

NEGOTIATING BRIDE PRICE/ *Rachel Hillier Pratt*

ONE NIGHT, a year and a half into our Solomon Island Peace Corps service, James, the school's vice principal, came to visit us. He announced himself near the front porch of our leaf-and-stick house.

"Who-ee-oh," he cooed.

My husband, Larry, and I emerged from behind our single wall to greet him on the porch. The weather was clear that night, the sky velvety black against the rim of the moon. Occasional clouds cast shadows as they passed between the bright moon and the earth. The air thumped out the rambunctious night tunes, the hooting and twittering *squawk!* of the jungle.

James had entered from the side of our porch—a bark floor supported by bamboo-like studs and rafters. The walls behind us were large, overlapping palm fronds stitched with vine. James stood on the scraped betel-nut-bark floor a proper Melanesian distance from us, respecting an even larger personal space than Americans occupied. Women in the Solomon Islands shouldn't address men directly when another man is around, so Larry talked to James while I admired his wide, well-callused feet, the way his toes spread out. They'd obviously never been restrained by patent leather.

"I have good news," James said. I looked up to see a wide, overly enthusiastic smile. He seemed excited or nervous. His dark eyes didn't match the strained joy of his face. James was from another island, Guadalcanal, and had a darker complexion than the Makirans of this island. He came from an entirely different culture and on his native island had spoken a different language than he did now, making him a sort of expatriate in his own country. Smiling while he talked, he told us that he and Kamarie were going to have a custom wedding. He thrust out his jaw, pointing his sharp chin, graced by a goatee, up and out toward the jungle.

"Brother George and I will travel to the 'n'other side,'" he said with another chin point, "to buy custom bride price for Kamarie." Laughing suddenly, he slapped Larry hard on the back—a rather painful and annoying habit he'd picked up from Brother George.

"Everything will be just fine," he said. Then he hopped off the porch and "*heh heh heh'd*" into the darkness.

"What the hell was that?" Larry asked me.

"Who knows," I said, shrugging. I meant, how were we to know why James had acted so strangely about the whole thing.

After two years, we knew not to jump to conclusions; we regularly contended with unconscious cultural misunderstandings. And also, Solomon Islanders lied for kicks. It was their primary form of entertainment. During the first week of Melanesian language/culture classes, the Solomon Islander instructors spent a lot of time teaching us to say "liar" in three different languages (*asuge, alolei, hagaparu*). It was important that we practice the intonations: *a-SUE-gay, a-LOW-lay, ha-ga-PA-ru*, rising, peaking and then falling. No good to have us out in the world without knowing how to call everybody a liar.

After a year and a half, we'd learned to think it, if not to say it. Whenever we heard any news, we listened with skepticism and waited until we saw proof that it was true.

We went back inside our bush house to read books. We had a recently installed solar-powered light that we used for a few hours a night. We could read, though we had to contend with sparrow-sized dive-bomber moths that thought it was the moon.

I picked up *Midnight's Children* but couldn't concentrate on Salman Rushdie's diction. Instead, I spaced off on the woven-leaf wall and imagined Kamarie, elegantly tall, dressed in a white, flowing wedding gown that undulated in the wind on the black, sandy ocean shore, with her kinky blond hair combed proudly. If Kamarie could have peered into my mind, she would have laughed to see the bush *gele* I'd conjured up in a "dolly dress" on the toilet beach. It made me laugh out loud, too; some of our customs would never fit into this place. Larry looked up from his book.

"I was just thinking about a beautiful wedding on the beach," I explained.

Larry snorted. One moonlit night a few weeks into our service, while we enthusiastically smooched on the warm, black sand of the South Pacific seashore, we noticed the moonlit silhouette of squatting people near the water at low tide.

"Didn't the Peace Corps tell us that some villages use the beach to toilet?" Larry had whispered. Indeed, they'd even explained that salt-water and sunlight combine to kill pathogenic microbes in human shit. Marvelous idea, really, they had said.

"Yuck," I declared. And from then on, the beach lost its romantic appeal.

Now Larry wanted to know why James and Kamarie were getting married. "Is she pregnant?" he asked. While I wondered about what

I should and shouldn't tell, he launched a moth away from his face with his book—*thwack*. It landed on the floor with a thud, and our cat immediately pounced and devoured it in a single crunch, leaving the gray, dusty wings behind. We laughed.

"She is, isn't she," he said.

