

Divorcee's hits, misses and laughs running an island beach bar

Even the Bushes Talk

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EVEN THE BUSHES TALK

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Dedication

To my husband Bob, who did not live to see this book in print but would be bursting with pride that it was completed.

Chapter Four

“So Captain, tell us what movies are playing over there,” prompted Addie, who ran the little branch library in Grove Point.

It was late afternoon, and Captain was holding court at the roundtable, which was slowly filling up as the regulars finished work and drifted in for happy hour on the beach. The exclusive table was situated close to the bar and right by the railing. Fishnets and other marine paraphernalia adorned the walls and ceiling; white sand spread a blanket just the other side of the railing; and the azure waters played their soft song a few feet away.

Whatever was happening up or down the beach, inside or outside the bar, was visible from this spot. Today was particularly lively because Captain had made a run over to nearby St. George for marine supplies, and doings on the ‘big island’ were always of great interest to Sighers.

St. George was the capital for this group of Caribbean islands. Life there was much more modern than on tiny St. Si. There was a lot of jealousy over the big island having first choice and St. Simon getting what was left, but no Sigher ever acknowledged a desire to live anyplace other than his own special little piece of paradise.

Captain duly reported on his trip to his eager listeners, and doled out packages which he had purchased at their request. Addie got her favorite perfume, not available here. Ginger, an expatriate real estate agent, had wrapped written instructions around her \$50 bill, to make sure the Captain brought back the right French night cream and lotion—although why anybody needed fancy French creams on St. Si was beyond Liz’s imagination.

A few of the men wanted machine parts and tools, while Winston and Liz made cooing noises over the variety of cheeses they had ordered, a specialty of St. George island.

EVEN THE BUSHES TALK

As Teddy, her young genial bartender, handled everyone's drink orders with his usual dexterity, Liz couldn't help smile at Captain, a ruddy, lovable character in spite of all his bad habits. She pictured him in his worn docksiders and far-from-immaculate Greek fisherman's cap, approaching the perfume and cosmetic counters in those ultra chic duty-free shops on Bay Street, elbowing cruise ship passengers out of the way. The snobby clerks must have had to rethink their imagery after everything was bought and paid for in cold cash, while the Captain executed his hidden gentility with a flourish. He really got a kick out of "boondoggling those highbrows," as he phrased it.

"Sometimes I wonder about Captain," Liz thought. But if you wanted to get along with everybody in the islands, there was an unwritten law: don't ask too many questions.

That same tacit advice applied to the islanders' logic: deep religious beliefs, contradicted by their cavalier attitude toward sex. Or their passionate views on the merits of some politicians over others, the worthiness of a particular candidate, the ways government should change—when they themselves didn't bother to vote.

When visitors or newcomers to *The Sundowner* wondered how such a mixed population got along so well on St. Simon, the staff just pointed to a bumper sticker Liz had posted over the bar. It said very plainly: "Live and Let Live," to which someone had added in block letters "but be there if needed."

Bar stools were filling up, the roundtable had now been expanded to about five chairs too many for its size, and Kim relieved Teddy of table duty. This lithe, pretty neighborhood girl from Momma Lou's 'yard' maneuvered deftly between out-of-place furniture with trays of drinks raised above the traffic, never spilling a drop. She was a wonder, that girl, and once again Liz gave thanks for her miracle staff.

However, one look around told her that Boysie was needed for bussing, and she quietly made her way to the back service area where her new student was sequestered.

When Boysie arrived for duty after their pact was made, Liz was ready for him. She had moved a few boxes around in a storage closet, found a

ELEANOR M. WILSON

serviceable table and chair to put under the high window, and deposited the books she collected from the library in Grove Point. That bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling wasn't really adequate. She'd scrounge up a lamp from somewhere, and a cork board with some letters and pictures. But for now, this was a start.

To her relief, Boysie actually was ready to improve his reading skills, and quickly ducked into the closet to follow his new teacher's instructions. The 'teacher' silently hoped he wasn't acquiescing so easily because she also happened to be his boss.

