

The Girl of Her Dreams

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"Make all your beauty dreams come true!" "Reveal your inner you!" "Touch up your life!" Those were the slogans that first reached her, deep in the midst of lockdown, and that first piqued her interest. For who wouldn't want to look like the girl of their dreams... and with only the touch of a finger?

Of course Laura knew that it wasn't real. Touching up selfies with these apps was simply the digital manipulation of a digital image – merely tweaking abstract patterns of pixels. Yet for that very reason, it was also incredibly liberating. No longer did folks need to spend hundreds of money on foundation and mascara and the latest celebrity-endorsed eyeshadow palettes. Why bother, when all you had to do was open up this handy-dandy new app, snap a pic, and tune it to your heart's content?

And since the gaudy world of social media was all fiction anyway, Laura reasoned, why stop there? Why use her real name when an alias would do?

Thus was born Carmen: the alter ego for her average-looking, slightly cross-eyed and unathletic real-life human Laura. She would be a yoga instructor, Laura decided late one night over a pint of Ben and Jerry's and a bag of her favorite dill pickle-flavored potato chips. Carmen would have a place outside of Santa Monica, and a Maserati, and a smoking-hot string of boyfriends... none of whom were good enough for her, of course. She'd have everything Laura had always wished for. In fact, she'd *become* Laura – Laura as she'd dreamed of being.

As for looks? Well, that was where the touch-up app really shone. How Laura had thrilled over that first photo of "Carmen": originally a selfie of herself, leaning against her kitchen chair with what she hoped was a moody smile on her face. Within seconds the transformation had begun. Blinding-white teeth? Definitely. The pale, freckled skin of a real human was smoothed away in a jiffy, replaced by a hermetic, faultless sheen in a fashionable shade of orangey-tan. The cheekbones became stronger; the chin, longer; the nose, digitally buffed away almost into nothingness.

Perfect. Now what if she... tried tweaking the other parts of the body?

So it went. And as she had clicked "Post" and given the world that first dramatic image of the chesty, wide-hipped, sun-kissed beauty that was Carmen, she'd shivered with delight. God, this was fun! Now to see just how many likes and follows it would bring her...

Two weeks later found Laura waking every morning and reaching impulsively for her phone. Carmen's profile was blowing up – or at least, that's how it felt to the inexperienced Laura. The first hundred, then two hundred, then five hundred follows had each been more intoxicating than the last. Every like ignited the desire for two more; every comment raving about how perfect she looked only stroked the ego of the lonely, insecure young woman staring dreamily into the phone. She was Carmen, and Carmen was her. These people loved... her.

Well, they loved her digitally-altered image, to be precise. But bothersome little details like that weren't enough to bother the attention-starved Laura. She wanted more – and the way to get more was to produce more. More photos, more tweaking, more photoshopping.

Strange how hungry she was getting these days, though. Editing photos sure seemed to burn a lot of calories! Not to worry, though; she could order contactless-delivery takeout anytime, and thanks to the grocery delivery folks, there were always more protein shakes in the fridge. Even if and when her ass gave an odd twinge or two – probably thanks to all that quarantine-induced sitting and lounging – she could just flop over and keep on editing to her heart's content...

When one day Laura had reached for her jeans and found it virtually impossible to zip closed, she merely shrugged and tossed them aside, feeling oddly unconcerned. Meh, they must have shrunk in the wash. It would be much better to slip into her comfy sweatpants – or better yet, just her bikini. It was so much comfier, after all, and those skimpy outfits were always big hits with the crowd online.

A month later, she was puzzled to discover that her favorite bikinis – and for that matter, her underwear – simply weren't fitting anymore. Huh. Strange. Welp, no worries! She'd seen some super-cute ones online. All she needed to do was order them in a size or two – or three – bigger. Yeah. No problem! Everyone was putting on weight in quarantine, right? Besides, the new bikinis would be so awesome for Carmen! Not to mention those cheeky new thongs she'd just ordered...

A month after that, anyone bold enough to peer in the young woman's window would have been truly startled at the sight inside. There was Laura, draped over the sofa, clad in nothing but a bra and panties, staring fixedly into her phone and fingering it diligently. Gone was her naturally soft, mouse-brown hair, replaced by crisp, highlighted, primed and permed locks. The soft little rolls and curves on her tummy and underarms had all but disappeared, leaving her limbs lean and trim...

and curiously orange. Her chest seemed to have grown massively, as had her hips and buttocks, with curves swelling to uncomfortably large dimensions within the taut fabric of her tiny bikini. As for her eyes, they no longer seemed crossed, though it was hard to tell with how intently she was staring into her phone...

Staring, with strangely plump lips and oddly white teeth moving silently as she worked away, tuning selfie after selfie into the epitome of female beauty.

Was that truly Laura? She might have said yes. But the unsteady giggle and the strangely empty glint in her eye would have made even the most obtuse visitor shift uneasily, wondering if the young woman was really all there.

And two more months after that?

There she sat, primping and preening for the camera, legs spread wide and body almost entirely naked save for a tiny, neon-stripped bikini. Skin glowing unnaturally orange, nose almost gone, pores vaporized never to return, she leaned closer to the lens with a provocative leer. Breasts, inflated and swollen beyond all natural proportion, jiggled and juddered within the bikini's straining confines. Hips, bare and similarly swollen to inhuman proportions, swayed and ground on the chair. And all the while, a titter of vacuous laughter escaped her grotesquely inflated lips...

For Laura was finally starting to feel *beautiful*.

But of course there was no time to revel in the feeling. She had more selfies to take, after all. Photos to tweak and retouch before uploading to Carmen's account. Because there was always so much to adjust, wasn't there? Carmen's teeth always looked better brightened up. Her hips always looked better a bit wider and thicker than in the original pics. And what even was the point of a photo app if you didn't make your boobs look a bit bigger?

Laura let out an inane giggle, licking absently at the odd trickle of drool that seemed to have escaped her. Whatever. Sure, she might be feeling pretty now – but a few more tweaks would make her alter-ego look even *hotter* – even more like the girl of her dreams.

There was nothing that the super-awesome app couldn't change, after all!