In a rural school, in the midst of thick jungle, among staff and students from all over the islands and all over the world, there were a myriad of conflicting cultural expectations regarding marriage. Brother George, a Dutch Catholic Marist, who had known James for years, had no doubts about James's Christian duty to marry Kamarie—a patriarchal tradition both Larry and I understood. A few days later, when Brother George announced the wedding to the students in the leaf-and-stick chapel, I had a perfect picture of it in my mind, but it didn't match what James had described.

That day a low-pressure weather system moved in and made the atmosphere thick and soggy. The dense, wet air stopped my nostrils and forced me to breathe through my mouth. Brother George's tan face gleamed with sweat. He had been working all day, and his sandy blond hair was tousled about his face. His shirt was dirty, mostly in the center, where his middle-aged belly poked out.

"We will have a first wedding in Na'ana!" he shouted, and slapped James on the back. "James is like a son to me," he said, tears welling up in his eyes.

I knew Brother George could think of no higher honor than to marry James and Kamarie here at the center. He described, in his Dutch-accented English, a Christian wedding with a "prrrrieest," without ever taking his unlit, soggy, hand-rolled tobacco cigarette out of his mouth. He wiggled his dirty toes in his plastic Chinese flip-flops and looked around at his students. It was clear that he loved them; he'd devoted twenty-five years of his life to Solomon Island boys like these. He giggled and wiggled his eyebrows; he was happy.

Brother George was well respected and admired by the students and staff. He'd spent countless hours planning curriculum, designing the school, writing to European funding agencies looking for more capital. He listened deeply, and his eyes lit up when he laughed. He had high expectations; he believed in what we could do and made us believe it, too. In that way, we were united at that school because of Brother George.

And he definitely had Western ideas about "progress" and his Christian duty to develop the land. Larry and I used to joke that if Brother George instructed us to clear ten thousand acres we would have

picked up our machetes and gotten to work. Anyone else would have thought that this thick jungle, in the most isolated part of Makira—the most isolated island in the Solomon Islands—would never surrender to a training school. Brother George saw only need; he was going to fill it. There were no roads, docks, bridges, airports or wheels. Yet guided by George's vision, we'd built a school in the middle of an inaccessible, sparsely populated, densely forested island. Supplies other than jungle timber we unloaded with a canoe from a cargo boat that came every six months. Staff and students plunged repeatedly through five-to ten-foot surf in a tiny dinghy to unload nails, bolts, cement, petrol and rice from that ship.

After our first year, the students, staff and Larry had completed fifteen student dormitories, four toilets with septic systems and a generator building. They started to raise the roof of the future kitchen and dining hall. They used the finest hardwood lumber in the world, huge and plentiful in this jungle. In the bush they milled logs eight feet thick with a chainsaw as part of the training program. Students carried the huge boards on their shoulders from the bush to the lumberyard. After a year, the complex of permanent buildings transformed the original five leaf-and-stick houses that marked our arrival.

But not all things could be expected to change so quickly. The jungle fought back. It grew over buildings while we slept and had to be hacked back daily to maintain a slender foot trail and a clearing around our bush houses. And, like the jungle, life and culture in Makira fought us as well.

On that day when Brother George spoke glowingly of the Christian wedding he would perform, I could tell from James's clenched-teeth smile and the worried looks on the students' faces that it wouldn't be as easy as that. James was from Guadalcanal; he and his family had their own cultural expectations; he was almost as much a foreigner here as we were. Kamarie was from a nearby village in Makira. It was clear from everyone's response that "custom wedding" meant anything *but* "Christian wedding."

Storm clouds loomed in the northern sky the day a runner arrived with the message from the family that a Christian wedding would not be acceptable. Weighty gloom fell upon the center. The staff was quiet, the students were quiet, and now, with the rain approaching, the jungle was quiet. Any quieting of jungle activity felt ominous. It meant only two things—earthquakes or big rains.

As the rain poured, we retreated into our houses. The downpour was pure and total. It pounded on the thatched roof so hard we had

to shout over the ruckus. Soon Larry and I were too exasperated to even attempt a conversation. Finally we acquiesced to the power of the rain and waited for it to stop so we could find out how seriously Brother George was taking the news that there would be no Christian wedding.

I had known Kamarie was pregnant for a few weeks now, but I hadn't told Larry about things the women said in the kitchen—a Makiran rule of female solidarity that I continue to hold to today. I spent the daylight (when I wasn't teaching class) inside the bush or the kitchen with Kamarie and Helene, cousins from the same bush village, who prepared meals for Brother George and the single men on the teaching staff. The leaf-and-stick kitchens differed from the houses; they were built on the ground, each with a slit of window in the back to let out some smoke from the constant fire. There we squatted together on stump stools with machetes to peel sweet potatoes and blue yams.

