



Still from *El Velador*, courtesy of Icarus Films

The Son of a Sinaloa Drug Lord in Search of a Normal Life

Diego Enrique Osorno

Eventually, everyone reaches the point where they end up telling their story. In early 2009, I met a young, successful, professional twenty-something—the son a of a Sinaloa drug lord (*capo*) who is now in prison. We were in contact for half a year and met four times in the

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outskirts of Mexico City.

The fifth time around, he agreed to tell me a little about his life, asking only that he and his father's name remain anonymous if our conversation were published.

This is the conversation we had during the summer of 2009:

DIEGO OSORNO: When did you first become aware that you were the child of a drug lord?

SON OF CAPO: It must have been in middle school, when I was really able to reflect on it. Because in middle school I had to spend my days with kids who were more or less related to the phenomenon, since their parents had some connection to it [the drug economy]. They asked me a lot of questions, and mentioned many names, and that's when I started putting two and two together. Because when they detained my dad I was in elementary school; I was very little and didn't know very much. Then one day I asked my mom, "Hey mom, what does dad do?" And she answered, "He pays other people to work for him." I said, "Damn, that's intelligent!" And it wasn't a lie, in a way it was the truth, but it wasn't until middle school that I started to connect the dots.

DO: Did you go to a private school?

SC: Yes, it was a private school and all the kids were enthralled with narco-culture. They were transfixed by it, and it was always a topic of conversation, as in: "Oh, check it out, he's the son of a capo," and they would approach me frequently because of it. And so when I didn't pay attention to them, when I pushed them away, well, they thought I was putting on airs or something like that.

DO: They saw your dad as a hero...

SC: At that time, he was a hero for some but not for others. Some of them already saw him as a figure in decline. When they detained him, Amado Carrillo was all the rage. They were always comparing them and for some reason I was always around. They said: "No, Amado Carrillo did more things," or something along those lines, but I had nothing to say to them.

DO: It was like a contest...

SC: Yes, they were always trying to generate some sort of argument, but I always kept a distance. Sometimes they questioned me: "Hey, why don't you drive the latest-model car? Why don't you wear jewelry? Why does your mom pick you up at school?" Those sorts of things. It was seen as stooping too low for people involved in that world, because they had bodyguards or Cartier watches while I wore a Casio.

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DO: What prevented you from joining those circles if it was so normal?

SC: Our family had a pretty plain outlook. We weren't interested in anything like that because money was never an issue for us. Maybe we didn't have the deepest pockets, but I could walk into a store and buy whatever I wanted. No, we never suffered from lack of money, thank God. My mom taught us many values and so did my dad. He was—he still is—a very austere man; we never saw him wearing jewelry or being ostentatious. He was our model, our standard. That's why when we saw people all gussied up with jewelry we thought it was ridiculous. We thought they were clowns.

DO: What did your dad used to tell you? Do you remember some of his phrases?

SC: No, he was mostly a man of action rather than phrases. One time, I remember we bought some water guns. He gave us money and sent a person with us to buy clothes and toys and we came back with these water guns. He got really angry. It's the only time I saw him enraged. He got incensed that we bought war toys. He told us never to buy those things, that guns were for criminals and troublemakers. We got very scared. He never hit us, but he was our authority figure, he was the law. His only obsession was for us to study, to get masters and doctoral degrees.

DO: What is your most important image of him? How did you learn to admire him?

SC: When people ask me about him—how he was and such—I say that I'll never forget that I used to see him outside the house watering the plants, in his pajamas making conversation with a neighbor, or walking to get the tortillas himself. He was very kind and well mannered—an exceedingly kind man. I remember that one time we went to pick up a camera, we were getting the lens repaired or something, and the person in the store treated him with such respect, not as you would treat someone you know, but with the mutual esteem displayed by two people who greatly respect each other. It was the type of thing that caught my attention. Everyone treated him so well, and he always corresponded; always very polite, he had a way with people. He knew how to deal with people without being disrespectful to them, without infringing on their sense of privacy,

DO: Do you still have friends from your childhood?

SC: No, I don't think so. I was very introverted, in a way. And in high school also, I couldn't get over it.

DO: It's strange that you were so shy, especially if your father is someone so well known, someone everyone was talking about...

SC: No, it was very different back then. When you think of someone important, you associate

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him with the image you have of these types of characters today. Back then, you could be very important, but no one noticed you; they knew about you if they heard your name, that's true. They were men who lived under the radar, unassuming, well mannered; they didn't call attention to themselves. We weren't exposed to outlandish or glitzy things; he was just a normal father, there was nothing conspicuous.

