

"La Karla"

Catriona Rueda Esquibel

LA KARLA is a tall Chicana in her twenties, dressed in Wrangler jeans, boots, and a long-sleeved cowboy shirt. Her hair is long and worn in a single braid. Deep down, she's just a girl from the ranch. Her manner is humorous; she's amused (sometimes a little embarrassed) both at being the "dyke on parade" and at having gotten herself into that position. She should definitely not be played as pleading the case for lesbianism.

KARLA

Love? Sure, I'll tell you about me 'n' love. The first time I fell in love, I was twelve years old. When I was twelve, I was five-feet, five-inches tall. And you know, in Northern New Mexico, being five-feet-five makes you taller than like two-thirds of the population. And so I fell for the only person in my grade taller 'n me, who just happened to be my best friend, Marisela. Me, her, and three guys from the valley were taller than the whole school. And we did everything together. We shared books and we shared eyeliner. She used to do my hair, and I'd do her nails, and we did each other's makeup. Eeee, we were all glamorous-or so we thought! Now I think of it, we useta put the lipstick on real red and wet like in the magazines, so you know we musta looked like a couple of real *putas*. Well, by the time we were in high school, Mari's problems always seemed to involve boys. I wasn't so much interested in guys, you know? *pero*, I figured I was only fifteen- a year younger than everybody-so prob'ly I just hadn't grown into it yet. Except that Mari was even younger than me, and *Ay Dios!* did that girl have boyfriends!

For the life of me, I couldn't understand it. I mean, what was all the fuss about? why would you cancel a

date with your best friend to be with some guy? *Pero*, what the hell, I give it my best shot. I figured, if everyone and her dog was ready to change her whole life because of some guy, well then, I just wasn't trying hard enough. So I tried. I did. I changed my plans for guys, I changed my styles for guys. And the whole time I was thinking that really, everybody else felt the same as me, deep down. I mean, we changed boyfriends every couple of months, but your best friends were always your best friends. Because we really cared for women, you know?

I had sex with guys, too, of course. I mean, in the winter there's only one theater in town: it's not like there was a whole lot else to do. It was better than a poke in the eye with sharp stick, but the earth didn't exactly move, if you know what I mean.

(Beat)

Yeah, you know what I mean. Anyway, with Mari, it finally hit me one day, clear out of the blue.

(*Con gusto*)

The girl was he-te-ro-sex-u-al. Well, it had me thinking a while, I can tell you. It sure explained a lot of things. I mean, the way she felt about guys, was, well, the way I felt about her!

(Earnestly)

You know?-I'd do anything for her; I'd be wrecked if I thought she was mad at me; I'd get jealous if she didn't call me-

(with humor)

and that's the way she felt about guys! Now, see, the way I'm telling it, it all sounds real simple. At the time, though, it was pretty much of a mess. Because, after I figured out that she was a heterosexual, it was like another year before I realized that the only reason I noticed that she was because I wasn't. Heterosexual, I mean. And then maybe two years before I thought, "you know, that prob'ly makes me a dyke."

(Aside)

No, prob'ly longer than that, 'cause I always thought being lesbian meant you were a middle-aged Anglo. With a bad haircut.

(Defensive and laughing)

Well, I mean, the only women I ever knew were lesbians generally fit that description.

Now, when I'm talking about time here, I'm not counting all the different guys I went through, thinking, maybe I just hadn't met the right one. So, then add a couple more years to get out of northern New Mexico, because, much as I love *la tierra encantada*, it's not exactly *la tierra prometida para las jotas*, you know? And when you're just coming out, you need lots of folks telling you it's okay to be, you know, queer. What you don't need is the *familia* freaking out, or telling you it's just a phase, or even that it's a sin. I mean you've already gone through that shit; you don't need some body else throwing it at you all over again.

(Realizing she's forgotten an important point)

And, of course, you wanna be around a lot of other dykes.

I prob'ly could've moved to Albuquerque instead of to Denver, but girl! everybody in small town New Mexico moves to "Burque. So it wouldn't really be like getting away, you know? More like living with your *madrina* instead of with your ma: Everybody still knows your business. So for me, Denver's a lot better. And the first time I walked into a lesbian bar, there weren't any of those middle-aged Anglo women with bad haircuts.

(Beat) Well, hardly any. Of course, there weren't so many big-haired Chicanas, either, but it depends on the bar. One time, I walked into the Metro and there was this little drag queen, and girl! his hair was big! I mean it was huge! I mean, it was up to here!

(Indicates an impossible height)

And the makeup! *Ay Dios!* If I wore that much eyeliner when I was seventeen-Eeee! you know, I probably did!-it's a wonder *mi gramita* could keep a straight face.

(returning to her earlier point)

Anyway, being around those other dykes is really important. Because it was one thing for me to say, hey, I really like being around women more than around men-that's actually no big deal. Everybody feels that way-But it's something else when you feel your body tingling all over from just being around somebody. Because, you know, hanging out with your friends is really great.