Helene was incredibly strong and skilled, though she was small, under five feet tall. If it weren't for the three tattooed black dots on her cheeks that boasted family lineage, she would have reminded me of a dark brown Shirley Temple. She had curly spirals that escaped the three cute little twist buns on her head. One time she'd even tried to fix my blond hair in the same style, appalled by the way my hair flew about even when I tied it back.

Kamarie, the more educated of the two cousins, had skin the color of creamed coffee and hair to match. She had been blond as a child, typical of Makiran children in this region: tawny brown skin, light brown, speckled eyes, blond, kinky hair. She had large breasts and unusually long, thin limbs that made her seem delicate. And she was unusual in that she had gone to school until sixth grade—astounding for any Makiran. She spoke fluent Pidgin English (so she could understand me!) and wrote English relatively well.

One day Kamarie suddenly returned from the nursing academy in the school canoe, but before I could speak with her she walked directly into the bush to pay her family compensation. I knew something was up, and Helene waited until we were alone to tell me. My curiosity was strong, since I'd written the grant and application for her to attend nursing school. But I scraped coconuts in the kitchen with Helene and waited, while she poked yams in the fire with a stick.

"Kamarie went home because she's *babule* [ba-boo-lay], Karecello," she said. (They called me Karecello instead of Rachel; my name "tasted bad—too crunchy.")

Following Makiran custom, I didn't respond or look up from my work. It wouldn't be appropriate to scan her expression or ask questions.

Later, when we gathered *tutumbu* (edible fern) near the river's edge about a mile from school, she said, "James is the daddy."

This piece of news surprised me. I didn't believe it right away, but Helene had never lied to me. I snuck a look at her face to try to read it anyway. Today she looked serious. Normally, Helene was a bundle of energy, always ready to laugh and joke. It was her usual style to speak boldly. Now, she frowned, concentrating on slicing the ferns and wrapping them in leaves. She *had* waited to tell me the news until we were in the bush, so I was inclined to believe her. But I had never even seen James and Kamarie talk to each other. Still, I reasoned, in Makira, even husbands and wives didn't interact during the daylight hours. I had learned early on not to show physical affection to Larry. I couldn't touch him when I sat next to him.

My life orbited around the Makiran women's world and Larry's around the men. Men's worlds and women's worlds were separated into well-defined roles. Soon after I arrived at my site I picked a woman's role. I had a choice. I could have lived my life there as a white woman, with a woman to do my laundry and my cooking. But I had chosen to live as a Makiran woman instead. Makiran women were proud. They worked collectively, cohesive and strong in their labor.

To Kamarie and Helene, men were another kind. They fished, hunted, took care of kids sometimes. They went to the garden sometimes and traveled to Honiara and sent money home, sometimes. They went to meetings sometimes and talked about government. Sometimes they just sat on the porch of the house they built a few years back and chewed betel nut. They did all kinds of things—sometimes. Women worked *all the time*, and that was the difference.

Sometimes male staff from the patriarchal islands of Malaita expected Helene or Kamarie to do something for them, like their laundry. They'd walk into the kitchen with their wad of dirty clothes. Helene and Kamarie stayed silent during their visit; they didn't even look up from their work. When the men finally left, they laughed and laughed. After a time, the men took care of it themselves.

But they never criticized a man in front of another man. They wouldn't step over a man or walk in front of a man or climb higher than a man. They even left the village and hung out in "menstrual huts" when they bled each month. Women in the jungles of Makira didn't seem to have any issues with men. They liked men—especially at night. But this was when all trouble began: at night in the bush. It was called "creeping" (crawling under houses to invite a lover to "lay a leaf." Married couples usually laid leaves in their gardens. Unmarried couples needed to be more careful because if the family found out, lovers only had a few options).

The Peace Corps had told us flatly, “Don’t creep, it’s taboo.” But it wasn’t exactly. You could creep, but if you got caught, either by a witness or a baby, you were busted. Makirans had consequences. He paid bride price—shell money (a long heirloom string of shells) or she paid red money (a short string of red shells and teeth) compensation.

