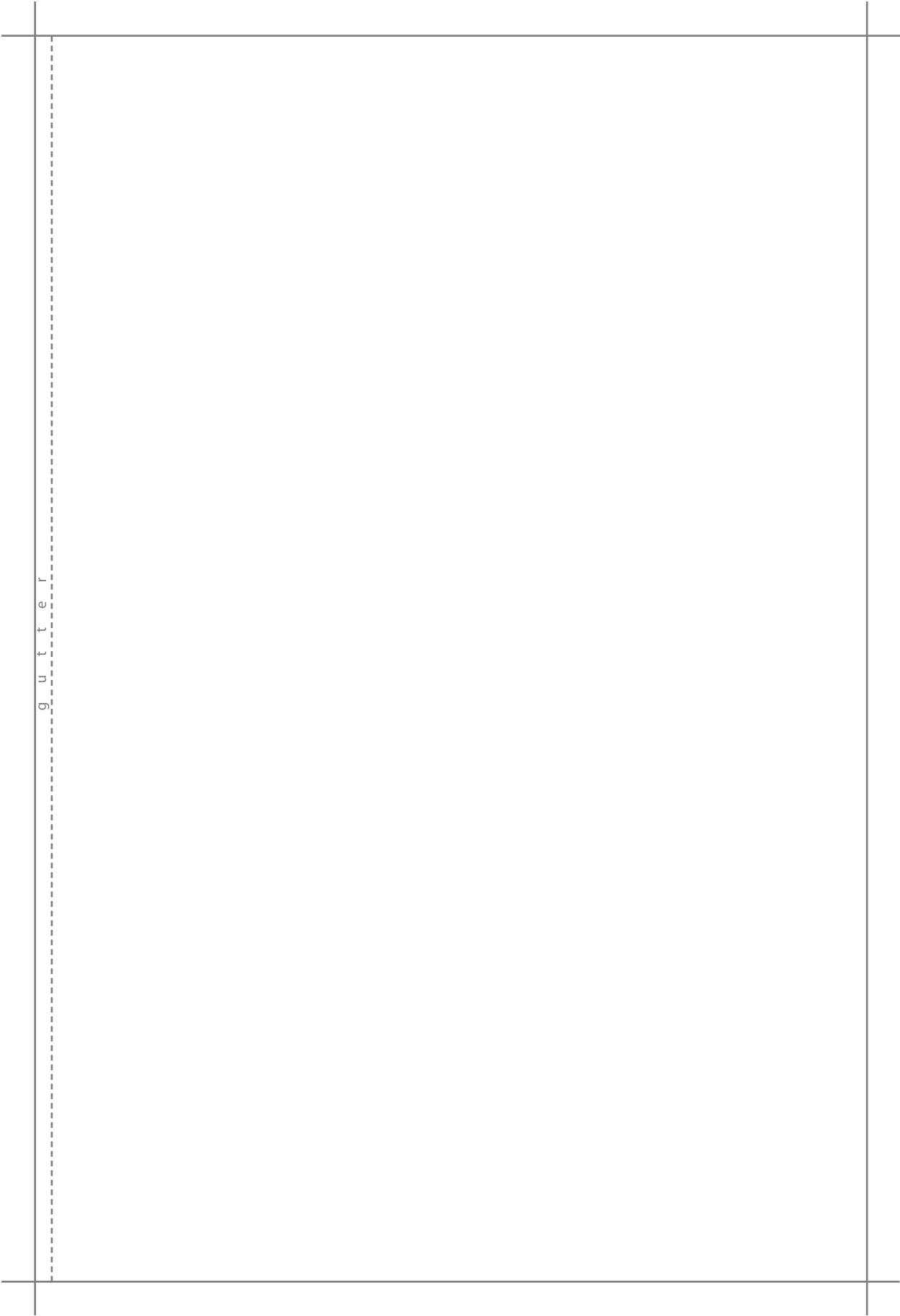


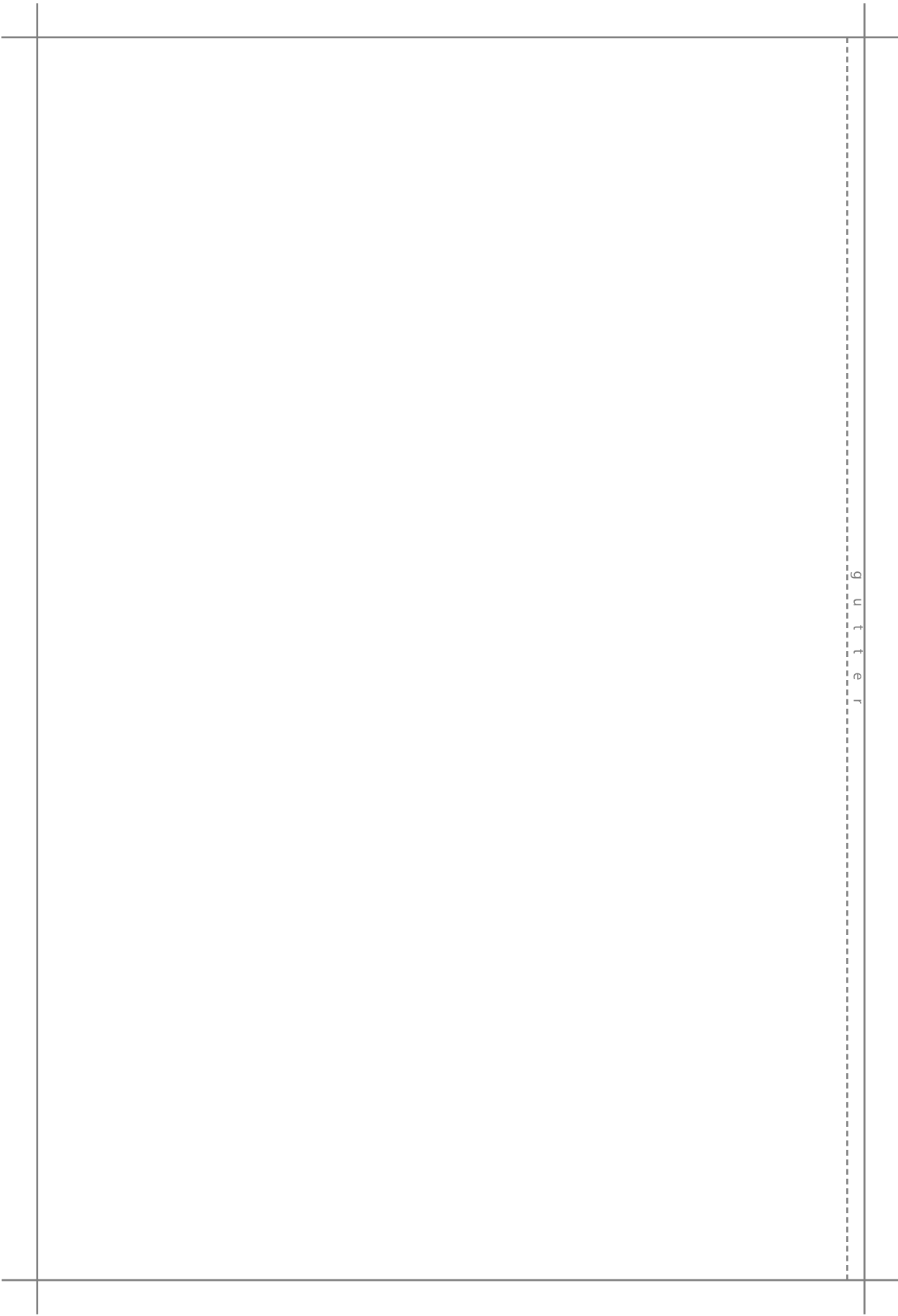


# **TIJUANA NOIR**

**A LONG SHORT STORY**

**FLORES CAMPBELL**





# **Tijuana Noir**

**A long short story**

**By**

**Flores Campbell**

Bloomington, IN



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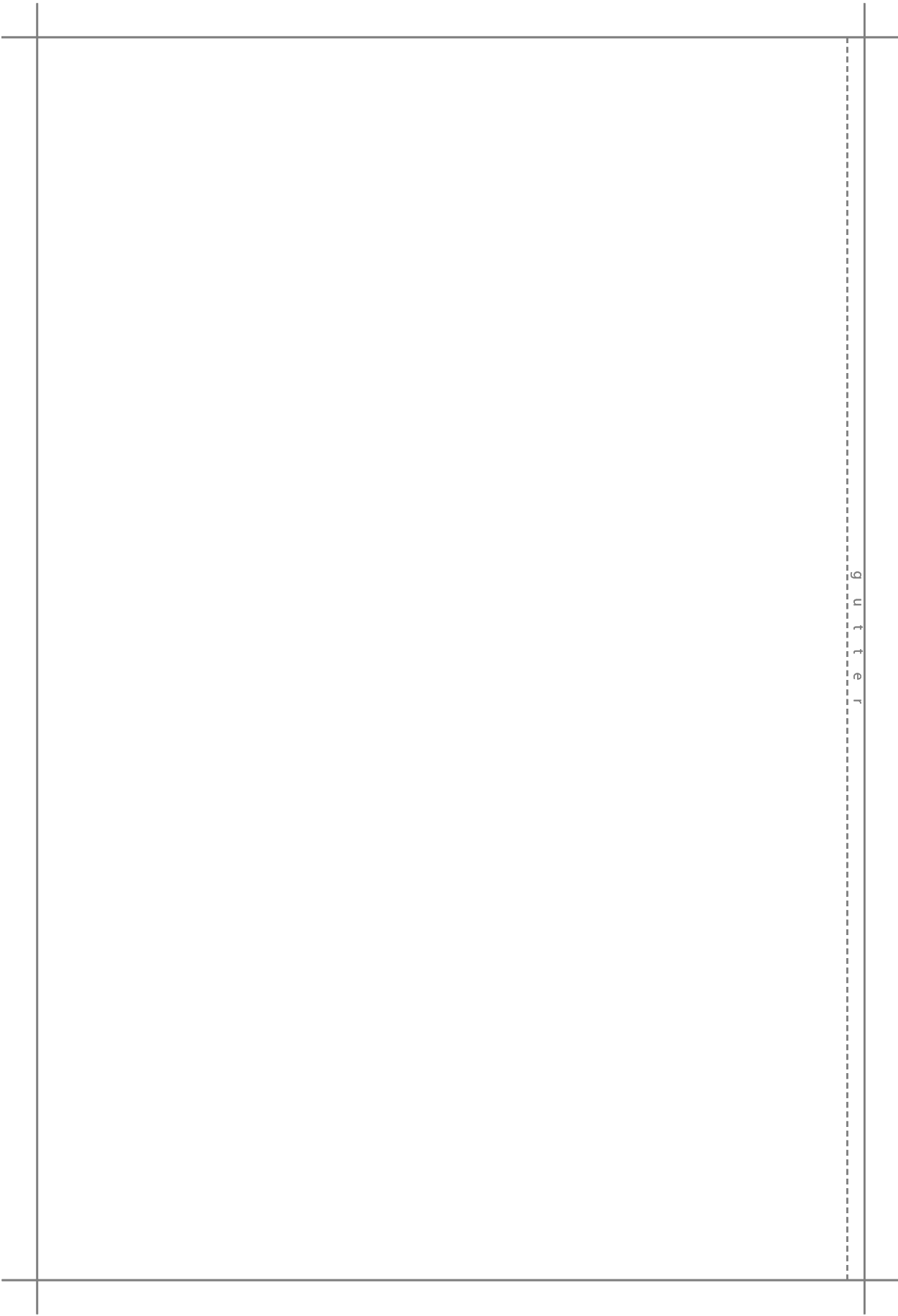
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*To Nathalie, Alejandra and Eduardo Alexsandro.  
My daughters and son.*



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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***Tijuana Noir*** is the first story in a trilogy entitled “*Stories of Narcofiction*.” All are tales inspired by police chronicles, newspapers, pop culture, and the US/Mexico border experience.

It is important to state that this is a work of fiction, *Narcofiction*. The use of actual places and organizations including the Tijuana’s Salinas International Airport, Independence Avenue, and the Twin Towers Hotel is meant only to enhance the story. All of the characters and events described here are fictitious and in no way represent or describe any real person, organization, agency, or event. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is merely coincidental and a product of the author’s imagination.

Thanks to all the people during the last few years that patiently listened to my stories, gave me valuable opinions, and helped me in many ways to reach the goal of publishing this book.

To Rodolfo Martinez, who moved to L.A. Even though I am no longer in touch with him, I am very grateful. To Gwendolyn, Emily, and Karina for all the help they gave me with the last draft of *Tijuana Noir*.



Thanks to Humbeto for his house by the beach, where I wrote and rewrote many of the chapters of this story. And finally, before this sounds like an Oscar acceptance speech, thanks are due to my friends, Armen and Heriberto, for their support. And to my father, from whom I learned and share the love for detective stories through watching old movies on TV.

America has many noir thriller writers that I admire. I love their long short stories. Some are no longer than ten chapters. I wonder how they wrote them. What was the formula they used? How did they turn on their imagination to develop a story?

When trying to find my own formula, I picture myself watching an old *Film Noir* from the forties. To get the proper mood and atmosphere, I played the Michael Bublé version of “Fever” and Patricia Kaas, “Scene De Vie” as the music bed. I especially liked “A L’Enterrement De Sidney Bechet” (“The Funeral Of Sidney Bechet”). I let myself go, describing what I saw. The Metro Goldwyn-Mayer’s lion opening the curtain of my dreams; a dark city, amoral characters, and femme fatales ... chapter by chapter, scene by scene.

In the absence of Robert Mitchum, Charlton Heston, Ricardo Montalban, and Jane Greer, and because dreams are free, I took the liberty of putting Robert Downey Jr., Clive Owen, Diego Luna, and Eva Green on the cast. And, of course, all of them are directed by Alfonso Cuarón.

*Tijuana Noir* is now done. The result lies before you, a detective’s long short story, set in the border city of Tijuana with a French Jazz soundtrack.

So please, sit down, relax, and enjoy the show.

