

A man wearing a black fedora and a dark jacket is shown in profile, looking down and smoking a cigarette. The background features a stone wall and a range of rugged mountains under a sunset sky with orange and blue hues.

THE BALLAD OF ROCKY RUIZ

A LUIS
MONTEZ
MYSTERY

MANUEL
RAMOS

"Thickly atmospheric—with just enough mystery to hold together a powerfully elegiac memoir of the heady early days of Chicano activism."

—Kirkus Reviews

Praise for the work of Manuel Ramos

“One thing is almost as certain as death and corruption: Manuel Ramos’ Chicano angst. You’ll find plenty of all three in his jazzy, fast-paced and delirious whodunits, which stand as an unparalleled achievement in American crime literature.”

—Ilan Stavans

“A thickly atmospheric first novel—with just enough mystery to hold together a powerfully elegiac memoir of the heady early days of Chicano activism.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* on *The Ballad of Rocky Ruiz*

“A very impressive debut.”

—*Los Angeles Times* on *The Ballad of Rocky Ruiz*

“Manuel Ramos is one of my all-time favorite authors and in *My Bad* he delivers everything I look for in a noir tale. Gus Corral is the guy I want on my side if I’m in trouble and Ramos proves once again he is the master of creating great characters. Clear your schedule and be prepared to read this blitz attack of noir in one sitting.”

—Jon Jordan, *Crimespree Magazine* on *My Bad*

“Ramos explores issues of the border, identity, violence and slights from outside the community, as well as within. They are thought-provoking and unpredictable. Many linger long after they end; and often they contain depth charges that explode in the reader’s mind after the story has ended. His novels belong on your bookshelves.”

—*Los Angeles Review of Books* on
The Skull of Pancho Villa and Other Stories

“Ramos puts Latinos back in the picture. He is known as a crime writer, but that doesn’t quite capture what he does. His books are love stories, political dramas, mordant cautionary tales. Characters who are Latino, black and white, artists, professionals and laborers, are described in staccato chapters, like a catchy corrido.”

—*Los Angeles Times* on
The Skull of Pancho Villa and Other Stories

“The Godfather of Chicano noir hits us hard with this collection. Great range, dark visions and lots of mojo—much of it bad to the bone. A fine book!”

—Luis Alberto Urrea, author of *Into the Beautiful North*, on
The Skull of Pancho Villa and Other Stories

“As invigorating as a dip in a Rocky Mountain stream.”

—*Mystery Scene* on *Desperado: A Mile High Noir*

“A dark mix of North Denver gangsters and Catholicism, but it’s [the] setting that really grips readers. Nostalgia is combined with reality . . . Ramos gets it right.”

—*Denver Post* on *Desperado: A Mile High Noir*

THE BALLAD OF
ROCKY RUIZ
A LUIS MONTEZ MYSTERY



MANUEL RAMOS



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For Flo

PART ONE

*Ojitos bonitos
que me están acabando
ojitos bonitos
que me están matando
“Ay ojitos”*

I don't recall all the subtleties and particulars and some of the events are screwed up in my head—out of sequence, out of synch. Hell, there were too many late nights and fuzzy mornings, and even back then I had a hard time keeping it straight. Life had this rough texture, like Velcro on a screen door. But there is one detail that stands out in my mind as clearly as if I was staring at her this minute, across the room, waiting for her to finish taking off her clothes. Those eyes—the round, moist, glowing brown eyes that will haunt me as sure as La Llorona prowls dark alleys looking for bad children; eyes that will stay with me until Chicanos reclaim their lost land of Aztlán—forever. There are days when I look over my shoulder and I catch them watching me, driving me up the wall, chilling my skin, making me forget every other woman I knew or met or loved. I know those eyes.

And the blood. I remember the blood. . . .

1

Toby Arriega's jury came back in about forty-five minutes—guilty on enough counts to send him away for at least another eight years, maybe a little more if the judge hammered him with aggravations.

The trial had exhausted me. I was too old for this—taking on work simply because it walked in the door, busting my butt trying to find a witness to back up Arriega's alibi, poring over police reports, talking to the names listed by the DA, calling Toby's brothers and sisters for help, piecing together a defense out of nothing and getting paid just enough to keep me on the hook until the trial was over. Then the damn jury took less than an hour to decide my effort was worthless.

It was a tough case from the beginning. I didn't particularly care for my client or his relatives. They were a hoodlum bunch from the Westside and they knew more about the criminal justice system than most judges. They had no qualms about cussing out their lawyer in the courthouse hallway.

I suggested to Toby that he cop out to one of the assault charges, but the old con would not go for it. He was already a two-time loser—what the hell did he care? He knocked over the convenience store, of course. What I couldn't understand was why he beat up the clerks and trashed the place. Toby denied the rough stuff and said wrecking the joint was the work of a kid, maybe one of the clerks, or another stickup

man, angry that Toby beat him to the punch—in any case, it wasn't Arriega. But I couldn't prove that. The clerks fingered Toby, said he locked them up in the back room and pistol-whipped them before he rampaged through the aisles of dog food, loaves of bread and comic books. And Detective Philip Coangelo finished the job with a very crisp and formal recitation of the incriminating remarks Toby had made when they busted down his door and dragged him away to the city jail.

I ended up in the Dark Knight Lounge, hunched over bourbon and beer, fed up with my scraggly assed existence as a borderline lawyer who represented guys who should have gone to the public defender or housewives who finally had had it with their fat and usually unemployed husbands. Yes, I was feeling sorry for myself, almost as sorry as Toby would feel when they shackled him in the van for the long, quiet ride to Cañon City and the state pen. At least he knew what he would be doing, and where he would be doing it, for the next several years. I didn't have a clue.