Even though I was immersed in the culture, there was still a lot I didn’t understand. A few days after Kamarie had reemerged from the bush, the kitchen atmosphere became tense. I was happy to see her, but Helene wouldn’t speak at all, and I certainly wasn’t going to ask any personal questions. Helene wouldn’t even look at Kamarie; she slammed lids on pots and moved around quickly. I asked Kamarie “Western” questions about school and how she liked it. She said only that she wanted to go back, and I felt worried for her.

I owed a kind of debt to Kamarie; she’d been the first person to include me in her daily routine—or at least she talked Helene into letting me tag along. Together, they taught me to survive in the jungle. But it had taken a year and every last fat cell. I was so skinny after the first year in the Peace Corps that Helene and Kamarie teased me, saying I looked like a little girl. It was true that I didn’t have the “woman pouch” that they were so proud of. My skin was too pale. To make matters worse, my blond hair, thinning from malaria meds, curled and frizzed all over the place in the humidity. Now when I picture myself there, sitting on a stump in the middle of the jungle, I think about how odd I must have seemed to them, asking preposterous questions, always following the flow of conversation down the wrong path.

One thing was certain: they pitied my emaciated figure—my lack of femininity.

“Maybe you are too skinny to have a baby,” they would say, shaking their heads.

“I take a pill every day to stop babies.”

And they hollered, “*Hagaparu*.” Each time I told that “lie” they slapped their thighs and laughed until they cried.

But they didn’t always make fun of me. Kamarie also allowed me to share things that I knew about. She made me feel like a real Peace Corps volunteer. She let me instruct her in preparing proper dressings, the power of soap, malaria medication, and proper antibiotic use. Even Helene was interested in how to sew skorts; they came in mighty handy when climbing a coconut tree.

The day after Kamarie returned from her village, she didn’t come along when Helene and I gathered coconuts. Helene whacked through

the bush furiously, grumpily slicing through thick, juicy stems of jungle undergrowth. I thought she was mad because Kamarie was pregnant. I knew she wasn't looking for coconuts in there; any coconuts that dropped into such thick bush would surely have rotted. Meanwhile, I collected dried coconuts and put them in a pile near the sharpened stick she had jammed into the ground.

When I had gathered enough, I started removing the husks. Before I had finished with my first coconut, Helene snatched it out of my hands and dehusked it quickly. She'd never had much patience with my clumsy, weak attempts at coconut dehusking, but she usually restrained herself and climbed a coconut tree for fresh coconuts to drink from while I stabbed my coconut repeatedly into the stick in the ground, sometimes dislodging the stick instead of the husk. These Makiran women were so strong and skillful with machetes that even after a year of training I couldn't compete—and I had some sizable biceps!

"Kamarie's drinking Chinese medicine," Helene grunted, impaling the coconut on the stick and tearing the husk off like the peel of an orange.

"Where did she get Chinese medicine?" I asked, too quickly. I wondered if Kamarie had brought it back from nursing school, some sort of prenatal concoction.

"From the store," Helene said, her laugh bitter. When she looked at me, her expression shouted, *Where else, egghead?*

We had a little "store" on "campus" where we could buy rice, Milo, fabric, local tobacco, and Spam. I didn't know they carried Chinese medicine, but after we got back from the bush I went over to the store to find some. I found only cologne labeled in Chinese. I bought it to show it to Helene.

"Yeah, that's it," she said. "One of those *karange* [crazy/stupid] women from Na'ana told her it would 'out' the baby."

I hesitated. "No, I don't think it will work," I said.

"It didn't work," Helene said, "but the baby will come out wrong, too much bad luck."

"No, I don't think it will do that either." I didn't believe in bad luck. "Tell her to stop taking it."

"She drank the whole bottle already."

I didn't ask why she would try to get rid of the baby, and I didn't ask why Helene would be so angry about it. I didn't ask anything at all. I thought I knew: unmarried women with babies had a hard life everywhere.

The runners sent from Kamarie's family must have expressed themselves clearly to Brother George. The family wanted compensation,

and there was no way around it. So Brother George artfully directed all his Christian enthusiasm and love for James and Kamarie to support a traditional Makiran wedding and official Makiran bride price. A Christian wedding just wouldn't work in the compensation system of Makira.

Families expected bride price, which consisted of long, decorative strings of rare, hand-drilled, sanded-shell beads. The deep-sea shells were harvested by specialty divers. The rarest red shells had the highest value. Sometimes people gave pigs and chickens in addition. In Makira, the bride price compensated the family of the bride for the emotional and physical loss of a productive daughter. It was part of the compensation system—a Makiran form of social control. Any social misstep in Makira had a fee associated with it. If it wasn't paid, the person who had committed it could expect the offended party's brothers or uncles to beat them up.