DO: He played with you?

SC: Yes, I remember he played with all of us. Physically demanding games and sports like handball or basketball.

DO: Do you remember the day he was detained?

SC: Not very clearly.

DO: What images do you have of him in those days?

SC: To be honest, I don't remember. I remember the next day that we went out and the city seemed abandoned. There were no people or policemen or anything—I remember that part very well. I remember the family visits we used to pay him, but that's all.

DO: What did you used to feel?

SC: Fear. I was very young. I was aware of some things but didn't make many connections, and seeing the city empty made me afraid more than anything else, it seemed strange to me. It felt weird. Many things were said on the phone, or behind closed doors, but you never knew exactly what was going on. "Oh well, they imprisoned him, they are bad," but you didn't know.

DO: What are the most important things that you have come to accept being the son of a capo?

SC: Isolation, loneliness, difficulty in establishing relationships. Who do you share your life with? Maybe with a waitress, in a gas station, in the super-market, that's all you do. And well, I was rather shy in elementary school; in middle school the narco-culture was already gathering steam; and in high school a similar thing happened, I made friends but they were only temporary. I knew they wanted something from me.

DO: How did you know that?

SC: Because they were always making references to my dad, or money, or saying we should go to my place or that place. They knew what I could provide so they resorted to that kind of thing a lot. And I... well I also took advantage of that. That way I could have someone to talk to, but I knew they weren't trustworthy. They were always asking to borrow this or that, and never paid

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me back. And it wasn't that I cared about it a great deal, but I did notice it. The relationships I value are those that I have made without people knowing who I am.

DO: You told me about a romantic relationship you had as a teenager, which you had to break off on account of your dad being a capo.

SC: She was a young lady from a family, how could I say it, from a family with a political past. It was practically my first mature love, if you can call it that. I had a good relation with all the family and spent time with her parents.

DO: Did you meet her at school?

SC: No, a cousin introduced us; he gave me her e-mail and we wrote to each other. Then we saw each other. At first we didn't hit it off; there was no chemistry. The second time we went out, I'm not sure why, we got along much better. It was a relationship that lasted one, two years at most. After a year and a half they randomly found out about my father and her family's attitude towards me changed completely.

DO: They didn't know who your father was?

SC: No, they didn't know. And when they found out, they had me come over and told me: "We have nothing against you or your family, but we can't accept you because of our standards and our heritage. We like you, but you must end your relationship with our daughter." And that was it: we formally broke up.

DO: It's a tough story. Even more when you are so young.

SC: Yes, but it happens.

DO: It's the tragedy of love. But also for you to have to bear such a destiny...

SC: That was the first time. Then it happened again, but by that point you had much more experience. Yes it was painful, but gradually you begin protecting yourself. You can better judge who will accept you, evaluate the person, the family, and gauge how far you can go with them.

DO: When the girl's parents called you up, what did you say?

SC: Well nothing really. I really respected, and still respect that man. I respect the decision, and in a way you understand; maybe they wanted the best for their daughter and they have an image of me, or of my dad, or of my family derived from the media or from the government. Then you understand: they want the best for their children so there is no way about it.

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DO: You look at it too rationally...

SC: Yes, but if you start analyzing it rationally, they have a very negative image of you, and there is no way you're going to change it. If I tell them: "No, my parents are good," well, they're not going to believe me. Then you can look at things with a cool head and understand them. Oh well ...

DO: So that happened to you again?

SC: Yes, but it wasn't as dramatic as the first time. It got less and less dramatic. I said: "I'm going to stop looking. If someone will come, they will come to me," and well, it's a formula that has worked, more or less.

DO: Didn't you ever wonder, "Why was I born into this family?"

SC: No, not at all. It has its advantages and its disadvantages.

DO: What are the advantages?

SC: I don't know. You never have economic problems. Maybe you don't have an excess of it, but you don't have to endure any scarcity, you live in your house comfortably and enjoy yourself, you have a TV, and, at that time, your Nintendo, your VCR, you can buy many things you like. You can live; I lived well, locked up in my own little world, for a long time.

DO: And what are the disadvantages?

SC: Well as far as social life is concerned, you can't have a very active one. You don't go out to many places also out of fear of crime. For example, Culiacán is a disorderly, conflictive place; any bum can wreak havoc with no consequences. Personally, all those things worry me.

DO: We once spoke of the social gatherings in Sinaloa in which you were marginalized, even though the others attending were children of people who benefitted from your dad.

