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Catalyst

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CATALYST

Ismael Pallares

It was 1986 and we were bored. Trouble, that's what happens when you can't figure out what to do; you focus on something that helps pass the time. I focused on Princess.

Her family was the only Latino family in the neighborhood, and maybe because that embarrassed her, she didn't act it. Always wore white washed denim jeans and leather jackets, polo shirts that matched her socks. She wore her hair long and straight, always had a piece of gum in her mouth, and always talked about college and leaving Detroit. She was whiter than some of the white girls I knew. It was the guys who gave her a hard time, though. They loved clowning her about her name. Hey Princess, let me be your Prince Charming, they would say. But she just blew them off. Always going to some after school elective like photography.

My best friend back then was Marcus. The coolest black kid I knew. Always had a constellation of girls in orbit. He was the kind of guy who ran five miles in the afternoon and still went to the gym.

I had known Marcus since we were in grade school. Our neighborhood was mostly a mix of whites, Italians, and Scotch-Irish. We were poor whites, but poor whites with union jobs. Marcus's family had left the east-side and never looked back. Everybody was fleeing to the suburbs back then. My dad used to joke that even chocolate city was too dark for some blacks. But my dad was a racist and nobody liked his jokes. I liked Marcus though. Blacks and whites didn't get along well, but we didn't know any better. When we were younger we jumped our bikes over milk crates and went swimming in the summer. Friendship was important when everybody wanted to be the tough guy. We were part of the same clique. I wasn't black, but Marcus called me his nigger and that mattered for something.

Marcus worked a push broom at a tool shop near the Ford Factory afterschool. I would walk with him to work sometimes. One day we saw Princess's Buick at the Marathon gas station. We all knew her car. She was the only girl on Joy Road that not only drove a car, but also owned it outright, a gift from her father. Most of us were still driving our dads' primer stained Chevrolets. That sea-blue '78 Buick Regal had a long nose and short rear-end, the exact opposite of Princess.

She was on the curb having words with some guy in a green mesh trucker cap. I walked up, maybe I was trying to be heroic, the good-guy, or maybe I wanted a reason to talk to her. I thought she was pretty, and I thought that meant something too. I walked up behind the guy in the green cap. “Hey, mami, dame un,” he said. “Fuck off, wino,” she told the guy.

I tapped the guy on the shoulder and he turned around. His eyes curtsied up and down, taking me in from head to toe in a split second, and he coldcocked me in the right eye. I wish I could say I punched him right back, knocked him on his ass, but I can't. I went down with the Power Cosmic popping behind my eyes. When the world came back into focus I saw Marcus jump over my limp body and grab Trucker Cap by the throat. Princess was in her Buick telling us to get in. Marcus shoved the guy onto the pavement. That was when officer Mitch Adamek showed up. He was a friend of my family, knew my mom from way back. He didn't even hit the misery lights; he just strolled over to the wino who hesitated between running and fighting back. Mitch didn't even blink, just kicked the guy once and told him to get the ever-loving fuck off the street, or he would pull him in for vagrancy. Mitch helped me up and into Princess's Buick. We won't tell your mom about this, he said. Princess thanked Mitch, and off we rode, cotton in my head, riding shotgun. That's how I finally got to ride with her.

After that we were tight. In the hallways we acknowledged each other.

“Your highness,” Marcus said.

“Asshole,” Princess called Marcus.

“Hey, Princess,” I said.

“Charlie,” she would say to me. I loved the way she said my name, the way she made the “a” soft in the first syllable of Charlie. From the moment she held my bleeding head in her Buick, I knew I had to have her. But for all the Spanish slang, or insults she threw at him, she still had eyes for Marcus.

It started out innocent enough. We drove up to Rue a lot, catching the last of mid-afternoon traffic. At the end of the night, when Princess checked her watch, I knew

it was time to call it. She started dropping me off first. I couldn't be mad. Marcus was my friend. It still burned though, especially when they made out in the back seat of her car while I sat on the diving board hood. What could I do? Go home and stare at my Frazetta poster of Vampirella?