We traveled to her village for the wedding when Kamarie was five months pregnant. We went by boat at dawn, when the air was cool and thick, the humidity so high that it condensed on my cold arms. It was the time of day when most of the obnoxious birds and bugs still slumbered. The ocean lay unusually quiet, gently lapping the shore, as if it had forgotten how to roar and pummel.

Our "wedding party" consisted of Larry, Brother George, James, his maternal uncle and me in a metal dinghy with a 45-horsepower engine (the only means of motorized transport). What I didn't know then was that we were on a journey that would end in cultural collision (even now, ten years later, I can't completely understand the subtleties of Makiran culture). But while I rode in the boat that morning, I didn't know what was ahead and didn't concern myself with the inevitable misperceptions I was soon to fall into. The salty, clear water felt warmer than the air. I liked to drag my hand in this warm, pristine sea and watch the rocky bottom pass below when we traveled. The land was so densely covered in vegetation that the mist had to sit on top like whipped topping. Thick buttons of green poked out under the white vapor. It looked like land before time.

An hour later, we pulled the canoe ashore in a lagoon surrounded by black sand and leaning rain trees. A six-inch trailhead leading straight up into jungle indicated the beginning of our hike. The canopy of jungle surrounded us in noise. The million bugs bawled, *wazz-a-wazz*, with such magnitude that the combined force made my ears ring. The sound pulsed and intermingled with the pounding of my own heart as I trekked up the steep hill. Frogs trilled at the top of their amphibian lungs. Birds didn't sing in the jungle; they squawked and screamed.

Wide green leaves covered the ground under the impossibly large, old rain trees. The jungle breathed; it had existed forever. It seemed happy to swallow me whole.

Kamarie had told me she was a bush *gele*, which meant that her village was not on the coast. What I hadn't realized was that she was a bush woman from one of the villages "on top." These were old traditional villages where people had lived before the British edict that required them to move to the coast and pay taxes. This village had never moved to the coast. They'd lived there since the old cannibal days. It was a good spot: hilltop villages could spot invaders, they didn't have malaria and they could communicate via drummed messages that bounced over the jungle canopy. I had not yet seen a "real" village; expectant, I trotted barefoot up the three-mile trail to the village.

We were in good spirits. Truthfully, Larry and I were overwhelmed with the honor of being invited to a traditional wedding. I still had questions, though. I still didn't know why Helene had been so mad about Kamarie wanting to "out" her baby. I'd never asked. And I'd never found the opportunity to ask Kamarie if she loved James. And I wasn't sure what I was doing with a group of men. I didn't know if I was invited because James had invited Larry or because Brother had invited Larry or because Kamarie had invited me. Later, Larry would insist it was because I was the only white woman on the island; but Kamarie would tell me that *she'd* wanted me to come.

James, his uncle and Brother cheerfully spoke about their bride price. They thought the traditional offering they'd brought was generous for a bride in Makira. Brother George proudly carried the ten strands of rare shells—eight feet in all—in a plastic bag. The cost of these shells equalled a year or more in wages (\$200-\$500 U.S. dollars). We'd also brought a hundred dollars in cash, enough for a few pigs and some chickens. I carried fifty dollars, a water bottle and my machete.

At the top of the volcanic hillside I gawked at the village and its immediate evidence of a cannibalistic past. It was surrounded by a fifteen-foot trench with sharpened spears at the bottom. Although many had fallen down, some still stuck up. Beyond the trench stood a small complex of bush houses. To get there I had to walk across a board positioned over the trench. If I'd tripped, I would have been impaled by one of those sticks.

I knew that the Solomon Islands were home to the famous head-hunters of lore. Even though the Makirans didn't have a head-hunting tradition like the other islands, they were admitted cannibals. I'd heard outrageous stories, but this was the first physical evidence I'd seen of their truth. The British had declared cannibalism illegal in the nineteenth

century, but *olos* (village elders) still claimed to have feasted on human flesh during special occasions.

Other than the menacing sticks in the trench, this vintage village was well maintained and friendly. The bush house we were deposited in differed from the coastal houses at the center. Its sago-palm-leaf-thatched roof reached all the way to the ground. The thickness of the roof suggested permanence. The floor was compacted dirt, the house long and narrow. Woven palm mats covered betel-nut beds suspended above the ground. The only light came through the doorless doorway.

