

Spitfire Press, Print Shop Project, Vol. 1, Fall 2004.

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Border Girl

by Karen Alea
Artwork by Spitfire Press



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Rosalia's room glowed with fire. There were four saint's candles ablaze and she was striking a lighter with her thumb to soften the end of her kohl eyeliner. The wood around the tip accidentally caught flame and she watched it burn and spark for a second or two before she calmly blew it out.

She used the softened eyeliner to write on her mirror: science project, Bobby, Emanuel, cash check.

The first was for her eleventh grade science teacher, the last from her job at a fast food restaurant and the others for messes she had made in-between.

"Rosa," her aunt called. "Ten minutes. That is it. We must go. I have two appointments at the clinic." Aunt Mimi came and stood in the doorway of the girl's room. Mimi was short and stout and wore dresses that only made people think, "There is a short, stout woman." Her hair was in a bun as it had been back in Guadalajara forty years ago. She wore men's black loafers and a watch that was her deceased husband's Timex—the ticking followed her around like a bomb.

"Bring it with you." She was pointing at the homework, the science project in particular, that Rosalia had scattered on her bed. "You can do that while we wait." Rosalia gathered her things, got in the hot car and helped navigate her aunt to the doctor's clinic where they had been over twenty times since February. Rosalia didn't ask anymore. It was Aunt Mimi's foot, or ears, or a tumor, or a growth that was going to be a tumor. Fortunately the clinic was one-stop-shopping and had all the physicians in the same building—and a cafeteria where Rosalia could sit while her aunt wasted their medical forms and ink.

She took out the letter that Bobby had put in her history book before the class bell rang that day. Bobby, the first non-Mexican boy who ventured towards her mossy eyes. Bobby, whose father owned the newspaper in town and three others in the state, a father who noticed nothing in his son except his English grades. Everyone is a snob about something.

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Rosalia,

It is only you I think of. I cannot be without you. Let me call you. Please. I will try again tonight. Please answer. Let me tell you what I really meant to say.

Loving you always,

Bobby

She tucked it back into her history book (devoid of her history) and looked out the window of the clinic's cafeteria onto the watercolor grounds. She sat in the same place out of habit. She

always bought a cola and potato chips.

Arriving in America two years prior (although seven years of planning and pay-off went into it), Rosalia had sculpted her own immigrant-in-suburbia life. It was the others in her wake that were left gasping for air. No one survived meeting her and swam away with their pre-existing acceptance of mediocrity.

Emanuel was stung first. His parents owned the Mexican restaurant that took over a decrepit Pizza Hut on the outskirts of Murfreesboro. He met Rosalia on the Sunday after she arrived in Tennessee. He was hooked in by his parents to help her learn English.

Good match, his mother's eyes said. No money, his father's eyes flashed back. But it was Rosalia's eyes that Emanuel watched. They were brown, like every other Mexican he had met, but with an olive green seeping out, like the mossy growth around the base of a childhood tree. For the next two years Emanuel's desire for her had grown into black obsession. Two D's and three detentions later, his family was filling in applications to strict fundamental schools in surrounding cities.

Rosalia never noticed the dead in the water. That was the problem. She didn't notice Emanuel or the others. They assumed it was a natural progression for their chests to slowly fester with crashing love, their leisure time soon consumed with dark video games and sullen rock ballads.

Naïve to her allure, Rosalia sat in the cafeteria as doctors, nurses, mothers with babies and old people trickled in and sat at surrounding tables eating the most unhealthy food that could be offered at a health facility. She listened to them. It was her favorite way of honing her English. A world opened up when she began to understand hidden conversations. The patients would lament over their illnesses or bills while staff would group together to tell a staccato story of the latest patient who had a phantom pregnancy or body odor.

By four-thirty Aunt Mimi was done with her appointments. At home, after a dinner of chili-tainted spaghetti, Rosalia put the finishing touches on her science project.