Pero, sometimes, you get that empty feeling in your arms, and you just need to hold a women close. And feel the shape of her body.

(She closes her eyes)

And put your face against her neck. And smell her skin. And smell her hair. And you just want to kiss her till she can't breathe no more.

Long pause

KARLA opens her eyes and comes back, obviously embarrassed at having gotten carried away.

I haveta say, though, I am glad to be alive today. In this day and age, I mean. I keep thinking of what it was like twenty-thirty years ago. I mean, Eloy says he had a *prima* who was a lesbian: a real *macha* who worked in construction and supported her wife. But that was back in L.A. What if you were in some place like Anton Chico, or Trujillo, or Española? And what if you actually did manage to find the only other lesbian in town and you two did not hit it off? Can you imagine? I mean, unless you move away to Los Angeles or someplace, you'd either have to make the best of it or

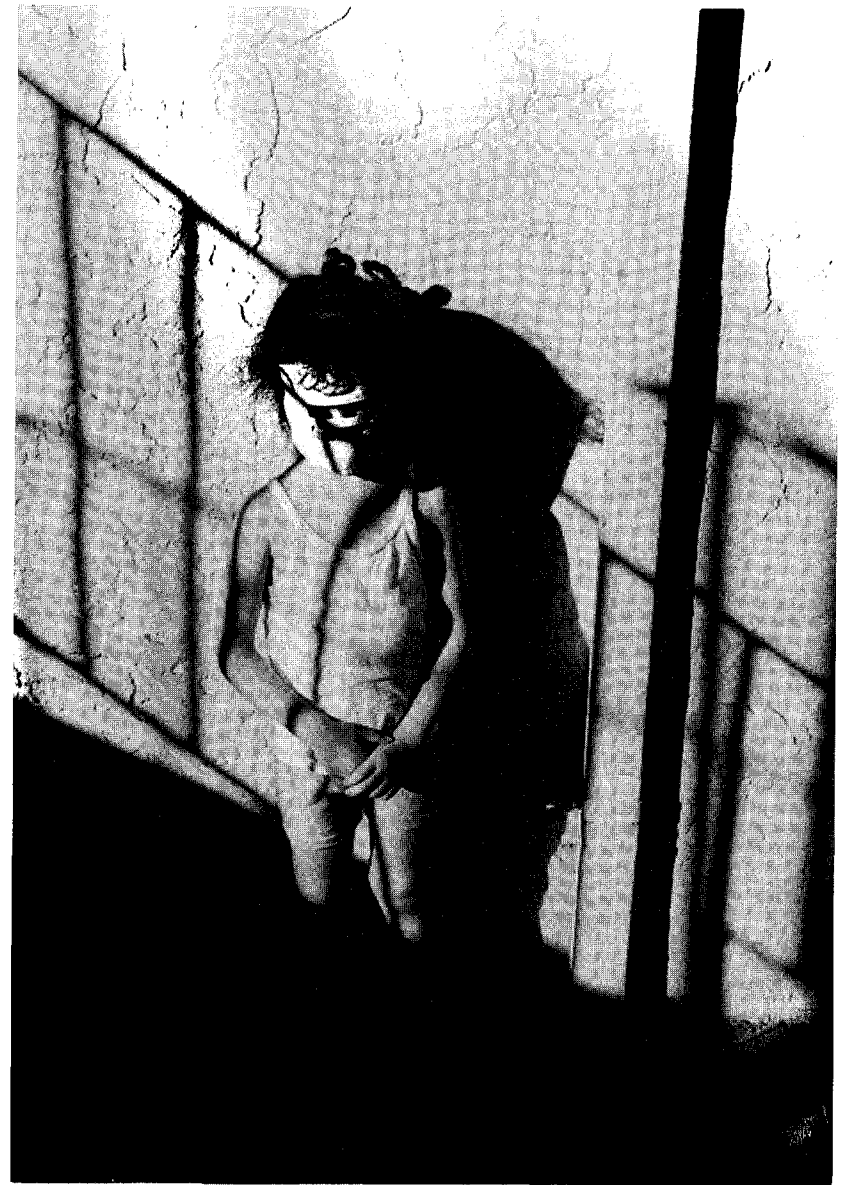
take your chances on straight women. And me, personally? I'd rather take a bath in *chile colorado* than take my chances on straight women. Which is pretty funny, when you think about it. Because then there are these women like my cousin Josie. Every time we see each other at a family party or something, she looks at me like,

Ay! that nasty *jota* Karla is going to put the moves on me! And I wonder, What is she thinking? Next time, I'm just gonna tell her,

(With attitude)

Josie, if you were the last woman on earth, I'd be celibate.

BLACK OUT



Debi Cooper, *In the Shadows*, Redwood City, California.
September 21, 1996.