





Arturo Hernández/Demotix/Corbis

*The end of the nearly one-mile tunnel through which drug kingpin Joaquín Guzmán Loera escaped, Almoloya de Juárez, Mexico, July 12, 2015*

Within a few hours of his relaxed escape from Mexico's highest security prison early Saturday evening, Joaquín Guzmán Loera, better known as "el Chapo" for his stocky build, was back on Twitter, hopping about the ether, crowing and taunting like some sort of manic cartoon character. "Never say never," the world's most wanted drug trafficker cried at @ElChap0Guzmán. "There's no cage for this great Chapo!" He sent greetings to his family, thanked his collaborators, praised his sons, looked forward to working again with his *compadre*, Ismael "el Mayo" Zambada, who had run the Sinaloa Cartel since Chapo's arrest; and *Don Rafa*—Rafael Caro Quintero, a patriarch of the drug trade who was scandalously released from prison two years ago by a compliant judge and is now a fugitive. Lapsing momentarily into a bitter, mulling mode, Guzmán made rude references to president Enrique Peña Nieto: "And you, @EPN, don't call me a delinquent again, because I give people jobs, not like your piddling cheap government." Back in manic mode, the trickster taunted: "Tricks are more effective than brute force, that's what's worked for me."

Whether the tweets were typed by Guzmán himself, who is known to be barely literate, or dictated, with constant spelling errors, by minions, was hardly the issue. He and his equally boastful older sons have all had the same accounts for some years. The tweets were taken as authentic, and provoked fervent responses from any number of young women twittering love emojis and young men praising his courage or crying, "Welcome, Great Lord!" Another form of tweeted submission was popular among men, who tuned in to exclaim *¡Eres la Verga!* ("You are the Big Penis!" or, more precisely "You are the Mammalian Penis!") in response to their hero's missives.

There was a vengeful tweet early on from Guzmán—offering, to my mind, the first convincing evidence that he did not, in fact, turn himself in last year in the course of an arranged deal, but was captured by army and navy special forces. [UPDATE: Though a new account suggests he may have been captured by US agents disguised as Mexican forces.] "Now they're scrambling for a place to hide, those who put me on trial, the marine who took me to the helicopter, and the faggot *que me puso*," a narco expression that means, roughly, "(he) who betrayed me by positioning me so that I could be caught." Immediately afterward he quoted an old Spanish

saying that sums up both his *modus operandi* and Mexico's present humiliating condition. "Money makes the dog dance."

"I put that escape at some fifty million dollars." This highly professional estimate came from a man called Jhon [sic] Jairo Velásquez Vásquez, more commonly known as Popeye, Pablo Escobar's closest bodyguard, contract killer, and go-between. Out of prison after twenty-two years behind bars, compulsively garrulous, a little tense, he discussed the case of Joaquín Guzmán with a reporter from Univision, the Spanish-language television network. "That's a very delicate case," he said. "In high security prisons you can't make tunnels, because in the [control] room where they have the cameras they have sensors that detect immediately if there's digging going on. That escape was about money...[involving] the prison guards and a lot of people outside."

The high-security Altiplano Center for Social Rehabilitation, better known as Almoloya, has three-foot thick walls and restricted communications, and in fact, all of the imprisoned heads of rival organizations to Guzmán's are still very much in residence in their own solitary confinement cells there. Guzmán, who is the head of the "Federación"—a loose assortment of drug clans who work together in the state of Sinaloa—was sent immediately to Almoloya following his arrest on February 22, 2014. There had been a week-long chase earlier in Guzmán's home state, ending at a beachside residential hotel in the pretty resort city of Mazatlán. It was the eve of the Mazatlán carnival, which features several beauty contests—Guzmán, partial to beauty queens, is married to one—and when he was asked what he was doing in such a public place, he replied simply that he hadn't seen his two little girls for quite a while. This was understood to mean that he had taken a heroic risk to see his family, but it could also mean that Guzmán was proceeding as usual, taking a little time off to watch the beauty queen parade from a hotel balcony in the company of his wife and kids, without fear of danger.

In the helicopter flying him to Almoloya last year—he had already escaped from a high-security prison once, in 2001—the world's most notorious trafficker commented off-handedly that he was responsible for some thousand or so murders, but he was in fact charged in several Mexican courts only with trafficking and organized crime. As the pretrial investigations began their lumbering progress through the legal system, the prisoner was confined to a windowless cell equipped with a twenty-four-hour video camera. He was taken to a patio for an hour of solitary exercise every day, and allowed family visits only once a month, each visit

contingent on a judge's specific approval. Despite these restrictions, it is claimed that he somehow managed to organize a hunger strike last summer to protest the jail's appalling conditions, although the government, while acknowledging the strike, denies his involvement in it. But plans for his escape were well underway by the time of the hunger strike. In fact, they appear to have started almost as soon as he was arrested, and they were based, cheekily, on the very same device that has become Guzmán's trademark: a well-lighted tunnel equipped with a transportation rail.

