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No lo entiendo:
An Attempt at Understanding Something I Never Could

*All names of persons involved have been changed for their personal privacy and safety.

PART I

*“No one ever asks about him.”*¹ Clara was surprised to receive my call. She’s one of those aunts that I don’t maintain regular correspondence with. I only ever saw her at family functions and now that I’ve moved out of my home state of Texas, I only see her during the winter holidays. My family has always been extremely close with one another and family gatherings never had a maximum capacity, despite some of the smaller homes in the historic parts of San Antonio’s southside. That being said, even if I had been at numerous parties with her throughout my lifetime, even if we had been within close quarters, Clara was never a relative I gravitated towards. Clara is a soft spoken tía compared to her more boisterous eleven sisters. Upon greetings, we might have exchanged hugs and kisses at the very most before separating to do our own things. Me— more interested in the chisme with cousins closer to my age. Clara— parked at the breakfast nook table, playing dealer between rounds of Texas Hold ‘Em. And as the other card players would get loud with laughter as they drank Lone Stars, Clara would remain reserved with her sweet tea and soft smiles.

Since I’d moved away from home, I’ve barely thought about Tía Clara and in complete honesty, I don’t think that I had ever thought about her son.

“No one ever asks about him.”

Clara, being originally from San Antonio, Texas had held dual citizenship since the beginning of her marriage to Fernando, a Mexican citizen. When her and Fernando first met in Mexico City, she had been on a missionary trip with her parish and he had been a minor league baseball player. They fell in love and decided to stay in Mexico for his baseball career. After nearly ten years of building a life together, Jonathán was born in Ocampo, Coahuila in Mexico in 1997. For the first three years of his life he lived with both of his parents. While in Mexico, Clara had worked as an office clerk for an elementary school in Ocampo. Fernando was the head coach of a boy’s baseball team. Growing up, the family trio did their best but financial troubles lead to difficult decisions. There came a time, living in Ocampo, that the elementary school’s population had decreased² so much, that Clara was let go from her position in the office. Jobs at the time were scarce in the small town³ and in order to make ends meet, Clara decided to return to Texas in search of more job opportunities.

¹ Though this story is not about Clara, she is the closest contact still alive to make and it is through her conversations with her that I am able to recount this journey as true as possible.

² In 2010, the town census recorded Ocampo’s population to be 3,679. Clara would guess that this number might have been of a slight increase since her time living in the town, but for counter intuitive reasons. Clara recounts of an economic recession happening in Ocampo during the early 2000s during which young people would leave home for better school or job opportunities, but without any influx of migrants settling in their places. The town was slowly becoming run down upon itself in many ways as the population shrunk.

³ For Clara, understanding Ocampo’s job scarcity was a matter of understanding that there were fewer people returning once they left. With fewer people starting families, Clara’s administrative job became a position fillable by another, more essential, teacher.

By 2003, Clara was hired at a local bilingual library within the city of San Antonio, living in a shared house with one of her sisters, and was making plans to save up for an apartment to build her own life in Texas— a life to eventually share with Jonathán and Fernando. As a way to maintain contact with her son and husband, Clara would often spend alternating weeks between San Antonio and Ocampo in the beginning. Though her dual citizenship made her travel back and forth easier it did nothing to aid in the financial strain this kind of travel placed on her. But she made the journey back and forth anyways.

Though I was very young at the time, most of the adult family watched this struggle Clara and her family went through and it became a picked up practice for one or several of Clara's sisters to accompany her. As these travel caravans outgrew the accommodations that Fernando and Clara's house in Ocampo could provide, Clara's eldest sister, my Tía Marie, began renting a small property in the village. This property served as a timeshare of sorts amongst the family, not only so that Clara would feel more comfortable traveling the distance with a group, but also as a way to introduce Jonathán to the larger family from Texas. I don't particularly remember these roadtrips, but my own family also went down to Ocampo on several occasions. It was over these longer drives that my own mother and Tía Clara became particularly close. In the spring of 2001, when I was six years old, we took the long way back home to Texas. It was decided that we would drive to Monterey first, spend the day and the night in Monterey, then drive back up to Texas. Driving through the desert between Monterey and the Texas border, we hit some traffic. Thinking it was an accident, we continued along and as we approached the hold up it was realized that the issue had not been an accident. We passed by a crime scene in the middle of investigation. On the side of the road, what had been previously blocked by several police vehicles, was a row of human heads on spikes. Assumed victims of drug trafficking violence.

Different family members tell the account differently— my father claims that there were six in total but my mother swears she saw at least fifteen. Tía Clara was much more hesitant to add anything to this story.

