

Alfonsina 's Story

by Karen Bradford

Alfonsina Mariella Tinoco Romero is two and a half years old, 12.5 kilos and scheduled for an incomplete cleft lip repair. Where a sweet little upper lip should be, two bulbs of flesh look like mushroom caps with a space between them, her teeth showing. She is considered fortunate that her nose is not deformed nor her gums impaired.

It is 12:54 p.m., Sunday January 31, as she enters the room. We are grateful for her medication to calm her into relaxation. It must be terrifying to see faces that do not look like *madre* or *padre*, to be with strangers and undressed in a chilly room. I remember Alfonsina from yesterday's intake clinic, defiance and fighting as her expressions of fear. My Polaroid photo of her for her medical records makes me look like an incompetent photographer, but I know I was lucky to get a clearer picture of her than the blur that wanted to escape.

It is 1 p.m., and RN Claire Donohue starts to swab the girl's face as other preparations in the room go on.

Fifteen minutes later, anesthesiologist Srikanthan Kandasamy begins her anesthesia. Alfonsina's little heartbeat fills the otherwise quiet room: *blip, blip, blip*, 112 times per minute. Only the swishing, crunchy sound of our improvised shoe covers --- small trash bags tied around our ankles --- make other noise.

There is an occasional *zzzzt!* of the electrocautery pen as surgeon Joe Zbylski begins making incisions on the grotesquely malformed lip. Surgeon Bill De Shazo moves in unison to staunch her bleeding with gauze. We could hear birds beyond the window, a reminder of the life that goes on outside. For the moment, though, all concentrate on Alfonsina.

As I watch her misshapen lip cut apart, Bill turns to me and winks: "It looks worse than before we started!"

Bill and Joe work together, artists' hands that heal. They stitch together two sides of a lip that has never before met. In time, these little lips will surely kiss her own children, but soon, Alfonsina's lips will certainly be kissed by her mother.

Sam gently squeezes a ventilation bag thirty times a minute to breath for Alfonsina. In the United States, a ventilation machine would take over this function for Sam, but in Peru, his hand and his knowledge are her life.

Bill turns to me: "Karen, do you know what 'the cupid's bow' is?" I say yes, but what does it mean to a surgeon? He replies, "It is the shape of a perfect upper lip ... the shape of the top of a heart."

He has to explain "vermillion" for me, though, as it is more than the brilliant version of red. It is the skin of the lip: "dry vermillion" as the outside, where a grown-up Alfonsina may some day apply lipstick, and "wet vermillion," the lip part that is in the mouth. The "vermillion border" is the line between the lip and the skin around the mouth. At 1:58, Joe and Bill properly adjust the vermillion border and stitch it into place.

With a cleft lip, there is always a deformity of the nose, the surgeons tell me. At 1:59, Joe quilts together the four corners of his initial incision under the nose, now that the vermillion border is established.

On our operating room's periphery, our "doctor of gizmology," biomedical engineer Ted Leonard, uses a cordless drill to install a latch on our door, operating room 1, to protect overnight our valuable equipment that we schlepped and negotiated to retrieve from bizarrely balky and bureaucratic customs officials. His toolbox is padded and has cutouts for the tools of his business: a volt meter, surge protector, plastic zip ties, Teflon tape, vise grips, batteries, wire strippers, clevis pins, more batteries and the various electrical outlet configuration plugs of the countries he's visited.

2:08 - Alfonsina now has a normal-looking lip.

2:12 - Sam injects pain medication into her IV drip as her heart rate has risen to 135 beats.

2:15 - Joe cuts away excess fleshy lip skin: none of the fashion models' "pouty, bee-stung lips" look for this mountain girl.

2:18 - Her heart rates calms to 112 as the pain meds course through her little body, so brown and still under the sterile drapes. Her cheeks are a leathery rose color: windburn, I wonder, from the viciously cold wind that sweeps down from the snowy heights of Huascarán?

BOOM! We hear the explosion of festival rockets outside, part of the local "progression of the crosses" that is taking place now. I think of watching *M.A.S.H.* on TV: how Hawkeye, BJ and the colonel kept operating despite the sounds of shelling outside their camp. We remain focused, too.

2:27 - Bill and Joe suture the underside of her lip. It is the place that her tongue will soon investigate, something new in her mouth to explore.

2:30 - Joe starts to clean Alfonsina's face. Her lip has swollen from surgery, as is expected, but it is still beautiful. He injects a long-acting local anesthetic for her later comfort. Claire ties a colorful "no-no's" on each arm: cloth-covered depressor sticks, to restrict her from touching her face. It is the human equivalent of the veterinary cones put on animals' necks to keep them from picking at their surgery stitches.

"Wake up," Claire coos to Alfonsina; "*Despierta,*" our translator says. It reminds me of the traditional Mexican happy birthday song, so I sing it softly: "*Despierta, mi bien, despierta, mira que ya amaneció.*" Wake up, my dear, wake up, look at the break of day ...

2:35 – Sam removes the breathing tube, tenderly cradles Alfonsina in his embrace and swoops her away to the recovery room. In less than two hours, I have seen a life changed.

This child and 110 more in Huaraz, Peru received free surgeries in January, 2005 to repair cleft lip and cleft palate anomalies. Members of Rotary International District 5330 in Riverside and San Bernardino counties raised more than \$60,000 to fund this project, called Rotaplast. I was the medical team's volunteer Rotarian photojournalist to document the mission.

This story won a Polaris Award from the Public Relations Society of America-California Inland Empire Chapter with a near-perfect score in feature writing.



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