Flores Campbell  
March 2005

# Tijuana Noir

*“The title is perfect ... you should wonder.”*

Alan Rickman in “Fallen Angels”  
Episode: “Murder, Obliquely” directed by Alfonso Cuarón

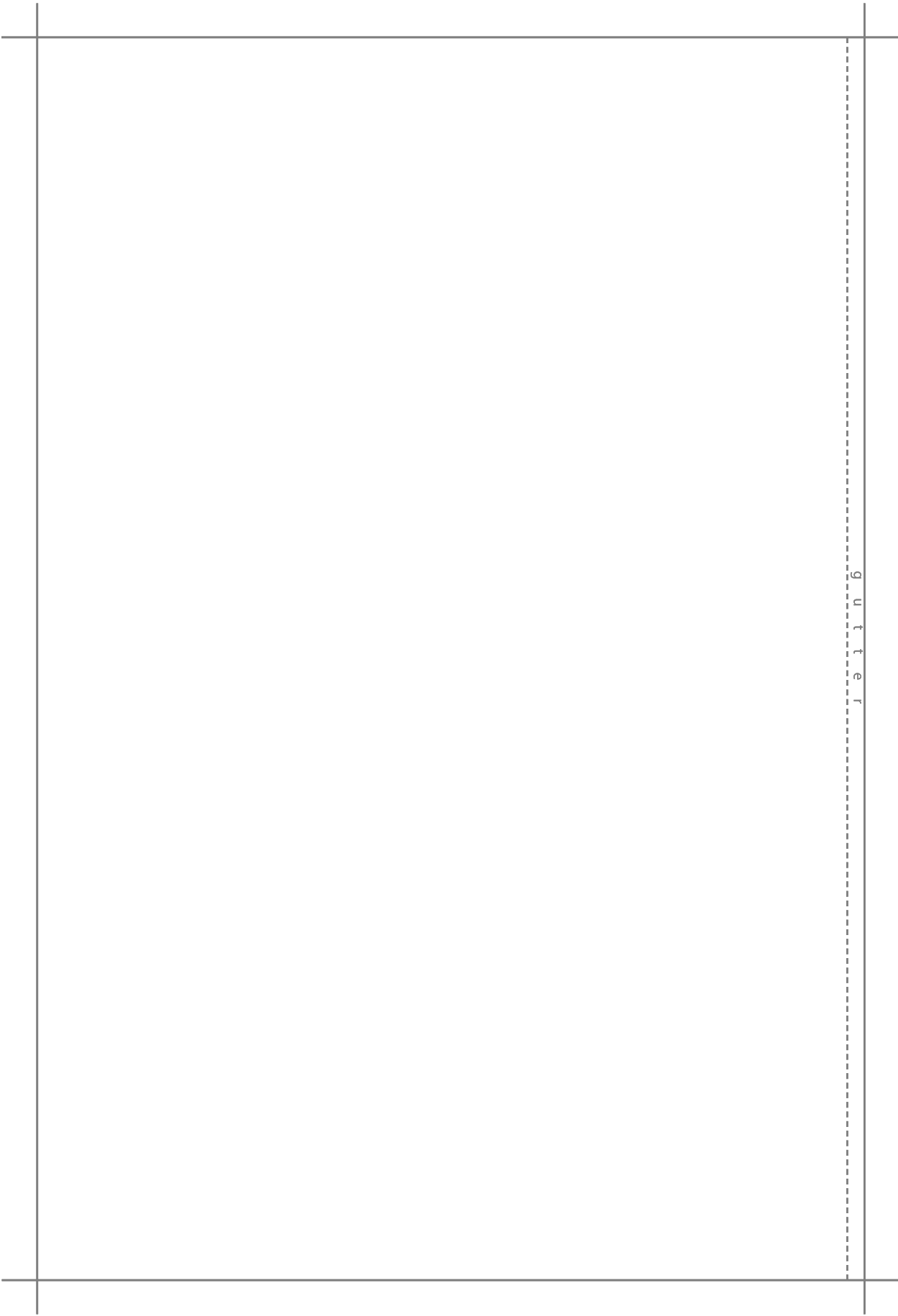


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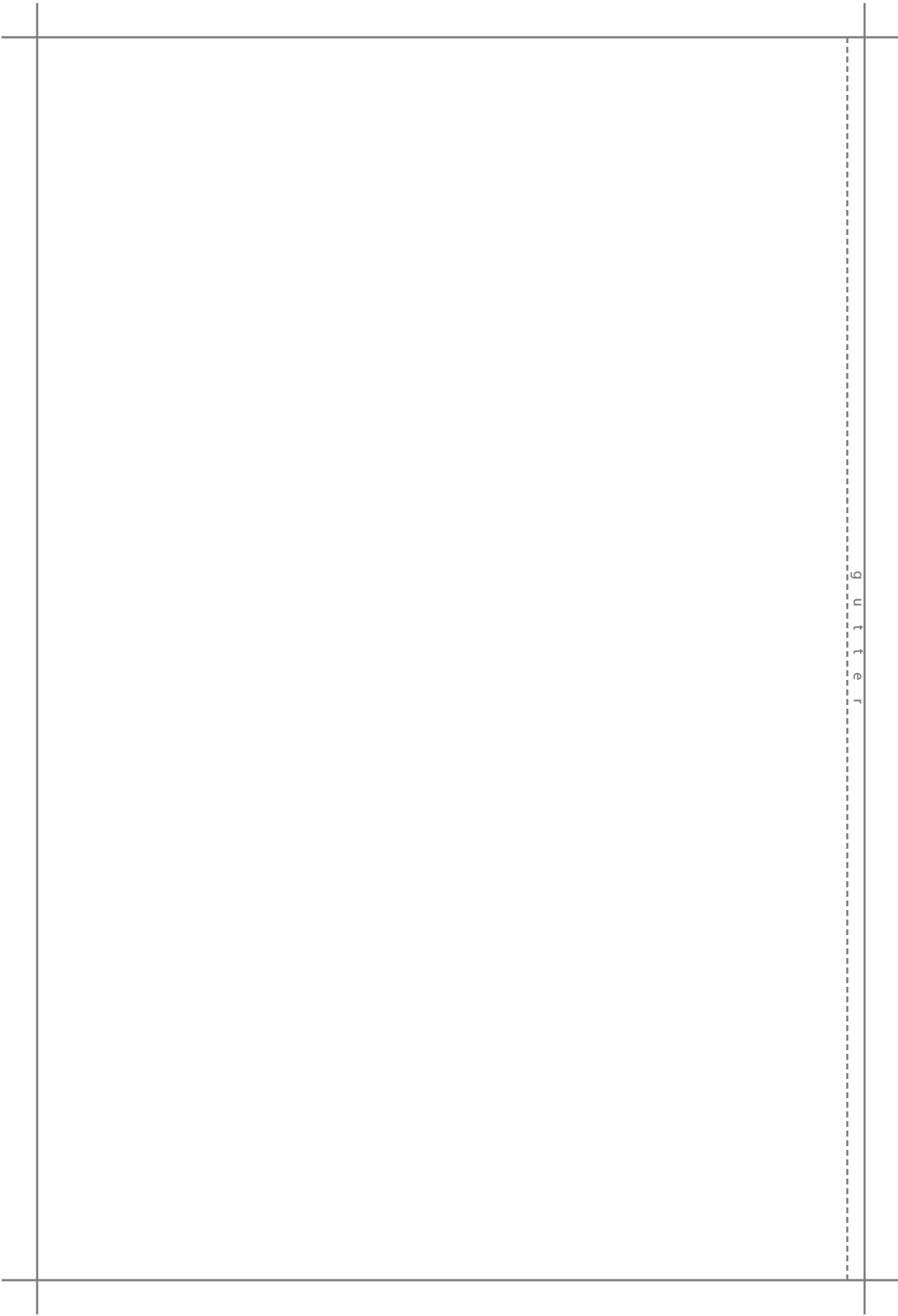
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*"Come closer. I want to talk with you again. I once told you about the stunning story of the Maltese Falcon. I have a more astonishing tale to tell ..."*

Sidney Greenstreet in the 1942 *Across the Pacific* movie trailer.

# 1

---

**T**he white Lincoln Town Car with polarized windows lined up behind the black Chevrolet Suburban and the Kevlar-armored Cutlass, stopping its motion for only a few seconds. Toward the right front of the vehicle stood a sleepy man with dark circles under his eyes, so purple that they looked tattooed. He was in charge of the parking lot boot. He made a semi-circular motion with his hand to the driver. The chauffeur of the Lincoln concurred with a slight nod of the head, as if thanking him for not saying a word.

In the privacy of the backseat, Cardinal José Maria Pizano, dressed in a black suit and bowler hat, looked indifferently out the window as people exited the main entrance of the airport. The Cardinal watched the Guacamayan yellow and green cabs, VW minibuses, North American medical students, promiscuous teenagers, and a child or two. His gaze was lost among these images; he was absorbed in his own thoughts, far away from everything.

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Neither the noise from the street, the smell of the wet soil, nor the driver's sudden expression of terror and speechless scream made him realize what was taking place. He was able to see his killer bend over and point an AK-47 less than one meter from his window. Its reflection could be seen in the thick gold chain and crucifix that he wore around his neck. He tried to speak but he couldn't.

The Cardinal's life left his chest as if it were air escaping from a balloon. Small red bubbles burst upon touching the atmosphere, spattering on the official Vatican seal on the Samsonite portfolio at his feet.

"God be with you, sir!" cursed the hired killer.

From his armored car, Alfredo Medina, with a semi-automatic pistol in hand, lifted his gaze as if he were looking for someone. But the only thing he saw was the chaos in the gunfire, his bodyguards coming out from behind the parked cars, firing high-powered machine guns. To his side, the driver leaned forward as if he were picking something up from the floor, only to fall lifeless onto the steering wheel with part of his brain on the dashboard. Another one of his men was exiting the Chevrolet Suburban when he was killed by a burst of gunfire from a Kanaslikov automatic rifle.

And then the rest of Medina's bodyguards appeared. Five young men, wearing full-face ski masks, light Kevlar vests, and armed with police-issued submachine guns, swept the attackers at the entrance of the parking lot.

"Let's go! Let's go!" Don Alfredo screamed as he sank into his seat and then onto the floor. The hard pull from the movement of the car and the heavy rain of lead hammering on the roof told him that one of his men was driving him away from the gunfire.

\*\*\* \*\*

Later that day, the Mexican Assistant Attorney General, Antonio Gaviño, sighed, put his hands in the pockets of his off-white classic trench coat, doffed his aviator sunglasses, and relaxed his beer gut. One that he had managed to hold in during the brief run he made among semi-dry bloodstains and white chalk outlines of human figures.

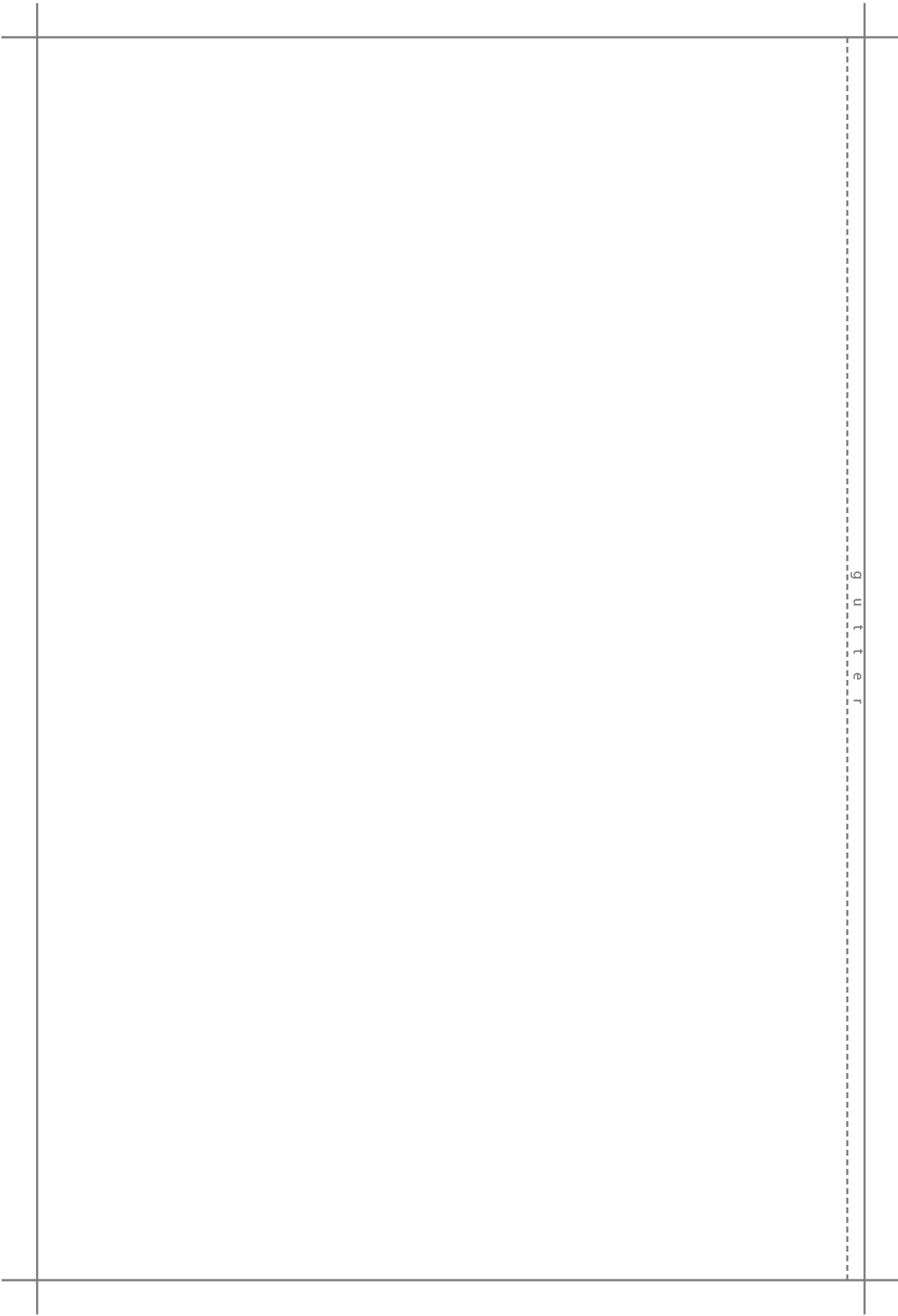
At a safe distance, reporters' cameras circled, all the while restricted by a yellow ribbon that cordoned off almost the entire parking lot and the building's façade.

"Are you going to talk to the press, sir?" asked his assistant. He shifted his model pose left to right. He was a rookie, dressed in an Italian designer black suit, who probably got his fashion tips from the X-Files. His name was Xavier Gallo-Velazco, but the rest of the force called him J.R. because he had gotten his position from a recommendation by a senior official and also because he belonged to a more privileged social class.

Gaviño put his Ray Bans back on and responded dryly, "The press conference won't be until tomorrow," thus saving himself any explanation since he had to weigh the political repercussions of the case.

Never in this country's history had there been a case that created such a furor. There were two types of cases on which he never liked to work: those having to do with the clergy and those having to do with drug trafficking. Unfortunately, here existed the two ingredients that assured many a long night. These are cases that never end, and if they do end, they never end well.





*Deckard: "They don't advertise for killers in the newspaper. That was my profession. Ex-cop, Ex-Bladerunner, Ex-killer."*

From the Sci-Fi noir picture, *Bladerunner*.

## 2

---

**I**f the devil had a woman's name, she would surely be named Lia Buzelli. And that was the name of the woman who just happened to be waiting for Gaviño in his office. Among the smoke of menthol cigarettes, French perfume, and leather clothing, Lia introduced herself as having been sent by the Mexican Secretary of Interior to request case information.

The beauty didn't intimidate Gaviño. He responded, "I've already heard of you." To which the woman answered with a facial gesture, described only as a fake smile because a real one is something altogether different.

He knew of her brief career as a television commentator, a model, and then federal police officer. A Molotov mix that he was forced to take on, and her presence at an inconvenient time was never strange.

Cutting right to the chase, in her bittersweet voice, she said, "The federal government is worried about the bad publicity that this

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case will generate, as well as the way it can affect its relationship with the Vatican.”

Gaviño looked at her face, resisting the impulse to move his eyes up and down to enjoy the woman at least with a roving glance.

“Miss Buzelli, I understand the Secretary’s concern. Tomorrow, before the press conference starts, it will be my pleasure to fill you in on the investigation’s progress.”

“I don’t need to tell you that all information needs to be checked by me before it leaves this office.” Lia Buzelli emphasized to him, making him aware of her authority.

“We don’t have any idea as to what really happened. I am still waiting for the autopsy results, as well as the witness statements.”

“It doesn’t matter who or how many killed him. I want to know what the cardinal was doing at the airport. Early tomorrow morning, I will give you the press bulletin that I want you to read to the media.” The false-colored-eye woman did not ask, she ordered him.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” answered the experienced police investigator, visually upset as he rested his hands on his PM steel desk.

