

Bobbie Rae Wilson

Making Do

The late afternoon sun glowed, fleshly red like a split fig, over the roofs of the two-storey buildings edging the plaza of San Marcos de Colón. A few dark, mestizo faces turned, briefly, to stare at the pale gringos, their heads perversely bare, stuffed backpacks at their feet. Mad people were commonly irregular in behavior. The male half of the couple studied an Esso road map. Bridget, the other half, her red hair falling in two braids over her ears as she bent down, tightened the flap of her pack.

"A couple of years back when they were fighting *La Guerra de fútbol* with El Salvador, road maps like this were good enough for the Honduran army. It shows the roads all right, but not how to get there." He bent down, picked up two tamarind leaves and ground them together in his fist. He wanted her to see his frustration. "If there are no buses, we'll have to hitchhike."

"No," she said emphatically. "No. I'm not playing auto-stop with you in this place. You're not the one who will find yourself raped. Probably not, anyway." She didn't smile. Her sun-splotched face, unobserved by the young man, was taut and unplayful. "Go check the bus schedules. I'll watch your pack. See if we can rent a car at least." The man smiled, amused. "God, Brie, you're wonderful. Who would want to rape you? You haven't bathed in two days." Then, answering his own question, he said, his voice lowering its register, "I would. You know how badly I always want you, don't you, Brie." He tried to snuggle up against her breasts, making playful snuffing noises at the sweat-stain in her green plaid shirt under the right armpit.

The woman turned away from him. Stop it. She hated that dumb nickname. He should call her by her right name. Or not call her anything. Please. She gave the final word a strong flourish, a personal underscoring. With both hands, she pushed his burrowing head away from her breasts. A few feet from them, a boy stared amazedly at this foreign by-play. Two older women on the other side of the plaza had begun to watch them. Stop it, she commanded. The man drew his shoulders up, hands splayed out before him, in an exaggerated shrug. Just a sex-crazed little boy, he mimed. Bridget thought, Yes, that is what it amounts to, the kid from down the block who nightly sneaks up to your bedroom window to see you naked. Or perhaps he is the down-the-block kid who calls you to whisper, or sometimes snarl, "cunt" and "fuck" so that he can imagine you wince as the ownerless words jab into your ears. That is what the shrug means, she thought, just the sex-crazed kid, don't blame me, I have a hard-on, male drives, you know, don't you, sweetheart.

"I do love you, Brie. You must know that. I want you so badly." His hand rested on her shoulder lightly in a comradely grip. He was doing his best to look warmly, lovingly it might have been, into her eyes. She recognized a young man on his first date practicing the semiotics of courtship. In the now-sinking red light, she saw herself, twinned, miniaturized into lilliputian objects of desire within his eyes. She felt acutely that her being might whirl apart and reassemble itself innumerable times in his eyes, in his own indifferent self. In the plaza-turned-theatre, people had begun to notice them more closely. Gringos were a disturbing people. It was well known that they lacked decency.

"Try not to want me. Not here anyway. I won't have sex with you until we can find some kind of contraceptive. I will not take risks."

She spoke as emphatically as she knew how, but she knew that once they had reached Choluteca, closed the door of some cheap hotel behind them, he would become importunate. He would promise the absolute safety of an efficient withdrawal. He would promise total care and concern. He would, smiling boyishly, promise the moon. He would promise whatever it would take to persuade her to take him into her. If she hadn't lost her diaphragm in Managua, he would assume his right to nightly sex. He would complain, as he always had, that the rim of the device rubbed painfully against the shaft of his penis. If they could buy condoms anywhere, he would wear them, but complain each time that they diminished his pleasure, like washing his feet with socks on he would say. They could not buy condoms, however.

No one could buy condoms in Central America in 1971. Nor could a woman go to a doctor and ask for a prescription for the Pill. The sexual technologies of the North were unavailable.

Sex had been, as she had suspected that it would be, the biggest difficulty in travelling north from Panama. She had managed with her diaphragm until Managua, though her tube of spermicide had wrinkled dry while they were in San José. She hadn't told him how permeable a defence a lone barrier of latex had seemed, how naked a cervix might feel behind its frail protection, a bridge beset but weakly guarded, nor had she complained to him about the nightly hygienic difficulties, the dirty, shared bathrooms, and the inevitably cold, rusty water. His assumption that he should be entitled to worry-free sex upon demand had lodged, unspoken, undebated, in the hidden baggage with which they began their trip together. It had not struck her as important to object. She would need to thread her desires, she had known, along the trajectories of his own. It had worked well enough while she still had her diaphragm. Then she had lost it. It had disappeared in the third-class, plastic-austere pension on a narrow street three blocks from the Somoza compound.