Senior year, Marcus and Princess got serious. Princess already made up her mind to attend NYU, and I had my dad breathing down my neck with his Budweiser breath to meet his union guy. We finally got into it that October.

"You come work with me," my dad said.

I laughed in his face. His face turned ruddy and the jaundice around his eyes got a little more yellow.

I had to laugh. My dad didn't work. He was home four or five days a week. Absenteeism his bosses called it. Not a big deal his union rep called it. My dad spent his mornings sleeping off a hangover and his afternoons waiting for my mom to serve dinner so he could go out with a full stomach. He liked playing poker, or betting anything game really. My mom wasn't stupid. She watched the news. She watched their checkbook too. She blamed Young for destroying the city back in the 70's like everybody else, but she knew that my dad could destroy the things closer to her. And she knew that the union couldn't save a job that didn't exist. I loved her.

"Betty, tell your son I'm not paying for him no more," Dad said.

"Mom, tell Dad I'll go to work when he does," I said.

My mom put down her wrinkled Town and Country magazine and smiled. I thought I made a good point, and I hoped she agreed. But my dad was her husband.

"Charlie, you're almost done with school. You are not a kid anymore," she said. "Talk to your father's friend."

"You will go down there Monday morning," Dad said.

"I'll go in with you," I said, looking him straight in his sick eye.

My dad didn't so much laugh as blow some air out of his nose. He went back to the couch and turned up the volume on the Mets game. I went to Marcus's house.

Marcus lived two blocks down from me on the Road. My house was almost directly between Rue River and the Jeffers Freeway. It separated the WASP-y Lavonia from the darker everything else. When I was younger all the houses on the road had lights on and mowed lawns. People cared. As I walked, every other house was vacant. No “For Sale” signs, just empty houses and hard caked dirt for lawns.

Someone had burned down a house across the street from Marcus. People had been doing that a lot lately. People had been burning bits of Detroit since Devil’s Night. Now people just burned buildings for fun. Cheaper than a movie.

Marcus’s mother answered the door. Lyvette dressed like every day was Sunday service. She was a secretary for a church back on the East Side. She wore a salmon colored dress and was happy to see me.

“Charlie, come in. Are you hungry?” she said, putting on her glasses.

“No thanks, I’m just looking for Marcus,” I said.

“He’s in his room,” she said.

“Who’s that there,” Marcus’s father said. Roy got up from his kitchen table and came over and put a hand on my shoulder. “You coming to work at the plant?”

Roy worked at the same plant as my dad, but on a different line. He showed up every day of the work week. “I’m thinking about it,” I said.

“Don’t just think, son,” he said. “Lyvette what is it with these kids? Marcus doesn’t want to work and now Charlie over here.”

I shrugged.

“Don’t blow it off. You’re already ahead of the game. You’re white,” Roy said.

Roy went back to his kitchen table, shaking his head. Lyvette said she had some mashed potato leftovers. I told her I wasn’t hungry.

“Suit yourself,” she said. In the kitchen, Roy had lit a cigarette and opened his newspaper. Lyvette kissed him on his head.

Marcus was in his room doing push-ups, his younger brother, Benji, reading a book. He had his stereo turned down low, Michael Jackson singing about something in falsetto.

“Let’s go out,” I said.

“Hold on a minute,” Marcus said.

He finished his rep and started doing sit-ups. I sat on his bed next to Benji. I took the book out of his hands. The Hobbit. I handed it back to him and nodded.

Marcus finished his sit-ups.

“Go where?” Marcus said.

“I don’t know, but we need a car,” I said.

October air slapped me from the passenger side window, and I shivered in my threadbare T-shirt. Marcus was in the back seat of the Buick eating Pop Rocks. Princess, pristine in her leather jacket, kept driving up Joy looking for a gas station that still had its lights on.

“Check this out,” Marcus said. “Listen.”

He leaned between Princess and me, and he opened his mouth next to her ear.

“I don’t hear shit,” Princess said.

“That’s because your hair is in the way. Here, now listen,” Marcus said.

“Sit back down. Why don’t you brush your teeth?” she said.

“I’m sorry, your highness,” Marcus said.