He wished that Lia, along with the scent of menthol cigarettes and French perfume would go to hell, which is probably where she sprung.

“Have a good night,” the woman said sarcastically, excusing herself in the manner that people with power (or those who sleep with them) usually do.

Now, alone in his office, Gaviño finally let his back relax into the cushion of the expensive faux leather chair. He stretched out his

hand to grab the television remote and started switching channels to look for the nightly news.

"J.R., bring a couple of coffees." He raised his voice as he ordered J.R.

Three minutes later, a pair of two-hundred-dollar Italian dress shoes parked themselves in front of the old steel desk.

"What a character, sir," J.R. said.

"Maybe for you, but not for me," a resigned Gaviño said, used to containing himself in front of powerful people.

"Here are all the witness statements. I have also included a chronological diagram of the crime," the young man said as he placed a big stack of files in front of his boss.

"Sit down, J.R. Let's start with the witness statements," Gavino answered automatically. At the same time, he watched the rain dampen his window. His gaze stopped at the window glass so as not to force himself to look at the blur, the dark, and his true feelings about handling the investigation of this particular crime. It was as if the case demanded to be solved and was attempting to cast light outside.

\*\*\* \*\*

The same pouring rain dampened the window of an American Airlines DC-10 out of JFK New York airport. It caused Teo Arango to lose his visual focus while he played with his Yaqui deer eyeball lucky charm. Arango thought to himself that this was the first time that he had been flown to a crime scene.

Arango always wore a black overcoat. He was over thirty and a tireless traveler who, like every man that travels alone and not by his request, is used to taking the seat at wing level next to the emergency exit. It was as if he had asked for it in case he ever

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contemplated suicide, since the door was right there. Arango liked the rain. It was a private pleasure. It was one of those things that even after a decade of drugs, alcohol, financial problems due to his divorce, and experiencing a religious awakening, he had never ceased to enjoy it.

A voice coming from the loud speaker woke him from his day-dreaming. "We will be arriving at the Tijuana's Salinas International Airport in fifteen minutes. The temperature in the city is twenty-six degrees centigrade, sixty-seven degrees Fahrenheit, and the forecast is rain until the end of the week. Thank you for choosing us."

Two years ago, life's train had left him alone at the main door of a Catholic church, seeking peace, refuge, and a new life. Another monk underneath a neon cross. His experience on both sides of the law, occasionally at the same time, allowed him to take charge of internal investigations of the church. He had brown skin, short hair, an unkempt beard, and a tattoo with the two masks, one laughing and the other crying, which he hid underneath long-sleeved shirts. He would explain that it was necessary to have them as an expression of his past, and it also gave him the look that good detectives should have.

Growing up in East Los Angeles was not an easy thing to do for Arango. His association with gangs and a short-lived police career darkened by crime, treachery, and deceit made him somewhat cynical. He carried violence with him as a daily language all the way to the office of the secretary of the powerful Vatican department that enforces internal security, Monsignor James McKnown. Shortly before breakfast, he had received a message that the Monsignor wanted to see him as soon as possible. Completely awake, he showed up at his office with the lucidity that the daily dose of caffeine offers after the exhaustion of the whore from the night before.

"Mr. Arango, do you know Tijuana?" A cigarette in one hand, Monsignor asked without a greeting. He directed Arango toward

a chair across the table from him next to a window where one could enjoy the garden's tranquility.

"Yes, I was there a couple of times when I was very young," answered Arango without going into details.

Monsignor puffed and asked very calmly, "Well, how's your Spanish?"

"From the barrio, but if I remember correctly, you don't need Spanish down there," responded the detective while he adjusted himself in the chair. He laid his own cigarette down very slowly in the ashtray and snapped his head around to look out the window for a few seconds.

Monsignor shook his head slightly and said, "Listen, I am going to get right to the point, so I would like you to pay the utmost attention. Up until now, your services have been of great use to us. You have investigated embezzlement, sexual abuse, fake exorcisms, and apparitions, most of which were cases where you do not run the risk of physical danger and where usually we can discretely intervene."

Arango nodded as Monsignor went on. "Around six months ago, the recently named cardinal Jose Maria Pizano arrived to this border town after having served as bishop for the city of Guadalajara for more than three years. His first public appearances were at events for the New Decency League, a local altruistic group that he helped found. That group provided one million dollars for the construction of the new cathedral. Last month, their president, Gabriel Perez Gomez, was murdered. He was a businessman in real estate and the head of one of the founding families of the city. His murder had the signature of organized crime, the makings of which never made it to the newspapers. His name was also on the money laundering investigation by the Drug Enforcement Administration that took place in San Diego, California. Also, last year the cardinal acted as liaison between the Vatican and the Mexican government to establish diplomatic

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relations. And in doing so, it would have been an uninterrupted road to a promotion which would have made him a good candidate for being the first Latin American Pope.”

“And, what seems to be the problem?” asked Arango after realizing that the Monsignor’s pause had lasted a sufficient amount of time.

“The cardinal was murdered a few hours ago during a shooting at the Tijuana International Airport. He, his driver, some passersby, and several gunmen are dead. By tomorrow, the news will be in all the worlds’ newspapers.”

“What a tragedy, being at the wrong place at the wrong time,” reasoned Arango with White Russian wisdom. Then he asked, “But, then what’s the doubt?”

Monsignor Mcknown drew in some air, squeezed his hand in Arango’s face, and exclaimed in a booming, nicotine-tinged voice, “I want to know why they killed him. What was the cardinal doing there? I am afraid that he wasn’t there by accident, but because he was invited.”

“You have to be malicious to take a case like that,” Arango muttered to himself when he left the room.

*"What do you want, my life story? I told everything I know to the Los Angeles Police Department."*

Robert Mitchum to the press.

# 3

---

**A**rango got off the plane with his bag over his head in order to protect himself from the rain. He walked through the airport halls unhurried, indifferent, and unaffected by the neon signs around him. When he got to the exit door, Arango had yet to cross the yellow ribbon when he caught the attention of two police officers that were guarding the area to his right.

"You can't go through. Who are you looking for?" asked one of the police guards while he stepped on his cigarette to put it out on the ground.

"I am looking for Assistant Attorney General Jose Gaviño. Would you please call him?" answered the man in the wrinkled gray suit.

The officer took down his information and called the Attorney General's office on his cellular phone to ask whether the visit was authorized. Moments later, one of the officers lowered the ribbon with his free hand in order to let Arango enter the restricted area.



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**“My boss will not see you until tomorrow. For now, I have instructions to show you the crime scene, so please follow me,” the uniformed man politely informed him as he walked alongside of him.**

**The impressions of death are like footprints in the sand that the detective must retrace with chalk. The smell of burnt gunpowder vanishes into the air. Blood dissolves quickly in water, leaving small bloodstains. The tragedy is felt through a sixth sense. Its trace is recorded in the mute witness that lies on the floor or in the walls and with everything that was present there at the time of the crime.**

**Arango decided to look around while he listened attentively to his surroundings and made a mental reconstruction of the crime. A crime report should have all the information. Some is purely technical data, like dimension, caliber, or autopsy details. One cannot say, “He was shot to death.” It needs to be accompanied by a forensic report that says something like, “He died due to an encephalic trauma caused by unknown objects of high density.” What needs to be explained is who the victim is, what the lines of the investigation are, and finally, after tying it all together, a conclusion needs to be reached. For all these reasons, Arango was used to answering when he was asked the question, “What do you do?” with, “I’m a writer. I write stories, dark short stories.”**

**Arango left the parking lot looking for a cab with more questions than answers. Everything indicated that there was no confusion. The assassins killed the cardinal and then they killed him again. Maybe they did not know him. It is possible, but seventy gunshots is too much lead for there not to be a motive. Arango opened a little black notebook and started to take notes of all the details that caught his attention.**

**Lia got out of her Cadillac just as Arango was leaving the parking lot. “Mr. Arango!” the woman called from several feet away. The airline’s toffee-covered peanuts’ crunching was loud enough that**

he did not notice the beautiful female figure behind him that called him by name.

"Teo, Teo Arango?" asked the woman dressed in tight Versace jeans, a black leather jacket, and exotic snake cowboy boots.

"Yes, may I help you?" the man responded without hiding his surprise.

"Hello, my name is Lia," the woman said. She smiled and extended her hand. "I am here on behalf of the Secretary of the Interior's Office in order to help you with what you may need, starting with taking you to the hotel," said the woman, exuding courtesy and charisma.

"Thank you, miss ... Lia. I accept the lift," answered Arango, trying not to speak too much Spanish because his accent already made him look bad to the crime scene guards at the airport.

"You're welcome. I have my office very close by ... over there next to the presidential hangar, just a block away from here ... in the federal zone, in the restricted area of the airport."

After he was charmed by the woman into a white Cadillac with diplomatic license plates, she said without looking at him, "You don't seem like the type to be a priest."

"The type?" he repeated.

"Just what kind of a priest are you?" Lia asked suspiciously.

"I'm not; I am just a detective," Arango answered curtly, trying not to continue the conversation. In reality, this type of fake well-mannered woman never appealed to him. It's possible that he was used to being rejected or he just never made the attempt. He preferred watching the winding wire fence that divided two cities and two countries indefinitely. People's hopes whirling to-

*Flores Campbell*

gether in a vacuum, waiting for the border patrol to be distracted.  
On the other side ... the American Dream.

For a moment, she was silent.

"I imagined ..."

"Yes?"

"I expected someone like Father Karras from the *Exorcist*," insisted Lia, trying to break the ice. "Would you like a cigarette, Mr. Arango?"

"No, thank you. I prefer mine," the chain-smoking man answered as he lifted a Zippo lighter to the woman's cigarette.

For a man like him, it was not strange to see how certain women used their charm to try to soften something or someone to get what they wanted. Arango had to keep his distance since beauty, charm, and charisma exuded from this flower. Her name was the feminine for Lio, which, in Spanish, means trouble and confusion. In the art of seduction, Lia was an expert. Arango knew this and felt threatened.

In a matter of minutes, they found themselves at the doors of the Twin Towers Grand Hotel. The towers were two dark glass buildings overlooking a golf course, symbolizing the modernity of the border city.

"It is very late now. Thank you for the lift." Arango excused himself without offering his hand on his way out of the car.

"If you need something, please call me," Lia reminded him with a seductive smile a la Jane Greer.

After registering, he was given the key and a beeper, a custom for guests of this hotel. He played with the beeper without paying attention to the hotel clerk's instructions. Arango waited patiently

for the elevator that would take him up ten floors from the lobby to his room.

Despite the humid environment, the dryness of his throat became more unbearable. The parched man did not notice the dimensions of the room, the color, the bathroom, or the television set. It had been years since he cared about such things. He did not even care to look at the welcome basket with candy, chocolates, and fruit that sat on the counter. Due to his inertia, he went directly to the telephone, called the bar, and together with the toffee-covered peanuts, he requested an Absolut vodka tonic.

“Now everything is good,” he said, knowing full and well that his thirst for sex would come later.

*Flores Campbell*

*File: Tijuana Noir*

*October 12*

*Case notes by: Teo Arango*

*Many aspects of this case remain unexplained.*

*Nobody knows who killed the Cardinal and the five dead men found a few feet away from his car (later identified as gang members from San Diego). According to some witness statements, they were protecting the arriving cars (a black Chevrolet Suburban, a white Lincoln Town Car, and a gray Cutlass) at the airport's parking lot. Nor can I find any explanation for the absence that morning of local police officers, federal police agents, or any other law-enforcement personnel that usually cover airport security.*

*If the cardinal was not the real target, why kill him like that? It would seem impossible, for instance, that he was confused with one of the gunmen or with Mr. Medina.*

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*"You're written in her book,  
Number 37 take a look.  
She's going to smile to make you frown.  
What a clown.  
Little boy she's from the street.  
Before you start, you're already beat.  
She's going to play you for a fool.  
Yes, it's true."*

"Femme Fatale" by Duran Duran

## 4

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**T**he press conference took place with unusual clinical precision. Gaviño read the press release, which was handed out to all present, without taking any questions and with the promise that the case would be discussed as soon as it developed.

Dressed in white with black thoughts, like a celluloid Femme Fatale, Lia Buzelli spoke with Gaviño until they were interrupted by a young voice coming from the door.

"Mr. Arango is waiting for you outside. What should I tell him?" J.R. asked his boss as he tried to ignore the woman that was next to him.

"Tell him to come in, I'll take care of him," said the woman, making a one-hundred-eighty-degree turn as her voice went back to being sweet and pleasant.

*Flores Campbell*

**“Miss Buzelli,” Arango said as he greeted her upon entering the office without hiding his surprise.**

**“Please, sit down. Would you like something to drink?” Gaviño offered in a friendly manner.**

**“No, thank you. I’m fine,” answered Arango, resting his body in the chair as if his visit was going to take a bit of time.**

**“I was at the press conference a few moments ago, and despite the lack of information, I was drawn to your preliminary conclusion that it was crossfire that killed the cardinal.”**

**With one incredulous look at Gaviño, Arango treated him warily. “I wonder, what makes you think there was not an ambush, that they were not waiting for his arrival?”**

**“It is based only on a hypothesis. The witness reports indicate that the shooting started at the moment that the cardinal arrived at the parking lot,” Gaviño explained nonchalantly.**

**Lia looked on silently at the scene as if she were waiting for the proper moment to intervene.**

**“What types of calibers were found by your personnel at the scene of the crime?” Arango asked directly. He was holding up a little black notebook, open at the middle with his right hand, and with his left hand, he looked for a ballpoint pen in the pocket of his overcoat.**

**Gaviño looked at him intently, like an animal protecting its territory. “That information is confidential,” he said as he turned his gaze at Lia who then involved herself in the discussion.**

**“All the shots were of high caliber. If you want to talk about the subject, I would prefer we do so privately,” she said.**

"You can't start your own investigation or draw your own conclusions," Gaviño exclaimed, raising his voice as he lost control of himself. He got up from his seat.

"Excuse the Assistant Attorney General, but you're here in the role of an observer," Lia again intervened, attempting to ease the tension.

"I'm sorry. It's my inquisitive nature. I worked for the police for six years." The church detective, turning and extending his palms upward as he got up from his chair, indicated that he was offering his unofficial assistance to the case. "I want to help with the investigation. I will be able to bring an impartial point of view to the case."

"No, thank you, we don't need your help, Mr. Arango," the Mexican official said with an edge of impatience. "And listen carefully, I would hate to airborne you back to New York as a *Persona Non Grata*, but I will if you dare intervene with this police investigation."

"I personally will provide you with information as soon it becomes available," interrupted the well-mannered woman in a tough, but tender, tone of voice.

"Be patient, Mr. Arango, and please make sure that you keep yourself on the fringe of the investigation," suggested the Mexican Assistant District Attorney, trying to control the mounting anger in his voice as he excused himself to leave.

As predicted, it had not stopped raining outside of the building for one moment since the previous morning. The forecast had been rain for the rest of the week, but at that moment, it was so light that it seemed like an ocean fog. At least that was what had gone through Arango's mind when he left, followed by Lia only seconds later.



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In front of the building's main door, the woman stopped and cast her gaze on the street to look for Arango, who then noticed and came back from the sidewalk.

"Do you have time for some coffee?" Arango asked as he accepted the help she had offered him previously.

