

# Until Brazil

By : **betheleemoulton**

She had the perfect husband, the perfect career --- the perfect life...UNTIL BRAZIL. A woman MBA in a stalled career, a troubled Brazilian company, and a fledgling consulting team far from Boston headquarters inhabit this compelling tale of cultural contrasts, business intrigue, and personal transformation. Those who join protagonist Beth Bartlett as she yoyos between Boston and Brazil will share the inner conflicts that challenge hidden assumptions and cause her to question the meaning of the good life. A fast-paced plot carries readers from roadside slums to smoke-filled boardrooms, from Boston Ballet to bossa nova, from Rolex-clad haves to barefoot have-nots. Along the way, Ivy League consultants, demanding shareholders, baffling Brazilians, and a street-smart Argentine reveal an insider's view of international business and strategy formulation. Then, amidst this journey of self-discovery, a surprising love story unfolds. As her two worlds collide, Beth's strategic choices reshape her client and her career, her love and her life. Beth's transformation and its costs echo the personal drama faced when one ventures far from home in search of opportunity or growth, making this story as timely and relevant as it is entertaining.



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## *Until Brazil*

*By Bethe Lee Moulton*

### Chapter 1

## Resistance

“Brazil?” Sue blurted out. “Why on earth would they send *you* to Brazil? You don’t speak a word of Spanish!”

“Brazilians speak Portuguese.” My quick comeback was a defense against Sue’s disapproval. I focused on the pie dough I was rolling out on her dark-green granite countertop. In truth, I had been just as ignorant a few days before.

“Well, whatever they speak, you don’t.” Thin, even apple slices plopped onto the cutting board where Sue wielded her German-made Henckels professional slicing knife. “Who else is going from the Boston office?” She wanted details.

“One of the Partners, Bob White, will direct the project.”

“Bob White. Isn’t his wife about to have their first child?” Her memory was too good.

“Yes, next month,” I said, trying to sound nonplussed. “He’ll come down after his baby is born.”

The knife stopped its rhythmic beat and clattered onto the granite. Sue put her hands on her hips. “In other words, you’re going alone. They’re sending you alone to a country where they don’t speak English . . . and you are supposed to develop a corporate strategy.” The crow’s feet deepened in Sue’s face. “You may have a Harvard MBA, Beth, but this is not smart. GCC is crazy and you are, too.”

To avoid her bossy blue stare, I kept rolling the already thin crust. Sue might be right, but I didn’t want to question my decision. Surely Harvey knew what he was doing.

## Until Brazil

A few days earlier, the smell of pipe tobacco had announced his presence at my office door. Despite being the highly respected founder of Global Consulting Center (GCC), Harvey Osborne had never traded faculty garb for the consultant's suit and tie. He crumpled into the armchair across from my desk, adding a few more wrinkles to his British tweed jacket. Its salt-and-pepper weave matched the bristly eyebrows that overarched his thoughtful eyes. Still a business school professor at heart, Harvey often dropped by to expound on his client's management challenges.

I shifted my attention from number-strewn papers to the man who had recruited me a decade ago. I set down my gold Cross pen, the firm's gift on my recent tenth anniversary. I fluffed the paisley silk scarf that adorned my navy suit. I was ready for an academic discourse, but Harvey had a different agenda and wasted no time in laying it on the table.

"Samuel Cohen, head of GCC-Brazil, has made a proposal to a very large Brazilian company. The country's economy has been in turmoil, with inflation over two hundred percent per year. However, new economic measures are being taken to get things under control. Sam's client, a drug company named BomFarm, needs a strategy for the new scenario. They'll accept his proposal if the team includes consultants who understand how to make money in a stable economy. Bob White has just the expertise they need; he'll be the Partner-in-Charge. We'd like you to get things rolling and cover the project in the field until Bob can get down to Brazil."

Both pride and panic swept over me. I had never worked outside of the United States. My textbook knowledge of macroeconomics was rusty and my experience with drugs was an occasional aspirin.

"Why me?" The question popped out and ambushed the cool confidence I should have shown.

Harvey got up and walked to the plaque on my wall. "That's why," he said, tapping the Insight Award that read: "Beth Ann Bartlett, Provider of Insights, Intellectual Depth, and Integrity for the Success of GCC's Clients."

"Those are the qualities we need on this job." Warmth rose in my cheeks as Harvey circled back to face me. "I want GCC to be a worldwide consulting force. Beth, with experience in Brazil, you'll be part of our international growth. You could be our first woman Partner."

Harvey beamed. I blushed. "Thanks for your confidence, but . . ."

"No *but*s, young lady," Harvey admonished with a shake of his index finger as he headed for the door. "This train is leaving the station. BomFarm wants to get started immediately. I knew I could count on you. I'll let Sam know you're on the team." Harvey was telling me, not asking me, to manage the project. Still, being railroaded left me flattered instead of furious. Brazil could be just the break I needed.

When I joined GCC in 1976, I was in demand as a junior consultant. One of three women in the firm, I had worked extra hard to outperform my male counterparts. My rapid rise from Associate to Senior Associate was based on my merits, not because I was a woman in a man's world.

Or so I thought, until my career stalled. After receiving the Insight Award two years ago, I hit a glass ceiling. My reputation as a great Project Manager became an obstacle. I felt pigeonholed as a project mechanic, without opportunities to be the trusted advisor to the top executives who hired GCC.