Kamarie's family wouldn't come through that slit of light until dusk, and we didn't know the whereabouts of Brother, James and his uncle. If we didn't exactly enjoy sitting together in the dark room alone for hours with nothing to look at or read, we got used to it.

"When do you think this thing will start?" Larry asked. We had adopted the leisurely pace of Makiran conversation. We did not answer each other quickly or make eye contact. In Makira, speakers look around as they talk, checking listeners periodically for reactions. At that point the listener looks away to avoid eye contact. Melanesians usually looked at each other's toes when they talked. Even Larry and I looked at our toes. There was also an almost unbearably long pause between responses. When I'd first arrived, the pause seemed so long that I always assumed I had misspoken and repeated what I said.

This was, of course, my first custom wedding in the bushes of Makira, and I had no answer to Larry's question. "Who knows?" I said.

Pause.

"Maybe I should go see if I can help the women cook," I said getting up.

Pause.

"Maybe I'll go see what the women are doing," I said again, figuring I could get the scoop in the kitchen.

"God, Rach, give yourself a break."

A break from what? I wondered. Sitting in this dark hut like an idiot? I didn't reply to Larry. He had hurt my feelings; I thought perhaps I shouldn't have wanted to peel potatoes in a smoky kitchen. But the subtle pause between responses had become so ingrained that Larry didn't realize I was pouting. Eventually he said, "That trench reminded me of a Hollywood movie set."

"What's a movie?" I asked. And we laughed at ourselves: exotic spectators at a mysterious event.

After a while people streamed into the house, startling at our presence. Many had probably never seen Caucasians. (I had met a good number of babies and toddlers who had been terrified at my appearance.)

The guests smelled of earth, wood smoke, and coconut sweat; they spoke only local language. Many of them wore just a single bolt of fabric tied around their waists. The original fabric colors had faded into brown, stained by the omnipresent mud of the jungle. They were all women, older and mostly topless. They looked exactly like the Papua, New Guinea, women I had gawked at in the *National Geographic Magazine* as a kid. The oldest women were toothless from years of chewing betel nut. Some had shells between their nostrils that perked up their noses. Others wore bones in large holes in their ears.

Each person who entered looked at us and laughed uproariously, while heaving giant bunches of betel nuts off their shoulders. These betel-nut branches, for the “reception,” were green, fleshy nuts that intoxicate when combined with special leaves and lime ground from baked sea-shells. Makirans say, “*Tamu Tamu Tari maki koro koro veh*” (“Chewing the nut/leaf/lime every time is sweet sweet too much”).

Thirty or forty betel drunks crammed together in the small, dark space at the other end of the house. They chewed the nut for over an hour. Our party of five continued our marathon sitting on the other side of the house. We didn’t chew; I could never enjoy a drug that tasted like battery-acid-soaked cotton balls. When Kamarie came in, she sat alone in the middle of the room on a stool set against the wall. At the time, I didn’t wonder what they were doing—why there were only women at the custom wedding—because I was focused again on the question of why I had been invited.

The crowd of people enjoying themselves in another language in a dark room, lit by a single kerosene lantern, intimidated me. But I also anticipated a celebration—a happy occasion. My expectations seemed about to be met when, finally, Kamarie’s maternal uncle asked, “Why are you here?” and Brother George stood up and thanked Kamarie and her family for inviting us to their village. He spoke for a long time in his formal, broken English about what a great guy James was, and said that he was an assistant principal, and that he, Brother George, loved him like a son. He said that he didn’t know Kamarie as well, but loved her like a daughter. He was very happy to tell Kamarie’s family that they should be proud. He was here to tell them that Kamarie and James loved each other, and that their love was sacred under God.

George’s speech was very nice; it was very *Western*. But the mood changed on the other side of the room. The outlines of faces, indistinct in the darkness, had stopped laughing. I knew they didn’t know any more about our customs than we knew about theirs. Words in Kahua flew about the room. Women spoke in harsh tones and argued extensively, repeating the word *hagatara* (money). I had no clue what the conflict

was; they spoke too fast. It was even too dark to read their body language. I looked over to check Larry's reaction. He smiled into the darkness. "Isn't this great?" he said.