After walking the distance of a new car dealership, several blocks of Tijuana's financial district, and a brief wait for a table at Sanz-Su-Si Chinese Café, a popular meeting place for the city's political and business elite, Lia bombarded him with questions.

"Why are you so interested with the different calibers and the crime weapons?"

"I only want to know if there were any sharpshooters at the scene. This would show that the gunmen were not there by accident, but instead that it was a concerted effort."

"Of course, it sounds logical," Lia commented, with a voice of false belief. Then she asked, "How may I help you?"

"I need information. All the data that you can get me," responded Arango.

"You give me a good feeling, and believe me, I am very difficult to impress, but I am going to help you in any way possible," said Lia as she licked her lips lasciviously. She rested the palms of her hands on Arango's hands as a sign of confidence and then brushed them with the tips of her fingers as she left.

There are caresses that make your skin tingle. Caresses that provoke a chain reaction, that wake up the passion, the desire, and the lust that we all have within ourselves. These ideas went through Arango's mind as he finished his burnt coffee and enjoyed his Marlboro, which, just like time itself, disappears faster the more it is enjoyed. It might have been the nostalgic sound of the increasing raindrops or Lia's words upon leaving that made a

man lose his sense of time. That is until a vibration in his pants pocket lets him know that he has a message at his hotel.

“Your wife has arrived. She has checked into your room. She asked that we inform you. She is waiting for you with what was promised,” a polite and easy-to-recognize female voice said through the speaker.

“Mrs. Arango!” confirmed the detective with a hint of malice in his smile as he entered his dark room a few minutes later and discovered Lia’s silhouette by the window.

“It is going to be a long night,” assured Arango. “Please sit down.”

The woman sat in front of the thick pile of files that she had left on the table. She grabbed a folder, opened it, handed it to Arango, and said, “This matter is hushed up.”

Arango nodded, scanning the documents. “Very impressive,” he said coldly.

Lia gave him a dazzling smile.

The detective quickly noticed the oversized, black ink letters DEA and AMOR written on the cover. They were the acronyms for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency and the Alfredo Medina organization. Among the photocopies of documents, pictures of members of the organization, and handwritten notes from special agent Alian Smithe, he found the legend “Tijuana Confidential” on every page in the folder.

He took a sip from his drink (vodka, cranberry juice, and lime) and began to read:

*Flores Campbell*

*During the mid '80s, Alfredo Medina arrived in the city of Tijuana. He was the youngest of four brothers that had worked directly with the head of the Sinaloa Cartel, laundering money. Following the persecution they were subjected to after the death of DEA agent Joe Louis, "Pepe" Camberos, the cartel members formed independent cells in different parts of the country. While the police detained the majority of the leaders, these cells achieved their own autonomy and later formed their own cartels.*

*Medina was able to control everything in a short period of time. By the beginning of the '90s, he controlled ninety percent of the drugs that crossed the Pacific. According to some reports, that was Mexico's second largest source of income behind oil exports.*

*Even if it was in Medina's best interest to maintain the status quo, the rivalry between the cartels was imminent, so the struggle for the territories began. At the same time, the Colombian cartels got entangled in a struggle among themselves and the government. The war between the Cali Cartel and the Medellin Cartel broke out from the streets of Bogotá to the San Diego barrios. It was a struggle among giants, where only the strong survived. In this case, it was the Tijuana Cartel.*

**By the time a mute Jay Leno was saying goodbye from the television on the wall, Arango already knew all of the details of the crime, the cardinal's life story, and about the cartel war.**

**"We should continue seeing each other alone, that way we can avoid any risks," Lia explained, whispering as she let her hair down. It appeared twice as blonde in front of the mirror.**

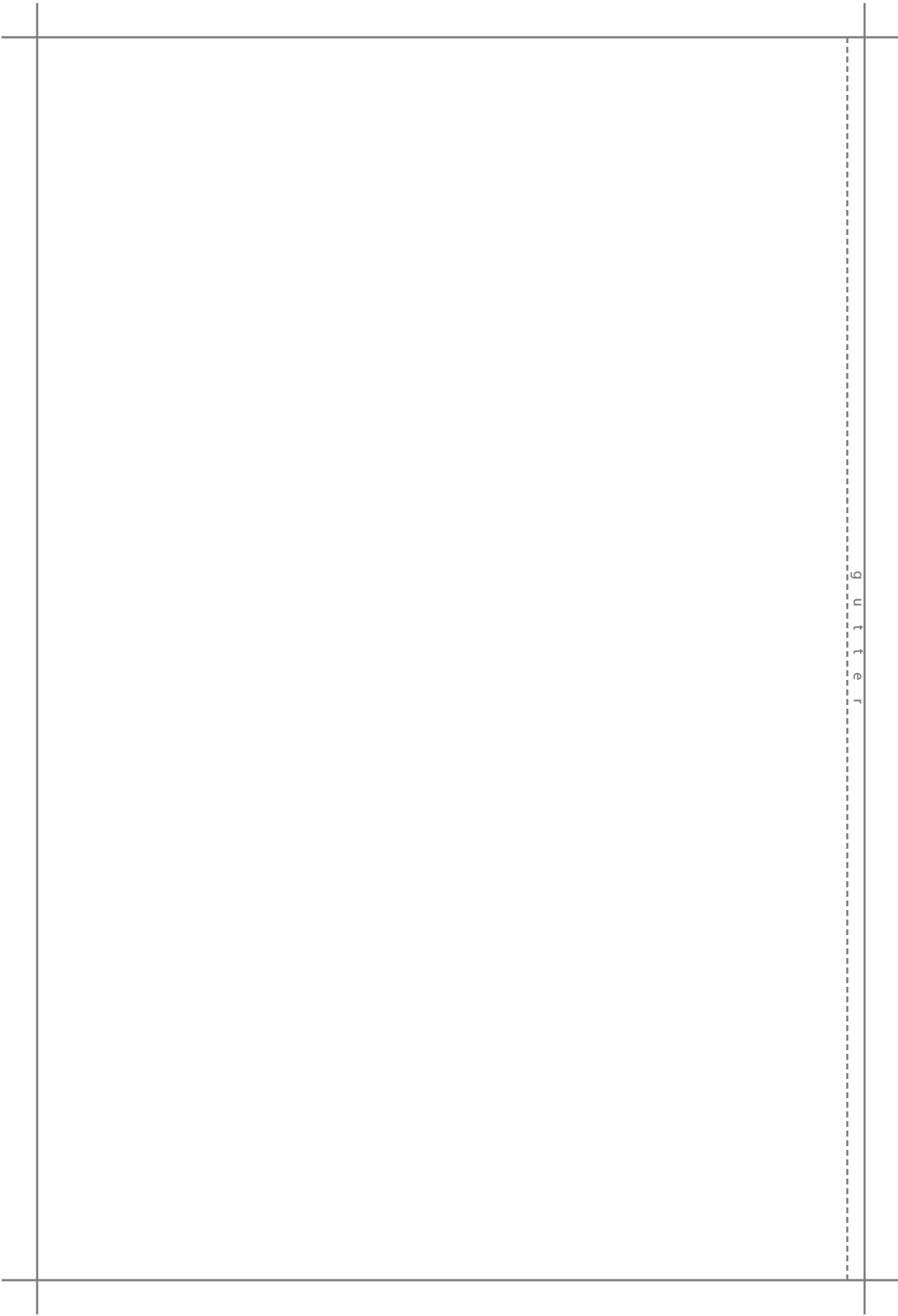
**Arango continued listening, but he was no longer paying attention. He slowly got close to her from behind and put one of his hands on her navel. His other hand headed in the direction of her leg. With his fingertips, he brushed the border known as the end of her skirt and the beginning of pleasure.**

**"Hush ... hush ... darling," he said in a deep and low voice.**

*Tijuana Noir*

The way in which she lowered her head to the left side and the way she lost her gaze as his lips got closer to her neck was the body language for which Arango was looking. The firmness of her nipples, the out-of-rhythm breathing, the image of Lia in the mirror, was a lustful ode that promised a night of carnal pleasure. One that Arango did not and would not let pass.

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*"You see it in the headlines, you heard it every day  
They say they're gonna stop it, but it doesn't go away  
They move it through Miami and sell it in LA  
They hide it up in Telluride, I mean it's here to stay  
It's propping up the governments in Colombia and Peru  
You ask any D.A., they'll say there's nothing we can do  
From the office of the president right down to me and you  
It's a losing proposition, but one you can't refuse  
It's the politics of contraband, it's the smuggler's blues"*

"Smuggler's Blues" by Glenn Frye

## 5

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An unexpected call from the front desk in the early morning hours interrupted the rhythmic movement of Lia Buzelli's hips over Arango.

He scrambled out of the bed, put himself together, and answered the phone. "Bueno!" he said.

"Mr. Arango, I need to speak to you urgently. I'll wait for you here in the lobby," said J.R.'s unmistakable voice.

"Can't this wait until morning?"

"I am afraid not; it's really important," advised the young detective.

*Flores Campbell*

**“I will be down there in a moment.”**

**With the mood broken, Lia rolled naked onto the sheets, sighing like Marilyn Monroe in heat. Arango gave in and wiped the sweat from his brow.**

**After he hung up the telephone, Arango realized his lack of caution when Lia asked an unexpected question that he wished she never would have asked.**

**“What does that tattoo mean?”**

**“You already know. Neither of us was born yesterday,” was his response as he turned his back to her, put on his gray raincoat, and walked out the room.**

**In front of the hotel’s main desk, the young police officer asked him to exit the hotel where a light-colored Grand Marquis was waiting with the engine running.**

**“Don’t be scared. There is someone who is very interested in speaking with you,” J.R. explained as if he read his thoughts when he saw the question mark in Arango’s look.**

**“What have I got to lose?” Arango blithely responded as he shrugged and agreed to join the shady Mexican tough guy that opened the car door.**

**After twenty minutes of navigating a series of labyrinths in one of the most exclusive residential areas of the city, the car stopped in front of a safe house that belonged to the Tijuana cartel.**

**The architecture resembled the old shell of a hacienda. Its rustic décor made any corner of its interior worthy of being on the cover of *Casa & Style* magazine.**

**Maybe it was purchased in the same manner as when one buys the set of a suit, shirt, and tie together with the shoes that match. Or**

maybe it could have been the work of an inspired decorator that had an unlimited pocketbook and could let his imagination run wild. Also, as is usually the case, it could have been the personal touches of a lover with very good taste.

Whatever the case, the décor was what Arango had the least misgivings about as he was escorted by two Schwarzenegger clones. He walked along the main hallway until they stopped in front of a door where he had to wait until his arrival was announced.

The gray color of the stone contrasting with the furniture's dark wood could be seen through the smoke of a cigarette. It made him think of the woman that was still lying in the damp bed. He then questioned whether it had been worth interrupting the moment in order to be here. He hated being in this state of mind and feeling the impotence that he feels when interrupted mid-stream. He leaned against a concrete tree and tried to decipher the mystery of who wanted the interview.

The well-mannered man that opened the door and requested that he enter did not live up to the reputation that surrounded him. A second-generation drug trafficker with a university degree, who even though he inherited a tradition of violence difficult to hide, he broke the previously established mold of what is to be a criminal. Alfredo Medina was the living image of the modern drug trafficker, dressed like a yuppie and running the cartel like a corporate director.

All this with the blessing granted by money and the protection granted by the authorities. He was a version of Tony Montana that was improved with negotiating capacities, making him more convincing as someone dedicated to their business, and also all the more lethal.

Arango widely stretched out his hand. Just like a boxer who offered it to make him think that maybe the fingers were too thick to work a trigger. Meanwhile, the man to his side was tapping a gun on his waist as if to remind Arango of its presence. The three



*Flores Campbell*

men stepped forward towards a large negotiating table, but they did not sit down. Fourteen chairs surrounded an old hacienda door that lay on two granite bases covered with thick glass.

“Would you like something to drink? Perhaps a vodka tonic?” Medina offered while he rested his fingers over Botero images reflected on the glass.

“No, thank you. I am not thirsty,” Arango lied, looking over his shoulder at the guard who had not left for one moment.

“Leave us alone,” ordered Medina noticing the detective’s discomfort.

“Mr. Arango, everything has its place in this society, much like at this table. Even crime needs to be organized. Besides being a worshiper, my relationship with the church is of the utmost respect, and personally, the death of the cardinal affected me a great deal. His place, just like mine, as well as the governor’s, is a strange balance that no one dare interrupt.”

“Do you disassociate yourself from the crime that easily?” Arango asked without fear of interrupting.

“I only want you to understand that I am not guilty of the cardinal’s death. On the contrary, his absence affects me more than you can imagine,” answered Alfredo Medina with the same conciliatory tone.

“And what about your presence that day at the airport?” Arango insisted.

“Completely circumstantial, as the authorities say. It was a cross-fire accident,” the man finally explained.

“Why did you bring me here?” Arango asked, trying to quickly finish the interview.

**“I want to ask you a favor. Base your reports only on the official information.” After looking away in the manner of someone that is lying or hiding something, he added, “That would benefit all of us, and believe me, I always reward favors handsomely.”**

**“So it’s either with cash or lead?” Arango asked insolently.**

**“That, my friend, depends on you,” he explained wryly. “Perhaps we are meant not to know some things,” emphasized Medina upon parting.**

**It was morning when Arango left the mansion feeling just like he did when he went in—full of doubts. Two bodyguards that didn’t say one word escorted him all the way back to the hotel. If Medina was innocent like he said, then the crime could have been a botched attempt, but there were still too many pieces of the puzzle missing to be able to confirm that. What intrigued him the most was the hurried way that Medina wanted the case closed. It didn’t make any sense. Just like Lia’s great interest to have it solved.**

*Flores Campbell*

*Tijuana Noir*

*October 13*

*I found Lia Buzelli to be a powerful, dangerous, and insincere source of information.*

*I found that J.R. Gavino's assistant, is on Medina's payroll.*

*Assistant General Attorney Antonio Gavino...?*

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*"Tss, tss, tss,  
 Hey, psst, amigo! Como se llama amigo?  
 Halloween in Tijuana  
 Full moon in my eyes  
 I wonder how in the hell I got here  
 Without a disguise."  
 "Should I take this last step  
 Or turn myself around  
 Or follow my intuition in to that border town."*

"Desperation Samba" by Jimmy Buffet

## 6

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**I**n the eternal night inside the hotel bar, Arango started his day with the taste of tomato, clam juice, vodka, and Tabasco sauce on his palate. For the sleepless trench coat detective, one Clamato cocktail was enough breakfast since it was too late to go to bed and too early to go out.

Upon returning to the hotel to rendezvous with his fake wife, he found his room vacant. The trace of a female on his bed, the aroma of French perfume, cigarette butts in the ashtray, and a huge vacuum in the air was all that was left. Lia had taken all the excitement out of the room ... the case files, and amazingly even the Moleskin pocket-sized notebook where Arango wrote his thoughts, notes, and fuzzy ideas.

*Flores Campbell*

Hours later, despite the fact that the clouds prevented any sun from getting through, the day looked good. The city continued to look as if it were bathed in a special light that made the color red look gray and yellow look white.

Arango walked a couple of blocks, stopping at the “Rue Morgue” café located across the street of the Old Lai-Alai Theatre. After buying the local newspapers and the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, he entered the restaurant. The place was crowded. He sat down next to a window, asked for coffee and some sweet twisted bread, and started reading after he looked around him, as if checking out the place. The coffee shop looked like it had seen better days a couple of decades ago. The bar’s acrylic tile, once red when new, now seemed a pale orange. The waitress’s hair was also discolored. She had lost her virginity several years back when a person could count the number of bars on Independence Avenue on one hand.

