

# Murder Movie

by Manuel Ramos

“When I volunteered to help with the festival, I didn’t think it would mean driving people around. I’m not a chauffeur.”

“Quit complaining, Miguel. This is a big chance for you. You’re the one that wants to be in the movie business, no? The Latino Film Festival puts you right in the middle of the action with people who can help you. Don’t be stupid. Impress people with your commitment to the festival, to helping out. Mingle, talk to them so they know who you are. It could lead somewhere. What else you got going that you can’t spare one weekend to take care of some producers, directors and actors, and see free movies, too? Seize the day, pal.”

What Marie said made sense, of course, but I didn’t want to listen. She may have been a good friend, even a girlfriend once upon a time, and she may have managed to get a good job at Channel 7 in the news department, and she still may have looked real good all dressed up for work, but I thought she had done me wrong with this festival thing. When she told me she could get me on the volunteer list for the festival, I had jumped at the chance. I thought I could moderate some of the directors’ panels, or introduce a couple of the films, talk to Eddie Olmos or Andy Garcia about my screenplay and maybe entertain one of the cute Latina starlets in between screenings. That’s what I expected, that’s not what happened.

The day before anything official started, I had to pick up a few Hollywood wannabes at the airport, at some very strange hours I thought, then get them to the hotel, and squeeze in a few trips to dinner for groups of AIPs (almost important people). Then, on Friday, I waited for them at their hotel until they were good and ready, trucked them to the theater, waited around to drive them to the receptions, and then later back to the hotel. I was stuck up front in the limo, and my only interaction with my passengers was an occasional hello or thank you or hey, slow down, we don’t want to die in Denver. I deserved more respect

than that, even if I was only 25, but there was no one to complain to except Marie and she had grown tired of my “whiny act.”

I managed. That was my attitude. I could survive anywhere, do anything, if I had to. I kept a smile on my face although the silly uniform I had to wear was too damn hot for the Colorado springtime sunshine. I said yes sir and no ma’am, got headaches from the perfume and liquor breaths, and did not get any sleep that first night before I had to be back at it early Saturday morning and do it all over again.

By that night, I was dog tired and cranky. The day had been hot, the passengers had not been in good moods since they were all nervous about the audience reaction to their movies, and I had not made any meaningful connections with anybody. The job had been a bust and then it got worse when Marie called me on the car phone and begged me to do one more drive that night, after the last film. I argued but in the end I gave in because she promised to make it up to me and the way she said, “make it up to you” was enough to re-energize my tired bones and dormant libido.

I had agreed to drive a producer and his actress wife to a late dinner meeting with a group of local Hispanics (among my friends, Hispanics means Mexicans with money) who wanted to play Hollywood. The concept was enough to make me gag but I kept my smile as I waited in front of the hotel for my passengers.

She twirled through the revolving doors and I knew it was Mrs. Castillo immediately. Short red dress, bright red lipstick, a black top that had to be some kind of lingerie not quite covering her ample bosom and the sweetest accent I had heard since my cousin Cristina from Matamoros had stayed with us one summer and learned a few English words.

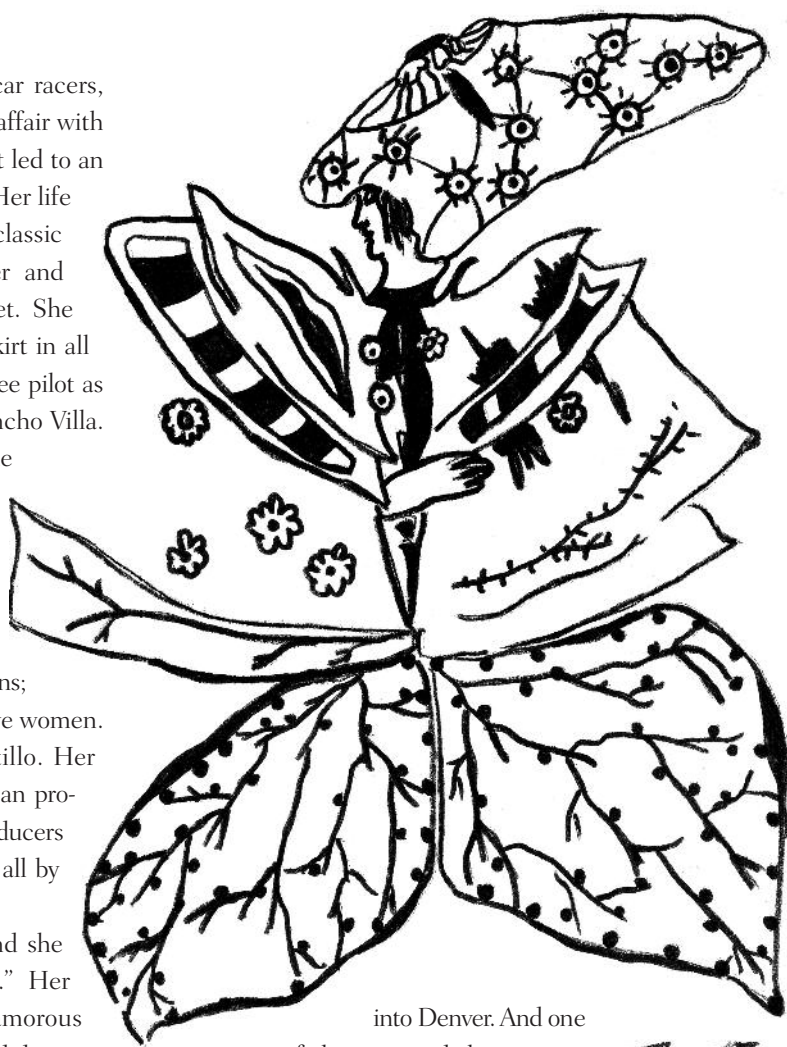
Debra Castillo used to be Dee Luna, the sexpot who had a decent career in Mexican B movies. The