They had walked up the hill to the compound just once. National guardsmen had watched threateningly as they strolled. Its presence, so close, almost hanging over the street of the pension, had caused them to feel a muddy apprehension about everything, like a thickening in the very light. People had not talked to them easily. Even the jocular, but important, question whether there really were sharks in the lake had not elicited ready answers. She remembered a handsome man, in his late thirties, serving in a bar where they had gone several times who, tight-lipped, his mouth set, would speak no more than whispered words, single, forlorn, their absent syntax screaming in her ears. His laconism had been, she thought, painfully typical.

She was certain that the pension's only maid had stolen it. She had immediately observed the young woman's furtiveness and hostility. "They just don't like gringos here," he had said. The Nicaraguans didn't have much reason to like them, she had replied. But she had wished that it had been otherwise. She would have liked to talk to someone in a friendly open way and to learn what that compound on the hill actually meant to the people who lived in the flat, hot city on the shores of the vast lake. The maid did not want to talk. No one in the pension had. She served the three

meals, the corn beer flavored with berries, and made up the rooms in silence.

When Bridget's diaphragm had disappeared from her cosmetics kit, she had known intuitively that Conchita had taken it. She had felt astounded at the vulgarity of the theft, and at the likelihood that the woman, evidently lacking in both common sense and hygiene, would try to use it. Thin, almost slight, her tiny breasts muffled behind her starched blouse, Conchita had seemed diminutively sexless. What a stupid risk to run, Bridget had thought, to wear someone else's diaphragm. It probably wouldn't fit either. It would be too large in her, slewing sideways, and sperm would leak around it. Then she would find herself pregnant anyway and have one more thing to blame on gringos. And then Bridget had thought how wretched it all was, how poor and deprived the people were. How very sad that a woman must steal another woman's diaphragm. She had not complained about the theft and when they left she had slipped back into the room to leave a small tip, hoping that he would not see.

"No," she had said that evening in Estelí, "no, I won't take chances. Even if you do withdraw, there is always a risk. You must know that as well as I do." She tried to feel confident about her decision, but she feared having a fight with him. "We can cuddle," she said. "I can do lots of things for you. We can do swell things together. Then in Mexico, I bet we can buy condoms." She had put on her most friendly, mistressy smile.

"Oh, hell," he had exclaimed. "Women are impossible. How do you expect me to be celibate between here and Mexico? You can't seriously expect me to travel with you all the way to Mexico City without sex, can you? There's no damn point to cuddling if it doesn't lead to the real thing. All your so-called swell things are just frustrations for me. Hand jobs, or you running off to the sink to spit, they're just piss-poor substitutes for the real thing." He had tried, grimly and worldlessly, to roll over on top of her. Momentarily, she had felt his erect penis press against her stomach just below the navel, prodding as if it would force an opening there, or any place. She had curled fetally away from him. Then they had lain, rigidly in silence, coldly next to each other without even holding hands.

Now he was walking briskly across the plaza with a small boy in tow. "This is Pablo. He is the side-kick of the man who will drive us over the *cerro* to Choluteca." He spoke authoritatively. He was a general putting difficult strategies into effect. He could have been a banker investing fortunes. He smiled like a grown-up in control of things. He had been gone

only half an hour or so, but he had already made arrangements, taken charge of events, thrust himself into command. She lapsed into uncertainty. He seemed to wear the quality of maleness like a prince's cloak.

"What does he do?" she asked. She couldn't imagine what uses the driver of a car would have for a side-kick. The scrawny runt looked at her with serious eyes. He seemed to proclaim confidence in his mysterious purposes.

"Oh, just a side-kick," he said knowingly. "They always have them, you know. Like co-pilots. And they're very important. Pablo is the *socio* of Javier, the driver. That is a term you might think only applied to banks but, in this case, it means side-kick. Javier wouldn't make the trip without him. You haven't paid much attention to things, have you, Brie? Not to notice that every operator of a machine of any kind whatever must have his *socio*." He patted the boy on the top of his floppy hat.