Now, Harvey was giving me a chance to prove myself; being in charge at the start of the project would establish my credibility without being in Bob's shadow. As if he had read my mind, Bob barged into my office, armed with his monogrammed leather briefcase. "So, I hear you're going to take on the

## Until Brazil

machos," he quipped. "Just kidding," he said before I could counter. "Don't worry, you'll be fine. Just get the project off the ground and keep things running until I can take the reins. As soon as Junior shows up, I'll head down there. I'm off to Parker Medical; we'll talk more tomorrow." Full of self-importance, he was out the door, leaving a pile of doubt behind.

Like Harvey, Bob thought I should keep a finger in the dike until the Partner came to the rescue. Maybe this wasn't such a great opportunity after all. Harvey had said I was the right one for this job, but maybe I was the only Project Manager who was gullible enough to accept the assignment. Harvey had said that going to Brazil was a good career move, but maybe he just wanted to fill a staffing gap. Was this a trampoline or a trap? My doubts were irrelevant; failing to object meant the assignment was mine. It was a done deal.

George, my husband, was furious. "You've got to be kidding," was his first reaction. "Do you really want to work in a dictatorship? In a place where men beat women with impunity? A place where human rights are non-existent?"

"Hold on. Take it easy," I tried to appease him. George respected facts, so I cited the information I had dug up that afternoon. "Brazil is in transition. After being a military government for two decades, it is now a republic with a civilian president. In fact, my assignment is precisely to help an important company succeed in the resulting economic conditions." I tried to paint a positive picture of Brazil's inflation and turmoil of the mid-80s.

George wasn't convinced. "South America has a lousy reputation. Why would you waste time in such a place? Just tell GCC you won't go."

To counter his protests, I couched Brazil as a step toward promotion. George understood ambition; honors at medical school had landed him a choice job at Massachusetts General Hospital. His aspirations extended to me. He had pushed me to apply to the Harvard Business School and was proud of my position with a prestigious firm. Whenever I asked about starting a family, George asserted that raising children would be a waste of education and talent. While I knew I could be a good mother, George would not be an enthusiastic father. After numerous attempts to change his mind, I had resigned myself to being childless. At first, success at work had been a balm for sadness, but with a stagnant career, a nagging void had grown. I needed more advancement to ease the pain.

"Look, George, my career is going nowhere. I need to do something to stand out from the pack. This could be my big chance."

"Isn't there another place you could prove yourself? Like Europe? GCC has offices in London and Paris."

"Right now, the opportunity is in Brazil. If I can make this work, all kinds of doors will open." Then I surprised myself. "Besides, I want to go. I know nothing about Brazil . . . I've never been outside of the United States!"

"Well, if you want to go, I can't stop you . . . but I think you'll regret this." George walked away. The conversation was over.

Our uneasy truce was preserved through deliberate silence, but George was mad and now Sue had joined his ranks. I could cope with my husband's anger, but not my sister's disapproval. She saw the tears of uncertainty well into my eyes. Baking a pie was no longer sufficient cover.

## Until Brazil

Sue wiped her hands on her apron and touched my sleeve. "I'm sorry if I was too harsh. I just think you're taking a huge professional risk. It seems like GCC is setting you up to fail; I don't want you to get hurt. And I don't like the idea of your being so far from home." Sue had grown protective during the past five years, since we had lost our father to a heart attack and our mother to cancer. As our family shrank, our sisterly bonds tightened.

I let the rolling pin rest and laid my hand over Sue's. I needed to talk. Turning to face her with forced composure, I admitted my fears for the first time. "Maybe I am a little crazy." I managed a weak smile. "Sometimes I ask myself, can I be credible in a country where I don't know the language or the culture? Harvey seems to think so." Sue knew I admired GCC's founder. "He's always been my champion and now he's giving me a unique opportunity." My lip started to tremble. I still questioned Harvey's motives, but didn't want Sue to worry.

"Take a deep breath," Sue insisted in her motherly way. So I did and regained control. "That's better." Sue pulled away but kept her eyes locked on my face. She could read me like a book.

"Sue, it's a little risky; for the project launch I'll be on my own in a foreign country, without the backup of a Partner. It's a real stretch for me and things could go wrong, but I have to give it a shot." I wanted to convince her (and myself) that I was doing the right thing. "I don't want to be left behind. Here's my chance to prove that I can be a strong international consultant. Yes, I'm a little scared, but I can do this."

Sue gave my arm a squeeze and turned back to the pie. With ease, she fitted the crust into the waiting Pyrex dish, layered the apples with cinnamon sugar and butter. I watched her crimp the two crusts together with precision and then add her trademark slits to vent the steam. The pie she slid into the oven would emerge fit for a photo in *Gourmet* magazine. Closing the oven door, she reached to set the timer and then turned all her attention to me. "Don't expect to accomplish anything in Brazil." She was firm. "Go to learn. Go for the adventure. Do the best you can, but don't be too tough on yourself if things don't work out."

Bethe Lee Moulton brings a unique perspective to her writing, grounded in strong family roots and inspired by global experience. Her characters confront choices and dilemmas, stemming from expanded horizons. An international strategist, Bethe divides her time between Boston, Buenos Aires, and Boca Raton, to be with her far-flung friends and family, spanning four generations, multiple cultures, and diverse worldviews. Learn more at [www.untilbrazil.com](http://www.untilbrazil.com).

Until Brazil

Until Brazil

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