Arango quickly came up to speed on the news of the day. A number of senior Catholic officials, local politicians, and analysts offered a variety of possible motives for the attack.

A paid, full-page ad from the New Decency League, an organization he helped found, issued a statement saying that in all his posts, Cardinal Pizano worked to make Mexico “a crime free, powerful, and safe country” and that his attackers opposed that goal.

Most of the headlines suggested that someone had leaked some important information to the press. They wrote that one of the dead was a San Diego gang member with an extensive criminal history. Likewise, there was speculation as to the use of gang members as bodyguards and killers for the Mexican drug cartels, a beneficial relationship for both parties. Particularly interesting was the information about gunmen fleeing on a commercial jet to Mexico City, and then leaving the airport without passing through any type of inspection, presumably with the help of local authorities.

For Arango, it was not news that the gang members help the cartels. He had already lived similar experiences a few years back. What was incredible was that the assassins fled on an airplane and the big secrecy about who would be traveling in first class at the time.

All of these resulting speculations seemed like they were old style propaganda techniques focused on creating confusion. Much like some campaign of wrong information that was run by unnamed authorities and heavily supported by the media.

“Good morning, Mr. Arango. May I join you?” J.R. asked, sitting down without waiting for an answer.

“Does your boss know you’re here?” Arango countered in his awkward, Mitchum-like way, folding the newspaper meticulously back to its original form as if he had borrowed it or was going to ask for his money back.

“Mr. Medina is an honorable man. The press, the television, and even the movies have given us a very distorted version of reality,” said the young man without waiting for an answer.

“And what is reality?” Arango asked, smiling at how ironic that sounded.

“That, no matter how you toss the dice, there are benefits for us in all this. Despite the violence, the corruption, and the impunity, there are millions of dollars that enter this country’s economy thanks to drug trafficking. The money is invested in construction, factories, ports, and communication that drive the country’s economy. Mr. Medina’s work benefits all of us, but it is misunderstood by society.”

Trying to emphasize his point of view, J.R. continued, “When something is needed, everyone is there—the businessmen, the politicians, and the clergy—all asking for favors. Of course, when there’s a problem, everyone turns their back on him like he

*Flores Campbell*

was Satan and they run.” J.R. assured Arango, “Everybody works for the drug lords in this town, they simply just don’t know it.”

J.R. had just finished his speech when his cell phone interrupted Arango’s right to a reply. He felt he had earned this reply because he had patiently listened, for the second time in the last twenty-four hours, to the same good guy/bad guy story.

The young detective excused himself and headed toward the door, seeking the privacy of the street. From his seat, Arango enjoyed himself as he watched through the window the way that J.R. cursed at the person on the other end of the phone by his looks and gestures.

A sip of coffee was enough of a distraction not to see the murderer, but only to hear the nine-millimeter blast that, at point-blank range, ended J.R.’s life. He didn’t have time to react at all or defend himself as the window behind him was shattered into a thousand pieces.

Arango was able to bend down to cover himself with his trench coat to protect him from the unexpected sharp-bladed rain from which he survived unscathed. Among the screams of the restaurant patrons, Arango made his way to the sidewalk. J.R. was lying in a small, black pool of blood.

Arango followed his instincts and ran to the corner where he saw a small, dark-colored compact car leaving at high speed. The car made a screeching sound and left tire marks in the asphalt. Next to the tire marks, Arango noticed a couple of menthol cigarette butts and quickly and discreetly put them in his pocket.

Thinking of Lia Buzelli, Arango went back to the cafeteria accompanied by Motian’s percussions and the rain that again wet the official vehicles with more force than before. By that time, the police had already closed down the street. Photographers’ flashbulbs lit up the café. He could feel a breeze blowing through

the empty space that the tragedy left behind. He decided to wait for Gaviño in order to give his statement.

“I don’t know if you follow death or if death follows you, Mr. Arango, but J.R. was here to protect you,” the Assistant Attorney General said in a debase tone of voice.

“I think that your agent had his own agenda. I don’t have the slightest idea as to why he was killed. He offered to join me at my table and then he got a cell phone call. He went out to the street and you know the rest of the story.”

“Take him away. Let him give a complete statement in the office,” Gaviño ordered his officers without excusing himself before leaving.

A few minutes later in an improvised press conference, Assistant Attorney General Antonio Gaviño’s distorted face was unable to hide the shame, grief, and sorrow of losing one of his own men.

Lightning had struck much too close for Gaviño’s comfort. It demonstrated how the violence was escalating and how vulnerable the authorities were to it.



*Flores Campbell*

*October 13*

*I am still inclined to consider that the homicide of the Cardinal was just what it seemed to be ... crossfire between two rival criminal organizations. However, I can find no explanation for the discrepancy of the eyewitness statements on the origin of the gun battle.*

*The reason for Mr. Medina's request to cease the investigation remains without apparent motive. The fatal shooting of J.R. this morning is possibly the most baffling incident of all.*

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*Captain Dudley: "I admire you as a policeman, particularly your adherence to violence as necessary adjunct to the job."*

From the motion picture *L.A. Confidential*

# 7

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**A**rango never lost his cool during the questioning, where the hours, cigarettes, and "I didn't see anything's" were repeated many times. The authorities' lack of confidence was due to Arango's vague answers. For instance, the automobile in which the assailant allegedly fled was plain dark, not red or green, simply dark-colored.

Describing a murder in the manner that someone describes a shadow also did not help. As the situation went along the same path, the tense climate in the police building's basement continued to increase. The truth was as it had always been, much more simple and logical. A bullet much too close to his head allowed him to view the world in his manner. That is to say, through a totally different light.

Colors were memories. Much like the color of your grandmother's kitchen or the scent of your first lover's perfume. Vague and distant memories that he did not have a desire to share with anyone. Especially here in an interrogation center, where there were people who hadn't left alive. Coffee was switched to mineral

*Flores Campbell*

water, the sugar for chili powder, and the cigarettes were ever closer to his skin.

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Hours later, the sound of electric typewriter keys, as well as the smell of fresh coffee, made him open his eyes and blink. It took a few seconds to make out a blurry male figure with a window behind him making it possible to see everything around him except his face.

The man playing with a fountain pen in his hands walked a few steps in order to sit in front of Arango. He did so silently and without taking his gaze away as if he depended on Arango being the first to talk.

“Mr. Gaviño, what a pleasure to see you,” a wrinkled Arango said with a tinge of sarcasm in his voice.

“In so far as torture interrogation techniques are concerned, your men are professionals. My entire body hurts like hell, but I’m still fine,” continued the detective with the dark compliment.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know about your color blindness,” Gaviño said honestly, followed by the mandatory question, “What did J.R. want with you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he couldn’t tell me. He was explaining to me the necessary evil of organized crime when he received a phone call that made him step out of the cafeteria.”

Much like someone who is forced to deal with another due to circumstances, like opposite characters that fight for survival against a ferocious beast, Arango and Gaviño recognized the necessity of working together. After a pause that lasted a few seconds, the conversation continued.

“You were right about the sharpshooter. A bullet was found that was a different caliber from the rest in one of the gunmen’s bodies. Despite the fact that he was armed, the lack of gunpowder on his hands indicates that he did not fire his weapon. According to a witness, he was the first victim of the shooting,” Gaviño confessed, forced to concede in order to receive information.

In response, Arango put his fingers to his lips showing his doubts as to why he was given this confidential information.

“I tell you this because this was the theory that you proposed. Besides, the investigation has been sabotaged from the beginning,” confessed Gaviño.

“By J.R.?” Arango asked, directly taking advantage of Gaviño’s new availability to share information.

“By everyone, but partly by him. It was known that he leaked information to the newspapers and altered some witness statements. There are a lot of mistakes in the case files, some due to negligence, but the more important ones are due to corruption.”

“I understand. Nobody can resist a fifty thousand peso kick-back,” concurred the detective with solidarity as he recalled his grandfather’s words.

“If this case is too risky, Mr. Gaviño, why won’t you resign?”

“I can’t. This is what I am, a police officer. You know what I mean ... the feeling ... it’s like a gun pointing at you and you enjoy the taste of the muzzle in your mouth,” confided the rectitudinous Mexican Official.

Gaviño opened the drawer, took out a semi-automatic gun, placed it on the desk, and said, “Take it. Trust me, we should work together.” He waited for a response from the mistreated

*Flores Campbell*

detective. He then asked, in perfect English, “Do you have a death wish?!”

Arango then responded like Jack Nicholson in *Chinatown*—with a smile that said he could no longer lie to him. Accepting the gun meant establishing a symbiotic relationship that could prove beneficial to both of them. The detective definitely concluded that doing this was better than making a pact with the devil.

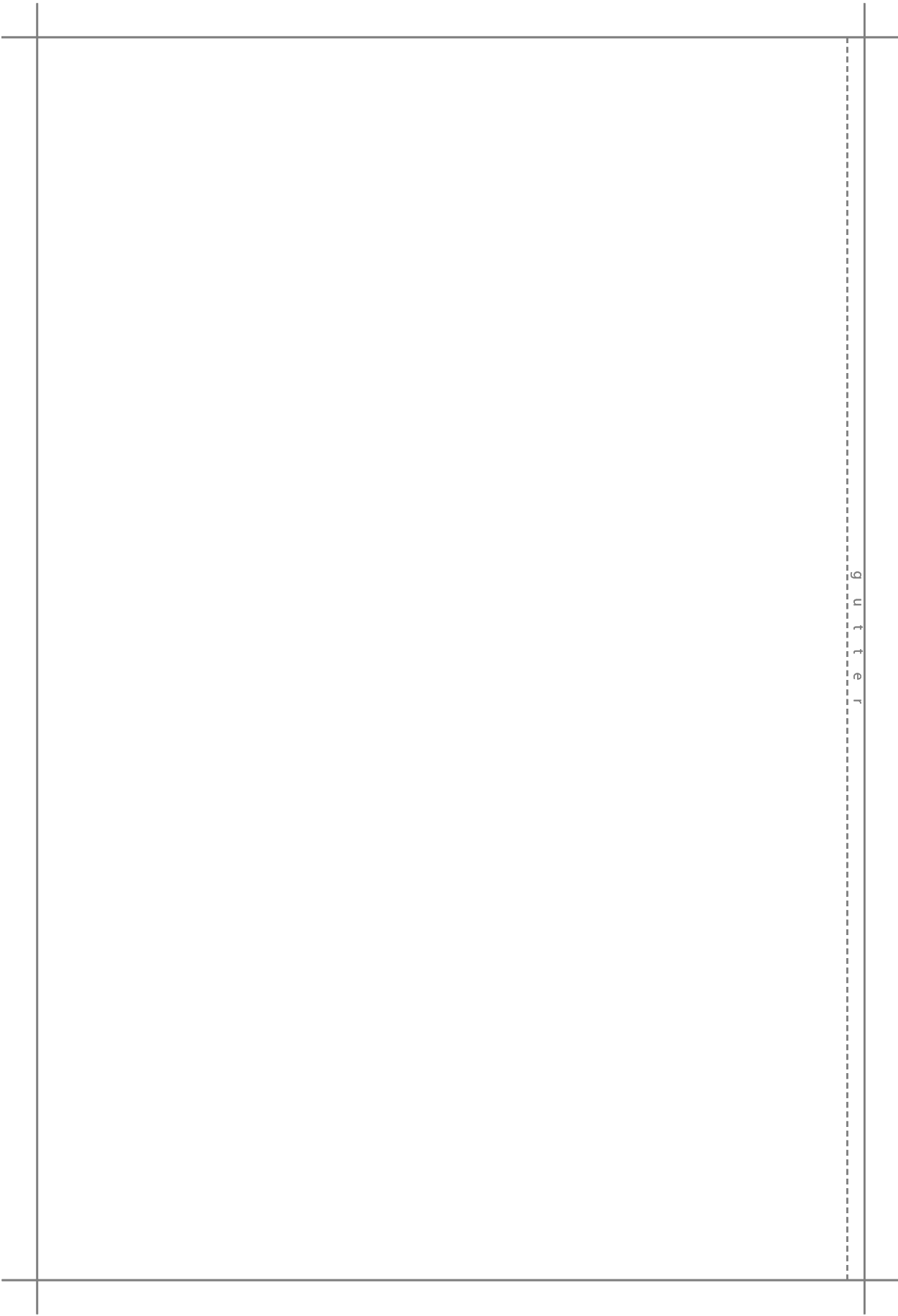
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*October 13*

*I believe that Gabiño's offer of a gun for my protection is his honest response, a good gesture on his part, and not a ruse to conceal his complicity in any criminal undertakings.*

*Although I was present in the Rue Morgue Cafeteria when J.R. was murdered, I was not next to him when they shot at him; therefore I was unable to corroborate any description of his assassin or assassins.*

*J.R. last words; "Everybody works for the drug lords in this town, they just simply don't know it."*



*"This isn't the real Mexico. You know that.  
All border towns bring out the worst in a country."*

Charlton Heston in *Touch of Evil* (1958)

## 8

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**B**efore leaving the police building, Arango went to the restroom. With the agility that is developed through experience, he checked the magazine, loaded it, and placed the Beretta 9mm on his back at the waist. Afterward, he wet his face. He looked at his wrinkles, and though with his fingers he stretched back the skin, he could not erase the ghostly dark circles under his eyes, which reminded him of his body's mortality.

It may be that Robert Mitchum, Alfred Hitchcock, or even the most fatal of women, Jane Greer, were never in Tijuana, but what would they have done, if they were part of this story?

The damaged man asked himself how he should act. His voice of experience told him that the detective's job is to discover the truth. Proving it only through evidence and not by pursuing the guilty. He arrived at the conclusion that the scenery, the lack of light, and the absence of colors did not reflect the darkness of the story. No, not in that manner. The darkness emanated here from the characters he reasoned in front of his own image.



*Flores Campbell*

Teo Arango did not feel like he wanted to sleep. He felt comfortable in this weather, the city streets' light and shadow effects, the bustle of traffic, and the solitude of his soul. The light rain that wet his face cleared his mind. While he walked, he began to recover little by little. It was as if it was happening by parts. First, the legs, followed by the arms, and then the head. After he had his thoughts in order, the monochromatic detective walked back across the European-style round-around main boulevard and approached the lines of empty yellow taxicabs. Most of them were old chubby checkers.

"Where to?" a small, boy-faced taxi driver asked as he held the passenger door open.

"To the cathedral as quickly as possible please," ordered the detective.

"It's a bit of a hassle to get there quickly. There is a public protest blocking the streets due to the Cardinal's death," explained the cabbie after he took Flamingos Boulevard that headed south of the city.

"Don't worry, just get me there as soon as possible," Arango sighed in a nicotine-tinged tone of voice.

The taxi ran into stalled traffic before it reached the cathedral. Arango could hear loud voices coming closer.

"Pizano, Pizano, Pizano!" the voices chanted.

With that, a young man snatched a white flag flying in the wind. Everyone cheered wildly.

"Justice," an old woman shouted as she raised her right hand, holding up the picture of her dead son.

The throng filling the rain-soaked plaza was made of housewives, businessmen, employees, and complete families. The reason for

the crowd's anger was not only the Cardinal's murder, but also the hundreds or maybe thousands of unsolved crimes. In a cold way to look at it, Pizano's murder was just another statistic, it barely moved Tijuana's crime rate up a digit. On the other hand, it moved the people to the streets in a peaceful demonstration. For the Catholic Church, he was a martyr, for others, the poster boy of Tijuana's lack of safety, and for the rest, a wake-up call for the authorities.

