mexico and in Juárez in particular in a way they can understand. "You could start with Miss Sinaloa,"

one said, referring to the brilliant article, "Mexico's Red Days," written by Arizona-based reporter Charles Bowden for *GQ*. In it, he described in vivid detail how a Mexican beauty pageant winner arrived in Juárez and suffered almost unbelievable torture at the hands of the cartels simply because they could get away with it. Others want me to tell other individual stories, about how this cartel killed these people, about the drug kingpin who delighted in melting the bodies of his enemies or another whose signature was hanging beheaded bodies from traffic overpasses. They want me to speak of car bombs, crooked cops, 14-year-old assassins or gold-plated AK-47s. Everyone, it seems, has their own way to understand the Mexican Drug War.

But there was one voice that really reached me. Nuria J is a Juárez poet, librarian and women's rights activist. She is tireless in her own war against the Drug War. She told me that to understand Mexico, to understand Juárez, to understand why the violence and terror have become as rampant as they have, it is imperative to know about the missing women of Juárez. It would tell people how Mexico works: its people, its authorities and its criminals.

Las muertas de Juárez

Susana Chávez was a remarkable young woman. She started writing poetry in earnest at the age of eleven, and decided to make it her life's work. Even while still very young, she read her work before crowds and was included in prestigious exhibitions. Later, she earned a degree in psychology at the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez.

As a young adult, she turned the focus of her work to the growing number of women who had been murdered in and around Juárez. It was a strange and chilling phenomenon, even in what has since become one of the most violent cities in the world. Beginning in 1993, the bodies of women began showing up on the streets, alleys, vacant lots and garbage dumps of Juárez. Most of the victims were between the ages of 12 and 22, and many of them showed obvious signs of torture and rape. Some of them were intentionally left in degrading poses.

The majority of them were workers in *maquiladoras*, factories usually owned or associated with large corporations (invariably reported in the media as American, but they are just as likely to be Spanish, Korean or Japanese) that take advantage of Mexico's low minimum wage and relaxed enforcement of labor and environmental regulations. The factories generally employ far more women than men (sometimes exclusively so) because of a widespread belief that they are more reliable and trustworthy, and less likely to cause any trouble. Many of the victims were migrants from other parts of Mexico and Central America, attracted to the border region by the abundance of job opportunities.

Although about 400 bodies had been recovered, some estimates have claimed as many as 5,000 young women from the area have gone missing since 1993. The number of missing women is often under-reported because until recently Mexican police did not begin searches for missing persons until they had been gone for at least 72 hours, and their searches are often cursory at best. As one Mexican police commander told reporters: "It's not a crime to disappear." Sometimes families are afraid to report their daughter missing. Sometimes they just don't know.

Locals referred to the missing women as *las feminicidios* (the femicides) and *las muertas de Juárez* (the dead women of Juárez). Outraged by the horrific atmosphere of fear and violence against women in her hometown, Chávez became an activist, using her poetry and other methods to raise awareness and push the authorities to do a better job of investigating the murders. She became famous in the area—a leading member of the advocacy group Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa (Bring Our Daughters Home)—and her phrase *Ni una más* (Not one more) became a rallying cry for the entire movement.

And then she became one of the victims. On Wednesday, January 5, 2011, Mexicans were celebrating *Día de los Santos Reyes*, a traditional, non-statutory holiday marking the arrival of the Three Wise Men of the Gospels. Early in the evening, 36-year-old Chávez left the house she shared with her parents to go visit friends

at a nearby restaurant. She never arrived. "I waited for her all night long, but she never came back," her mother told local media. "On Thursday, we began to search for her. Then we learned she was dead. [The police] showed us some pictures, and that was the way we could identify her."

Police had been called that morning because a Juárez family had found a streak of blood, indicating someone had been dragged into an alley, on a sidewalk near their home. Police then found a severed left hand and, a few feet away, Chávez's body with a black plastic garbage bag tied over her head.