SC: The thing is that when my dad was outside, everyone thought highly of him. Especially the "decent" people, because he generated profit and helped them out, but when he was disgraced, people stopped respecting him and also no longer accepted me.

DO: What did you think in those moments?

SC: Well, I saw them for what they are: interested people who are looking for opportunities, always with ulterior motives. As time goes by you get used to it. Maybe you stop socializing completely. You say, "I have what I want and, in a certain way, I don't need them." Everything

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runs smoother, particularly when you find a romantic partner. That's really when you don't need anything else, you feel good, you do what you want.

DO: When you were talking about your ex-girlfriend's father, you said that you could empathize with their position because they had a negative image of you formed by the government. Do you reject that image?

SC: Yes, in a way I do, because many things aren't proven. Then, as my dad says, "if you have something to say, I invite you to prove it." No one has ever proven many of things that are said, especially the more dramatic ones—those that have done the most damage to us—no one has proven them. And if we really were as they say we are, I would have bodyguards now, I would be looking over my shoulder, or carrying a weapon, or involved in illegal things.

And it isn't the case. I live a quiet life, without any of those things.

DO: How do you live?

SC: In a normal, unassuming way. We aren't attracted by luxury or sports cars. We see cars as transportation. Jewelry? I feel that only insecure people wear it.

DO: How does it feel to spend several years of your life between jails and detention centers visiting your dad?

SC: For me it's normal, in a way, I got used to it as a kid.

DO: Do you remember your first time in a maximum-security prison?

SC: No, I don't remember. It's a normal thing to me. I've never thought about it before.

DO: This question sounds absurd but I can think of no other way to pose it: do you like going to the maximum-security prison where your dad is?

SC: Yes, well I like seeing my dad. But, once you arrive, you start thinking: "What will they come up with today? Who will they let me in with? How will they search me now? Will I have to pull down my pants or not? How long will each piece of paperwork take? How much time will I waste in order to go in and see my dad?"

DO: Are there many of these little abuses of power?

SC: Yes, it's normal.

DO: I think it isn't normal.

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SC: Well, in there it is normal. Every time you go, you know there will be something new. It happens as far back as I can remember. It's like *Big Brother*, the rules are always changing: today you pull down your pants, tomorrow maybe you won't, maybe next week they'll examine your foreskin. There are so many things, it's never a fixed procedure, so you have to go in with a flexible attitude.

DO: That is not normal; especially with a government that comes out every day to talk about the law.

SC: It's also interesting that considering all the things we have done to denounce it, no one listens, no one provides answers, they don't even say whether our complaints are true or not. No one.

DO: What do you feel when the media and the people refer to your dad as a capo?

SC: No, nothing. The only thing that sometimes seems funny is when they call him a godfather, no? I've always seen him as my dad and nothing else.

DO: The word "capo" doesn't trouble you.

SC: No. Maybe I've heard it so much that it simply stopped bothering me.

DO: In Sinaloa the newspapers are read back-to-front, following the trail of blood. How would you recommend people read the papers today?

SC: They should be very neutral, observe things as they happen, the things that really happen in the city, and then compare them with the things the government says. Examine the different realities, especially concerning security, and come to their own conclusions. They should take everything that happens into account and vote differently, and not believe the promises of the candidates they don't know. Those sorts of things.

DO: Is there a stigma attached to people involved in the drug-business in Sinaloa. What do you think of the culture in Sinaloa revolving around drugs?

SC: I don't know: people from Sinaloa are sometimes very violent. I feel that they really like blood, regardless of whether they are involved in the drug-business or not. If an assassination happens and I was near it, I would go away; I find it unpleasant, repulsive. But there are people who are attracted by it, they come closer, take pictures with their cell-phones. Unfortunately we have been exposed to so much violence and the situation seems to get worse and worse. Bodies are decapitated and dismembered—many horrible things that didn't used to be common practice. And nowadays people are not even surprised by it. They think it's so normal. That is the most disturbing thing: people have lost the capacity to be astonished.

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DO: Why do you think that there didn't use to be as much violence as there is today?

SC: I don't know, maybe human life was held in higher regard. Maybe values were stronger. Suddenly they started killing people. And they were not only killing them: they were shooting them in the head. Many things started changing then. I'm not sure, but maybe there is also a lot of poverty, unemployment, and those conditions have generated violence and have driven many Sinaloans to look for different ways to find happiness and earn money to support their families. I think crime originates in particular conditions: poverty and unemployment.

DO: How are your everyday relations with other people?