On a thin wooden board fished out of the growing rubbish pile at the end of her street, Rosalia had stuck a long spike. On that hung a red, deformed sphere. It was made from papier-mâché and finished off with darker shaded red clay and painted straws (which were procured from the clinic's cafeteria) cut and stuck in at different angles. An index card was taped to the front of the wood. In the left upper corner it listed her name and grade and the period that she took science. Centered on the card was, "The Human Heart." The typed paper that accompanied it was in a clear folder with a sliding spine-red, to coordinate with the heart. She placed both on her desk near her door and then smeared her licked finger over the words "science project" on

her mirror.

She had been ignoring the note to call back Emanuel. His intensity for her frightened her and lowered her regard for him. She sat at her desk and stared at his name before she finally smeared it out too.

Her desk was her altar, her office and somewhat of a hope chest. It was common, oversized vanity made of cheap particleboard, with decorative spindles for the mirror to attach to. On it she kept pictures of her family in Mexico—those above ground she taped to the top of the mirror, those below were propped on the desktop against red and yellow saint's candles.

Sitting back on the bed, for which she had no affinity, she looked for the letter from Bobby. She couldn't find it. The phone would ring soon. She thought she'd put it in the middle of the book. She turned the book upside down and strummed the pages to make them sprawl, hoping to see the note fall out onto her bed. She went through her mathematics book, then her English reader. Something fell from the English book. It was not the note from Bobby, the one on notebook paper with torn holes from his binder. It was smaller and laid perfectly flat. Opening it up, it had the drug Prevacid © written at the top and a picture of a stomach at the bottom. Then a note:

I saw you looking out the window and I was concerned that you were sad. I hope not. I hope you did not receive bad news.

I just wanted to say that I hope you have a good day.

There was no signature. The handwriting was small and neat.

It could have only been put in there when she had gone to find out if her aunt had seen the doctor yet, maybe five or seven minutes altogether. She tried to recount the people she had watched walk in the cafeteria. There had been a mother who said a few words to her after her toddler had banged and licked the window beside her. But she was more distracted with her boy than interested in Rosalia. She thought of the nurses who came two by two like Noah's guests, the doctor with the sunken eye, the orderly singing R&B, the old couple who shared a lone iced tea. She wished she had been more observant.

Bobby called before eight and started into his desperate song before Rosalia could interrupt him. He had been practicing his sales pitch, maybe even reading it. Rosalia pinched her knees, trying to stay afloat in the conversation. The last few months she continued to tell herself she would be more open minded about boys—more kind, unlike her mother who had “learned her



lesson". But her mind kept going back to the cafeteria. She was a bird that flew near the ceiling and looked down on the guests. She saw random faces, but none that seemed to be looking at her. She didn't want to listen to Bobby, who now seemed juvenile.

A week and a half later, she got an A minus on her heart, went to see an "R" rated movie with Bobby and visited the clinic two more times. Each time she left her books for ten minutes and returned home to find another note. She was trying to keep track of the people she saw each time, but had only reached the conclusion that it could be anyone.

It never occurred to her to hide behind a wall and watch as the perpetrator slipped the note in her book. It was a dance, not a game.

Rosalia stuck the notes in the one-inch gap between her mirror and desktop.

The second note read:

You come here a lot and I am worried you are getting treatment for something. Maybe your father works here and you are waiting for him. I hope it is the latter. I would lose sleep to think you are sick.

The third:

You intrigue me. You know what you are doing. You keep wanting these notes and I keep writing them. Do you know who I am?

Although she went out with Bobby again that weekend, she thought no more of him than that he drove the car, sat beside her, and opened doors. She didn't retain what they talked about. But she remembered she let him kiss her.

Aunt Mimi's sciatica brought Rosalia to the clinic again. She brought the books, she left the books, she leafed through the books at home.

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Enough. Meet me at Target, in the soap aisle. 7 o'clock tonight.

The last word was the one that made her slap at her knees. She showered and dressed, trying to drown the fantasy of meeting her resurrected mother or Benicio Del Toro.

By eight o'clock, she was eating chewy nachos in the café of Target with a married endocrinologist who had two kids and a receding hairline. Three weeks later, she was kissing the married endocrinologist with two kids and a receding hairline. Two days after that she was sleeping with the endocrinologist and the only thing that was bothering her was the hairline.

