



The Wiliest



Coyote

A decade in the life of America's most dedicated, brazen, and outrageously creative people smuggler

➔ KATHY DOBIE



FOG WAS his ally, but the rain was his best friend. It was 10 P.M. and drizzling, so Elden Kidd knew there would be nobody on the Tijuana beach to watch them leave: no bad guys, no *policía*. The rain shrouded them as they pulled on their wet suits, discarding their clothes on the sand and heading into the surf; it muffled the tiny noises they made—the frightened gasps of the two Chinese teenage girls clinging to the boogie boards as the first waves reared up and smashed over them, the sound of Elden's fins slicing the water as he headed out beyond the surf break. The colored lights from Tijuana's dance clubs began to shimmer, then blur. The frenetic thumping of the bass line carried across the dark water like someone breathlessly chasing them. Soon that, too, would fade.

Elden lay on his back, kicking steadily, a tow rope wrapped around his shoulder linking him to the girls. Every six seconds the beam from Tijuana's lighthouse pierced the dark and the drizzle, and he used the light as a reference point. First they headed straight out into the Pacific, paddling several hundred yards to get as far as possible from the

• Elden Kidd, smuggler extraordinaire, in the surf along the U.S.-Mexico border.

rusting border fence that sloped down into the beach—an area closely surveilled by U.S. Border Patrol—and then they could finally turn and plow their way north, the girls' destination all along.

Elden had begun smuggling people across the border five years earlier, in 1989. In a business run almost entirely by Mexicans, he was this clean-cut Mormon from California who barely spoke Spanish—the American Coyote. Mostly he took Mexicans, but when his satisfied customers found kitchen jobs in Chinese restaurants, Elden's reputation spread. He had shuttled people across the border dozens upon dozens of times, and always he was impressed by the bravery he saw: farmers and factory workers following him at a crouch along the ragged bottom of a gully, grandmas and children wading a cold river toward a night-shrouded shore.

On this night, the rain, cool and sweet-tasting, sluiced off his Vaseline-smeared face. Elden kept his ears tuned to the waves breaking on his left. If the sound grew too loud, he was drifting too close to shore; if it began to fade, they were heading farther out to sea. It would be five hours before they would come ashore at Imperial Beach in California. Until then, they were alone with the thick churn of the ocean, the velvety depths, the dark and the rain

curtaining them off. The girls began singing softly to each other.

Besides providing the two kids with dark-colored life jackets and boogie boards, Elden had fastened duck decoys on their heads, so if anyone would happen to spot them on a moonless night, in the rain, hundreds of yards from shore, they would see only a couple of ducks bobbing on the ocean surface. It had taken the girls three weeks to get this far, and this was the last leg of their journey, *his* leg, at \$5,000 a head. They'd never been in an ocean before, didn't even know how to swim. It had helped that the people who had brought the girls to him—they rendezvoused at a little bike shop in Tijuana—had told them Elden had supernatural powers, that this American had never failed to get people across. And the look of him had only bolstered the myth: six feet three, 270 pounds, a tanned and muscular giant with a pleasantly white-toothed grin. As soon as the girls had seen him, they left the side of their Chinese-Mexican handler and came to him, hugging his brawny arms, clinging to him like delicate vines.

After an hour or so in the cold swells, the girls began to ask, "*Meiguo?*" The word for America that translated to "beautiful country." All he could do was point up ahead in the distance, over the black water, at a cluster of white haloed lights that marked

Imperial Beach. Time crawled. Or sped. Lost its shape altogether out here. Had another hour passed? Less? Impossible to tell.

Finally, they came ashore at 3 A.M. They dug up the plastic bag of clothes he had stashed in the sand, buried their wet suits, threw their life jackets into the surf, and hurried to the motel room that Elden had booked. There, the girls jumped into a hot shower and stayed for 40 minutes while Elden sat wrapped in a bedspread, shivering and waiting his turn. His throat was raw from all the salt water, his ankles and calves throbbed, he was physically spent, his body tugging him down into the sweet molasses of sleep. But elation is what he felt—he was almost goofy with it.