SC: Normal. I only take certain precautions to protect myself and other people. For example, a political candidate added me as a friend on Facebook. He looked all right, like a normal guy, someone you could trust, but I didn't accept him. He tried to friend me again so I asked him if he knew me. He answered that he didn't so I told him that maybe it wasn't such a good idea to add this particular stranger to his Facebook friends considering his political aspirations, because there are many people willing to dig up any kind of dirt to tarnish the image of a person like him. I gave him that piece of advice, that maybe he should take better care of the people he adds on Facebook, because it could be used against him in the future. I gave him that advice and deleted him. He sent me more messages and kept insisting, but it was in vain, I also didn't want to expose myself and that was that.

DO: Something similar happened to you with Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

SC: Yes. I recently ran into *el Peje* in an airport. I don't necessarily sympathize with political parties or movements, but he is a well-known public figure, I have seen him on TV, in the papers, etc.

DO: Does he attract you?

SC: Yes. He seems to me a very charismatic, simple, humble guy, and quite frankly, I just felt like approaching him, maybe greeting him. But then I thought, "No, this person has many enemies. If he takes a picture with me, and they want to harm him, this will be a way for them to do it." I would have liked to say hi, but then I realized I shouldn't.

DO: Why?

SC: Because of the same kind of stigmas. If someone wants to throw dirt at him, they will say that he has been seen with people related to imprisoned criminals.

DO: Do you always have to bear this consciousness of being the son of a capo?

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SC: Yes, almost all the time.

DO: I can picture your hesitant, aborted approach to López Obrador...

SC: It was a strange thing. He's a public figure you see on TV and you agree with him in certain things, and you feel the impulse to approach him and tell him: "I like what you have to say about this or that." Maybe I would have done it with someone else, but it was him I stumbled upon. I saw that the people from the media were swarming him. Then there was a moment when he was left alone, walking with a woman who was with him. I was going to engage him, but then I thought, "No." I regretted it and said to myself, "Yes, I'm going to talk to him." To tell you the truth, I followed him for a while, but then I thought: "definitely not. Why would I do harm to this person?"

DO: Were you ever interested in politics?

SC: Yes, but obviously, as things work around here, my career would have gone nowhere. This society would not have liked a candidate with an imprisoned relative, especially considering all the ill repute that has grown around our family.

DO: You inherit everything...

SC: Yes, I would have been classified as a narco-politician and that was not too attractive a prospect.

DO: Hypocrisy?

SC: When you yield benefits people love you, but after you fall from grace they don't. Ugh! That's the way it goes with everything.

DO: What do you think about the legalization of drugs?

SC: I'm not so well informed as to how it would work. If they began by regulating marijuana then you could look at some data. If the government took charge of production, that would limit consumption to certain quantities, the places where it could be consumed could be determined and certain limits established—maybe that could work in certain ways. But let's not forget that marijuana is not the only drug. And also: what is the market for marijuana? What groups consume it? Other drugs are more popular: cocaine or the synthetic ones that are around these days, pills and all of that. Who knows how well it would work. Maybe some marijuana growers would be unemployed. But let's remember that marijuana is not the only thing produced. How much of a solution would the regulation this one drug represent? One would have to ask people who are better informed. It would not be sensible to give a definitive opinion.

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DO: Do you like narcocorridos?

SC: No, I've never been one to like *norteño* music, to be frank. It sounds strange, maybe stupid, but I grew up watching MTV and VH1. I see the music videos for corridos and they seem ridiculous, as do the lyrics. They depict these characters that don't even exist. I could pay people to compose a corrido saying that I am a great golf or cricket player or anything, but it's not true. I can't play either golf or cricket.

DO: Why do you think they do that?

SC: Vanity is the most probable explanation.

DO: Why do you think Sinaloa has become the obligatory reference when talking about the drug-trade? Why Sinaloa? Why not Guanajuato or Colima?

SC: I can't tell exactly why. Maybe socioeconomic conditions have something to do with it. Also the fact that the state is so well suited for agriculture, which might be a factor in the cultivation of drugs—I don't know. To be honest, I could not give you an opinion.

DO: How would you describe the Sinaloan of today?

SC: Friendly. Everyone is generally friendly, but I cannot give a single description because every Sinaloan is different.

DO: Some call them, the *sinalocos* [*Sinaloa-crazies*]

SC: But we're all different. I don't think it's right to stereotype like that, to say: "all Sinaloans are like this." We're all different.

DO: You did not get involved in the [drug] business, but other sons of capos did. Do you understand them?