She timed her library visit while Addie was at lunch, so she wouldn't compromise Boysie's secret agreement. Luckily, her browsing had produced an adult education reader that began in the form of the old reliable word-and-picture cards. These were cleverly arranged with more mature subjects than the first grade variety she remembered.

St. Si's library was sponsored by a large U. S. pharmaceutical company that had established a branch plant here. True to their promise of community support...and Addie's prompting...they were diligent in keeping the library shelves well-stocked with source material for all types of training. They also held special classes in skills required for employment at their place of business.

The cards Liz selected for this first lesson pertained to boats and the sea. She wanted Boysie to be sparked right away to learn, and the subject in which he was most interested should have the desired effect. The best way to handle this ticklish situation, Liz reasoned, was to give the boy a few days alone with these materials before she checked just how good—or bad—his reading skills actually were. The last thing she wanted to do was embarrass him, or treat him in anything but an equal manner, so no questions were asked as to how he was doing.

By the time she got back out to the bar, discussion at the roundtable had gone into high gear, and of course, it centered on the new resort.

Ginger held forth on her platform by stating, "Real estate values would increase significantly for the homeowners in this area, and a building boom would take place to house workers and staff."

EVEN THE BUSHES TALK

She reasoned that anyone who owned raw land (which on this end of the island was still mostly in the hands of local families), would come in for a killing. She was immediately bombarded by those voicing several opposite opinions.

Actually, Ginger had lived on St. Si long enough to realize that employees for business establishments came from all around the 54-square-mile island. There was no such problem as “you can’t get there from here.” True, most islanders did not own cars, but they were used to walking, or bicycling, hitching a ride, or taking a jitney—a combination bus and taxi system which was St. Si’s answer to rapid transit.

Obviously, there would be some new housing for those brought in by the company, but if management obeyed local law, only minimum hiring was allowed to come from ‘off-island,’ the term for any place other than St. Simon.

Comments remained heated on everything from land use to water pollution, to traffic, to nesting turtles, to jobs...and all the usual arguments were exhumed once more. Ginger held her own, outwardly remaining cool and calm. Still, Liz thought this an ideal time to offer trays of the St. George cheese she had asked Winston to dice and mix with slices of fresh coconut. Each day at happy hour, a munchie treat was laid out for her patrons, and today’s was especially enjoyed. It also had the desired effect of cooling down the discussion to a more reasonable level.

Don Harmon’s arrival added to the calmer atmosphere. His Dolphin Watersports Center serviced the Dolphin Hotel further down the beach. The tall tanned divemaster ambled into the open-air room with a big smile on his face and hellos for the entire assemblage.

He was accompanied by Harry, an electrician who usually stopped in after work, dressed in the uniform of his trade...coveralls with his name embroidered over the left pocket.

Ignoring already crowded seating arrangements among the regulars, Ginger made room next to her for the new arrivals. In spite of her aloof manner, she always managed to have some sort of romance going, which she thought was clandestine but usually kept the gossip mill running at full tilt.

ELEANOR M. WILSON

Would her latest conquest be one of these two, Liz wondered? Ginger was opinionated to a fault—more admired and accepted than liked. She lived alone in one of the homes she had purchased over the years whenever a good bargain came along. She didn't really have a close friend, but seemed to be content mingling with her business associates and at the sunset roundtable sessions.

She and Don *would* make a handsome couple, Liz had to admit. Don the fair-haired and tanned physical type one expects to find in his watersports position; Ginger with her perfectly coifed blond tresses and meticulously turned out size-eight body. Happy-go-lucky Don didn't much care about material possessions, but Ginger...an intense type in her late thirties...had a manic desire to 'get ahead.'

With all that drive, why she was content to remain on sleepy St. Si for so many years was one of those mysteries nobody bothered to explore. She believed money was for accumulating things. Whether or not those 'things' were actually necessary to your well being was another story.

"What is it that pulls two people together," Liz wondered? "Chemistry among humans doesn't seem to have any connection with the logical formulas I learned in college."