THESE DAYS, Elden is still an impressively large man, thick-necked and bear-pawed. I first met him in a pancake house in Riverside, California. He had his second wife and her two kids with him, his pride and joy. He didn't walk so much as surge and shamble. Even though he's 62, it's not hard to imagine that he'd once shepherded scores of people across the border, becoming a legend in a time and place now long gone. He'd created dozens of routes and perfected an endless array of ploys, cover stories, costumes, and props—all products of a profoundly devious and clever mind.

• With an array of routes and schemes, Elden Kidd and Tim Burraston (right) ferried scores of immigrants out of Mexico.





• Throughout the 1990s, Tim, top, and Elden were the rare Americans in a business run by Mexicans.

A lot has changed since Elden prowled the border—though, to listen to Donald Trump, you’d never know it. A cornerstone of his campaign for the presidency is to build a wall to save America, and so, naturally, he doesn’t mention that much of it—some 700 once porous miles—is already sealed off. Nor does he mention that more Mexicans leave the U.S. today than enter it. Today, the wild and untamed border—an unruly netherworld where hordes of Mexicans pour into our country—exists mostly in Trump’s mind.

But once upon a time, before 9/11, in an era that now seems innocent and free, the border was a stranger, more chaotic place. And in those days, Elden felt fireproof. He had married at 22, and he and his wife settled in Riverside, California, and began having babies. Providing for his family was Elden’s high holy cause, his “earthly mission,” as he says, a calling that made him feel both invincible and free to do whatever it took, however risky, underhanded, or illegal.

Then, as now, the politics of the border—the legalities of immigration—didn’t much concern him. This was about making money. If Elden had a flag, it would be for his family. He was an adventurer, a restless, ready soul. Human smuggling married so many parts of his personality—his athleticism, his williness, the rebellious prankster and the defender of the underdog. As his ex-wife says, with both appreciation and pain, “he’s the freest man I know.”

Back when Elden first started, hundreds of people would storm the stretch of border near Tijuana every night, swarming the outmanned Border Patrol agents stationed there. “It was as simple as ducking under a fence in those days,” Elden says. Some nights, all it took was Elden hanging out near the Tijuana River with a rubber raft; when immigrants reached the water, he would ferry them across at \$25 a head.

Sometimes Elden would be joined by his buddy Tim Burraston, a surfer and carpenter he’d met while leading white-water-rafting trips in the U.S. and Mexico, along the Guatemalan border. When the river was running full, the two were in their glory. The going price for taking someone all the way from Tijuana to Los Angeles was only \$250. “A thousand-dollar night was a home run,” Tim recalls.

Things would change when, in 1994, President Bill Clinton launched Operation Gatekeeper, intensifying security on the most heavily trafficked section of the border—the six westernmost miles. Reassigned agents flooded the area, armed with infrared telescopes and encrypted radios. Lines of double fencing were built and high-powered stadium lighting installed. Crossing the border became a lot more difficult, but being a smuggler became a lot more lucrative. Elden began to charge \$1,800 a head for Mexicans and \$5,000 for Chinese immigrants, a riskier bunch to take across because they were undocumented on both sides of the border. (But children always traveled for free; nothing made Elden happier than ferrying a child or a baby.)

As the preferred crossing routes shifted away from the heavily policed sections of the border and toward much more treacherous terrain, many more immigrants began to die during the passage. And although no one ever died on Elden’s watch, the routes demanded more complex—and inventive—schemes. Case in point: One Christmas Eve, he crossed six young men over the border and into California, dressed them in Santa Claus suits he had purchased at Big Lots, gave them bicycles, then sent them north, through an area often patrolled by border police. Or during pheasant-hunting season? He put them in hunting vests and handed out BB guns.

Of course, avoiding the cops altogether was always preferable, and for this, Elden figured he could use a little intel. So, one day he approached an agent in Yuma, Arizona, introduced himself as a Boy Scouts leader, and said he was bringing a bunch of scouts camping there next weekend and he knew the boys would love to be able to tune in to the agents’ activities and cheer them on. Would the agent be kind enough to share the call signs they used on their radios? Sure. After that, Elden could easily listen in, and if cops spotted him heading into Mexico (“Looks like we got a guy on a taco run...”), he would turn around, hunker down, and try again later.

If elusiveness failed him, he resorted to quick thinking. Once, when Elden was discovered by Mexican police, he let the cops chase him into the bottom of Smuggler’s Gulch, where he promptly clutched his chest and fell to the ground. Four cops

labored to drag him out of the 180-foot-deep canyon—270 pounds of dead weight—and then when they reached the high ground, Elden leapt to his feet and took off down the slope again. The officers were just too exhausted to follow.