"My heart still stops thinking about it."

This became the last time Clara or any of the family would drive to Mexico to visit for a long while.

In 2004, Clara returned to Mexico for the first time since that particular drive. Neither she nor Fernando had felt comfortable with her making the drive alone, nor did they feel comfortable asking other family members to join her along the journey anymore. *"We hadn't ever thought about the violence at the border. Not seriously. The war on drugs⁴ was one of those things that we watched on the*

⁴ Though the war on drugs was a Nixon-era campaign from 1971, combative rhetoric was used to describe the trafficking violence and policing across the US. During his first televised national address (September, 5, 1989) President George H. W. Bush called drugs "the greatest domestic threat facing our nation today," and vowed to escalate funding for drug-related policy. The approval of policies, such as the

news but it felt too far from our quiet place in Ocampo to think anything could ever happen to me or them.” And even when she did return, it was against Fernando’s wishes. Fernando had been of the mindset that it was becoming too dangerous in the neighboring state of Nuevo Leon to continue making regular journeys.

“So I stayed in San Anton-⁵ and we worried less and less about them applying for citizenship and more and more about making ends meet. Especially after my Fernando got sick.”

Fernando was diagnosed with lung cancer in 2010, and despite his diagnosis, he addimently maintained that Clara stay in the US and not risk endangering herself along the journey. At this point, Jonathán was 13 years old and Clara was not only thinking about providing for the financial support of ‘Cisco’s medical treatments but to afford to send Jonathán to a private college preparatory school. After having worked in the San Antonio Independent School District for a decade, Clara recognized that though there was a Catholic school that worked out of the local parish in Ocampo, it was small, underfunded, and with an unspecialized teaching staff. She had her own students to hold as a comparison on the US side of the border and worried that Jonathán would fall behind by simply going to the local school. Knowing just how financially trapping Ocampo could be for a young adult, and knowing that Fernando might have been able to receive better medical care outside of the small town, Clara was reinvigorated with a desire to support her family.

“Me necesitaban. Yo era todo lo que tenían. They needed me now more than ever.”

By 2013, Fernando was too ill to maintain his coaching job and Jonathán, 15, got a part-time job at a gas station bodega. When he started his job, Jonathán first mentioned an interest in dropping out of school. He felt isolated from Clara as she was tied up with her own busy work schedule and he worried about putting too much stress on his mother to make ends meet. He didn’t mind time spent at the bodega, but he felt that he wasn’t able to earn enough money to measurably help out. He also didn’t like the precarious moments of waiting for funds to be transferred from Clara to them if his own earnings hadn’t been enough to cover their basics– which happened more often than not. Even though she recognized the stress Jonathán was now under, both stepping into roles of caretaker and financial support, letting him get the part time job had been the most sacrifice she was comfortable in making. She worried she was letting him down enough by not being able to afford her ideal school tuition for him, the idea of her only son dropping out of school to care for his father was unacceptable. She began looking for a second job.

Fernando’s health continued to decline and his medical treatments became increasingly more expensive. It was becoming a matter of dire need for Clara to find a second job.

In February of 2014, Clara began part-time work at a local Motel 6 as overnight-custodial staff, but after a month in the position, she was already contemplating asking to increase her time to

1033 program, equipped local and state police with military-grade equipment for anti-drug operations. Many critics attribute the escalation of state-sanctioned violence as a leading contributor to the escalation of violence used by drug traffickers.

⁵ An abbreviated term for San Antonio, Texas, often used by locals.

full-time because the additional paychecks weren't quite enough for Fernando and Jonathán to afford both medical treatments and the basic cost of living. During a phone call between Clara and Jonathán, she mentioned having a horrible shift at the motel. *"I wasn't made for that kind of work. I'd only ever known working in libraries or in school administrative offices. I liked the quiet that the overnight shift had, but every once in a while the most unreasonable people would disturb the peace. And no one ever wants to go to the hotel manager– they go to the maid. So I was left to deal with whatever their mess was, even if it wasn't really my job to deal with."* During this phone call, Jonathán told her that he had applied for some financial aid at Fernando's oncology clinic and that he was granted a check. He told her that the check would be enough to last at least a couple months, and that instead of asking for more hours at the motel, she should look into applying for a different second job. He could hold things down for them in the meantime.

"I was so proud of him– he was always such a good good boy. He just wanted to help and I was so proud of him taking such initiative. He was becoming such a good man."

