

Trans Substantiation
by April Maria Ortiz

Carmen stopped taking communion the day she went on E. When she believes in hell she thinks she'll probably go there and if she does it'll have been worth it. She still goes to mass because Olive wants to. Rachel left both her and the church when she came out and she figures that that was a fair response. They live together but in separate rooms.

Carmen and Olive sit on the Mary side. The statue has a blue dress and pale skin and small breasts and a large round tummy. Aside from the skin it makes Carmen think of her own comfortable figure, and she imagines the Blessed Virgin with a tuck. Carmen's skin is a warm tan and her hair is long and dark and she is small which is what allows her to pass. Her dress is black.

It is Good Friday and the priest comes in and prostrates himself on the floor. Everyone kneels. Silence fills the church. Carmen kneels and looks at the empty tabernacle. She thinks of the big white pills and the little blue pills awaiting her at home and reflects that, if the eucharist is the medicine of immortality like they say, then what she takes is the medicine of *mortality*. On the day she came out to herself she comprehended her material finitude in a way she never had before.

Her spironolactone makes her think of little hosts. The last time she picked it up, the clerk, a white lady with a shirt that said *Soccer Mom Soccer Mom Soccer Mom*, mistakenly called it spermalactone. "That's right, ma'am," Carmen said, "I *do* lack the sperm." Remembering that gets her musing on Jesus' Y chromosome. But then she stops those thoughts because the priest is rising. *Help me to be less of a bitch*, she prays.

"Dad," whispers Olive.

"What is it?" asks Carmen.

"I think I'm starting," says Olive. Olive is twelve.

"What?" says Carmen.

Olive opens her eyes wide. "You know."

"Oh," says Carmen. "Shit. Okay. I've got it in my purse. If you just—"

"I don't want to go on my own," says Olive.

"Listen, we can just run home, baby," says Carmen.

"No," says Olive, who suddenly looks like she might cry. "I'll stain the seat. Everyone will know. Can't you just come with me?"

Carmen closes her eyes. "Yeah."

They discreetly go to the ladies' room. Carmen leads the way inside, relieved to find it empty. She uses public toilets when she has to but Encina is a small town and at church everyone knows her. "Here," she says, giving Olive the pad. "You know how to do it?"

"Mom showed me," says Olive. She goes into a stall.

"Everything's okay, baby," says Carmen. "I'm so proud of you."

When they come out Carmen sees a man watching them.

The veneration of the cross follows the homily. Servers hold the crucifix, the one from the old Mexican church across the tracks that they tore down. Carmen and Olive get in line.

The crucifix is truly ancient, its corpus crude and wooden, with big doelike eyes and real human hair. In the past, Carmen always touched the nail through the feet, but today she kisses the side wound, which looks like a vertical mouth hung with droplets of blood. Olive kisses the

hands.

Later, at the kiss of peace, Carmen hugs Olive. There's no one else near them. Olive communicates but Carmen keeps her arms crossed to receive a blessing instead. The crucifix stares at her. She has that funny feeling she always gets on Good Friday afternoon, wondering if it felt anticlimactic to go home after watching Jesus squirm to death in the sunshine while the grasshoppers sang.

"How was it?" Rachel asks.

"They made me vice president of the women's club," says Carmen.

"Did they," says Rachel, amused. Rachel, a convert, hates the church now. She hates how it treats Carmen and everyone else. Carmen, born into it, can't live without it but feels like shit for going.

Olive goes off to message her friends and Carmen goes upstairs to put her hair up and change into skinny jeans and ballet flats and a camisole and comes back down and puts her apron on and starts dinner, which tonight is rice and black beans and fried plantains. Rachel is wearing jeans and a tank top and she hangs out with Carmen, sipping box pinot gri. She is taller and has a sunny, freckly face. Her silver-streaked golden hair is cut in a feathery wedge. She is incorrigibly het.

Carmen wants to talk about Olive but she's afraid it'll start another fight about how she's usurping Rachel's place. Jen comes over and that eases the tension and soon they're all laughing like they did in school. Carmen's heart sings as she moves around the kitchen, chopping, stirring, drinking, laughing. She's working her ass off, as she does every day. Every day her housework is a plea: I am a good wife. *I love you*. Rachel says she feels more like a sister now.

They sit down to eat and Olive comes in and talks like one of the adults. "This is so good," says Jen. "This is what love tastes like."

Carmen's heart fills with the presence of these women. She catches Rachel looking at her, waiting for her to look, like she did when they were kids. Rachel blinks once, like butterflies, and looks away.

After dinner Carmen goes to the bathroom upstairs while Jen and Rachel start clearing things. She sits on the toilet and her phone buzzes. The text is from Rachel.

Carmen reads it and screams at the top of her lungs until her lungs are empty, then sucks in a ragged breath and begins sobbing, cradling her face in her hands as lava tears run through her makeup. She wonders if god screamed while they were being born.