“OCTOBER 11 1994. To my great misfortune my life has changed completely. I’m being held against my will in the Federal Prison in Toluca Mexico.... My heart is broken. I feel as if I am already dead and this place is my tomb.” That is how Elden’s prison journal began. At the time, he had no way of knowing that he was facing a two-year ordeal that would make him harder, humbler, quicker with his fists—and, ultimately, a much better criminal.

Elden was arrested for smuggling in Toluca, 40 miles west of Mexico City—he wasn’t moving people, a crime he had committed many times, but rather marijuana, which police found hidden beneath the floorboards of a motor home he was driving. He’d been hired by a wealthy Mexican-American mango grower to drive the motor home down into south-central Mexico for a large family gathering, take a few days off while they partied, and then drive the motor home back to the States. This was the third such trip Elden had taken for the man. He claims he had no idea he was being used as a mule. “Back then I was still a serious Mormon, and marijuana was the devil,” he says.

After his arrest, Elden was transported to a prison in central Mexico called Almoloya de Juárez. Elden’s cell block contained 250 men; he was the only American.

At first, Elden had no interest in friends or alliances; he didn’t belong here. He had only one aim: to survive this hell until he could find a way out. “I dream of escape every night, but there is no way. 10 guard towers manned by two men each with rifles. High grey walls topped by spools of razor wire. Doors, gates, bars... May God help me and my family.”

The mornings were god-awful. He woke to the sounds of phlegmy coughing, water sloshing in buckets, mops clanking, the first garbled cries and shouts of a language not his own. Twice a day, he was fed from a barrel filled with rice and beans or some unidentifiable stew. “This was a rough day. The food was horrible. Horse teeth in the soup pot,” he wrote that October. He quickly began to lose weight.

Other prisoners tormented Elden, throwing rocks or bread rolls at him when he was in the yard. “Got in a short fight with a guy who attacked me with a heavy pipe. Put him down instantly.” Elden spent hours outdoors in a distant corner of the yard, reading and watching the sky. He noted snowy egrets and kestrels, flycatchers and blackbirds.

And he tried to forget the headaches, colds, hives, and badly abscessed tooth that plagued him. His skin became gray.

Still, he jogged in the yard and lifted buckets of water, buckets of rocks. He easily won a prison-wide arm-wrestling contest. By the spring, some prisoners were glomming on to him for protection: An old man who was too afraid to walk the yard alone. A young Zapatista who had his shoes stolen. (Elden retrieved them.) A humble Indian who was getting kicked around.

But after 18 months inside, Elden had lost his faith in God. Writing to his still devout wife, he asked her not to judge him too harshly. “My plan is to love you as much as you let me. I can never be the same though. To be the money making machine I was... running Mexicans through the sewer river and freezing waves or back-to-back river trips, it’s over. When my freedom finally comes I won’t waste even one hour doing anything I don’t want to do. I need to enjoy nature...see my parents, play with the kids, catch a fish.... There’s no bitterness against God. I just will let God do as he please and I will do what I can to be a good person.”

In February 1996, under a treaty that allowed American prisoners in Mexican jails to serve their time in the United States, Elden was transferred to La Tuna federal penitentiary in Texas. Eight months later, he was released. His eldest daughter, Eileen, vividly remembers her dad’s first day home, his grabbing her mother, pulling her close, and slow-dancing with her. His grin like a big wink to the kids as they watched, delighted at his impetuosity. They figured the worst was behind them.

But within five months of returning home, instead of doing what everyone thought he would do, what he had promised to his wife—to walk the straight and narrow and keep miles away from trouble—Elden starting running people across the border into Arizona. What was he thinking? He says his prison experience affected him in a peculiar way. “That’s what kind of made my mind a little twisted as far as, yeah, let’s bring a *bunch of people in*.”

THANKS TO HIS TIME inside the Mexican prison, Elden was now fluent in Spanish—a skill he knew would make him a better smuggler. And his elder kids would be needing college tuition. Still, to this day, he’s not really sure why he took the risk. He’d been released on three years’ probation, so any slip would land him back inside. His ex-wife thinks he needed to be the hero again—the Moses of Mexico. Maybe his time as a lowly jailbird made him need it even more. But I wonder if the expectation that he would behave felt like a harness, and parole just another cage. What better way to feel unbound than

dashing back and forth across a walled and heavily guarded border?

