

Excerpt from the novel *Samba Dreamers*

by Kathleen de Azevedo

Kathleen was born in Rio de Janeiro Brazil but lived most of her life in the United States. In her spare time she writes and rewrites. Her novel, *Samba Dreamers* of which this selection is excerpted, began as a poem, then as a story, then, went through five major drafts and many minor ones. The book won the 2007 Pen Oakland Josephine Miles Award, given to books that address human rights themes. It also won a Latino Books into Movies Award. Kathleen has published articles in magazines and newspapers and online, but she says her secret comes down to this – “I rewrite until the piece is as close to perfect as I can make it. So of course, when I tell students they must revise their essays, I’m treating them like writers all around the world!” Kathleen started teaching at Skyline College in 1995.

Activating Schema Questions (before reading)

- (1) What do you know about the L.A. gang scene? Has it changed over the years?
- (2) Why do people feel compelled to break the law, even putting themselves in danger?

Rosea drove over to East L.A. to look up Geezer Ortiz, who sold guns from his house. She used to carry a gun on her street forays, but never used it. A parolee should not use a gun. Shouldn't have one. Rosea knew this. She wasn't stupid. Shouldn't be in the garden in the first place. But she was going to buy a gun, even though it was the worst thing she could do. For all she knew, someone had heard her in the garden when she screamed and fell. Maybe the police would find a piece of her clothes or her flesh, snagged on thorns. Or maybe the dogs were speaking dogs, the kind in children's TV shows, real snitches, real puxa sacos, as Joe would say. But life couldn't just be a job, an apartment, a happy parole officer. The garden made her feel pure, clean. Like Joe, pure and clean and sweet. As pure as when God first made Brazil.

Some of her compañeros were married, but Geezer had a long way to go to get straightened out. Oh, it had been hot back then! Her love for Mexicans started when her mother told her of the

pachucos and how elegant they looked in their linen suits woven with sparkly thread, their sleeky baggy pants, the thick silk ties and matching handkerchiefs. And the knives that appeared out of nowhere---a breast pocket, their girlfriends' beehive hairdos---knives surprising someone like a slippery, deadly eel. Carmen had told her about the action at the Sleepy Lagoon, where some cop killed a Mexican, causing one grandissimo fracas, and Rosea, in love with defiance, grew to seek the fire that went with it.

Many people considered this neighborhood a flick-of-the-knife, fuck-you-gringo sort of place, and so of course the kids today acted like it was scary, too. Instead of the smashing zoot suits, though, they dressed in black Ben Davis pants and buttoned-up flannel shirts, big blue jackets puffed like bruises, peaked hats like wooly elves. They looked like corpses left in a ditch somewhere. The pride and the snazz had disappeared.

Rosea was older now, her heaviness had softened, and she carried more tragedy around. She looked at these street kids and wondered what she had wanted here, way back when. What drove her from the Hollywood Hills to the barrio? She seemed out of place now, in her sweatshirt and jeans, her thick ponytail, no lipstick, and dangly earrings. She hoped Geezer Ortiz, her old boyfriend, was still in the gun business. Once Geezer had brought a gun to her house and had shot coconuts from the trees in her mother's yard; the coconuts had shattered and splashed cool, sweet milk, and she and Geezer had stood under the trees with their mouths open and tongues out, trying to taste the exotic rain as it splashed down.

Rosea remembered the two-story apartment, and she wondered if he still lived there. She drove to the apartment and pulled to the curb. Nothing had changed: not the faded green paint, the rusted rain pipe along the side of the building, the brown water oozing from cracks in the plaster.

More graffiti on the wall in front, though. Rosea sat in the car, getting up the nerve to go in. She didn't want to just go up to the front door, have a stranger open it, and say, "What in the hell do you want with us? We are a clean family; we are tired of your element." But oh, Geezer had been swell in his burst of glory, still young, with a gorgeous beard shadow on his ruddy face, his skin white like a güero, and boot-black hair. Jesus, he had been cute and a chingón to the max.

