

La Mala Hora

retold by S. E. Schlosser

My friend Isabela called me one evening before dinner. She was sobbing as she told me that she and her husband Enrique were getting divorced. He had moved out of the house earlier that day and Isabela was distraught.

I called my husband, who was on a business trip in Chicago, and he agreed that I should go stay with Isabela for a few days to help her during this difficult time. I packed a small suitcase and got right into the car. It was late, and it would take me at least four hours to drive from my home to Santa Fe. Isabela was expecting me to arrive around midnight.

As I traveled down the dark, wet highway, I kept feeling chills, as if someone or something were watching me. I kept looking in the rear view mirror, and glancing into the back seat. No one was there. Don't be ridiculous, I told myself, wishing fervently that I was home in my bed instead of driving on a dark, rainy highway. There was almost no traffic, and I heartily wished that I would soon reach Santa Fe.

I turned off the highway just before I reached the city, and started down the side roads that led to Isabela's house. As I approached a small crossroads, I saw a woman step into the street directly in front of my car. I shrieked in fright and slammed on my brakes, praying I would miss her.

The car shuddered to a halt, and I looked frantically around for the woman. Then I saw her, right beside my window, looking in at me. She had the face of a demon, twisted, eyes glowing red, and short pointed teeth. I screamed as she leapt at my window, her clawed hands striking the glass. I put my foot down on the accelerator and the car leapt forward. For a few terrible moments, she ran alongside the car, keeping up easily and striking at me again and again. Then she fell behind and in the rear view mirror I saw her growing taller and taller, until she was as large as a tree. Red light swirled around her like mist, and she pointed after me, her mouth moving though I could not make out the

words. I jerked my attention back to the road, afraid what might happen to me if my car ran off the street. I made it to Isabela's house in record time and flung myself out of the car, pounding on her door frantically and looking behind me to see if the demon-faced woman had followed me. Isabela came running to the door and let me in.

"Shut the door! Shut it!" I cried frantically, brushing past her into the safety of the house.

"Jane, what is wrong?" she asked, slamming the door shut. She grabbed my hand and led me into the living room. I sank onto the couch and started sobbing in fear and reaction. After several minutes, I managed to tell my story. Isabela gasped and said: "Are you sure you were at a crossroads when you saw her?"

I nodded, puzzled by her question.

"It must have been La Mala Hora," Isabela said, wringing her hands.

"The bad hour?" I asked.

"This is bad, Jane. Very bad," Isabela cried. "La Mala Hora only appears at a crossroads when someone is going to die."

Ordinarily, I would have laughed at such a superstition, but the appearance of the demon-woman had shaken me. Isabela got me a cup of hot cocoa, brought my luggage in from the car, and sent me to bed. She was so concerned for me that she didn't once mention the divorce or Enrique.

I felt much better the next morning, but I could not shake the feeling of dread that grew within me all day. Neither of us mentioned La Mala Hora, but we were both thinking of her when I told Isabela that I wanted to go home. Isabela insisted on accompanying me. I flatly refused to drive after dark. I was afraid I would see the demon-woman again when I passed the crossroads.

We left the next morning, and we hadn't been home more than twenty minutes when a police car pulled into my driveway. I knew at once what it meant, and so did Isabela.

The officers spoke very gently to me, but nothing could soften the news. My husband had been mugged on the way back to his hotel after dinner last night. His body had not been found until this morning. He had been shot in the head and was killed instantly.