The car climbed slowly and noisily. He explained that it was a 1951 Bel Air, held together by Javier's great ingenuity. Bridget felt a quick rush of antiquity, like walking around the corner in a museum and suddenly confronting the artifacts of one's childhood. The car was exactly as old as she. Her mother and father might have driven a white and blue Bel Air like this one when she was a child. She wondered if it might have rolled off the assembly line on the very day, April twenty-fifth, in 1951 when she had been born. From the right-hand corner of the back seat she was conscious of Javier's gaunt, malarial cheeks as he concentrated on the narrow highway and mountain curves. Pablo sat impassively beside him, peering straight ahead into the road as it unfolded in the car's weak headlights. Across the car, in the bright tropical night, dazzling in starlight, she could make out the sharp, phallic shapes of the volcanic mountains that stretched darkly into the distance towards the Pacific. They jabbed and poked grotesquely.

Javier slowed the car and stopped along a curve, more on the road than on the shoulder. The car leaned to the left, towards the black emptiness that fell away from the road, and pointed sharply upwards. A fence paralleled the road. From its gate a track appeared to lead through some trees to a light a hundred yards or so farther on. Pablo had turned attentively sideways. "*Un gaseoso*," Javier commanded brusquely. "*Muy fuerte*."

"What's going on?" Bridget asked. He explained that Javier had sent his side-kick off for a fizzy pop. "He used the word *fuerte* rather than the correct *espumoso*, but I understood what he meant. He wants Pablo to bring him a pop with lots of fizz." She accepted his lesson doubtfully.

"¿Qué pasa?" he asked, leaning over the seat to force Javier's attention. "Nada," the driver replied nonchalantly. Nothing did seem to be happening, only the driver waiting for his side-kick to bring him a pop, as fizzy as possible. He explained once more that Javier should have said *espumoso*. That would have been normal Spanish, he said, but either usage meant fizzy. Bridget remembered the highway between Yarmouth and Shelburne. It would have been unlikely for anyone to park there, doubly angled and along a curve, to wait for a drink. Quite a few things seemed unlikely at this point. Javier had ducked under the wheel to do something physical. He seemed to be ripping up the floorboards.

"I don't really understand this," she said.

"I paid him ten dollars to take us directly to Choluteca," he complained. "He isn't keeping his end of the bargain." He groused into silence, trying to look hierarchically over Javier's shoulders to check on what he was doing. Bridget nestled back into the corner of the Bel Air. In the bright, still darkness, she thought about this crazy, frustrating trip and the man, her pseudo-lover, beside her. No solution spread theatrically, like a constellation, over the mountains, or burst volcanically from the invisible horizon and ocean, but she determined to think the problem through until one did shape itself.

Pablo came back running down the track through the trees. Smartly, like a military courier successfully returned from a mission, he handed Javier a large bottle of Pepsi. Javier held the bottle against the door frame and knocked off the cap with a single blunt strike from the right palm. "¡Pum!" Pablo yelled joyfully "¡Pum!" Then Javier bent down under the wheel and poured the fizzing pop. The gurgling noise was unmistakable as it fell into some kind of receptacle.

"What is he doing now?" Bridget asked.

"My God, it's quite amazing. He is pouring the pop into the hydraulic brake cylinder. He's using the pop for brake fluid."

"How can he do that? Isn't real brake fluid like oil or something?"

"Brake fluid would be more viscous, of course. But this will work, at least for a time. The pop just becomes a kind of low grade brake fluid. It's probably all that he ever uses. It's called *bricolage*. A guy takes one thing and uses it, as necessity demands, in the place of another.

"What do you mean, a 'guy'?" She felt combative.

"I mean that some men develop a talent for lateral thinking. They learn to substitute one thing for another. I suppose it comes from working around

machinery and complicated mechanisms. That's *bricolage*. It's the sort of thing a guy does when he substitutes baling-wire for a weld. Oh, Lévi-Strauss," he ejaculated, "thou art mighty, truly mighty." His excitement momentarily subdued her.

Javier and Pablo let them off at a small hotel, looking straight ahead as they started back to San Marcos. Next to the hotel there was a tiny *abarottes* that was still open and Bridget got out to buy bread for their breakfast. When she got back to the hotel, he had already registered them as married. She heard him say to the clerk, ingratiatingly, man to man, that they required a double bed, *un matrimonio*, as comfortable as spring lawns. The clerk, a bald, flabby man who wore a green visor over his eyes, like someone from a thirties movie about newspapers, looked up at her as she entered carrying her backpack on her shoulders, bread and a stalk of sugarcane in her hands. His eyes focussed unblinkingly upon her green headband, her thick hair, in its two dishevelled braids, falling from it to her shoulders, as if he would grasp, if only he could, the bizarre mystery of red hair.