SC: Sometimes I feel bad for them, because they catch them when they're still too young and I say, "No, they still had so much to do." I also think that perhaps their parents let them get involved in the business. I ask myself: if they were making good money and had it all, why did they let them ruin their lives?

DO: How do you get along with authority?

SC: You always have to follow the rules and keep everything up to date: carry papers demonstrating your clean criminal record; have a valid driver's license; keep your car well tuned, with all the lights working; respect the speed limit, the traffic lights; be extremely polite,

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twice or three times as much as a normal person; avoid using foul language or anything that might provoke a negative reaction or a repressive action on the part of the authorities. To avoid giving them any grounds for suspicion, because you are always being watched. Let's say they pull me over driving under the influence of alcohol: they won't say they stopped any random person. They'll say they stopped the son of a capo drunk, driving irresponsibly, blah, blah, blah. So I prefer to avoid it, keep trouble at a distance. Avoid all the negative things.

DO: How do you endure such a lonely life?

SC: I live normally.

DO: I'm referring to your emotional life.

SC: You get used to it from the time you're little. The truth is that I do things without... they come out automatically, so you don't get into trouble.

For example now, if the waiter brings you the wrong drink or something, if you can drink it, just do it, don't make a fuss. If the food is salty, eat it and don't come back. Don't give people the grounds to talk about you. Don't make a fuss in a restaurant or anything like that. And also, be careful about who you go out with. If you invite someone to dinner and they get bad service and make a scene, you can attract attention to your table, to the place where you're sitting. Someone can spot you and say, "I saw the son of so-and-so and he was causing a commotion with a group of good-for-nothings," or something along those lines. So you start doing it unconsciously, taking precautions becomes the norm.

DO: Have you judged you father for his life as a capo?

SC: I guess that he had his reasons for taking the paths he took. As all fathers, I suppose he was trying to give us better things, a better life. He took a path—I don't know if it was the right one or the wrong one—but he took it. It was his decision, he had his reasons, and if he did anything wrong the law applies its punishment.

DO: What do you talk about when you visit him in jail? Do you tell him about your everyday problems?

SC: No. If you have problems you don't tell him about them. You come in saying, "No old man, everything is wonderful outside." "How's life? Any problems?" "No, no, nothing; all is good." "Did they give you trouble getting in?" No old man, they were so gentle." Why? Because if you tell him, "They frisked me and touched my penis," well, you're going to make him tense. He can't do anything about it, and being locked up, it can maybe incite negative behavior, which would bring some sort of punishment on him or stress him out. So it's no good. All the negative stuff from the outside, we just get rid of it and come in with the best face possible in order not to

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cause him any more problems than the ones he already has.

DO: What do you talk about?

SC: About the family or things that happen outside. Many times he asks me about computers or friends who are outside, people whom I can contact. General things, business, everything, general things, but never problems or anything, unless they are very serious and he can give us advice.

DO: Who do you love more, your dad or your mom?

SC: Both. They both represent something different.

DO: What does your dad represent?

SC: Authority, the paternal figure, support, the guide, the mentor, I can ask him anything about any topic. My mom: love, tenderness, support, her presence, everything.

They both play an important part, and I love them both the same. God-forbid, but the day I lose one of them, it will be just as heartbreaking either way.

DO: What do you give your dad for his birthday?

SC: Birthday cards are the only thing that is allowed, although, it's rare that they allow even cards these days. When they are too elaborate, then they say no. If there are more than three pages, or have figures in relief, well they don't get through. So you try to find the simplest one, with a drawing or something corresponding to the occasion. Basically letters, hand-written letters.

DO: What was the day you saw him the happiest in jail?

SC: The day my older brother got married. We had to visit him after a sleepless night and he was very happy. I imagine he was also sad for not being able to be there, but he was very happy.

Translated by Miguel Winograd

Diego Osorno is the author of five books of *crónicas* and his writing has been anthologized in Venezuela, Cuba, the United States, France, Spain, and Colombia. He writes for the magazine *Gatopardo* and his blog, "Historias de Nadie" (Stories of

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Nobody), appears on NuestraAparenteRendicion.com. His work has been published in newspapers and magazines in Mexico as well as other countries. Osorno received the 2011 Premio Latinoamericano de Periodismo for Drugs (the Latin American Journalism Prize for work on drugs) and the Premio Internacional de Periodismo *Proceso* (the *Proceso* International Journalism Prize), whose jury included Jon Lee Anderson, Alma Guillermoprieto, Vicente Leñero, Rafael Rodríguez Castañeda y Juan Villoro.