Through the end of spring and into the beginning of summer, Jonathán continued to say that he was managing without the extra income that increasing her motel shift hours would bring. He was adamant that he was able to stretch the financial aid from the clinic and that when it ran out, he was confident he would be able to apply for the aid again. Clara was confident in this new system and continued her search for a different position, something closer in line with a school position. Her more specific job search was taking longer because by the mid-spring, most schools would not wait to see any retirement or turn overs until the summer. She made a deal with Jonathán that the two of them would hang in until the summer, then she would be able to nail down a job in the school district– she was sure of it.

In June of 2014, Jonathán was arrested and charged with one count of possession with intention to sell marijuana and one count of resisting arrest of an officer.

Clara heard news of her son's arrest from Fernando a couple of days after it happened. Fernando had heard from the wife of the owner of the bodega where Jonathán had worked part time. She told Fernando that he had been working his normal scheduled shift, he was stocking cleaning supplies while was working behind the counter. The shift had been running smoothly when two police vehicles pulled into the parking lot and her husband moved from behind the counter with her, saying he needed to check something in the office. The officers approached her and asked if her husband or Jonathán were working. She explained that as soon as the officers mentioned Jonathán name he turned to run out of the building. He made it into the parking lot when he was tackled to the ground by another officer who had waited outside through the whole event.

Both Fernando and Clara attempted to call Jonathán while he was under arrest but neither had success of getting through to speak to him. It wasn't until July that Clara would be able to travel back to Mexico. Before traveling, Clara borrowed several thousand dollars from two of her sisters, telling

them that Fernando's treatments were becoming more expensive— a truthful statement— but leaving out mention of Jonathán's arrest.

“He was a good boy. He was. I know he was. It had to be a mistake. I didn't want to tell them and have them think the worst of my boy when it was all a mistake. I didn't want them to think the worst and then not help out. I needed the money and I'd pay it back to them no matter what. But I just couldn't have them thinking the worst of my Jonathán.”

She stayed in Ocampo for two weeks, during which time she was able to reconnect with Fernando, check in on his health and his treatments, and set him up with a nurse that would visit him a few times a week at home. Though he could no longer work consistently, Fernando had been strong enough to drive himself to his appointments on most days, and now that Jonathán wasn't around they arranged for a neighbor to help out if she could on days that he wasn't strong enough to drive. While in Mexico, Clara drove to the prison where Jonathán was held and waited over three hours to visit him.

When she finally was able to visit with Jonathán, he told her that he had hoped she wouldn't come. He didn't want to face her. Jonathán told her about how bad he felt by making her work so much and how he hated to hear how tired she was all the time. He felt helpless when watching his father get more and more sick, but there was only so much he could do. When he was presented the opportunity to do something more that would be able to help his mother he didn't hesitate.

The bodega owner had overheard him talking to Clara during one of his breaks and understood that Jonathán was interested in making more money. He pulled Jonathán aside one evening and asked how serious he was about making more money.

“He would've done anything. I didn't realize how desperate he was just to do anything.”

Jonathán told his mother about how his boss had arranged to use his bodega as a host location for a drug ring, mostly marijuana but every once in a while he would be asked to host methamphetamine. The bodega owner's wife was beginning to get suspicious of a possible affair when he would need to take long drives outside of Ocampo into neighboring states to deliver the drugs to their next location. His boss would pay Jonathán a cut of the profits if he would take over the delivery drives, as needed.

After his first drive, Jonathán felt confident that he would be able to eventually cover enough of the household expenses that he could tell his mother to quit her second job entirely. The story of receiving financial aid from the oncology clinic had been a cover story— one he never intended on telling her until she mentioned how bad her time at the motel was going.

“I should never have said anything at all. Yo era tan estúpido. How could I not think that my sweet boy would do something crazy if I told him I wasn't happy?”

Clara's visit only lasted about an hour before Jonathán was returned to his cell. She was able to set up a weekly schedule with him of when she would attempt to call him.

“Saying goodbye to him then was harder than leaving to drive back to Texas.”

Clara returned to Texas and told no one about what was happening with Jonathán. She was both embarrassed and feeling responsible for the entire situation. She began a habit of closing up whenever people, even family members would ask about Fernando and Jonathán “*Prescribed conversations,*”, she would describe them as. If anyone would ask about Fernando’s health she would give them only basic updates of his treatments, but as months went on she worried that he was fighting a losing battle and she wasn’t even there to hold his hand through it all. She told no one about the regret she felt over her absence. If asked about Jonathán she gave vague answers: “*Oh you know, he’s just a ___ year old boy.*” The only piece of her response that would change became his age as months became years.

“Eventually people stopped asking about him.”