In the midst of these confusing negotiations Brother George (in a Western hurry, it seemed to me) stood up to present the bride price. He tied the strand of shell money to the roof rafter and began attaching the \$350, rolled up and tied by a ribbon, to the strand. He chuckled like Santa handing out presents to happy children. James smiled too; he had already explained his generosity. He told us Kamarie was lucky to score herself a man from Guadalcanal. Larry added our \$50 to the strand.

According to the coastal people we had asked, people didn't even give custom money anymore. The men who lived near the training center told Brother George that they would only expect ten dollars for their daughters. But perhaps Brother George had asked the wrong people. Or perhaps he asked the right people and got the wrong answers. He'd been in Makira only a year longer than Larry and I. He'd spent most of the last two decades in Guadalcanal, a region of the Solomons accustomed to Western practices. It seems to me now that it would have made a spectacular lie: send a group of foreigners up to a traditional village, where they still tattoo their daughters' faces, with ten bucks! The imagined consequences alone would be funny for generations. And we had fallen for the lie because we had no way of knowing otherwise. We were trying to behave appropriately—perhaps err on the generous side.

Why would they lie to us about something like this, you ask? Why wouldn't they? *Hagaparu!*

Kamarie's family greeted our offered bride price in silence. After an uncomfortable few hushed minutes, the women returned to their rowdy discussion, which continued for over an hour. The women talked *fast*, the way women talked in the kitchen. But now they sounded demanding; this was the real deal, and I was right in the middle.

After a long time, a woman prodded Uncle, who stood up and said, "Although the family is happy with the string of custom money, they still would like \$1,550 in cash."

We were astounded. Something had gone wrong. My ears buzzed, and my mind busied itself with elementary math skills.

I asked Larry, "Why \$1,950?"

"I think they added wrong."

Kamarie's uncle quickly corrected himself; he wanted \$1,600. So this was a bartering negotiation, and we had already hung our whole wad on the rafter.

In retrospect, I see a foreign groom party connected to a school run for boys. Our “clan” owned a boat, a tractor, a store with rice and petrol, a generator, and imported teachers. We were wealthy—and white. But then I didn’t think about it that way, I had stopped viewing myself as white. I had been so completely isolated from my own culture for so long, I failed to identify myself as a Westerner.

When Brother, James and his uncle had a conference I figured they were calculating their next move. But James had his own rules, and he dropped out of the groom discussion. He moaned and wrung his hands. Brother George stood, watching him, with his arms crossed tightly across his chest. He didn’t know what to do. Uncle stood next to James and watched the other side of the room. Kamarie sat on her stool and studied the floor.

Brother called Larry over and spoke to him in hurried whispers, gesticulating—in a room full of people who *never* gesticulated. Larry glanced toward me while they talked. I sat still on the mat, feeling stupid. The men would make decisions without me; but I wanted to *act*. Should I speak up? Stay silent? Offer more money? Run?

Finally Larry came back and said, “James is pissed. He wants to run away. Brother George is trying to talk him out of it.”

“He can’t leave. What about Kamarie?” I said. “Did you tell them we could give more money?”

“Of course,” he said, “But James is offended. They didn’t accept his bride price. He’s ready to run.”

We shook our heads sadly, trying to smile despite the tension in the room. It struck us both that this was a Makiran version of a shotgun wedding, with a staged groom getaway.

Just then, James stomped his foot, stood up and spoke for himself—a real no-no. “If you don’t want what I gave, I’m leaving without your daughter!” he proclaimed.

I winced. Solomon Islanders *do not* talk so loudly, directly, or seriously. They certainly don’t stomp their foot. Marriage was an agreement between families; the first-person pronoun had no place.

After James’s outburst, Kamarie’s family sat in silence, the matrons puffing on pipes, spitting betel juice. I could not help but wonder if her brothers waited outside with machetes. The women could pick up their own ubiquitous bush knives and slice us to bits. I feared James would snatch up the bride price; he had a nasty temper. He’d fling the entire heavy string of shells over his shoulder and stomp out into the black, thick night. And then what? I thought of oblivious foreigners I’d read about in *Newsweek*, caught in the center of some tribal conflict. Here I sat, just as stupid, just as vulnerable.

Puff, puff, spit, spit. My stomach cramped. Bile rose into my throat. James sat down and bent over with his face in his hands. Kamarie left the room. Larry had another conference with Brother George.

"If you don't have the \$650 now, you can always send it later," the uncle said, while Larry talked to Brother George.

Then James stood to join the group in their conversation. Larry's mouth sagged at a crooked angle while James spoke. My husband looked sick.