When Elden returned to smuggling, the routes around Tijuana were all sewn up. Everything had moved east, to Mexicali and Los Algodones, to Sonoyta on the border with Arizona, into more and more treacherous desert and mountain terrain.

He always carefully surveyed his routes, and sometimes made a dry run: Could he climb that mountain? Swim that canal? Could children? Old men? What would happen if the plan failed? The part of every journey that felt dangerous to Elden was rarely the part that was scary to those he was crossing with. When he had used the ocean route, it wasn’t swimming out into the Pacific at night that he worried about; it was the instant right before they entered the water, when, say, he and the two Chinese girls were on the Tijuana beach, pulling on their wet suits. No cover story could explain that. And even though Elden knew he could escape by diving into the ocean and swimming away, the girls couldn’t. The moment was electric with tension.

Within months of getting out of prison, Elden had established a route out of Mexicali, using an old ruse of his: bird-watching. On a desolate stretch of furrowed sand and brittle bush, Elden would set up camp on federally owned land on the American side of the border. A tent, his trailer. He tramped around with binoculars and a bird book. Made campfires. Whenever Border Patrol came by, he offered the agent coffee or hot dogs or pancakes. Asked the agent if he’d ever seen a burrowing owl around these parts. Later he listened to them radioing one another, “Oh, he’s just some bird-watching nature boy.”

After a few days of this, Elden would take a cab across the border, to Mexicali, and meet up with his clients. On one particular trip, they rendezvoused at a motel, where he checked everyone’s gear—no white clothes, no light-up sneakers on the kids. Then they all hopped into a pair of taxis and set off for a cemetery just outside town, not far from the border. Along the way, they stopped to pick up flowers and a kind of powdered-chile candy they could rub into their eyes if they needed to cry. At the cemetery gate, the Mexicans headed inside while Elden skirted the perimeter until he found a vantage point from which he could keep watch. While his group huddled around a grave, some hushed and intent, others brimming with the desire to giggle, Elden scanned the area for Mexican border police and any other kind of trouble.

As the sun dipped behind the mountain, the dry earth seemed to sigh with relief. A breeze kicked up and tiny birds swiftly

stitched the sky. Elden watched as his group rose and, the parents putting their arms around their children’s shoulders, walked slowly to the back of the cemetery. When the dusk deepened and the sky was drenched in ink, they set off toward the border and the bird-watchers’ camp on the other side. Elden carefully inched the group forward. They stopped often to crouch in the gullies. When they arrived, Elden put the immigrants in the tent and

Like a sudden change of weather, a flash flood, or a stampede, a flock of official vehicles—Border Patrol, Highway Patrol, dark unmarked cars—swarmed Elden’s van.

got a campfire going. He sat there toasting marshmallows, ready to offer some to Border Patrol if they happened by.

Even when one scheme succeeded, Elden was eager to try another. “The thing with Elden,” Tim says, “is he’d come up with a plan, it would work perfectly, and instead of saying, ‘Well, that plan worked, let’s do it again,’ Elden says, ‘Well, that worked, let’s try something different next time.’”

By 2001, Elden’s operation was booming; he and Tim were now taking people over the Rio Grande into Texas, and the two men were joined at the hip. The route was easier to manage with a partner, and as Elden neared the end of his parole, he wanted to play it a little safer. “It just came so naturally to us,” Tim says. “Because of our river-rafting tours, we knew about transporting people and the logistics of packing everything in a van and camping out, and we were good in watery environments. We were so good, we got careless.”

THE TRAIL that led to their arrest began with a sidelong glance. It was February 2001, and Tim had flown in for a job from his home in Santa Cruz, rented a 15-seat passenger van, and driven down to Big Bend National Park on the banks of the Rio Grande, where Elden had already set up camp. Elden was driving an old moss-colored Dodge van with crushed beer cans on the dashboard, bumper stickers written in Spanish, and no rear license plate. Their decoy car.