Their subsequent investigation determined that Chávez had met three 17-year-old boys in a bar and decided to drink with them. After some time, the boys convinced her to go to one of their homes. Police said that Chávez went with them, but when she refused their sexual advances, they tied her up, covered her mouth with duct tape and drowned her in a bathtub. They severed her hand with a hacksaw, police said, in an effort to make the murder look like it was the work of organized crime, which, of course, was still running wild in Juárez despite thousands of police officers and soldiers occupying the city.

The Chihuahua state police claimed that her murder was an unfortunate isolated incident, and not the result of the Drug War or Chávez's activism. "Unfortunately, these people were drunk, they were taking drugs, and after hanging out for a while, they decided to kill her," Chihuahua State Attorney General Carlos Manuel Salas told *Milenio*, a national daily newspaper. The boys were, according to police, members of a local street gang called Los Aztecas, but did not have previous criminal records.

Few in Juárez believed the boys were guilty of the crime. Since the murders began in earnest in 1993, many people have been charged with the killings and put behind bars, but the bodies keep showing up.

The first victim identified as one of the missing women of Juárez was 13-year-old Anna Chavira Farel. Her beaten, raped, sodomized and strangled body was found January 23, 1993 in a vacant lot in the city's Campeste Virreyes neighborhood. The next,

16-year-old Angela Luna Villalobos, was found two days later in a similar condition not far away. As more bodies were found and far more young *maquiladora* workers went missing, citizens pressured the authorities to do something about what they were calling "El Depredador" (the Predator). In October 1995, after at least 46 bodies of girls and young women had been found in Juárez, Chihuahua state police arrested a suspect.

He certainly seemed the part. Abdel Latif Sharif was born in Egypt in 1947. A gifted chemical engineer, he emigrated to New York City in 1970. He was fired from his job there for embezzlement and moved to New Hope, Pennsylvania, in 1978. One of his friends and co-workers, John Pascoe, later told police that he took Sharif on a deer-hunting trip and was surprised to see him torture a wounded buck, laughing while breaking the limbs of the helpless animal until Pascoe put it out of its misery. He also noted that Sharif was often in the company of young women, some of who had disappeared after their contact with him. When Pascoe found the possessions of a girl who had gone missing next to a mud-stained shovel on Sharif's porch in 1980, he severed their friendship.

Sharif's talents led an upstate New York-based building materials company called Cercoa (now part of the giant Ferro Corporation) to create a department specifically for him in Florida in 1981. The job paid him well enough that he could afford to live in Palm Beach. On May 2, 1981, he invited a 23-year-old woman named Molly Fleming, whom he met in a bar, to his house where he beat and raped her repeatedly. When he was finished, he offered to take her to a hospital where he was promptly arrested.

Cercoa bailed him out and paid for his legal defense, which was further complicated in August after he sexually assaulted another woman he met in West Palm Beach. He was sentenced to probation for the first rape and 45 days in prison for the second.

After his release, Cercoa fired him and Sharif moved to Gainesville, a city dominated by the University of Florida. He was married briefly. His wife, Joanne Collins Podlesnik, divorced him after he beat her unconscious. On March 17, 1983, Sharif placed an ad in *The Gainesville Daily Register* looking for a live-in

housekeeper. He beat and raped a woman who answered the ad and threatened her by saying: "I will bury you out back in the woods. I've done it before, and I'll do it again." After he was arrested, he escaped from jail, but was quickly apprehended. He was sentenced to 12 years in prison with the understanding that when his sentence was over, Sharif would "be met at the prison gates and escorted to the airport" for deportation to Egypt.

But it didn't work out that way. He was paroled in October 1989 and soon hired by Midland, Texas-based Benchmark Research & Technology, where his work in nonflammable, hydrocarbon-free well drilling materials received praise from the U.S. Department of Energy and influential Senator Phil Gramm. It also earned Sharif a consistent income from patents he registered while working there. But he was arrested again in 1991, this time for driving under the influence. A former co-worker from Florida who had coincidentally moved to Midland saw his name in the paper and called Immigration to investigate Sharif's deportation order.

