

TONY BÁEZ MILÁN

w r i t e r • f i l m m a k e r

'shrooms

by

Tony Báez Milán

The incensed television sets were miles off, the front pages of the newspapers fluttered restlessly in street vendor kiosks, and the frenetic radio waves fell short. Half a world away they bickered and battered each other with their rhetoric and vileness, but here, in the meadow that was peaceful even as it teemed with the new life of a simmering spring, the calm made her forget all about it.

Her daughter wandered off, trying to start another game of hide-and-seek. Three and a half years old. Already that was her favorite activity, as it had been with her, seemingly so long ago. Thinking about it now, looking at her own hands, sun-baked but smooth and firm, being twenty-five years old was not really all that bad.

Her husband, hard-working man, was away again. She always took the opportunity to come out and play. She

would see him to the door, hand him his lunch, wave to him. As soon as the car disappeared around the bend she grabbed her little girl and off they would go—down the road to the park, to the lake to watch tiny fish come up for the bread crumbs bobbing on the surface, to the top of a hill somewhere, to sit until the sun came down from its perch and they could see the stars blink on one by one in the clear skies at dusk.

This morning, despite the turmoil in the rest of the far-off world, her husband had risen early and without saying much, for I love you's were hard to come forth from his mouth, lunch in hand, had gone out the door without touching her and without turning to wave back. She thought about the park, the lake, thought about the hardened bread in the breadbox, a hill somewhere. She thought about the road. The other car collected dust in the driveway... The watchful neighbor, who had sometime tattled to her husband about her taking that car; spitefully she looked in the direction of the house with the man with the big mouth inside of it. She looked at the little girl who was her spitting image, blond hair and fair features and tiny perky nose, large and bright and alerted eyes. She thought about the camera but immediately desisted; too many times she had dressed her up and undressed her and posed her and taken

picture after picture, which she kept in a cedar chest in the attic, for the future, for posterity, to think back and remember the time when they had both been young and beautiful and inseparable, or to embarrass her child when boyfriends came around, or to bring her back to earth when she thought too much of herself and too little of her, as daughters often do when they become taller and more beautiful and better educated than their mothers, or to return the youthful smile to her daughter's face if she turned out like her husband, if she grew morose with the years.

Somewhere there was that hill. The lake waited, its surface unbroken. The car. Next to the car was the old tractor and she thought of dressing down to a bikini and mowing the lawn as the day began to steam, but decided she was not in the mood for the passersby nor for the growing boys on their bicycles, come to gawk at the wondrous mermaid this far away from the sea. A streak of fresh sweat ran down her chest and she felt it make its way between her breasts and she pressed down on her blouse to absorb the sweat. With her long and perfectly manicured index finger she wiped the moisture from her brow and thought of being cooled off, of the breeziest place she knew, of the most peaceful place around, away from the

snooping neighbor and everything else going wrong in the world, and so again she thought of the car, for the meadow was a good drive from them, and she looked at the little girl looking at her, with the tiny face shaping up like hers, with a smile on her face that looked, at least for now, like her own, without a care in the world, and said "Sure, what the hell, little girl, off we go!"

And the countryside was worth it. No throngs of protesters. No doomsayers here. The ride was placid, bumpless, and the meadow waited for them untouched and quiet and endless...

She finally found the little girl hiding behind a tree, grabbed her by the waist, startling her, and they fell down laughing. The grass was soft and warm, it smelled green, and the soil was aromatic. They saw the clouds roll by. The clouds were full and white.

"Exploring," said the little girl.

"Sure, go, explore!" She saw her daughter skipping up a hill, then down, then up again, and was happy. She looked back, behind her. It was as if she could see the rest of the world from here, as if, for that while, the rest of the world were comprised by the meadow and the two of them. As far as she could see, the wide-open world.

Her girl pulled at her blouse and she turned to see that she held a silver locust in her hand.

"Ocust," said the girl.

"Lo-cust," said the mother.

"Lo-cust," said the girl.

"That's right," said the mother. "Let it go."

And so the girl did, and she turned around and went exploring some more. From afar she said, "Blue jay!" and pointed in one direction, and then "Cardinal!" and pointed in the other. She stopped to pick blackberries. She shared them with her mother. From a mound of warm dirt, a bullfrog croaked at them. Close by, there was a long and wide patch of trees. Nestled in there was a stream of crystalline water. They had been to it before.

"Water!" said the girl.

"Yes!" said her mother. "Go! Let's go!"

They went into the trees and found the stream, and the little girl walked across the water with her shoes still on.

"You got your tenners all wet!" exclaimed the mother, enthusiastically, lovingly, and for a while they chased each other through the woods. They were as fairies.

"Race you back to the car!" said the mother at last, gave the girl some advantage, and then started after her.

The girl ran through the stream, out again into the clear of the meadow, from where her mother heard her yell:

“'shrooms!”

Again, a giggle-scream. “'shrooms!”

Her mother caught up with her, looking down at the ground, searching, as the frenzied tree-bound locusts sounded off.

“Mushrooms?! You found some mushrooms? Where are they? I don't see any!”

“'shrooms, 'shrooms!” said the little girl excitedly, pointing with her short and bony index finger into the distance.

Her mother looked up at the world. Still far away, sprouting across the horizon, inaudible, innumerable, the giant mushroom clouds looked small.

The young woman and the little girl stared.

They held hands.