In the late afternoon, the two men waded across the Rio Grande, the cold, jade-hued water pulling at their legs, and then walked for about an hour and half to Bocquillas, where they met a group of indigenous people from Oaxaca. After ferrying everyone across the river, black now beneath a thousand white stars, and hiking

a half hour more through the hardscrabble terrain, they arrived at the camp.

The next morning, the two vans pulled out of the camp—Tim and the entirety of the group in one vehicle, Elden up ahead playing scout, in his. They were heading to Fort Stockton to hole up for the night, as they always did. There they would get the men haircuts, coax them into shaving off their mustaches, and put everyone into thrift-store suits and dresses. Sometimes Tim and Elden handed them Bibles for the ride out; sometimes they put little dots on the women's foreheads.

Ten miles south of Fort Stockton, where the two-lane road runs through a creosote-studded desert with nowhere to hide, Elden spotted Border Patrol up ahead. He pulled onto the shoulder and jumped out. "Good morning, officer. I'm wondering if you can help me out. My son wants to join the Border Patrol..." While the agent was giving Elden a phone number, a large gold van

drove past, and he noticed Elden giving it the side-eye before quickly looking away. Elden turned up the charm, though now it had a nervous edge. After Elden drove off, the agent contacted Fort Stockton P.D., asking them to watch for a green van missing a rear plate. They found the van, and when they ran the existing front plate, they came up with a name: Elden Kidd. And guess what, buddy, he's got a prior for transporting marijuana.

Later that day, police saw Elden with another white man standing beside a gold van matching the description of the second vehicle. They put out a BOLO (be on the lookout) alert for the two, and Elden's photo was distributed. The cops figured they had a couple of drug smugglers working the west Texas border.

A month later, an off-duty Border Patrol agent coming out of the Walmart in Fort Stockton spotted a hard-to-miss Elden walking in. He and Tim had just made another border run, picking up 18 Mexicans, including a 6- and a 7-year-old child, and after checking them into two different motels, they were out buying them socks and shoes. It was 9 P.M., and for the next 12 hours, several law-enforcement officers watched as the two men drove between the La Quinta and Atrium motels, bringing bags of food from McDonald's and trays of coffee into the rooms. In the



• After a life of adventure, Elden settled down. But he hasn't changed much.

morning, they saw Elden and his now identified associate, Timothy Burraston, load two vans full of people. The cops waited until the men had driven out of the city and were heading west on Route 10, Elden in the lead.

Baby blue skies, Tim thinking ahead to the surf back home when, like a sudden change of weather, a flash flood, or a stampede, a flock of official vehicles—city police, Border Patrol, Highway Patrol, and dark unmarked cars—swarmed Elden's van, corralling him and moving him to the shoulder. Tim kept on driving, his heart leaping, blood draining to his feet, thinking, "Maybe they don't know I'm involved, maybe they don't..." when Texas Highway Patrol zipped in cleanly behind him, blues and reds flashing.

At the local Border Patrol station, Elden and Tim were stashed in an interview room, where Elden tried to reassure his friend with a wink. Later, Tim asked him, "Did you think everything was gonna be okay?"

"Nah," Elden said. "I knew we were fucked."

They were locked up in Pecos, Texas, where Elden wrote to his wife, "Neither of us fully calculated the risk. Seems like in some ways a good thing to be caught, because when would I have stopped?" After 28 days, Tim got friends to sign bonds totaling \$60,000 for his bail, and he hightailed it to Santa Cruz. Because of his criminal record, Elden was left inside. The

charge was importation of illegal aliens, and he was looking at five years. "All I have to do is think of this as my gift to the family," Elden wrote, accepting his fate. Coal miners risked black lung; coyotes, jail. If it wasn't part of the job description, it ought to have been.

Resigned and philosophical? Only if he needed to be. After a decade-plus of successful smuggling, Elden figured he had some valuable information to trade—and he was looking for a deal. Before long, five agents with U.S. Border Patrol arrived. After grilling Elden about his underground contacts in the Mexican and Chinese communities, they realized he could be useful helping to catch crooked border agents and gathering intelligence on counterfeit goods coming from China via Mexico. If he agreed, it would be an open-ended commitment—they might cut him loose in six months or in two years, they told him. The judge might look favorably on his cooperation, but there was no guarantee.

"I would start walking a backwards moon walk the 1500 miles...right now in my boxers just to be on my way home," Elden wrote to his wife. And so he signed a "contract of co-operation," and he was allowed to go home before sentencing.