Princess fixed her hair in the rearview and flipped Marcus off. I rolled up the window and asked Marcus what time he wanted to go home.

“Screw going home,” he said. “Let’s have some fun for a change. It’s almost Halloween. Know what that means?”

“Means you’re going to dress up like Wonder Woman and go trick-or-treating,” I said.

Marcus kicked my seat.

Sure, but only if you let me borrow your bra,” Marcus said. “But for real, let’s light something on fire.

Princess smiled at me. “It’s time to drop you guys off,” she said.

As we rounded the off-ramp on Jeffers Freeway I asked Marcus what he was going to do?

“What do you mean?” Marcus said.

“For work. You going to work with your dad?” I said.

“Maybe, maybe not. There’s always a job somewhere,” he said.

I wondered if that was true. I thought of my dad, his jaundiced eye. I hoped it was.

We pulled into a Marathon station and bought some Cokes. I wished I had grabbed a jacket. Under the fluorescent lights, Marcus hugged Princess and they looked like a couple in love. I told myself that I could stand them together like that.

“Let’s burn something down,” I said to no one in particular.

“Now you’re talking,” Marcus said.

“You guys can burn whatever you want but not with my car,” Princess said.

“Don’t be like that,” Marcus said.

“Like what?” Princess said.

Marcus sucked air through his teeth. “I’ll let you hold the matches,” he said.

She didn’t say anything. She just touched his face. A car backfired somewhere in the night, and the streetlight turned green. We were quiet. And then we were quiet for a second longer than that. They kissed. I wasn’t too far from my house and I told them I was going.

The wind kicked up. I wanted to go home and I didn’t want to go home. There were no stars out, only the piss yellow of a streetlight. I was farther from my house than I thought. I put my head down. I tried to be nondescript, invisible on a deserted street.

I heard someone call out to me. I waited for a Coke bottle on the back of my head, or a knife somewhere soft, but it was Officer Adamek was in his cruiser.

“Get in,” he said.

Mitch didn’t say anything on the way to my house. The cruiser’s radio crackled to life every few seconds, breaking the silence. Before I stepped out of the car I asked if he always wanted to be a cop.

“No,” he said. “I wanted to be a fireman. But that union is lousy. Your granddad had to be one first, foot in the door sort of thing. And I wasn’t going to work in the plant.”

“Your parents give you a hard time about making up your mind?” I said.

“No, I just gave myself one,” Mitch said.

I left his cruiser and went inside my parents’ house. My dad was sleeping on the couch.

“You are not as smart as you think,” Marcus told me the next day.

We were riding in Princess’s car, killing time before Marcus had to go to work. The day was like any other day: nothing, nothing, and nothing. Princess ate potato chips and steered with her free hand. I reclined across the back seat, my feet pressed against the window. Marcus played with the shutter release on Princess’s grey Nikon. He was fooling around like he was going to take pictures of her. She lifted her Ray-Bans and blew him a kiss. Then she blew a kiss to me in the review. I sat up.

“You think you can go to college?” Marcus said.

I had asked myself the same question that morning. My dad was not on the couch when I finally got out of bed. My mom asked when I had gotten in and when I told her about Mitch she only said, “Oh.”

She didn’t know where Dad was. His union guy still wanted to see me. If only I could see the future, but everything was opaque in my mind. Was this what life would be from now on? One moment of hesitation and then eternity.

“Do you think you can go to college?” I said to Marcus, meaner than I wanted.

Marcus sniffed. He kept clicking the shutter. He held the camera out the window and snapped a picture of the Marathon station.

“You should take pictures of all the gas stations in Detroit,” I said to Princess.

“Why?” Marcus said.

“Gas stations are the only stores in this town,” I said. “How many super markets do you see anymore, anyway? Gas stations are the only things that exist on this side of the burbs.”

“That’s a stupid idea,” Marcus said.

Princess tossed the bag of chips on Marcus’s lap. She took the camera from his hands.

“You are stupid,” Princess said to Marcus. “I think that’s a great idea,” Princess said

to me.

“I have to go to work soon,” Marcus said.