The case dragged on, and in May 1994, a judge agreed to a deal in which the prosecution would drop all charges if Sharif would voluntarily leave the U.S., never to return. Benchmark then transferred him to one of their *maquiladora* factories in Juárez and rented him a large house in the city's posh Rincones de San Marcos neighborhood.

In October 1995, a worker at the factory accused Sharif of raping her repeatedly. She said he warned her not to go to police or he would kill her and dump her body in Lote Bravo, a stretch of desert just south of Juárez where many bodies of young women had already been found.

Although she later dropped her charges, a detective working the case found out that the 48-year-old Sharif had been dating 17-year-old Elizabeth Castro Garcia, whose beaten and raped body had been found in Lote Bravo on August 19. Sharif was arrested, tried and sentenced to 30 years in prison.

But while the media was trumpeting the arrest of the Juárez Ripper—and pointing out, almost boasting, that he was a foreigner brought to Mexico by the Americans—the killings didn't stop.

In fact, they increased. Not only were there more bodies, but those that were found were more and more likely to be mutilated in horrific ways. And the press also neglected to mention that the killings had begun at least 15 months before Sharif had moved to the area.

The citizens—particularly young women—of Juárez were growing increasingly frightened and the authorities were at a loss to explain why taking Sharif off the streets didn't do anything to stop the killings. What happened next would have been rejected if it were the plot outline for the cheesiest crime show in television history.

On April 8, 1996, police questioned a man named Hector Olivares Villalba in connection with the rape, mutilation and murder of 18-year-old Rosario Garcia Leal. Under interrogation, Olivares Villalba admitted that he was indeed one of many young men from a Juárez street gang called Los Rebeldes (the Rebels) who had murdered Garcia Leal on December 7, 1995. Police raided a number of nightclubs associated with the gang and rounded up almost 300 people for questioning. That led to the arrest of gang leader Sergio "El Diablo" (the Devil) Armendariz Diaz, Juan "El Grande" (Mr. Big) Contreras Jurado, Carlos Hernandez Molina, Carlos Barrientos Vidales, Romel Cerniceros Garcia, Fernando Guermes Aguirre, Luis Adrade, Jose Juarez Rosales and Erika Fierro, all members of Los Rebeldes.

Eager to pin the murders on Sharif, police accused the nine members of Los Rebeldes of participating in a sinister plot in which Sharif would pay them to commit rapes and murders using the same methods he had in order to make people believe that he was not the culprit and that the real *depredador* was still at large. Police claimed that Contreras Jurado testified that Armendariz Diaz had once ordered him to visit Sharif in prison and bring back an envelope containing $4,000 in U.S. currency. Once it was received, they said, Armendariz Diaz ordered the gang members to kidnap, beat, rape and murder a young woman known to them only as "Lucy."

All of the accused later recanted their confessions, saying that they were made under torture. They showed reporters burn marks

they said came from their interrogators. Charges were later dropped against Ceniceros Garcia, Fierro, Guermes Aguirre, Hernandez Molina and Olivares Villalba. The others—Armendariz Diaz, Contreras Jurado, Carlos Barrientos Vidales, Luis Adrade and Jose Juarez Rosales—went to trial for 17 murders police said were coordinated by Sharif from his prison cell. Armendariz Diaz added some excitement to the proceedings when he pleaded guilty to organizing and participating in the gang rape of a 19-year-old fellow inmate while awaiting trial. Police also said that Armendariz Diaz's teeth were perfect matches to bite marks found on the breasts of at least three victims attributed to Los Rebeldes.

But putting Los Rebeldes in prison didn't do any more to stop the killings than imprisoning Sharif did. The murders continued unabated even though Mexico's own Human Rights Commission openly criticized the state police and their methods, insisting they take the problem more seriously. But still the police and prosecutors clung to the idea that the murders were the work of one extremely proficient serial killer, probably working under the direction of Sharif.