She still saw Bobby. And she didn't leaf through her books at home for hidden notes. Now the doctor gave them to her in person and she went over them with her olive eyes while tucked into her bed at night.

He had given her gifts too: a necklace with a diamond (or close enough) hanging on a clear thread; a cookbook—she told him she wanted to be a chef; and a lacquer box painted with Oriental blue and pink herons. When her aunt asked her where these things came from, she replied Bobby. Aunt Mimi believed her, rolling her eyes at such American ways.

Rosalia wanted to give the doctor something.

"Open it," she told him in the front seat of his Passat, parked in back of Target, which had become their meeting place.

He looked at her. The package was bulky and wrapped like a fishmonger's carp.

"Open, open," she said, biting her lower lip.

He removed the newsprint wrapper and revealed the disfigured statue.

"My heart," she said laughing. "Well, not really mine. It was for a science project. I got an A. I thought it would be a sign. No...I mean symbol."

He smiled and revealed his underused dimples. "I am going to put it in my office."

"No, you are not," she teased.

"Yes, I am. I have lots of things patients give me. I would love to look at this everyday."

"It is ugly. I didn't make it right. I was just giving it to you as like a joke, but to show that you have my heart," she smiled at him with a mouth that suddenly made him see the smile of youth—youth, without the lines developed after years of squelching emotions.

"I am going to put this in my office," he went on. "It should be in the public eye."

But it only would be eyed by seventeen other people in its deformed, heart life: police, lawyers and a jury of twelve.

He sat the heart down behind the passenger seat and drove on to the park they frequented.

When news spread that Rosalia was pregnant, Bobby was teased by his friends—the sting of adolescent mockery. Bobby buried his head in football drills during the week, his bedroom on weekends. Bobby's mother had sworn to her husband that they would not have rumors infecting their supper club or church group. No one was going to accuse her son of fathering the child of a Mexican slut.

When the child was born, Bobby's parents felt justified when the baby showed features contrary to Bobby's family genes. And although he had long stopped seeing Rosalia, she had never come out and said who was or wasn't the father, leaving him to defend himself to his family

and friends.

The infant boy even had a receded hairline. Rosalia laughed. She had assumed that the father's was due to age, not heredity.

The town was small enough and Bobby's parents big enough to start a whirlpool of interest in the unclaimed baby. Aunt Mimi only shook her head and talked in Spanish about the sins of the fathers. Rosalia was angry that her mistakes could not be credited to herself alone.

The only one who talked to her without genuflecting first, was her old friend who taught her English and was the first to fall in love with her, Emanuel. He brought back frijoles refritos from his parent's restaurant to help Rosalia get her iron back up.

And then it happened. A full day of patients at the endocrinologist brought a woman suffering from a thyroid imbalance. Synthroid, he told her. Off he went to write a prescription, leaving the science teacher under stimulated. She soon saw Rosalia's project on the counter of the examining room under a poster of the hypothalamus. The clay had been smashed on one side—from a drop or shove. The straws were chipping off their paint and the stake was dipping with the weight of the heart.

Summer boredom fueled the mystery. The science teacher, along with others, brought clues to the "case"—a story that may not have been a story if the town had a pro sports team or a water park.

When the doctor finally admitted he fathered the boy, Aunt Mimi decided she and Rosalia and the boy would go to Mexico to live with Mimi's cousin, Consuelo. Mimi was not upset, but happy that the father was a man of means that could send Rosalia money. She would no longer have to share her welfare check.

Rosalia took his acknowledgement of paternity casually and spent most of her time sitting on her bed nursing her son and cooing into his olive eyes.

The doctor came in and out of her life between the turmoil of his. "She's leaving me," the doctor told Rosalia. He stood across her room. She sat on her bed, her shirt open to feed the baby. Mimi had let him in, looking up into his eyes with half-meant rebuke. "Well, I am leaving her, technically—she is making me leave the house. But she is the one who will get all the money and Steven and Jonathan." He banged his hand on the desk Rosalia loved, a picture of her as a child in Mexico fell to the floor.