The clerk pointed down to the registration card. He would call attention to the discrepancies in their names, perhaps wave their passports angrily in their faces. But he only pointed, his forefinger underscoring, down to her name on the card. What is this name? he wanted to know. What class of name is this? Before she could say anything, she heard the man's voice beside her take the answer from her. Her tongue poised silently between her teeth.

"Brie" meant *queso*, "cheese," he said.

"¡Cómo!" the clerk exclaimed. "¡Cómo es posible?"

It was a good name for a redhead, *una pelirroja*, didn't he think so? He tried to ruffle her hair as he spoke. "Very ripe," he said. He smiled broadly, happy in his wit, his command of Spanish, his control. *Muy madura*. She felt as a small dog might, if a dog could have self-consciousness, when its master displayed its peculiar markings. He enjoyed being masterful.

In the room there was a double string bed. The white walls were stained by the dried husks of mosquitoes. A single United Fruit calendar, for 1968, decorated the walls. The window opened onto a back courtyard from which scattered night noises, animal and human, rose. There were no screens. She put the bread and the thick, brown stalk on the table and stood her backpack against the ancient wardrobe in one corner of the room. There were no closets. A stained sink protruded from beneath a discolored mirror. The

toilet would be down the hallway. She took off her blouse and bra and began to wash herself under the arms. The cold water stung but made her feel good. She knew that he was watching her wash. Her breasts hung down towards the sink in a way that she knew excited him. Gravity adds definition to the female body, he would say. She splashed water over her breasts and then her face while he watched. Then she turned to him, smiling, and held her arms out. He hurried into her open arms and began to kiss and to touch her. She pursed her lips upwards, snapping tiny fricatives in the classic feminine manner. Make love to me.

They made love on the edge of the bed. He thrust inside without preliminaries. The act of love, a quick pounding, was soon completed. Then he rolled off her with a happy grunt. "Don't go to sleep," she said.

He caressed her perfunctorily along the upper arm. "Of course not, darling. Tell me what made you change your mind?" Bridget understood him to mean that she had found him irresistible at last, her body burning with desire for him, and abandoned her foolish commitment to abstinence.

"I found a solution to the contraception problem. I should have thought of it before. It's an old solution."

He turned towards her, genuinely mystified. "How?"

"At the little *abarottes*, when I bought bread for breakfast, I also bought a sponge and some vinegar. That's what I'm wearing now. It'll probably work."

"Where did you learn that amazing, pre-scientific trick?"

"It's the sort of thing that women learn," she said, "but in my case I learned it from George Eliot."

"Who?" Surprise, a hint of rivalry, tensed his voice.

"The novelist," she said simply. "Eliot used a bit of sponge soaked in vinegar to prevent conception. It worked for her and it should for me, too. And it's just as scientific as stretching a piece of rubber inside oneself. It's really just *bricolage*, isn't it? Like the Pepsi that functions as brake fluid. The vinegar is spermicide and the sponge, a cervical barrier. Eliot understood the reproductive machinery. The sexual mechanism, you might call it. It's pretty complicated, I guess, but you could understand it if you tried."

In the morning, they ate the bread and sucked sugarcane. A young woman, looking vaguely like Conchita, brought them big cups of hot milk dashed by strong coffee. Bridget laid the Esso map out on the table while he watched. "There," she said pointing to the northern border of Guatemala

where Mexico bulked into imaginary space, its vastness running off the map. "There," she said pointing to Almatenango de la Frontera, "there is how far I will go with you. If I like you better when we get there, I might stick it out to Mexico City. But you will have to learn a few things. I want my lovers to respect me. I don't think that you have really tried very hard. You will have to learn how, or travel alone."

She looked at the map more closely. "There," she said pointing to a little town north of the border. "I will stick with you until we reach this place. In Chicomuscelo, once we get there, I plan to catch a bus for Mexico City, and say good-bye. That should give us a week or so to see what you can learn."

He looked at her in astonishment. Dismay tortured his face. "But," he cried, "I want to see Copán." He wanted to see ruins.