And many in government indicated that the deaths of women on the streets of Juárez were far from a top priority. "Women who have a night life, go out late and come into contact with drinkers are at risk," Chihuahua's former attorney general Arturo Gonzáles Rascón told *El Diario* in February 1999. "It's hard to go out on the street when it's raining and not get wet." Although there was no evidence to support it, other authorities had accused the victims of being prostitutes, or in some way provoking their attackers. "Despite the fact that most of the victims were schoolgirls or workers, there's a persistent belief around town that the targeted women somehow invited the attacks," said American journalist John Burnett. "Nowadays, it's a common joke when two men see a provocatively dressed woman, for one to elbow the other and say: 'She better watch out or she'll end up in desert.'"

More light was shed on the hundreds of rapes and murders on March 18, 1999, when a badly injured 14-year-old girl named Nancy Gonzalez started banging on a stranger's door in Juárez, screaming and begging for help. When police arrived, she told them

that she had been repeatedly raped, beaten, suffocated and left for dead by a man named Jesus Guardado Márquez, known locally as "El Tolteca" (the Toltec), because he looked like he was from that indigenous group. He was a *maquiladora* bus driver, who picked up women from their homes and dropped them off at factories, returning when their shifts were over. The concept behind the buses (which the factories paid for) was to keep the women safe from the predators on the streets. But when Gonzalez—who had falsified her birth date to get her job—finished her shift at 1:00 a.m., she found that she was the last passenger on the bus and that it had taken a turn into the desert. Guardado Márquez then assaulted her and tried to choke her to death.

Upon hearing that Gonzalez was still alive, Guardado Márquez (who had been found guilty of sexual assault once before) fled Juárez with his pregnant wife, but was arrested on April 1 in Durango. Under interrogation, Guardado Márquez admitted to his crimes against Gonzalez and named four other bus drivers—Victor "El Narco" (the Narc) Moreno Rivera; Augustin "El Kiani" (the Persian) Toribio Castillo; Bernardo "El Samber" Hernando Fernandez; and Jose Gaspar "El Gaspy" Cerballos Chavez—who raped and murdered their passengers as a gang called Los Choferes (the Chauffeurs).

Incredibly, state police claimed that their leader, Moreno Rivera, had been hired by Sharif in an effort to clear his name, just as they alleged Los Rebeldes had. They said Sharif had paid the bus drivers $1,200 per murder and that he demanded the victims' underwear as proof.

A British reporter tracked down Sharif in prison (he was in solitary confinement and said he was frequently denied access to his lawyer) and asked him what he thought of the government's story. "They accuse me of everything. They always said I was a genius and very intelligent. How come a genius would make the same mistake twice?" he said. "If I did it with Los Rebeldes, why would I do the same thing the same way? Paying people to kill women outside [prison] is very stupid." Police could provide no evidence of cash transactions, phone conversations or visits to Sharif in prison.

The accused claimed they did not know Sharif and that their confessions were the result of torture. Authorities blamed them for a total of 211 murders, including a ludicrous 191 by Guardado Márquez alone. Media had started calling him "El Dracula." He and the other bus drivers recanted their confessions. Motores Electricos de Juárez, Gonzalez's employer, fired her and sued her for taking a job she was too young for. Sharif's sentence was reduced from 30 years to 20 after the prosecution admitted it had "problems with evidence," and both sides promised to appeal. He died—of what officials called "natural causes"—in prison in 2006.

Not surprisingly, the killings did not stop. By the end of 1999, the phenomenon was making international news. The victims, known as *Las Desaparecidos* (the Disappeared) were drawing a great deal of interest in the United States, including some celebrities who championed their cause and protested what they saw as poor efforts by police and government to stop the killings. Canadian Candice Skrapec, an instructor of criminology at the University of California, Fresno, told newspapers that the killings were likely the work of American Angel Resendez Ramirez, better known as "the Railway Killer." She was wrong. When he was arrested, Resendez Ramirez admitted to a number of murders, but none in Mexico.

When the skeletal remains of eight more victims were uncovered in a vacant lot just a block away from the Maquiladoras Association headquarters on November 5, 2001, police announced the creation of a new task force to investigate the crimes and offered a reward of $21,500 for information leading to an arrest. The area, known as "El Campo Algodonero" (the Cotton Field), had been the site where so many bodies have been buried over the years that it led to a commonly used threat, "I'll leave your body in the Cotton Field."