She got the nerve to get out of the car, climb up the concrete steps, and wander down the corridor until she found the metal number 10 nailed over the door. Rosea knocked. She could hear a loud TV and a bunch of children chattering. The door opened, and a small boy with large eyes and a dirty Sesame Street T-shirt stood hanging onto the doorknob. Rosea asked, "Ortiz?" The boy ran away from the door. Rosea stood at the doorway. From the dark hall, she could see the blue glow of the TV in the living room and could hear cartoons with their thump-ti-dump of frantic characters running around and slamming into walls. The little boy who answered the door ran back to the two other kids watching TV, lolling on blankets and pillows scattered on the floor.

A young man came from the lighted kitchen, stood halfway down the hall, and called out, "Quién es?"

Rosea tried to get a better look. His features danced before her in the shadows, the side of his face lit by the pulsating light of the TV. She guessed it was Geezer's brother. "You Scooter?" she said.

"Yeah."

"You don't remember me, Rosea Socorro Katz. I used to go with Geezer, remember?"

There was a long pause from the skinny, dark figure. Old cooking oil sizzled in the kitchen. "Geezer's dead," he said.

"Shit."

"Shot. Long time ago."

"Too bad." Rosea was not surprised.

"What do you want?"

Rosea asked then if someone had taken over Geezer's business. Scooter turned abruptly and walked toward the kitchen, and Rosea hung back, not knowing whether she should enter or leave, but Scooter stood at the doorway of the kitchen and called, "You coming? Close the front door behind you."

Rosea stepped inside, made her way to the kitchen, and sat at the table. A large stack of dirty dishes climbed out of the sink, and a pile of wrinkled clothes lay bunched on a chair. An old woman stirred some chorizo in a pan but didn't look up. Scooter went into the pantry, brought out a shoe box, and put it on the table. "Two hundred dollars. Look first." Rosea pulled the box toward her and opened the lid just enough to peer inside. A gun lay there, a .22, with a handful of loose bullets rolling around in the box.

Rosea felt sweat on her upper lip. She wished all this could happen outside in the fresh air, but of course it couldn't. A small girl, about four, came in, took one look at her, then at the shoebox, and she knew. The girl, so fragile and tiny, wore a small T-shirt and floral panties. She said something to Scooter, who told her to shut up. Then the little one turned and left, unaffected by the harsh words, and her skinny feet pattered back over to the cartoon room. Rosea pulled out her wallet and counted out a bunch of twenties, saved up from Hollywood Celebrity Tours. Jesus. Innocent tourist dollars smelling like perfume and Certs and midwestern innocence. She slid the money over. Scooter counted it and nodded, pointing to the box. "Be careful," he said, "it bites."

"I know." Then Rosea remembered her and Geezer shooting coconuts in the backyard. She turned to the old woman at the stove. "I'm sorry about Geezer. I was a good friend of his."

The old woman didn't even look up. Rosea suddenly felt sick about the whole thing, made worse by the mixture of smells from fried chorizo and rotten fruit and stale kitty litter. This place was a filthy dump, and she was a nobody. Scooter frowned. "Life is tough here, Rosea. Always was."

Rosea nodded and slipped the box under her arm, then she turned and left. She used to think it was so cool going with Geezer and being a chola tough chick and a part of his fully Mexican family, instead of everything in her life being "not quite Brazilian." She used to ride behind him on his motorcycle and snuggle her face into his neck smelling of hair tonic, her long hair snapping freely in the wind. She used to think she needed nothing else, but, remembering Geezer's face floating in the apartment window and his sardonic wave to her as she headed toward home in Beverly Hills, she realized now how his family must have despised her.

Publisher: University of Arizona Press p. 142-145
ISBN 13- 978-0-8165-2490-7
ISBN 10 - 978-0-8165-2490-4

Discussion questions:

- (1) What do we know about the main character Rosea? From the information in the opening paragraph, what could have happened previously that caused Rosea to seek out a gun?
- (2) How do the past and the present work together and/or collide in this story?
- (3) What is Geezer's family like? Does the final line of this story seem accurate?

Writing about reading:

- (1) Rosea appears to have tried on the lifestyle of the barrio for a time. What would be alluring about this for a girl from Hollywood Hills? How does class play a role? Had she been a true part of this world? What can we learn from examining her attitudes and observations upon her return there?
- (2) How do we see undercurrents of violence threaded throughout the story? How does it shape the setting, the action and the characters? What is the effect or outcome for the reader?