

The Flame Child

by Michael K. White

Lupe drove. She didn't know where she was going, but still she drove. The Mustang whined because she did not shift gears. The street was wet from a night rain and if she hadn't had blood all over her face in her eyes, she would have been more cautious about the conditions. As it was, she just drove.

She was trying to get to work on time at Cedaredge High School for her shift as night janitor. Her work was her only break and she loved her job even though Chang, the lead night person hated her. Chang was a sixty year old Korean woman who smelled like cabbage and garlic and didn't understand the Spanish spoken by the rest of the night crew. They communicated by sign language and by Chang's frequent loud outbursts of frustration and anger.

But now, Lupe was late, and she was covered with blood. The pain had not yet set in, it was all so new. She could hardly see to drive. Joe had hit her about six times, making sure to hit her face. He wanted the world to see how she was. He wanted her marked for all to see. Lupe had made sure the kids were outside. Not that it mattered. Something in her side hurt bad. She didn't feel it so much sitting and driving, but when she had gotten into the car, she had felt like someone had jabbed her in the side with a sharp stick.

At a red light Lupe tried to clean the blood off her face with a sheaf of Dominos and papa John's pizza coupons, but only succeeded in smearing it all over her head. It was a long light and she could make out the angles of her face, sharp and thin and her bony arms and thin hands. She looked like a crow to herself, a scavenger who fed on the leavings of others. It wasn't fair but she had to go back. She knew should would have to go back. And Joe

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would keep hitting her until she died. Because that's what he said he would do.

She noticed a car had pulled up next to her at the light. She glanced over to see a middle aged blonde woman in a fancy Escalade staring at her with a horror stricken face. the woman was blonde and rich and she gawked at Lupe with her bloody face and he janitor shirt and all the rage that Lupe usually kept so tightly packed down came up like lava from a volcano.

"What the fuck you staring' at bitch? What the fuck you think you see bitch?" Lupe screamed at the woman who looked down, ashamed and gunned her motor, running the red light. It was a good thing that there were no other cars coming. It was eight o'clock at night and the intersection was clear. The Escalade took off through the red light and sped away into the night. Lupe watched the red tail lights until they became two little points, like stars in the sky.

The light turned green and Lupe went rough it carefully. She was a couple blocks away from the school and she knew that although she was late she could still get her shift in. Suddenly the inside of the Mustang was filled with a surreal disco of blue and red light strobing so violently that Lupe thought she was going to get sick.

Cops!

She could still see the two red points of the from the Escalade disappearing into the night and before she knew it an officer was tapping on her glass. She rolled down the window of the idling car, unaware that she had pulled over to the side of the road. The inside of the Mustang was filled with fresh air and she could feel the blood drying on her face and matting her hair. She took in a breath and it hurt her side. She could hear the voice of the officer but she didn't know what he was saying. It might as well be Korean. The dried blood on her face and in her hair made her look orange in the harsh blinking lights. She felt like fire, flickering, crazy nervous, looking for something to burn.