On November 10, two more bus drivers—Javier "El Cerillo" (the Match) Garcia Uribe and Gustavo "La Foca" (the Seal) Gonzalez Meza—were arrested for the eight murders discovered a week earlier. Again the men confessed and then recanted, saying the confessions were the results of torture.

One of their defense attorneys, Mario Escobedo Anaya, left work on February 5, 2002. He had received death threats before, and when he noticed he was being followed by a Jeep Cherokee, he fled the scene, stomping on his car's accelerator pedal. The Jeep, police claim, was the personal vehicle of state police commander Roberto Alejandro Castro Valles. The police initially reported that Escobedo Anaya had died when his car crashed, but when the autopsy report showed he had actually died as a result of repeated gunshot wounds, they changed their story to say that an officer killed him in self defense. To prove it, they showed local reporters a Jeep Cherokee full of bullet holes. By the end of 2009, the pair's other two lawyers—including Escobedo's father, Mario Escobedo Salazar—had also been killed in mysterious circumstances.

Over the years, things changed. Celebrities from the U.S. and Mexico did their best to raise awareness. Journalists came from all over the world to spread the word. And, in May 2005, the Chihuahua state police dropped their 72-hour waiting period before they would investigate missing persons. But it didn't help the situation for women that violence from the cartels had exploded in the city. Police—who were already overwhelmed by the crime level in the city and were understaffed due to purges of corrupt officers—were suddenly confronted with 10 or 12 murder investigations a day. The mystery of the missing women of Juárez took a back seat to the drug war.

And the bodies still keep coming. There are lots of theories. People in Juárez like to blame groups like Satanists, organ harvesters, even a cabal of wealthy men who pay huge sums to hunt women on the streets of their city for sport. The common thread is that outsiders are to blame.

Academics on both sides of the border blame the *maquiladoras*. They point out that the factories attract vulnerable women and force them to travel to and from work in dangerous places and at dangerous times. But the places and times being dangerous are less the fault of the factories than they are of the place itself. The *machista* culture of many Mexicans has been deeply unnerved by the fact that many women in border areas make more money

than their fathers, brothers and husbands. "Women are occupying the space of men in a culture of absolute dominance of men over women," said Esther Chavez Cano, the best known of all women's right advocates in Juárez. "This has to provoke misogyny."

Indeed what was happening in Juárez wasn't coming from outside. It was coming from Juárez itself. Although the sheer number of murders and missing women suggests many culprits, there is one group that has been conclusively identified as contributing to the slaughter. The Juárez Cartel employs a number of former and active-duty policemen as an enforcer unit. They are called *La Linea* (the Line) and are heavily armed and extensively trained in urban warfare. Because so many police in Juárez are involved with *La Linea* and the cartel, it's difficult for Mexicans to feel safe when the very people employed to protect them are also the most likely to prey upon them. "The Juárez Cartel are the cops," an informant told U.S. federal officials during an investigation about police corruption in the city. "They've turned Juárez into their deadly playground. They make their own rules."

In an interview with *The Dallas Morning News*, a former drug trafficker who had worked in cooperation with *La Linea* said it was not uncommon to see abducted women at the gang's parties. And when he did not see the women again, he simply assumed they had been killed. He explained his logic by telling the reporters: "Sometimes, when you cross a shipment of drugs to the United States, adrenaline is so high that you want to celebrate by killing women."

While all of the factors that would appear to contribute to the wholesale violence against women in Juárez also occurs in other border cities, the women in them have not be subjected to anywhere near the same amount of terror. Tijuana has more factories, a largely corrupt police force and just as many entrenched gangs. The conditions in places like Nuevo Laredo, Calexico, Matamoros and other cities are much the same as they are in Juárez, but the women there are not nearly as likely to be victims of rape and murder.

I asked the Mexicans I knew if they had a theory. Only one of them—Miguel G, a journalist who has fled Mexico to work in the U.S. as a graphic designer—did. He told me: "Juárez is just a bad place."