"James said he's leaving tonight," Larry said when he returned. "He said he *thinks* we would be safe sleeping here until morning."

"He *thinks* we'll be safe? He's going to ditch us? Leave us here and hope for benevolence?" I didn't wait for Larry to answer. "What if we don't want to stay? What then? Dash away across the headhunter trench? Sleep in a rain tree until dawn?"

"Geeze, Rach, it's not that bad," he said.

"Yes it is," I said, and Larry held my hand in the darkness. His palms were sweaty; he'd felt what I said.

Kamarie's uncle interrupted our panic attack. He told us a long, long story about how love is more important than money. But he also spoke firm words to James, telling him that Kamarie had a lot of land, a strong family line and a child of her line in her womb.

While he talked, I thought about James. How he had measured himself by different standards. He'd learned the Catholic ways.

Kamarie's uncle finished with, "... only fifty more dollars ..."

And Brother George took advantage of this opened door to boom, "*Ve vill give jou not only fifyd doolars, but one hundred and fifyd doolars. Heh-ho-heh-heh.*"

The family hooted and cheered—an explosion. This sudden joy startled and puzzled me as much as it relieved my fears. Everyone hopped up and down, shaking hands with me, Brother, Larry, James and Uncle. Then they skipped over to see the bride price close up. We had tea, we laughed and ate cold sweet potatoes.

After finishing her cold potato, Kamarie told me she was pleased with the negotiations. I studied her face and wondered if she was truly happy. We squatted together over the leaves on the floor, and I didn't tell her that James had been ready to bolt, or what I thought of him.

That night, while I lay in my clothes on the coverless, pillowless palm mat in a room full of snoring Makiran women, I kept thinking, why so much money? It just didn't fit with my preconceived notions.

It depended on who I asked, and to this day I'm not certain. Brother George thought they wanted to buy a new outboard motor for their

canoe. Larry said we were rich white men, so why not ask for a huge wad of cash. James just shook his head and laughed queerly.

I wanted to believe Kamarie that it was a normal negotiation. But how could it be? It was anything but normal. True, only her line (mother, mother's sisters and their daughters) attended; her mom played the crucial role in the negotiations, giving the ultimate yes or no on the "price." Kamarie said that her family had demanded such a high bride price because of the pregnancy. The village lost two people instead of one, in a village where babies are beneficial; it's a place without "bastards." Clearly, they didn't share our patriarchal assumptions; they had no cultural dictate that said a baby could be legitimized only by having a father.

What remains now is how much I had wrong; I'm probably still wrong. Everything I thought I knew, I didn't. Why was I invited? At the time, I thought I was invited for the same reasons anyone gets invited to a wedding in America. But what happened next still makes me wonder.

The story of Kamarie and James didn't proceed directly to happily-ever-after. Two months later, after the newlyweds moved into the house next door and the baby grew big enough to push Kamarie's belly button out, there was trouble. Trouble in Makira usually involved complicated issues of social taboo; it meant *the brothers were coming*. It meant compensation would be demanded. It meant rumor had reached fraternal ears; someone had stepped out of line. It would entail action, more negotiations; depending on the deed it might cost a pig or two or . . .

The day Kamarie came to tell me about the trouble, she had been sitting behind me unobserved while I started my fire in my kitchen earth oven. She'd arrived silently with no customary "who-ee-oo" announcement. So she startled me when I found her, sitting quietly on a stool. She didn't smile at my greeting. Instead, she stood up. The baby poked straight out from her torso the way babies poke out of small mommies. Her face was flushed, beautiful in the pink afternoon glow. I felt her tension. She was a beacon of misery.

"Trouble, Karecello, something has happened," she said finally. I asked if her labor had started early or if someone had been injured. But no, it was something else.

"My brothers are coming. They're bringing the bride price," she said, and then she wept bitter tears onto my shoulder. James had been involved in an adulterous relationship with a village girl. The brothers were prepared to fling the long string of shells at James's feet—an act that would formally and shamefully end their brief union.

I hugged her that day, as her friend—someone she'd come to for comfort. But it occurs to me now—and the horror runs deep—that perhaps her tears were for me, for my complicity—the only woman who “stood up” for James.



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"We remain reasonably confident that once we nail down the little network problem we're having, all Hell will be able to break loose according to the modified schedule, which, unfortunately, is in a file we can't seem to locate right now."



"The economy's bound to turn around, Bill. Never underestimate the American consumer's totally irresistible compulsion to spend money they don't have on absurd junk they'll never need!"