

Drain Line  
by April Maria Ortiz

“Hey,” says Carmen, “I need to tell you something. Are you in a place where you can talk?”

“It depends,” says Eddy. There’s background noise. “What’s it about?”

“It’s kind of hard to summarize. If you’re out or something—”

“I’m at Arby’s with the fam.”

“Oh. Okay. I’ll call you back.”

“Why don’t you just tell me in like one sentence what it’s about, and I’ll tell you if I can talk right now.”

“Look, I’ll just call back. Is there a good time?”

Eddy sighs. “Gabriel. Just one sentence. Can’t you do that?”

Carmen draws her breath in and says: “I’m coming out as trans and I’m transitioning, male to female, I wanted to tell you about it before you hear it from someone else.”

A few beats of silence follow. Then Eddy, in a curiously stilted, almost squeaky voice, says, “That is a whole conversation and I cannot have it here. Give me half an hour.”

“Sure, thanks,” says Carmen.

She doesn’t expect Eddy to call back, but he does, and they talk for a long time. Eddy at once tells her that he’s secretly dated many trans women over the years. He says they’re more fun than cis women. He tells her that he cross-dresses and that he’s wearing panties right now. Carmen keeps trying to talk about her own coming out but he starts asking about hormones and surgeries.

Still, Carmen feels a new thing bubbling up inside her, a hope that maybe, *maybe* she would soon truly be the little sister she’s always been in her brain, a kind and loving ear whenever Eddy needs someone to talk to. They haven’t had much of a relationship since the time when they were teens and Eddy ... well, he claimed he was sleepwalking, and why would someone make that up? Anyway it was a long time ago, when they were both kids. Eddy’s marriage is on the rocks now and Carmen gathers that he’s having a hard time with it. She asks if he wants to meet for lunch. They decide to meet at Pearl.

Carmen is wearing slacks and a work blouse and makeup and has her hair up as well as she can manage with its current length and intractable bushiness. She feels clocky as hell but sales clerks and random strangers call her ma’am so she figures she’s doing something right. Really though she wants to look pretty for her brother. She stops at a Starbucks as she gets to town because the drain line at her house is clogged again. She relieves herself and makes sure she looks okay and heads to Pearl.

Eddy is waiting outside of Southerleigh and he appraises her with a hasty, embarrassed glance that at once retreats to a distance of five hundred miles. She suddenly feels cold, like a pinned specimen. They get an outside table.

“Let’s begin with the unpleasantness first,” Eddy says. “I talked to Misty, and we decided that the kids are just too young to be exposed to what you’re doing. You’re not going to be allowed to see them again. I’m not happy about it, it’s not my choice, but Misty is insisting, and you know how it is with us right now. I still want our kids to know Olive, of course, and we’ll work something out with Mom and Dad. I just have to ask that you not be there.” He begins breaking up a hot pretzel and shoving it into his mouth.

Carmen, stunned, feels her eyes glaze over, but she carefully blinks the tears back. *Not*

*here*, she thinks, *not with all these people, goddammit, just wait until the car*. She orders a salad and Eddy orders pork schnitzel. Eddy launches into a story about some asshole he got the better of at the office, and then goes on to another story that also features his boldness and crassness and ingenuity. He talks *at* Carmen rather than *to* her, as though to hold her at bay, as though she might infect him. He doesn't look at her.

They get their food, and Eddy says, "You're not saying much."

"I'm having a hard time dealing with what you told me about your kids."

"Oh," says Eddy. He quickly begins another story.

They pay and go separate ways without much of a goodbye. Carmen gets in her car and to help shoulder aside the avalanche she texts Jen because her wife is at work. "My brother just told me I can never see his kids again," Carmen says. "Holidays, whatever. I've broken up my family." She waits a minute but gets no response so she begins the drive back to Encina. *I'm going to end today on a crisis hotline*, she thinks. It's been a long time since she's been here.

A string of messages from Jen come in as she gets onto the freeway. She pulls over a while later and responds: "It's okay, I'm okay, I just had a moment there. Thanks so much, dear friend."

She takes off again. *Why am I feeling so violated, so brutalized?*

Then she knows.

She gets home and Rachel still isn't there so she puts on an apron and starts washing dishes. With a tremendous sucking sound the drain line unclogs and three days' worth of shit goes down the pipe.