IMPERIAL BEACH, 2016. The Tamed Frontier. The new 18-foot-tall border fence runs down a bluff, across the beach, and then straight out into the ocean for 300 yards more, like a runaway roller coaster. On top of that hill, a white Border Patrol Chevy Tahoe with green stripes stands watch. Another one comes rolling down the kelp-strewn beach toward us. It's been almost 20 years since Elden last stood on this beach. As the ocean unfurls wave after wave, gray and pearly under a half-lit sky, he has a visceral memory of the cold water and the burning in his legs, and it hits him now like it didn't then—what a huge responsibility it was taking people into that ocean at night.

"What do you think, Elden? Still doable? You just stay in the water, stay low..." Tim says, coming up to Elden's side. "Like, if you had a little bag of diamonds and you wanted to get it..."

"If I had to smuggle diamonds," Elden replies, "I'd just have you swallow them in a burrito and follow you around with a bucket." *(continued on page 237)*

else. Or it's like a pinnacle that you're put on. People expect certain things from you. Undue things, and easy things. And that's cool, you know. And that's what I do now."

It's arguably part of his job to look me in the eye and say that a hoodie is just an article of clothing. Which isn't to say it's not a choice. It very much is. But you could understand why he'd make it. Even if it's dispiriting to hear. It's probably dispiriting to say, too. To channel the most anodyne version of himself through conversations like the one below:

Do you have an opinion on Donald Trump?

"I don't. I think he's an unbelievable businessperson. That's probably it. But outside of my personal belief, that's just, you know, my personal belief."

Did you vote for the North Carolina governor that enacted that bathroom law?

"Um...that's too personal. You know, I gain nothing by answering it."

I think the bill is repellent. I'm not trying to be coy.

"I love people too much to care about those type of things."

That's exactly why it bothers me.

"I went to school to study sociology. You know, and that's something that really gets my attention. I don't look at things through color lenses. I don't look at things through genetic images or whatever. Their sex. I just love the different type of vibes people bring. I try to alleviate any type of bad energy. But I could care less. I love a person because of who they are. And that's who I am. So whatever you are personally, I don't care. You know, if you a good person, you a good person. No matter what anything, from religion to politically to, you know, sex preferences—"

Wouldn't that be a reason not to vote for the North Carolina law?

"But that's too personal. That's when you put the microscope to the person. But overall, I don't care. Man, in my circle, and especially growing up in Atlanta, you see everything!"

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THAT PART IS TRUE! Cam walks around Atlanta like the city belongs to him, like he belongs to the city. We barely make it into the cigar shop before the other salesman, a dapper guy with cuff links and thick-framed glasses named Jonathan, cries out in recognition, takes Cam aside, Cam getting more and more excited.

He turns around: "This guy's fiancée sold me the pants!"

You know the ones. Zebra-print Versace. Part of a long series of out-there, occasionally dubious fashion choices for Cam, who more than once wore a \$200 foxtail—the feathery tail of a dead fox—clipped to his trousers during a press conference. Another way he can't help but assert personality in his colorless league. After he wore the Versace pants on Super Bowl Sunday, they sold out almost immediately. Cam was even told they made more. "I heard that's unheard of," Cam says proudly.

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HE'S FASCINATED with other successful people. "Because I love people! I love them, man. Pretty much can talk to anybody. And that's kind of like my gift and curse. Sometimes I talk too much. But needless to say, it's fun. I'm all about learning." Fascinated

with those who came before him. "I read *The Wall Street Journal* constantly. I read, you know, certain magazines, just to try to get hip to certain people's vibes." He says he's been watching ESPN's O. J. Simpson documentary. "That's been unbelievable. Just compelling to just see a person of his magnitude. And not just *him*, because the show doesn't just talk about him. It talks about everything around him, from the socio-economic problems that we had to everything. And it's just a day back in the history, and to keep people hip to what or where we came from."

This spring he shot a TV show. *All in with Cam Newton*, for Nickelodeon. A big deal—no other active quarterback has his own television half hour. Cam grew up watching the network, "from Nick at Nite to *All That* to *SpongeBob* to *Rugrats*, everything." Then they gave him his own show, about helping kids accomplish their dreams. He loves kids. "Not necessarily saying that the older generation isn't important. I just feel like my impact and my heart tends to, you know, go the younger route." Every episode, Cam helping some young boy or girl realize some weird ambition, like making a YouTube show about snake handling. Cam out in the desert with this kid, in a full rubber bodysuit so he doesn't get bitten. Cam looking at the camera in terror: "You never know when a snake is just gonna *pop out* of the bushes!"