plots of her flicks usually involved stock car racers, rodeo cowboys or serial killers. She had an affair with a Chicano senator from California, and that led to an appearance in a Robert Rodriguez project. Her life changed with that small part. There's one classic scene that produced a memorable poster and about a million downloads on the Internet. She stands in the desert, the wind lifting her skirt in all directions and she blows a kiss to the Yankee pilot as he takes off in his biplane to hunt down Pancho Villa. Her gringo lover loses control of the plane after Pancho has riddled it with Gatling gun fire, and the desperation in her eyes as she watches the plane spin in fiery descent was enough to get her more and better parts. In just a few years she had graced the cover of every magazine that catered to (1) movie fans; (2) Latinos; (3) men who like to ogle attractive women. She was the current Mrs. Reynaldo Castillo. Her husband was one of the few Cuban-American producers in Hollywood and one of the few producers of any heritage who could bankroll a movie all by himself, if he had to.

I opened the passenger door for her and she gave me a breathless, "Gracias, jovencito." Her entrance into the car was anything but glamorous and I had to help her with a polite push. I did get an eyeful of a pair of tanned thighs that would have made me stay for a double feature but she didn't seem to notice or care.

A few minutes later the husband stormed through the same revolving doors. He practically ran to the car and jumped in. I was closing the door when he grabbed it and jerked it shut. By the time I had made it to the driver's seat, they were in a full-fledged shouting match that even the massive body of the Lincoln could not contain. I spied on them in the rear view mirror but they were so intent on drowning out each other that they did not stop even when I pulled away from the curb. I did not need to talk to them anyway. I had my directions and I knew the address.

They were meeting the investor group at an expensive restaurant in the foothills about 30 miles away, and I had an hour to get them there. I had bitched about the drive to Marie, but she explained that the money people from Boulder didn't want to drive



into Denver. And one of them owned the restaurant.

An out-of-the-way place for a serious discussion about Latino movie-making in the brand new century—that's what Marie had told me when she filled me in on the details of my task.

I drove through the city streets to the interstate, cut to the Boulder Turnpike for several minutes and then off the highway onto a gravel road into the hills and the secluded nature reserve that surrounded the restaurant.

I thought I saw him slap her and I did see her break into tears at least twice. They finally stopped arguing about a mile from the restaurant when she tried to rearrange her makeup, without much luck.

I stopped the limo and opened the door for them but only he got out. He turned in her general direction and said, "Quit the games, Dee. I'm not doing this anymore. Either you come in now or you can find another way back to the hotel. Hell, you can find another way back to L.A."

I heard her answer: “¡Cabrón! ¡Déjame!”

Mr. Castillo must have understood that to mean that he would have to go the meeting by himself and he chugged off, mumbling under his breath.

I still held the door so I leaned in and said, “You okay? Anything I can do?”

She answered, “¿Habla español?”

I stammered, “Uh, lo siento. Por favor. I’m Chicano, pero, uh, I don’t speak Spanish very well.”

“That’s all right. I can manage in English. At least I think I can.” She coughed and I thought she was going to cry again.

“You sure you’re all right? Did he hurt you?”

“No. No. Not really. Not this time.”

I felt very strange feeling sorry for one of the most beautiful women in the world, whose makeup was smeared and whose dress kept inching up her legs and whose angry husband was less than 50 yards away in a high-powered meeting that could have determined my future. I wanted to be in that meeting. I wanted to pitch my script. It was the right audience: influential and wealthy Latinos who should want to hear from a young Chicano writer who had a story about murder and lust and revenge among the Hispanic middle class. It was a natural. A murder movie with a Latino slant. But I hadn’t been invited to that meeting so I had to be satisfied with soothing the very upset Mrs. Castillo.