I finished my shot and ordered another, nursing the beer. My gut burned with the liquor. My bones, from eye sockets to ankles, were sore. You'd think Toby had worked me over after the verdict came in. It was only my forty-one-year-old body letting me know, in the cute way it had, that I drank too much, ate all the wrong foods, represented too many of society's dregs and let the little tensions of life overwhelm me. I stared into the bottom of the empty shot glass, looking for a sign, a hint, anything that might lead me into tomorrow with more than a hangover and an empty wallet.

"You look lousy, Luis. Ain't no big thing, man. It couldn't be that bad." Tino Pacheco wasn't exactly what I had in mind. He was an old friend—damn, who wasn't?—but I had a hard time handling more than a few minutes with him. Unfortunately, Tino would hook into a person for days—months—and his edgy, tough-guy act eventually rubbed off on whoever was

with him. Tino had this influence on people. He had a way to make a person talk and act crazy.

Our hands met in a halfhearted attempt at the Chicano handshake, but we didn't quite remember all the intricacies. "Tino. Long time. What's up?"

I put up with Tino because of the old days. When we were young, Tino and I had ended up crawling on the floor more than a few times, usually after a dirty, ugly fight in a bar where the white kids were too sensitive for Tino's insults or the Chicano brothers decided they had had their fill of him.

He had a gleam in his eyes, like mica dust, and he was either higher than a kite or in love. I was drunk enough to be amused. He pushed the girl in my direction, and I knew that Tino's problem was not drugs, not right then. He hung on to a Chicana many years younger than either of us. I checked her out, not expecting much, and I was pleasantly surprised. In the shadowy smoke- and alcohol-induced glaze of the bar, I saw that Tino finally had done something right.

Long black hair framed a thin, seductive neck. Her slender body snuggled against Tino with the right bit of casualness to whet my curiosity. "Luis, old buddy, I want you to meet Teresa Fuentes. She just graduated from law school, man. A lawyer like you. This is the guy I was telling you about, baby, Luis Montez. Attorney at law and old-time revolutionary pal of mine."

I looked at her face and, you know how it is, there are times when the people, atmosphere and emotions all come together at the right instant and you swear that life really is fine after all. The four black musicians on the small, barely lighted stage kicked off their last set with a moody, bluesy jazz harmony that set exactly the right tone. The bourbon cruised my system, mellowing out the rough parts and tricking me into thinking that the city was the only way to go. And I stared into the most beautiful pair of eyes I had seen in years

of chasing every manner and style of woman, tearing apart two marriages and who knows how many affairs, living through broken hearts and breaking a few, too. But those eyes turned me into a twenty-one-year-old loco, a dude on the prowl, and the world again was inhabited by beautiful, sensual women. The most beautiful, the most sensual was right there in front of me, rubbing her thigh against macho Tino, to be sure, but now she had met me, and, if Tino was *pendejo* enough to steer her my way, well, *ese, así es la vida*, man.

She offered her dark, manicured hand and I took it, compared its color to mine—almost a perfect match—rubbed it and held it for a few seconds more than was appropriate. She smiled at me and about ten years of crust fell off my skin. “Very nice to meet you, Mr. Montez. I’ve heard a lot about you.” I assumed from Tino, which meant I already could be trash in her eyes.

“Luis will do, Teresa. And don’t believe anything Pacheco tells you unless he can produce two witnesses, unrelated.” Tino socked me in the arm—“Hey, bud, don’t give Teresa the wrong idea”—and a puzzled, worried look creased her forehead. I wanted to touch her face, to assure her that the thing between Tino and me wasn’t serious, that it had started somewhere back in the history of our lives too ancient to remember. I massaged the charley-horse in my shoulder left by Tino’s punch. The guy always had been a pushy son of a bitch.

The night turned into a hazy, gritty smear of strong drinks, loud music and smoky bars. We bounced around from one joint to another, Teresa drinking one for the three Tino and I guzzled. She was quiet, aloof, and I appreciated the way she surrounded herself with mystery. I tried to stay cool, but I was lost in the booze and every ten minutes or so I caught myself wanting to grab her and kiss her and rush her away to my place.

I couldn't ditch Tino, and the longer the night lasted, the more belligerent and hostile he became. A half dozen times I had to pull him away from some guy he was going to bust in the mouth or from the victim of one of his unprovoked verbal assaults who was ready to clobber him with a beer bottle. It was obvious he was trying to impress Teresa, but all she gave him was an occasional hug or a little kiss on the cheek and plenty of exasperated sighs. I guess it was enough for him.

Lolly's Taco Shack on West Thirty-Second Avenue has the best jukebox in town—James Brown and Los Gamblers, Al Green and Freddy Fender. At three in the morning, it's usually crowded with Mexicans whooping it up from the dance at the GI Forum Hall, suburbanites tasting the edge and professionals celebrating the fact that everything has gone their way. Teresa and I ended up at Lolly's to put a cap on the night with something other than alcohol. We munched away at menudo, enchiladas and green chile, listening to a background of kitchen noises and the excited babble of culturally deprived white folks soaking up the color and smells of Denver's Little Mexico.

I tried small talk, but my concentration was shot. Those eyes. I would start to say something and then realize I had been staring at her in silence, taken in by the flashes of color and midnight deep in her eyes, and finally, awkwardly, I would look away or say something stupid.

I figured it was safe to ask about Tino, since he had passed out in the backseat of my car. "How long have you known Pacheco? He doesn't seem to be the type that would be in your circle." The cloud that passed over her face told me I had again turned to stupidity when I had nothing else to say.

"Exactly what is my circle?" Something about my half-hearted attempt to insinuate she lived in a separate, more refined world upset her.