Clara would call during the times they had arranged on a weekly basis but would often be unable to reach Jonathán. The calls were expensive and if she was not patched through within the first 30 minutes she would not be able to call back until the next week. Fernando’s own experience of calling the prison was much of the same– inconsistent phone calls and brief contacts. They would often go several weeks between calls without any contact with Jonathán.

After a six year battle with lung cancer, Fernando finally passed on November 12, 2016. Clara had been unable to drive to Mexico in time for the funeral and Fernando was laid to rest by friends and neighbors in Ocampo.

Though Clara maintained her weekly calls, she was in the middle of a particularly long streak without contact with Jonathán. To her knowledge, Jonathán did not know his father had passed.

Unable to make bail, from the time Jonathán was arrested, tried, convicted, and had completed serving his sentence, he would not be released until December 23, 2016.⁶ When Jonathán returned home after being released, he ran into a neighbor, one who had assisted his father while he was locked up. The neighbor told him about his father’s passing and offered their phone to Jonathán for him to try to call his mother.

Clara came home to a message from Jonathán explaining that he had been released and that he would be staying at the neighbor’s house⁷ until she called back. She called back immediately and spoke to her son for the first time in over seven weeks.

“We just cried. I just cried. I don’t even really remember what we talked about or if we talked once we stopped crying. Maybe we didn’t. Maybe we really did just cry.”

⁶ In all honesty, this timeline is extremely lenient in comparison with the majority of Mexican drug-related offences. My only guess as to why his process and sentence were seemingly expedited was because drug-related arrests and convictions are lower in Coalhuia than neighboring states, Chihuahua and Nuevo Leon.

⁷ Jonathán was unsure he he had been evicted from home after not being present to pay December’s rent.

By happenstance, Clara had maintained rent payments for the months of December and January, despite Fernando's death. She attributes the decision to an angel whispering for her to do so. If she had not done so, Jonathán would have either been released from prison into homelessness or would have been facing homelessness by end of the year. As it was, Jonathán didn't want to be in Ocampo any longer. He had made his worst decisions there and his father had died there. Since his imprisonment, many of his friends had lost touch and he felt strange seeing them after his release. His mother was not there and he felt he had nothing keeping him there besides his own citizenship. Him and Clara began looking into him obtaining a visa to move to Texas while he worked on finally getting his citizenship.

In the meantime, he was hired as a kitchen hand in a small restaurant.⁸ While at work one day, he ran into the bodega owner's wife. She apologized for his arrest, maintaining a belief that it was unjust— her own husband had been quickly released from his own imprisonment and his charges dropped after being found not guilty. She invited him to stop by the bodega to catch up longer— he had been a missed employee.

In a later phone call with Clara, Jonathán would share his suspicions that his old boss had been able to bribe his way out of conviction but had left Jonathán to fend through the judicial system on his own. Clara told him to let it be, to forget them and any trouble they would have to offer him if he were to return to that bodega.

By mid-January, 2017, Jonathán was growing stir crazy the longer he remained in Ocampo, isolating himself. He told Clara about a friend he had, who had knowledge of contacts who could help him get to Texas, without a visa. Despite a long argument with him, telling him to wait for the process to work on its own, Jonathán did not budge on a belief that he would never be granted a visa of any kind. He was a convicted felon and he was confident that his conviction would halt any authorization possible for legal entry into the US. He would begin making plans to come to Texas as soon as possible. He told Clara that every day spent in Ocampo was a day closer to returning to prison, and that he couldn't live like that anymore. By this time, Clara feared that her son was being dishonest about having stayed away from former illegal activities.

"If he had contacts willing to move people across the border, I'm sure they also moved drugs."

She just wanted him to leave that part of his life behind but could not fight him into waiting for a possible visa approval. She refused to send him any more money, worrying that he would use it to pay for a coyote's⁹ services.

Without any explanation of how he was paying for his border travel on short notice, Jonathán told his mother that he would be leaving for Texas on February 21, 2017. Before leaving, the only other things he told her was that he would be walking as much of the way as possible, so that it might take him a couple of weeks to reach her, and that he loved her.

⁸ He had worked in the kitchens while in prison and now had basic kitchen skills.

⁹ Coyote is a term used for a person who acts as a guide to migrants traveling across the border illegally.

At this point in the timeline of events, it had been several years since Carro had given truly honest knowledge to anyone in the family. Whether or not “no one ever asked about him” was also an honest statement– so to say, in the most literal sense, that no one ever asked about Juan Carro– or an exaggeration– because people asked about him but never pried beyond receiving simple, surface answers– is still debated at family events. Suffice to say, my own recent questioning of Carro’s family in Mexico and Juan Carro’s life growing up away from the rest of the primos took most everyone by surprise.

I wish I had asked about him before now.