Not that it was tough duty. Smeared makeup or not, she was easy on the eyes, as Bogart might have said in *The Big Sleep*, and I thought that I should at least try to calm her down.

“Has he hurt you before?”

She didn’t answer right away. She didn’t want to answer, I could see that, and that told me all I needed to know. The mighty Reynaldo Castillo beat up his wife.



“It’s not that important. The fights aren’t what I’m afraid of. That’s not it. I wish that was all.”

I shut the door, walked around the car and sat behind the steering wheel. I slid open the glass that separated the passengers from the driver and watched her for a few minutes. She seemed better, more in control.

I said, “If you don’t mind me asking, what is it? What are you afraid of?”

She hesitated again. It was difficult for her to speak but it wasn’t the language problem that was getting in her way.

Why should she trust me with the secrets of her heart, with the pain of a marriage that obviously hadn’t worked out? I was just the limo man, the driver, not even a real chauffeur, and she knew it and she had every reason to tell me to mind my own business.

She finally said, “One of Rey’s wives was killed, by a man who broke into their home. They never found the killer. Rey’s first wife disappeared after the divorce. She’s been missing for years. I think Rey had them both killed. It’s crazy, I know. But he’s a macho like from the old days, and he’s rich. Can’t bear to think that any woman would stand up to him, much less leave him. He thinks every woman wants his money. He’s mean, cruel. If I told you what he does, you wouldn’t believe it. No one believes it. He’s famous, generous, a leader of the community. I’m just a Mexican bimbo—I know that’s what they call me. No one listens to me. No one believes me.”

I wanted to reach over and hug her, tell her that I, for one, believed her, and that I would take her away right then and there to wherever she wanted to go. But, as I thought about what I would say, it sounded so stupid even to me that I could not dredge up the courage to say it to her. She started crying again and I listened and watched in helplessness. I shut the partition and gave her some privacy.







But, it'll never work. You've got to get the gun back from this guy and I don't think that's going to happen. Right, kid?"

We stood along the edge of the headlight beams and I was having a hard time making out any details. He was moving so slowly that I knew it would take several minutes for him to reach the direct glare of the headlights. I had to watch the both of them at once. I held the gun on him but I tried

to keep her in my vision, too. It was all a jumble, a mass of confusion in my head. I had to think clearly.

He was right about one thing. She was an actress, and I had to remember that.

Castillo said, "Kid, I need help. I'm going to faint. You must do something. ¡Ayúdame, hombre! She's a witch. Watch her. Don't turn your back on her. See what she did to me."

She moved closer and I jerked the gun in her direction and waved her away from me. Then I quickly re-aimed the gun at the wounded man. I could not see their faces, and I realized that I was incredibly hot and that sweat was dripping in my eyes. I should have taken off the chauffeur's coat but it was too late for that.

She said, "Don't listen to him. Let's just leave him and go. You can call the police after we drive away. He's up to something."

I wiped my face with my free hand and I began to put it together. What she said did it for me. Her words clicked and my brain made all the necessary connections at once. Why wait to call the cops? Did she want to do something before the cops showed up? Maybe shoot me while my attention was diverted, then finish off her husband? He was the one bleeding, right? How had she managed to get the gun away from him in the first place? And why would he have a gun when he was going to a business meeting? She had to have had the gun all the time, in that fancy purse she had carried all night. She had played me, that was obvious. She was a beautiful woman, toying with a kid who had been dazzled by her cleavage and legs—her sexiness. I had almost fallen for it.

I pointed the gun at her.

I said, "Okay, enough. No one's going anywhere. I'll call the cops, and we'll wait for them to come and sort this out. You just stay there, please."

I motioned with the gun for her to stand still.

She bit her lower lip. She said, "Don't. You don't know what he's doing."

I shook my head because now I understood completely.

I said to Castillo, "Hand me your phone."

He said from between clenched teeth, "Certainly. Take it."

He moved slowly, pulling the phone from his suit coat pocket. I reached for the phone with my left hand and when I touched its plastic case I relaxed the hold on the gun in my right hand. I realized my fingers ached from holding the gun in a vise grip and I did not want to have any accidents. I was close to him, closer than I wanted to be but I had to get the phone. I paid more attention to dealing with the phone than to the man or the woman, or to the direction the gun was pointed. That's when he grabbed my jacket lapels with his blood-smeared left hand, jerked me forward and kicked me in the stomach. I felt dizzy, sick. I fell backwards and dropped the gun.

He picked it up and aimed it at me. I heard her scream. I lay on my back in the dirt, unable to catch my breath, the sweat on my skin suddenly ice cold. My lips quivered and almost everything disappeared—the woman in the red dress, the man bleeding all over his thousand dollar suit, the limo, the night. All I could see was the barrel of the gun, and it made me smile. The gun roared and I twitched but I still smiled. I should have seen it coming. The ending was just like my screenplay. **MM**

