

The First Two Pages: “Mala Suerte” By E. Gabriel Flores

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An Essay by E. Gabriel Flores

“Mala Suerte” was inspired by a family anecdote from many years ago. In the 1950s my father was engaged in the highly lucrative—and non-legal—activity known as “running the numbers.” People chose three-digit numbers, wrote their numbers on a slip of paper, and gave them to him in an envelope with a dollar bill. Bettors won if their numbers matched another three-digit numeral published in the daily paper, like a standard stock market figure or a horse race’s winning time.

My father’s job was to match the winning numbers and award the lucky winner a large portion of the takings. As the numbers runner, he was able to keep part of the money for himself. As an elderly man, he lamented that he could have retired a millionaire if he had been able to expand the business and hire others to work for him. And he might have done just that, if not for one unforeseen misfortune: the legalization of the numbers game. Starting in the 1960s, the government took control of the once-outlawed practice and created state lotteries. What a stroke of bad luck! (Is it any wonder that Nevada, gambling casino capital of the US, has never implemented a state lotto?!)

And thus, the idea of how an unexpected turn of events can mess up a criminal enterprise took root and grew into a short story.

For this essay, I went back to look at my earlier drafts of “Mala Suerte” to see what I had in mind for the opening paragraphs. (Since the story was originally called “The Lucky Day” it was hard to locate the previous versions on my computer. I’m glad I changed the title!) What I discovered was that the story’s beginning in the early incarnations was much the same as in the final version that was published in *EQMM*.

That’s not always the way it works when I plan a story. Yes, I said plan. The hardest part of a story for me is the planning—the thinking part, where I spend days, weeks, or even longer—rolling ideas around in my head. I make a series of increasingly detailed story outlines. I think about the characters, allowing them to become more like real people. *What events in the past made them into the people they have become? How do they talk and what do they talk about?* Of course, there are also passages of description—when and where the story takes place.

All that preliminary work definitely puts me in the “plotter” category as opposed to the “pantser” who flies by the seat of their pants. I’m not the type to just start writing and see where the story goes. By the time I get ready to write, my hope is that the story can just flow because I’ve already mapped the whole thing out. For me, writing a story is like preparing a new dish only after having read through the recipe, having gathered all the necessary ingredients, and having the right utensils laid out.

I don’t like to wing it the way some writers do because I prefer to know how a story will end before I start. This is especially the case if I’m writing a crime story.

I've got to admit that I don't always stick to my plan of how the story train gets to that final destination. Characters can develop personality quirks as I get to know them better, bits of dialogue no longer fit into a scene, the plot takes off in a new direction, or the setting doesn't make sense and I have to shift the action to a different place entirely.

Therefore, by the time everything has settled into place and I get to that (ideally) carefully thought-out end, the way I had started the story might no longer fit. Because of this, I often go back to the beginning of a story draft and change the opening paragraphs so the ending still makes sense.

But—luckily—that's not what happened with "Mala Suerte." I had decided on how the story would end, worked out how to get there, and when I returned to the beginning, to my relief, I was still happy with the opening passage.

The characters were always in that car, driving, trying to escape the consequences of their actions. They still pondered how they ended up involved in a terrible crime. They talked about the origins of bad luck as expressed by various cultures. And from the get-go, there was that hapless victim "loosely wrapped in an old green sleeping bag like an enormous California roll" and hidden in the back of a car being driven north of Miami....

As they drove away from the Glass Man's house, Carmelita asked the question that had haunted her all her life.

"Do you think bad luck is passed down in families? Is there really such a thing as a family curse?"

When you are a murderer on the run accompanied by an accessory after the fact, you might as well discuss what brought you to this sorry pass. Better than worrying about what might happen next, bad luck-wise. The dead body in the trunk—a pale form loosely wrapped in an old green sleeping bag like an enormous California roll—could serve as Bad Luck Exhibit A. Did *mala suerte* lurk in a person's DNA like a genetic disease, dormant until life circumstances triggered a flare-up?

“No, that's a ridiculous notion. Bad luck doesn't run in families. How could it?” her companion responded, “There's no such thing as the evil eye or hexes or family curses. You make your own luck. I'm living proof of that.”

It was said in such a matter-of-fact way, it brooked no argument.

But as a child, Carmelita had heard the stories that purported to explain the origins of bad luck, *la mala suerte*. A girl—why does it always have to be a girl?—pops open a mysterious box and all the ill fortune flies out into the world. Why do bad things happen to good people? Well, see, it was the fault of that stupid little girl.

Until you realize that the story leaves out the most important bits, like 1) Where did all that bad luck come from to begin with? And 2) if you made a box strong enough to hold all the misfortune in the world, would you leave it lying around where any nosy kid with a pen knife could get to it? Wouldn't you weld it shut and leave it at the bottom of the ocean?

“Yeah, Pandora. Right.” The passenger smirked in the darkness. “Nowadays that's a music service on the Internet. Times change.”

The other so-called explanation says there was this lady—yeah, again, a female—who ate the wrong piece of fruit. And what happened? Pain and suffering for everyone, all because a woman got hungry. How did this story ever catch on? As silly as the one about a girl opening the box. Some dude gathered up all the bad luck in the universe, and instead of blowing it to smithereens like any sane person would, *put it in a goddamn fruit?*

As the story goes on, there are references to the experiences of other people who were swept up in the historical and political winds of fortune. Like my father, some of them might resent the interference of the state poking its nose into perfectly

good, non-violent, money-making services provided to otherwise law-abiding members of the community....

One of the challenges of writing a crime story is being fair to the reader by giving out enough of the plot, bit by bit, while still making the characters, setting, and dialogue real enough to be interesting. I believe that what makes crime stories so compelling is that gradual sense of revelation. That was the difficulty of the opening paragraphs of “Mala Suerte”: how to reveal enough about what was going on—while the two characters distracted each other with their talk about luck—to keep the reader in that car with them. *Who is the Glass Man? Someone easily broken, perhaps? Who are these people? How do they know each other? Where are they going? And, perhaps, most importantly, how did they end up in a car with a dead body in the trunk?*

All will be revealed, have no fear, dear reader. Except, maybe, you too should be afraid of the *mala suerte* that is right behind the desperate people in that car, chasing them down through the generations like a family curse.

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E. Gabriel Flores is the author of short stories including “The Truth of the Moment,” “La Loca Bella,” and most recently “Mala Suerte,” all published in *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*. She received the 2017 Robert L. Fish Memorial Edgar Award for “The Truth of the Moment.” Flores is currently working on her first mystery novel.

A former social worker, Flores has also been a morgue attendant, a dishwasher, a fashion designer and an agricultural extension agent. For the past 20 years, she has been a geography professor. Flores has lived in Africa and Latin America.