What an opportunity, for him and for the children. He believes people have different talents in this world, see? That's the idea behind the show. "When you look at comic books, and when you look at different superheroes, they all possess something different. Spider-Man wasn't like Superman. Superman wasn't like Wonder Woman. Wonder Woman wasn't like Aquaman. Aquaman wasn't like the Hulk. They all brought something different." Don't be like Cam, was the idea. Be like yourself. Be your own Aquaman.

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HE SAYS THAT Chosen's helped him grow up, become a better man. Before, the goal "was always to live comfortably and do the things that you want to do with whoever you want to do it with. Now it's like, you have a seed on this earth that you see all your similarities in, from the nose, the ears, the face, the smile. You know, the body composition, and everything just makes you feel obligated to make his life as easy as possible."

What about the parents who won't let their kids play football anymore? Would you let Chosen play?

"Of course. Why wouldn't they let them play football?"

I'm incredulous that he's so incredulous.

Concussions. Brain damage.

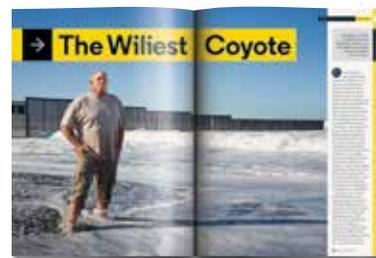
"But they don't talk about the joy it brings! Super Bowl Sunday trumps every TV rating known to man."

But that's the point. I get to sit on my couch and watch you risk physical harm from Von Miller for my own entertainment. It's great for me. But is it great for you?

"Oh, of course!" I believe that he really believes this. I believe that he loves what he does, even when it doesn't love him back.

"There's no doubt in my mind: Yes." ❌

ZACH BARON is GQ's staff writer.



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Elden was sentenced shortly after September 11—an event that made his decision to work for the government feel righteous. In exchange for his help, the judge gave Elden three years' probation. He would eventually report to agents at the new Department of Homeland Security. Elden would be an information gatherer: Watch this guy or that warehouse. Get close to so-and-so. He says he handed the authorities puzzle pieces, rarely getting a glimpse of the bigger picture, but he preferred it that way. Eventually his smuggling contacts dried up. Still, he kept his eyes open. He says the last time the government contacted him for a tip was in 2008.

Tim got three years of probation, too. He never wants to slip up again. "Elden's the tough guy; I'm the guy that hits the floorboards," Tim jokes. These days Tim performs in a band; he picks up carpentry jobs only when he runs completely out of money, the slacker to Elden's workaholic.

Early that evening, I head with Tim and Elden over the border into Mexico to take a road trip down memory lane. Before leaving his house in Riverside this morning, Elden had tucked an axe in the back of my Jeep Cherokee ("You never know when you might need to chop some firewood," he explained dubiously) and then worked the roof lining loose on the driver's side and slipped several thousand dollars in there. (He brought along his bird book and binoculars and had debated whether to pack some Red Cross T-shirts for us.)

As we near the border, Tim is anxious because he doesn't have a passport. Elden keeps telling him everything is going to be fine, but Elden, who's got an almost socio-pathic sense of security, only makes Tim more nervous. "You always say that, 'Don't worry,' and then something bad happens," Tim complains to Elden as we crawl toward the border checkpoint.

We roll through without incident and are soon strolling the streets of Tijuana. Tim and I watch as Elden pads ahead of us, past the hawkers and the call girls, the police cars with their roving lights. So much has changed, but has it? Fences and walls and cameras and patrols. But Elden is only a calmer version of the man he once was—a guy who always figured that he'd been born in the wrong century, that the 1800s would've suited him. Still the man who needed a wilderness to traverse. As he ambles down the neon-lit street, he looks like an old lion in a jungle, Elden does, an out-back Buddha, a man on the loose. ❌

KATHY DOBIE's last article for GQ, "*The Curious Case of the Homesick Bank Robber*," appeared in the January 2016 issue.