She didn't expect him to marry her. She didn't expect him to keep wanting to be with her. The medical board was investigating him and his forehead was growing redder each time she saw him, but it stopped at the invisible demarcation where his hairline should have begun. When



Rosalia noticed it, she would look back at her son, tracing his hairline with her finger and kissing a halo around it.

It was agreed that the doctor would pay expenses for the baby. It was agreed that Rosalia would get her GED. It was agreed that the doctor would stop seeing Rosalia. It was agreed that Rosalia and the boy would go to Mexico, not just until things died down, but permanently. It was better for his career, it would be better for both of them, he said. Mimi watched the newspaper for the exchange rate. She was going to return a rich woman, though thirty years later than she had promised her old friends.

The house was packed up and there had been two weekends of yard sales to rid the house of things that Mimi thought looked cheap in the first place.

Friends trickled by to say their farewells; even the science teacher came by to make sure that the poor girl was mentally recovered from the abuse of the old, perverted endocrinologist.

Bobby did not come by, but Emanuel did. He made her a card on his computer that had a mother and baby on it. It was beautiful, and Rosalia put it with her notes from the doctor.

They planned to leave on the 18th.

On the 15th, the endocrinologist was found in back of a discount tobacco shop with his hands bound and his jugular sliced. The blood had poured out of him onto the sticky concrete in a similar shape to her handmade heart.

It was Bobby who was put on trial, not from any hard evidence, but from leads of his jock friends who told police that the boy wanted “that doctor to bleed to death”. That and the fact that his mother was missing a knife, that was later to be accounted for when his fourteen year old sister admitted it was in her bedside drawer along with blocks of cookie dough and moldy cheese that she ate in her journey towards bulimia.

During the trial, the doctor’s letters to her were read, the heart was tagged as evidence, a picture of her boy was blown up for the jury. Rosalia only attended on the day she testified of their love affair. She told a blinking jury that she was not bitter at him for making her leave the country. All the other days during the trial were like all her others, playing with her son and taking pictures of him under the trees of her aunt’s back yard.

The science teacher, who fancied herself a heroic figure in the demise of this family, persuaded Aunt Mimi to have Rosalia and her family stay and that Rosalia should attend her senior year of high school in town. Rosalia, though sad to leave her son at home, did not seem embarrassed to return to the world of kids who would mock her. She did not even have shame when she faced the legally redeemed Bobby outside of their math class that he would transfer

quickly out of.

The trial was over, though the case was still open. The endocrinologist office was taken over by a podiatrist that Aunt Mimi could not wait to visit, and the heart was boxed and put to sleep in a room below the city courthouse.

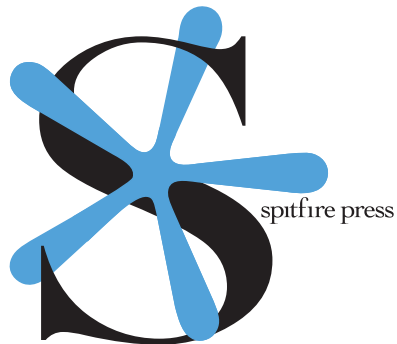
Rosalia fed herself and her child by working at La Comida Feliz Mexican restaurant. Her friend Emanuel, who had first taught English to the sea-eyed immigrant, got the young mother the job at his parent's restaurant following the trial. He wanted to prevent her from having to go back to Mexico to be supported by family. He also started a savings account for the boy, unbeknownst to his parents, putting in some of Rosalia's work check and a bit of his. He was getting B's again, playing chess with his father, laughing with his brother at cartoons. He was happy. He had her back.



Karen Alea was born in Buffalo, New York in 1967. She grew up in West Palm Beach, Florida, and as an adult, has lived in North Carolina, Thailand and Australia. She now makes her home with her Aussie husband and two girls in middle-Tennessee.

She received a Bachelor of Arts in English at Palm Beach Atlantic University and has several nonfiction credits and stories published in *Out of Line*, and *Eureka* (forthcoming) literary magazines as well as recently winning first place in a literary competition judged by Ann Patchett. Her nonfiction book, *For which He Stands* came out in 2001.

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