Arango glanced out the window behind him, handed the driver a ten-dollar bill, and muttered, "Thanks." Then he stepped into the street and scrambled through the mob of umbrellas.

As Arango headed toward the cathedral, walking slowly now, the sound of the crowd faded away until he could only hear his own steps on the wet soil.

Before knocking on the door of the cathedral, Arango turned to his sides as if he was waiting for someone, or as if he was going to discover that someone was following him. Visibility was poor in the rain, but he could make out all the parked cars from both sides of the street. In a certain twisted way, the detective missed Lia Buzelli's lethal company—his own devious Kathie Moffitt. A woman who appears to be an object of desire, but in reality she has the power to destroy everyone.

The elderly woman that opened the iron door looked more like an apparition than a housekeeper. Her gray hair, lowered head, and sunken eyes, due to her constant crying, created a gloomy image. Arango could not help but check her feet, in case they float like fetters; that is where one needs to pay attention, the walking.

After identifying himself, he asked to speak with who was in charge of the house. The woman indicated that she was the only servant working at that time.

"Why didn't you go to the ceremony?" the detective respectfully asked.

*Flores Campbell*

**“Someone needed to stay. Besides I still have not finished packing the Cardinal’s personal belongings,” she indicated without being able to hide the grief that this task caused her.**

**After crossing himself at the entrance, Arango walked slowly behind the woman down a long corridor until they reached the Cardinal’s private office in the other wing of the building. It was a solemn room with little light that filtered through a multicolored stained-glass window. Nothing superfluous. Behind a mahogany desk, a picture of the Pope John Paul the Second was hanging on the wall.**

**All of this made the room seem like one of those places where time does not pass. It stands still where everything is induced in a scene of timeless serenity. A semi-new Smith-Corona typewriter from the ‘40s looked impeccable, as if it had just arrived in the office.**

**A black, heavy, rotary telephone matched a small art deco lamp that indiscriminately illuminated an appointment planner open to the date of the crime. All of this gave a magical touch, a mystical atmosphere, a claro-oscuro, difficult to describe.**

**He kept the woman waiting momentarily while he searched in his trench coat pockets for his little notebook. No other detective went into a witness interview better prepared than Arango. And he rarely interrupted them; he let them talk and talk until, without being obvious, he turned the conversation towards the juicy stories, the ones in the closet of the subject of his investigation.**

**The woman spoke with nostalgia of her many years of service to the church’s prince. She spoke of his years as a priest, bishop, and cardinal. She spoke with joy of the last years and the stressful last days when he appeared nervous or tired and took visitors that were out of the ordinary past his bedtime hour.**

**“What type of visitors? Like Mr. Medina?”**

"No, Señor, Mr. Medina had always maintained a friendly relationship with the Cardinal, even way before he was this city's bishop," confirmed the woman, making a certain degree of sympathy toward the drug trafficker noticeable.

"Then, to whom are you referring?" asked the detective as he continued to shoot questions without easing up in order to get immediate and honest responses.

"To the governor and the strange woman who spent a couple of hours in his office just a few days before his murder."

Arango almost smiled, turned back to the startled woman, and asked, "What was the woman like?"

"I don't know. I never saw her, but her aroma seemed to invade all the corners of this office for several days."

"Any sexual peccadilloes? I really need to know," affirmed Arango as the woman's face turned a whiter shade of pale.\*

"No, not ever. The Cardinal was a saint in all the extent of the word," said the sad woman after taking a deep breath.

"Were the police already here?" asked Arango as he acknowledged it was the proper time to change the subject.

"No, only Nuncio Apostolico Monsignor Cratzi, the Vatican ambassador, with a few priests yesterday. They asked me to leave and I didn't come back until nightfall."

Arango paid close attention to every detail of the room, looking for something out of place, a clue. Then he stopped his gaze at a small trashcan that was close to the door.

There were the remains of a bottle of cheap California Pinot Noir over a series of crumpled carbon papers in a language that was difficult to understand.

*Flores Campbell*

Without looking at her, Arango asked very politely, “Ma’am, may I have a glass of water?” He asked this in an effort to distract her attention since the woman had not taken her gaze off him since they entered the room.

The woman’s footsteps faded down the long corridor. Arango put his left hand on the door handle and shut the door carefully, knowing that he would only have a couple of minutes of privacy.

He took the papers out of the trash, laid them in front of him, and began to read:

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*Tijuana Noir*

*Mese October 1994*

*Exellencia Santissima;*

*Nuncios Apostolicus Monsignor Peppino Cratzzi moni mihi, coram sacerdotus testitus, dixit occissionem domine Pizano directe et intentionaliter. Privatem fuisse, minime ob confussionem sine adjuvante sed a sicariis faraneis ad Infernus hoc insuper se cognoscere nomen mandates sed... non posse loqui neque to certiore facere.*

*Si tutti Cognoscere posses un potencius plus lax to Satus Iglesias Cattolica com et Banco Ambrossiano Scandalus.*

*Humillitus,\*\**

*L'Abal*

**To which Arango understood as:**

*Month October 1994*

*Holy Excellence;*

*Nuncio Apostolico Monsignor Peppino Cratzzi told me, in front of priest witnesses, that the assassination of Mr. Pizano was direct and intentional. It was not in any way due to confusion or circumstances, but instead conducted by foreign hired killers from hell contracted for the case. Plus, he now knows the name of the one who gave the orders ... he cannot talk nor tell you.*

*If this information goes out, it may hurt the Catholic Church worse than the Ambrossian Bank scandal.*

*Sincerely,*

*L'Abal*

*Flores Campbell*

**For Arango, it was easy to decipher the letter but not the truth. The curtain of secrets fell once again, but there was still no answer for all of this. Hearing a commotion out in the corridor, Arango did not wait for the woman, he left the room to head toward the church chapel to look for a place to think, digest the information, and make decisions.**

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*October 13*

*Maybe Medina's "or else" was to protect the Cardinal's reputation to avoid any objection of the church to fast track his sainthood.*

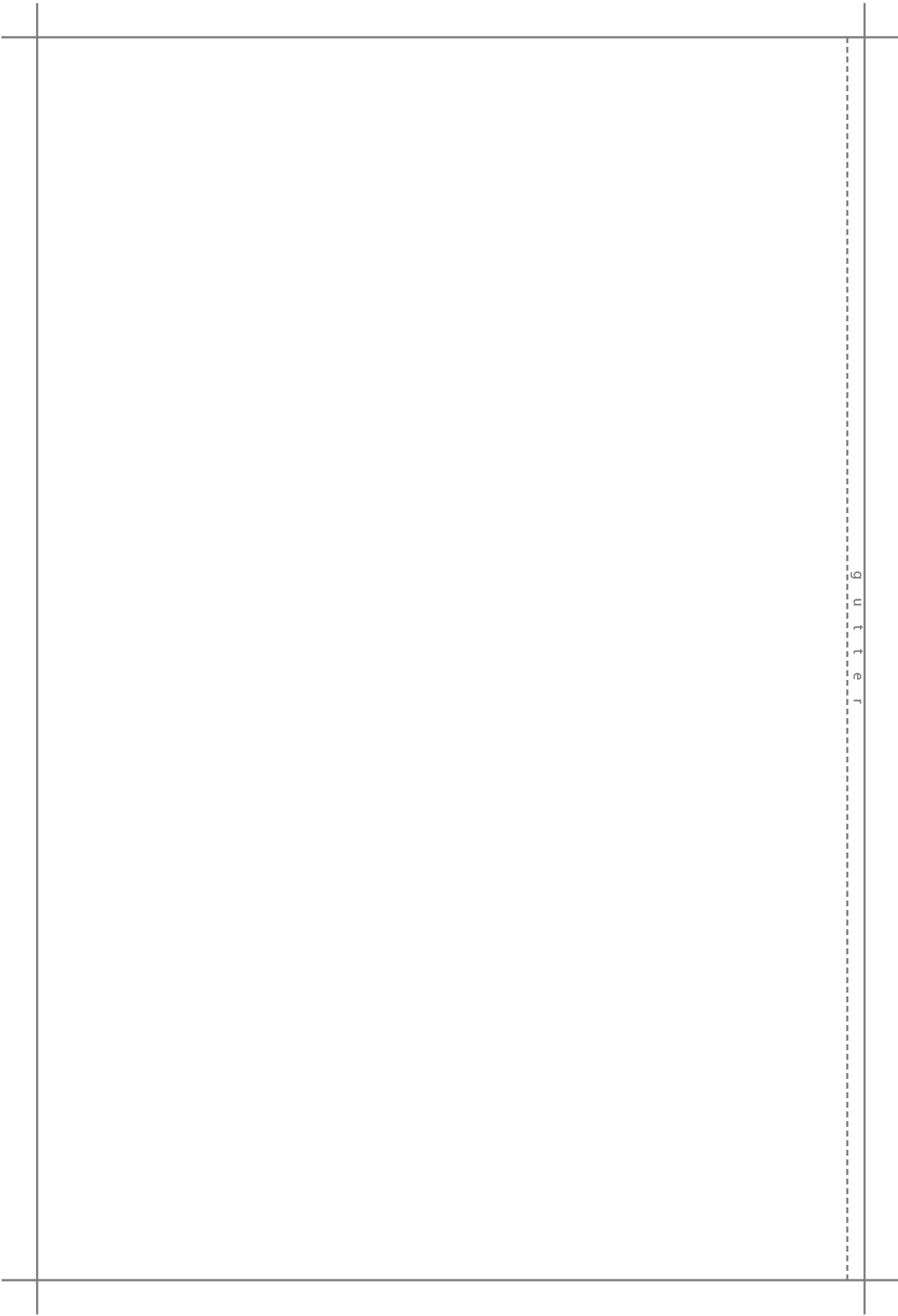
*Some priests have said that they believe that their faith is under attack,*

*Was a devilish pleasure to work with Miss Buzelli; too bad this relationship won't survive this investigation ... but after all, what does?*

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- \* From the lyrics of "Whiter Shade of Pale" by Three Dog Night.
- \*\* Faux Old Latin Language.





*"It was a nice little joint with bamboo furniture and Mexican gimcracks. One little lamp burned. It was all right. And the rain hammering like that on the window made it good to be there."*

From Jacques Tourneur, *Out of the Past* (1947)

## 9

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**A**rango walked along the wet city streets of downtown Tijuana, oblivious to the rain. His disdain was palpable to the souvenir shop employees and street vendors advertising their wares along Independence Avenue, the border town's main drag.

"Psst, psst, Amigo! Do you want to get high? Marijuana?" The vendors whispered as Arango dodged them until a sign on the wall caught his attention:

**"Roma Antigua Hotel & Restaurant: Birthplace of the World Famous Caesar Salad in 1938"**

There was a time when the Hollywood crowd would drive to spend the weekend in this legendary hotel or just for dinner in order to have Mr. Alessandrini, the Italian chef, up on their tables. Over seven decades, though, that prestige wore away and the once legendary hotel became known as a flophouse.

As always, Arango found the peace he was looking for in a bar, in the semi-dark ambience and the heat given by an alcoholic drink.

*Flores Campbell*

He landed across the street from the hotel, at “Nelson’s Blue Tattoo,” another relic from the past with glass-block windows and 1930s architecture.

“What will you have to take care of the cold?” asked the dark-skinned, young waitress.

She was wearing a tight wet T-shirt that exaggerated her breasts. An Aztec calendar tattoo above her tailbone peeked out of her skirt, which implied a strong desire to screw.

“Would you like some company?” she insinuated as she drew her small skirt up to her hips, which were used to being abused and pinched now and then.

“Absolut Tonic for me, and for you, anything you want, darling,” Arango answered, resting in the energy that is given by liquor when it is mixed with salt, lemon, and the female figure.

In his room hours later, Arango attempted once again the therapy that never failed, the Prozac that was going to bed with someone. Her butt was hot and soft, her breasts silicone firm, and her face was pretty enough to get any not-so-sober man wet with just a simple kinky smile.

For all the times that the headboard hit the wall and the young woman’s efforts showed in her sweating, it was all done in vain. It was like making love to a corpse. He was unable to feel anything at all. The loveless kisses could not erase the passionate memory of the night before. The memory of Lia’s beautiful body so cruel and so blessed at the same time.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what is happening today, maybe some other time,” he said to the part-time fluffer upon saying goodbye.

“No rain-checks in this type of business, honey!” reminded the young woman.

She had not yet finished her work, but she worked hard to earn the one hundred dollars that she took from the bedside table before leaving.

A situation like that was unusual. He was tormented by flashes of Lia's image, leaving him sleepless and with bruises on his heart. You have to fall sleep drunk or tired in order to escape your own conscience. Attempting to clear his mind, like a frustrated person trying to turn off sound, he mitigated his thirst and meditated. Arango picked up a new cigarette and put it in his mouth as he directed his attention to the television set.

The midnight movie once again offered *Out of the Past* in the Film Noir marathon. It's ironic how life itself, along with the violence, seems to spin and spin without stopping, he thought.

Arango went down the ten floors that separated him from the bar and went through the lobby. It was neither the first time nor the second, but on the third time that the emotionally mangled detective finally paid attention when someone called out his name.

"Mr. Arango, there is an envelope for you at the front desk," the young woman repeated until she received an acceptable response from the distracted guest.

To his surprise, opening the envelope made him forget his destiny and instead made him pay attention once again to the crime investigation. Somebody, for some particular reason, had sent him a confidential facsimile from the Mexican President's staff. The document announced a private visit from the President's brother on the day of the crime, also noting the time of arrival and the airline that he was taking. This explained why the plane was allowed to take off after the butchering and allegedly help the cartel heads flee along with some gunmen.

"Sabotage," he muttered in the air before taking the uncolored cab that waited for him at the hotel's doors.