We drove around for a little while longer. The sky was turning the color of a nickel. On the way towards Lavonia, Halloween decorations were out. They carved pumpkins on that side of town. I guess they didn’t have to worry about letting their kids trick-or-treat. We did one last loop off Jeffers.

We pulled up to the tool shop. Princess circled around the chain-link fence and got out of the car with him. She left the car running and the radio on. I turned it off. Marcus and Princess hugged in front of the car, framed within the windshield. Marcus said something that I couldn’t make out. All I heard was Princess saying, Okay. Marcus walked over to a group of black guys and bumped fists with them.

Princess got back into the car and I jumped into the passenger seat. We didn’t say anything at first. For Princess and me to be in the car together was rare.

“What happened last night?” I said.

“That’s what I was thinking. You left pretty damn quick,” she said.

“I didn’t want to bother you and Marcus. I didn’t want to be a third wheel,” I said.

“Is that how it is?” she said.

Princess drove down Joy all the way to the freeway. The houses were getting nicer again. They had mowed lawns, and metal siding. “Let’s go find another gas station,” she said. She tossed the camera in my lap. We found another Marathon heading over to Westland. We got out of the car and she showed me how to load a roll of film. I took a photo of her smiling. She took one of me. I don’t remember what I was doing in the shot. Princess told me it would be a good picture, though. She drove us over to Rue again and she took pictures of the stagnant water. She climbed down a little bank and checked the shutter speed on the camera. She looked good in the half-light, but what I liked more was the way she tossed her hair over her shoulder before she took a photo.

With Marcus gone, I didn’t know what to say. The Buick felt a littler bigger. Princess rolled past the corner where officer Adamek had picked me up. The black guys were gone.

We drove and drove following an invisible path of familiar streets. Gas station, empty lot, vacant house, park, and then we ended up in front of my house. Snow was on the way and the heater in the Buick was on full blast. The street was empty. My dad's Impala was gone. Princess turned off the engine and the whole world got quiet. Our breath fogged the windshield. Princess raised her eyebrows. She said, "So?" The question was so open-ended. My dad's car was gone.

Princess looked at every picture in the hallway. The light bulb had burned out and she had to get close to see them: me at six years old playing in the yard, me at twelve, that kind of thing. She picked one photo off the wall and held it. How strange it was to see that. I had never pulled one down from the wall before She lifted it off the nail so easily I almost snatched it from her hands.

"I didn't know you won a science fair," she said.

I asked to see it. I placed the framed certificate back on the nail.

"That was a few years ago," I said. "I placed third. I built a trebuchet."

"What's that?" she said.

"It's like a catapult."

I opened the door to my room. Princess sat on the bed, the sheets bunched under her legs. I leaned against my desk that used to be the dining table, before we got the bigger one. She put her hands in her jeans. I became aware of how my room must have looked to her: the stack of Marvel Presents on the floor, the popcorn ceiling, the bookshelf with *The Inverted World* sitting on top. It's embarrassing seeing your life from someone else's eyes.

I sat next to her on the bed. She didn't get up.

"I'm not a nerd," I said.

"Are you going to college?" Princess said. "I thought you told Marcus you were thinking about going."

"Thinking about it," I said

"What happened last night?" she said.

“I went home. You and Marcus were doing all right,” I said.

“You weren’t bothering anybody,” she said. “Were we bothering you?”

I didn’t have an answer for that one. Not one that I wanted to say out loud. I had a best friend whose girlfriend I wanted. I had Princess in my room, on my bed.

“I’m leaving soon. He knows that,” she said.

I kissed her. I remember the taste of mint and Marlboro cigarette.

She didn’t stop me, but she didn’t kiss me back.

A fire stops burning when there isn’t anything left to burn.

Last autumn, I drove back down Joy Road. Marcus’s house was gone, but mine was still there. The porch had collapsed, and there was a hole in the roof. The yard was more meadow now. I pulled myself in through the back door. There was nothing in the hallway. My mom had taken all the pictures with her. Everything was gone. After I had stood in the dark long enough, I took the matches from my pocket and put them on the kitchen counter and I left. I don’t plan to ever go back.