One of the more entertaining photographs taken in the aftermath of Guzmán's larky escape shows Mexico's Attorney General, Arely Gómez, squatting next to a neatly carved and reinforced, twenty-inch-square opening in the floor of an unfinished cinderblock house. The house is in the middle of a cornfield a mile away and in plain sight of the Almoloya guard towers, and less than a half mile from an Army regiment. In the photo, Gómez stares wistfully into the black hole, as if hoping that a white rabbit might suddenly pop out of it. The rabbit, however, had already hopped onto an unknown mode of transportation a good twelve hours earlier. "Up to that moment," according to the somewhat pleading official communiqué issued near midnight on Saturday, "the day had transpired in normal fashion. [Guzmán] had even been provided with his daily dose of medication." One helpful detail Alejandro Rubido, the government's Commissioner for National Security, did not provide at the Sunday morning, no-questions-allowed press conference in which he confirmed Guzmán's escape, is the precise time that the prisoner's flight was perceived by his guards. At 8:52 PM, according to the official statement, the twenty-four-hour surveillance camera in his cell registered that Guzmán withdrew to the cell's shower area "where he also regularly washed dishes." Conveniently, the camera's blind spot is in precisely this area. "Once the prisoner's long absence from view was noticed," the official statement reads, emergency measures were put into place "according to security protocol." Following protocol can consume long hours, and it may be that during the entire time it took Guzmán to reach his tunnel's escape hatch, clean up in a makeshift shower, select from a pile of brand-new clothing waiting for him in the safe house, and make his way over muddy, pitted, country roads to the main highway—or a waiting helicopter, who is to say?—the chase had not even started.

All that was left was for police and federal investigation units to marvel at the tunnel Guzmán's troops had dug unerringly from about sixty feet beneath this spot, under corn fields and pasture lands, beneath the prison compound and all the way across it, to the exact three-foot-square area occupied by the shower in Guzmán's

cell. He and his engineers seem to have a thing for waterworks; access to his first major oeuvre, a marijuana-ferrying, two-hundred-foot-long creation that crossed the border from the state of Sonora to Arizona, was activated by means of a lever disguised as a water faucet outside a private house. Days before his arrest last year, he is said to have evaded his pursuers by means of a tunnel hidden under a spring-loaded bathtub in one of his many Sinaloa residences.

It took admirable skill to carve what may be history's longest escape tunnel, sixty feet underground. There was all that prison drainage, wiring, and pipes to avoid, too. And Guzmán, who for all his pranksterism has revealed himself to be obsessively devoted to detail, no doubt insisted on the tunnel's inner dimensions: 5'7" high, so that he would not have to stoop (he is just under 5'6") and 70 cm across. The tunnel was equipped with ventilation ducts and electricity, as well as, apparently, a motorcycle hooked onto a sturdy rail, allowing Guzmán to speed under the muddy fields to the waiting safe house in a matter of minutes and in great style. *El Universal*, a Mexico City newspaper, has estimated that 291 trips by a dump truck would have been required to remove the 2,040 cubic meters of dirt and rubble extracted in the construction process. Praise songs retelling Chapo Guzmán's second escape from prison are already up on YouTube.

The most damaging consequences of Guzmán's latest great adventure will not be suffered by the government of the ever less popular Mexican president, Enrique Peña Nieto, or by those with whom Chapo has scores to settle, or the drug troops of enemy cartels he will necessarily do battle with, or the soldiers, journalists, judges, politicians, and police he may order hits on, though they may add untold thousands more to Mexico's narco graveyard. The Sinaloa drug clans have not suffered greatly during his time in jail, and business appears to be stable; the drug world has already reconfigured itself, and there is some small chance that we could be spared a major increase in violence even when, as seems inevitable, Guzmán is recaptured, or killed.

"What's happening now with Mr Chapo Guzmán?" Popeye asked rhetorically. "When [Escobar and his people broke out of prison in Colombia in 1992] the CIA came after us, the DEA came after us. That's what's going to happen to Mr Chapo Guzmán. I give him eighteen months at large. Mr Chapo Guzmán must be feeling what I felt after we broke out of prison. Right now he's feeling good, Pablo Escobar was feeling good, but [Guzmán] knows that...they're going after his family, his wife. He's going to have to break with all his old ties. He's only going to be able to meet with his partners in the drug trade and with the people in charge of his military

apparatus. It's going to be hard to catch him [but] the Americans are going to put a 20 million dollar price on his head. Anyone with [that kind of price] on his head will fall.”

It was one of those sunny Mexico City mornings when it seems that the world is the way it is supposed to be, with school children on vacation skipping along the sidewalks and the traffic almost manageable, a mirlo bird whistling sweetly on the telephone wires. Emmanuel del Rey, the keyboard player for one of Mexico's most idolized rock bands, Café Tacvba, considered the damages of the grim joke played by the trickster drug lord over the weekend. Café Tacvba has huge drawing power among youths from Mexico's poorer neighborhoods, and it was these kids del Rey had in mind. “The message the escape will leave all those *muchachitos* who work with the drug trade,” he said, “or who are thinking of making a life in organized crime, and who already think that Chapo is more intelligent, more astute, more powerful, more moneyed, and also a lot more fun, is that he is! They'll think Chapo Guzmán is proof that, just like in Star Wars, the dark side is more powerful. And this is a terrible thing.”

It should be a simple matter to keep one dangerous criminal in prison, and yet Joaquín Guzmán Loera did not last even eighteen months in his cage. As one of the anonymous praise songs on YouTube says about his latest caper:

Money is very pretty  
No cop can resist it  
They just look at all those greenbacks  
And they start to get the giggles.

One laughs only until the rage sets in.

*July 14, 2015, 10:17 a.m.*

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