*Flores Campbell*

**“To the airport quickly!” exclaimed the detective, being one step closer to solving this puzzle.**

**Outside of the car, the traffic was stopped due to the incredible mess caused by the rain. The traffic jam seemed eternal for the detective as he discovered in front of him, in the middle of a big run-around, the only statue of Abraham Lincoln in Mexico.**

**The sober-looking man waiting in the taxi occupied his mind drawing conclusions. The new information placed at least a Cardinal of the Catholic Church, the brother of the nation’s president, and the heads of the biggest drug cartels together at the same place and time.**

**A meeting like that could not have been overlooked by intelligence agencies. Also, due to logistical and security reasons, it could only have been called by someone very powerful.**

**Unfortunately for Arango, this involved the Mexican Secretary of the Interior. In other words, this meant Lia Buzelli opening another new line of investigation regarding government crimes.**

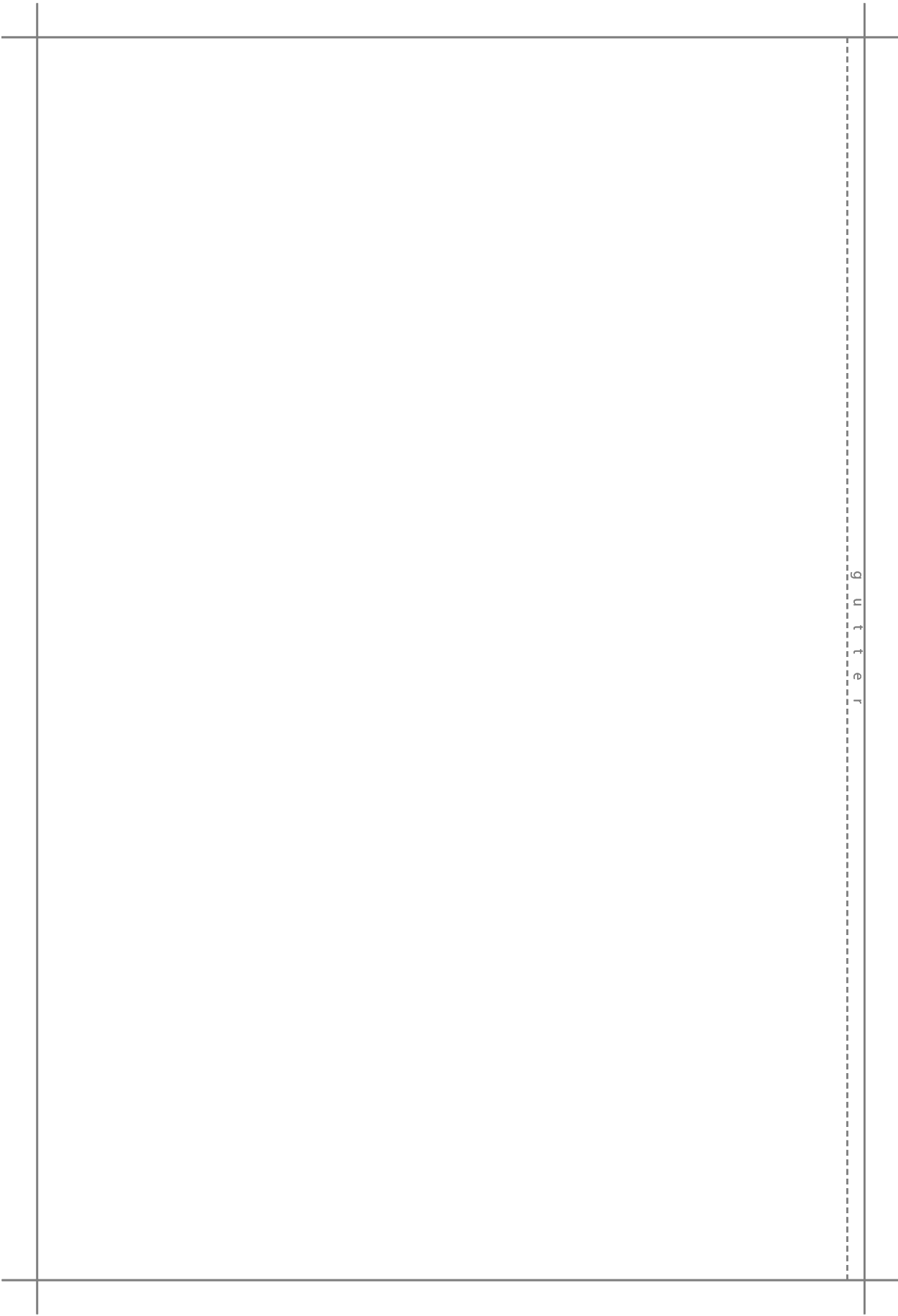
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*Tijuana Noir*

*October 14*

*It is difficult to weigh the evidence in this case without being inexorably drawn to consider the theory of a plot to sabotage at any cost a VIP meeting at the airport that infamous morning.*

*Lia's unexpected presence at the airport the day of my arrival, her great interest to solve the case, and her cigarette butts in J.R.'s murder location would appear to transcend the realm of coincidence. As does the fact that the Cardinal housekeeper was able to create a great description of a Femme Fatale (Lia Buzelli) like the woman that interviewed the Cardinal for hours a couple of days before his death.*



*Spade: By the way, where were you the night Miles was murdered?*

*Iva: Home (shaking her head)*

*Spade: No, but if that's your story, it's all right with me.*

From John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941)

# 10

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g u t t e r

**A**rango placed himself in the position of the first victim. Guided by a reflection, he looked to his left and unconsciously felt that someone was watching him from a distance. He focused his gaze on the federal area and began to think, tying two and two together. He recalled Lia's words when she had said that she had her offices there—in the building attached to the presidential hangar. Immediately, he went to the guards, borrowed a short wave radio, and called Gaviño on the radio.

“Trust my intuition, Mr. Gaviño. I think the trigger men never left the airport,” Arango said with the confidence of a poker player.

“You are wrong. After the crime, the airport and its surroundings were checked and police barricades were set up along the highways that head into the city,” the police officer answered incredulously.



*Flores Campbell*

**“Perhaps it’s just a hunch, although I will wait for you in front of the presidential hangar,” said Arango upon ending the call, knowing that he had no time to waste.**

**With slow but assured steps, the detective drew closer to the airport’s restricted area. Even though the sign stated:**

**“WARNING, Federal Restricted Area” and “It is unlawful to enter this area without permission of the Federal Authorities.”**

**The lack of presence of security personnel seemed very odd. Arango violated the fence’s lock like someone who has raped bigger locks before—without much thought in it. Using the side of the building, the intruder managed to scale up to the building’s flat roof. There was a small control tower on top of it with a series of white and metallic-colored parabolic antennas that could have easily served as the sharpshooter’s camouflage.**

**Arango acted like he was inspired by the likes of Bogart, McQueen, Douglas, and mainly Mitchum. There was something about this actor that made him want to imitate him in his professional life as well as in his private life.**

**Maybe it was his calmness, like the kind you get from marijuana that Arango sought when he invoked this personality.**

**The ability to imagine scenarios was one of Arango’s qualities, as well as his sense of observation, and the way he fit together pieces of a puzzle. It was not difficult to find what he was looking for in the tower. Not only did he find the assassin’s nest, but also the evidence that indicated his first and last name.**

**A criminal only sobers up when he thinks that he has been caught. Arango grabbed the bullet shells together with the cigarette butts. He wrapped them in a handkerchief, storing them in his inside coat pocket. He started running through scenarios again.**

"A single shot was enough to start off the shooting, to unleash the chaos. It was for that reason no one knew who shot first," reasoned the detective, but why? That only Lia could explain.

Forcing the door open in order to gain entry into the building was easy, although descending the stairs with a weapon in his hand was dangerous. In the first office, he noticed a sophisticated phone tapping system, as well as an arsenal that could have easily armed a regiment. Arango passed his fingertips over one of the desks, drawing two lines in the dust, which suggested the absence of a staff for more than two days, maybe weeks.

I am sure some of the readers can predict what happened next, like in a movie that they may have seen before. Arango went down the stairs that headed to the first floor, uselessly avoiding any noise. It was there that he realized that Lia was waiting for him, pointing a gun, with no smile on her face.

"Is that how you manage to enter the women's offices that you pursue?" Lia said, greeting him with more humor than sarcasm, given the circumstances.

"Always," he responded. "I have been following you for a while now."

"So, what was it that made you follow me?"

"There wasn't any one absolute revelation. Let's say it was the drip-drip effect. Everything pointed to you from the beginning."

"Drop your weapon. Don't underestimate me. It's not too hard for me to shoot," threatened the woman.

Arango drew lethally closer until he was a few feet from her ... where he could make out one of the triggermen. He was badly injured in one leg, which was resting on a metal desk, and he caressed an AK-47 assault rifle with the same tenderness that

*Flores Campbell*

you use to hug a loved one, a lover, or someone to whom you owe your life.

Lia and Arango looked in each other's eyes knowing that they were in the same position. She could not hide cursing the day she met him.

"And I thought I was Bogart's James Spade," Arango commented after a frank smile.

"I would have liked to have met you earlier, in another life perhaps. Sharing another story, but that isn't the case. Someone has to die here," Lia said with a remorseful grimace.

"I found some papers yesterday that make me wonder how Nuncio Apostolico knew that the Cardinal's death wasn't an accident," Arango said.

"His relationship with the drug lords and his position as a mediator between cartels was no secret to the church," said the woman in a non-belligerent or combative tone of voice.

"Why? What was the reason for the killings?" asked the detective, like someone on death row making his last request.

"We couldn't let the cartels unite, nor could we let the President's brother continue negotiating with them. Mexico could turn into a narco state," confessed Lia with the passion of someone that feels that the ends justify the means.

"We? The DEA ... Mr. Smithe?" Arango asked in vain. He knew he pressed the right buttons after he saw how she sealed her lips and just stared at him.

"And the Cardinal's death?" he asked, attempting to solve the last unknown piece.

Lia shook her head as if she were denying everything. She pointed her barrel toward the injured man. She opened her eyes like a Japanese anime, and in cold blood, she shot all her rage through the trigger.

“That was extra. Sometimes, only sometimes, several birds can be killed with one stone,” were the words that came from her lips when she ended the gunman’s life with a single shot between the eyes.

“I always felt I had diabolical, even divine, luck. This just confirms it,” Arango said with a tight, bitter smile.

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It was already too late when the federal agents entered the building. Upon seeing the couple in front of the lifeless gunman, the federal prosecutor understood that the hope of clearing up the crime involving the Cardinal was also dead. The only evidence that could have led to the mastermind was lying in a pool of fresh blood with a gunshot in his third eye.

“Good aim, Ms. Buzelli,” praised Gaviño when he noticed the way the woman tensely squeezed the gun with smoke still coming out of the muzzle.

“The official report shall say that I was attacked after discovering his hiding place and also that Mr. Arango was never here,” she said going back to the authoritative tone that she had lost for a while.

“Kind of shady, the way your investigation was conducted, Mr. Arango,” said a disappointed District Attorney before he said goodbye.

After leaving the warehouse, they noticed that it had finally stopped raining. They looked mutually at each other without

*Flores Campbell*

saying a single word so that they eventually could go their own way.

The separation of the clouds allowed a few rays of light to come through. They illuminated the airport, as well as a group of Central American illegal immigrants, who thought about the idea of finishing the day on the other side of the border while they crossed the street.

For Arango, the storm, just like his visit, had ended. Writing the crime's final report had been like writing a script for a "*Cinema Noir*" movie, or in this case, it was a "*Border Noir*." It tragically began at the scene of the crime. It included the usual stumbling of the trade for the detective, without forgetting the *Femme Fatale* warming his bed. Someone backtracking that was at the fringe of the murder or someone who was already dead. In this case, it turns out that Arango had stopped living for some time now.

Before he got on the plane, he let his overburdened past, black overcoat, and crime report with its sweeping, but undocumented generalizations, fall in his half-empty travel bag.

Teo Arango was traveling alone once again. The carrier of a truth that, like a secret in a confession, should stay unspoken, imprinted in his memory like a series of black and white images of a "*Tijuana Noir*" that he only hoped existed in these written lines.

On the plane, Arango closed his eyes in order to seek refuge in his dreams. It was at that moment that the words "The End" appeared and the curtain fell.

## EPILOGUE

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*File: Tijuana Noir, October 1994*

*Final case notes by: Teo Arango*

*The investigation of Cardinal Jose Ma. Pizano's murder in Tijuana's Salinas International Airport is now closed.*

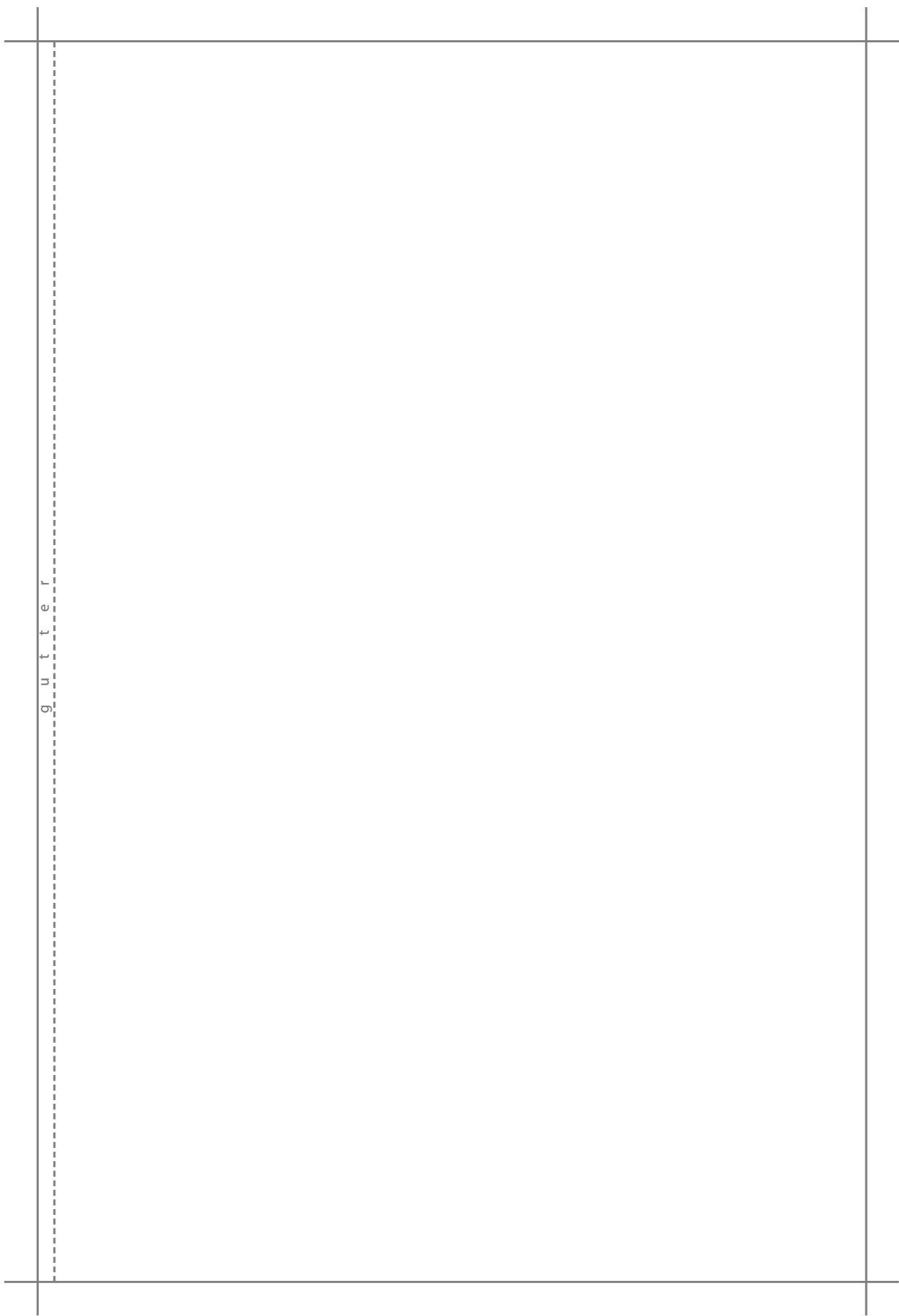
*This has been a tough one, due to the lack of honest information, corruption, and hostile ambiance in many of the characters involved on the case. My attempt to look deep in the suspected sabotage of the meeting between Organized Crime, the Catholic Church, and government officials was thwarted by Mexico's Ministry of Interior through Lia Buzelli. Her conduct fell within the framework of tampering and her remarks strongly suggest that she was aware of all the details that had taken place the day of the crimes.*

*However, it also seems likely that it was Miss Buzelli who anonymously delivered the Mexican Secret Service facsimile that alerted me of the involvement on the case of the Mexican President's youngest brother.*

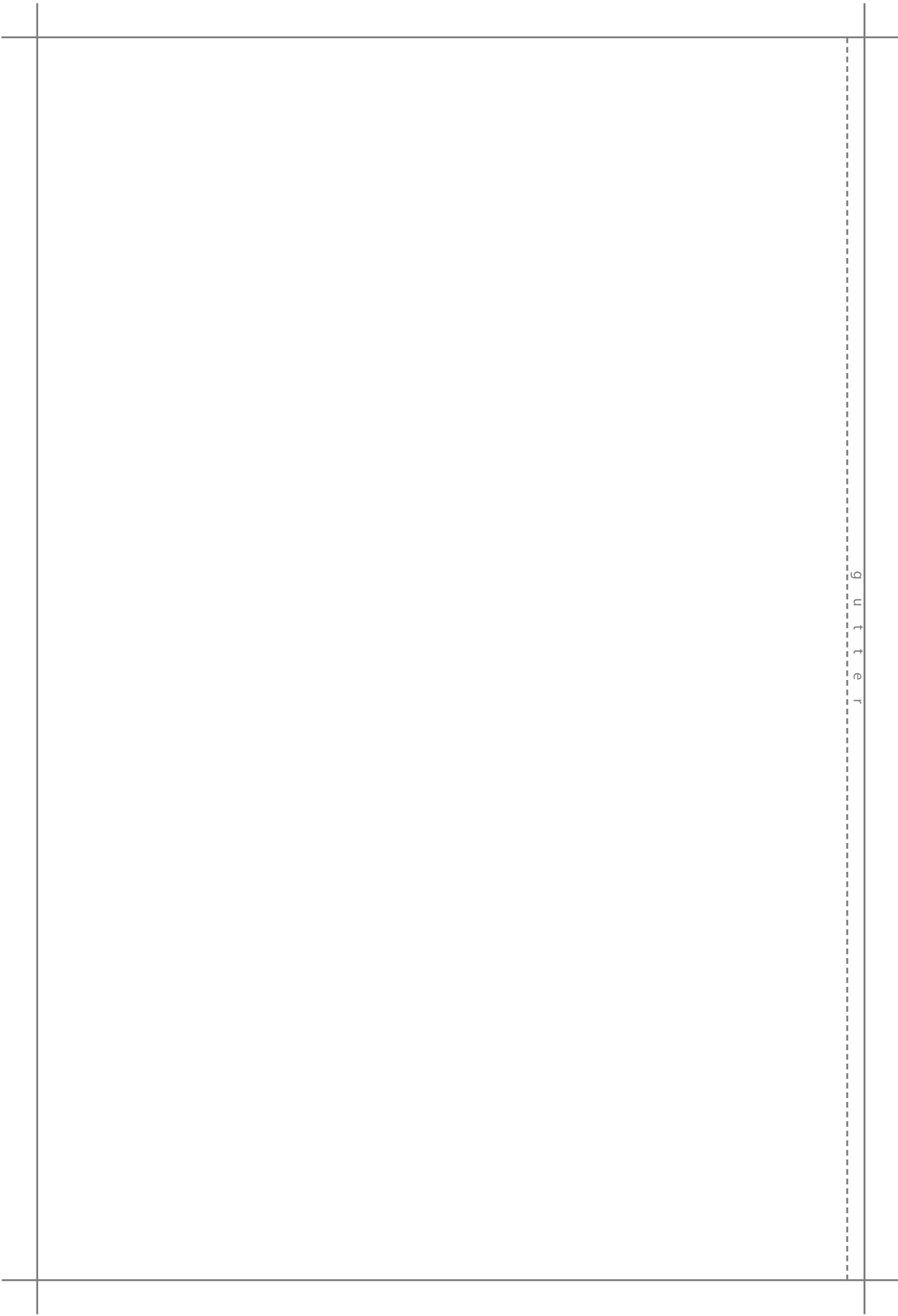
*Assistant General Attorney Antonio Gaviño and myself agree that Cardinal Pizano's lamentable brutal murder was not the main goal of the attack. We differ in Miss Buzelli's grade of participation on the tragic events.*

*Even if the identity of the perpetrators is well known, the name of the intellectual author remains a mystery and probably will stay like that forever.*

*But, then again, I never believe in happy endings anyway.*





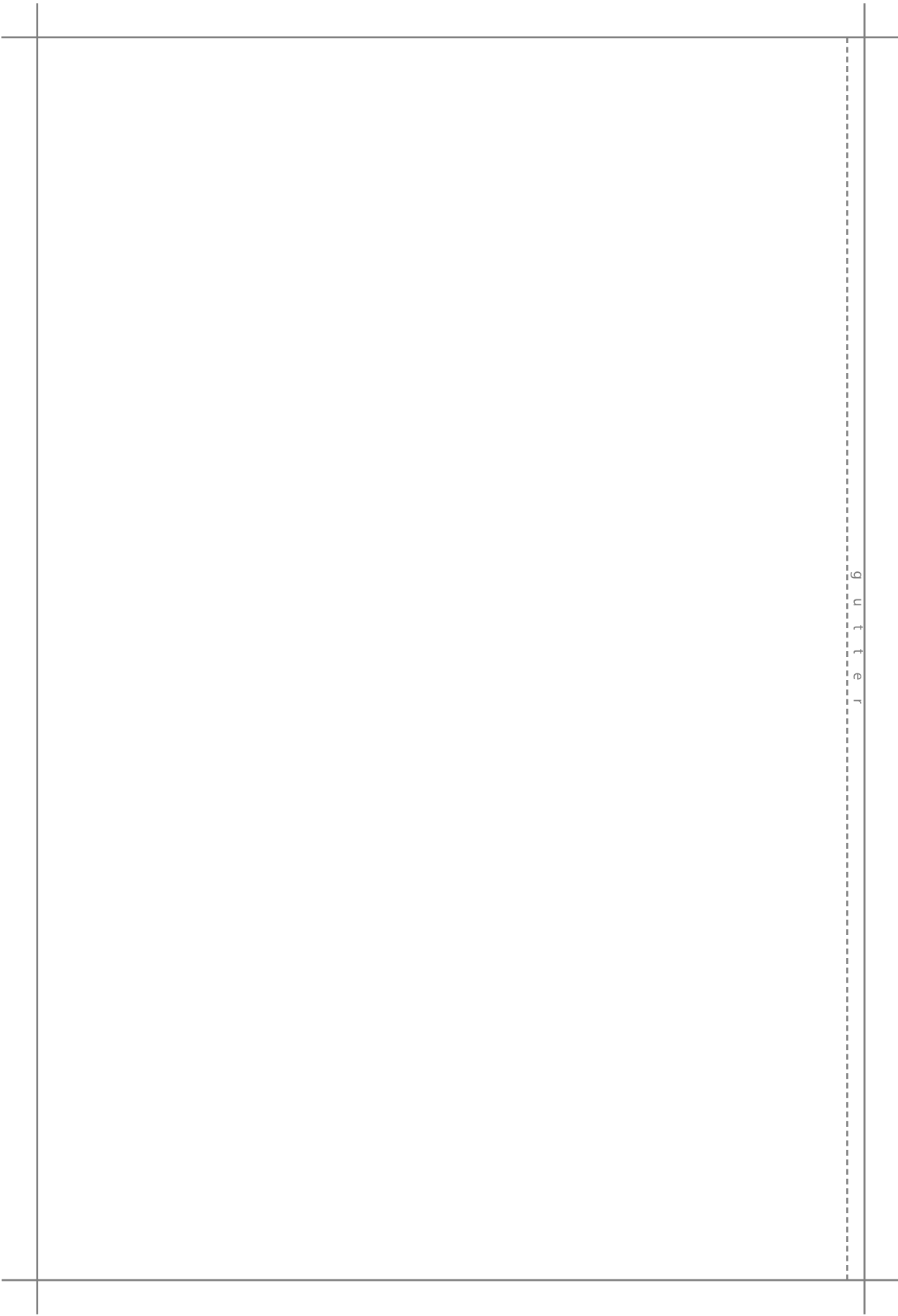


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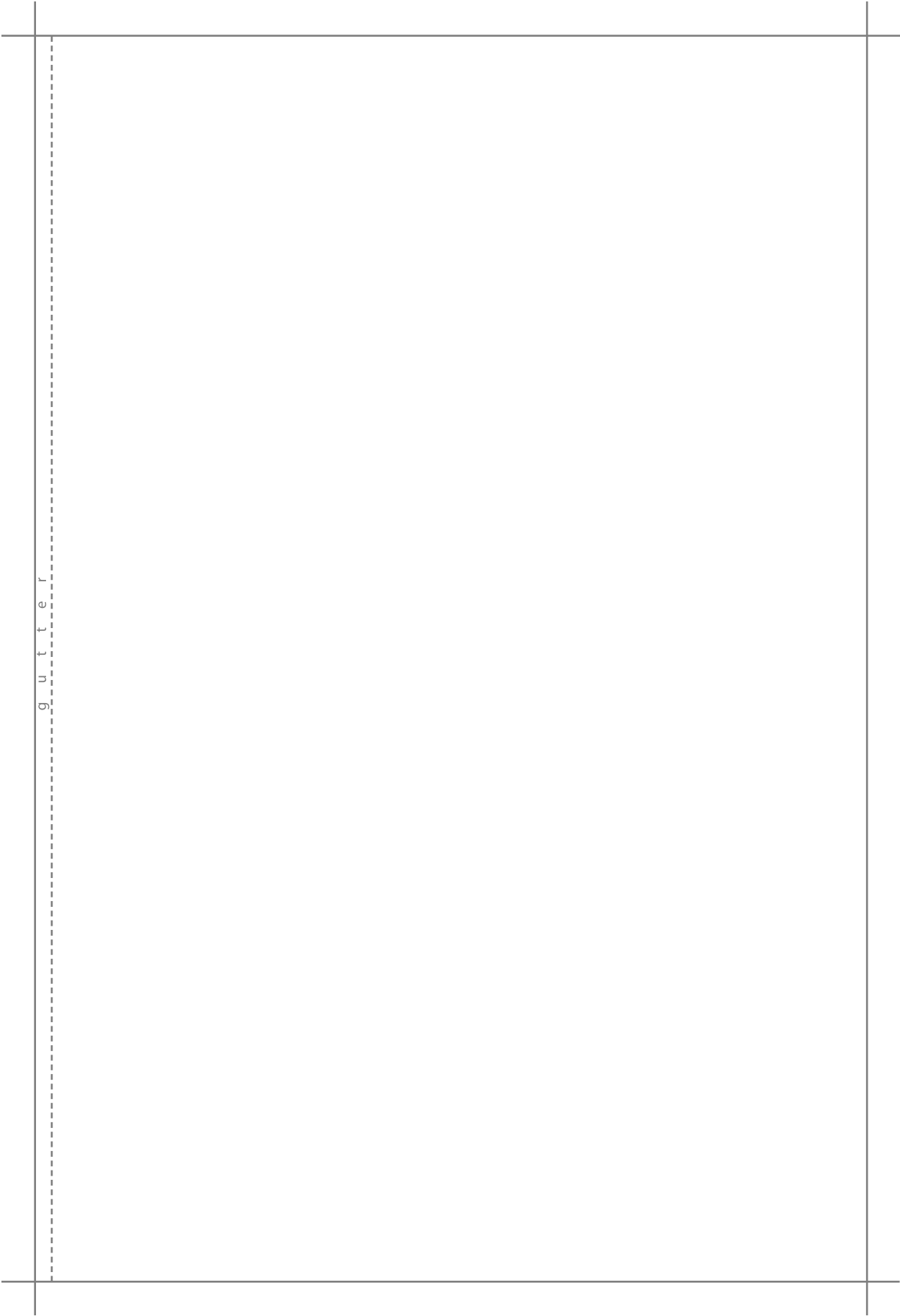
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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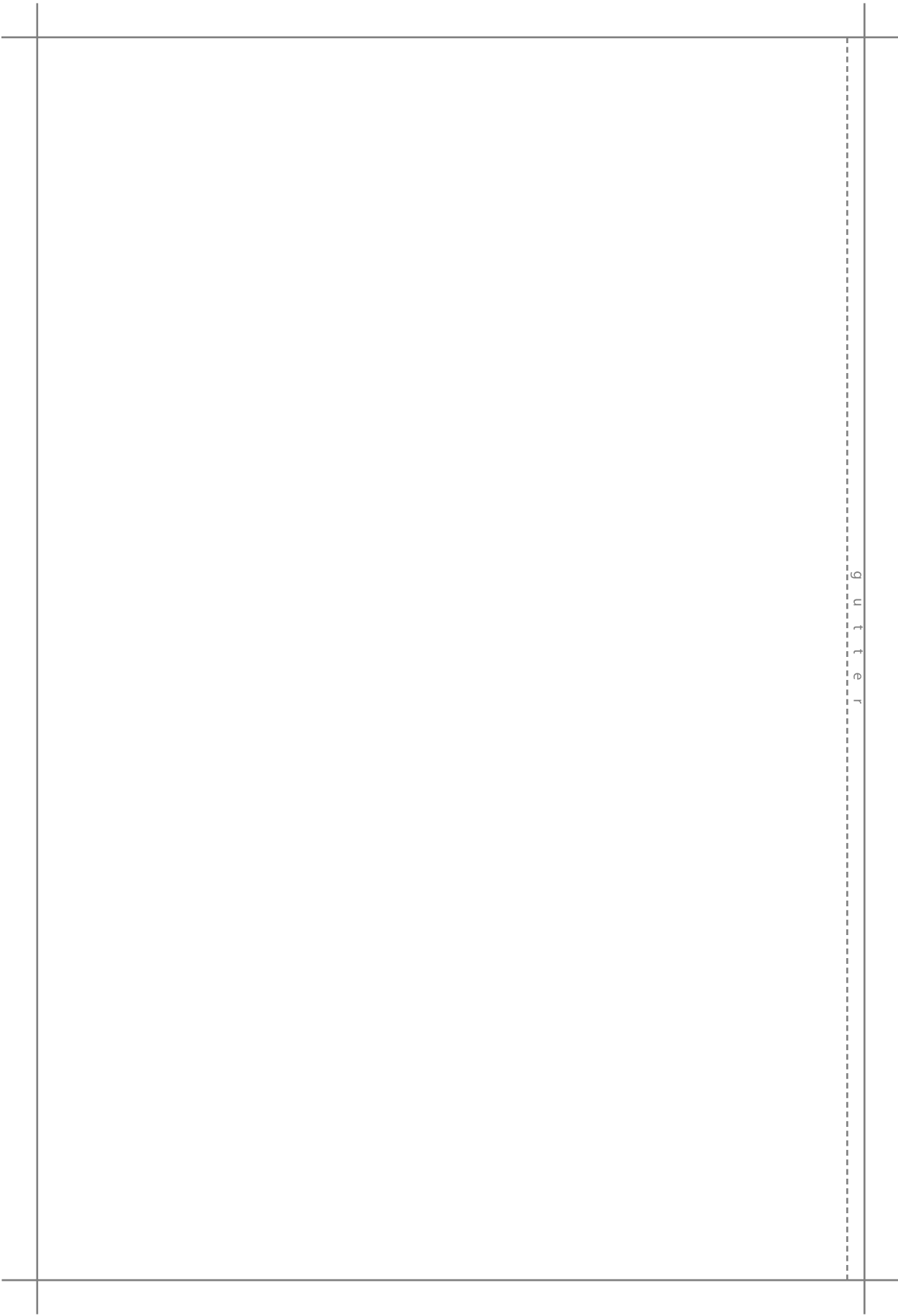
**Flores Campbell was born in San Diego, California, grew up in Tijuana and actually lives in Rosarito Beach. He has a bachelor's Degree in Business Administration; he is a publicist and part time actor. Tijuana Noir is his first published novel.**



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