When it came to business, Ginger and Don were equals. Both knew what they were doing and ran efficient, well-honed enterprises. For that matter, so did Harry...the steady, caring type who was always willing to pitch in for a worthy cause, usually without any publicity about his contribution. He wasn't behind the door when looks were handed out, either...not handsome, but large and comfortable. Could Ginger have set her sights on him?

"Do I really care?" Liz asked herself. "I certainly have more to think about than Ginger's love life." It would all come out soon enough, thanks to those talking bushes.

While Liz was daydreaming, conversation had turned back to Captain's sortie over to St. George, as the group filled the new arrivals in on that exciting adventure and displayed their shopping rewards.

EVEN THE BUSHES TALK

Everything was in good hands at the bar, the restaurant didn't open for dinner until 7 o'clock, and the sun was just beginning its descent. That was Liz's cue to duck into her cottage behind the restaurant, change into a swimsuit, grab her snorkeling gear and head out to the beckoning reef between shore and Little Si. She claimed this time of day for herself, barring any emergencies.

She waded into the warm calm water, navigating the shallows to avoid sea grass where urchins like to hide and feed with other forms of sea life. As she swam in long, smooth strokes, her mind and soul gradually released hundreds of nagging little thoughts and problems that penetrate each day, no matter how well things seem to be going from an outsider's point of view. Who needed expensive massages? This was her therapy, and the warm sea her sauna.

She reached the reef simultaneously with a school of yellow-tail snappers.

"That's quite a sight," she thought, as the setting sun shone through their thin tails. Then she settled in to appreciate her underwater surroundings. Little angel fish and tetras were hovering near the coral indentations, ready to dart inside if anything predatory loomed nearby.

Liz was careful not to move too swiftly or stir up the water, and was rewarded with a veritable parade of colorful tropical marine life, navigating over beautifully formed conch shells, between swaying sea fans and undulating sponges. Everything had color to it—yellows, purples, greens and reds in varying shades gave the corals an inviting glow. The sea was her haven, to immerse her body and mind as long as she wanted...and she never tired of doing just that.

Winston was aware of her evening snorkel habit, as were several of the bar regulars. So it was relatively safe to be out here alone about a half-mile from shore, basking in the sheer beauty of the place.

She took it all in—the warm water creating a cocoon around her, Little Si's welcoming solidness nearby, the marine life going about its business under her, the sun now a deep orange ball casting its glow all across the sky.

ELEANOR M. WILSON

A sloop was silhouetted against that vivid background, its sails billowing in the light breeze as it headed for destinations unknown. She turned toward shore to look at her 'estate' from this angle, and got a shock at the rather shabby look of the place. It really did need an infusion of money to add more appeal.

Her gaze turned toward the empty beachfront acreage next door. Palm trees gave it shelter, reaching for the sky in all directions. What would it look like if those construction plans went through? She tried to picture a big hulk of a building soaring up over the palms, dozens of people on the beach in lounge chairs, as more hordes boarded tenders that ferried back and forth to Little Si. Then she blinked hard and looked at the scene now. How could anyone want to spoil this?

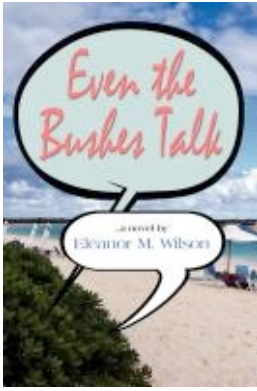
As she turned back toward shore, she heard the tinkling of glass and snippets of voices wafting over the water, and spied Doc settling comfortably in his hammock to smoke his sunset pipe. She surveyed her own valuable piece of shoreline real estate, and forgot all the problems that gnawed at her during the day. That familiar feeling of well-being cuddled her like gentle, loving arms.

She wasn't really a religious person, but believed that some unknown power was responsible for the wonders of nature. She gazed at the sky, and sent up a special thanks to that mysterious being for allowing her to be part of this great world, especially here on St. Si.

Unbidden, the lines of a song—or was it a poem—came to mind. 'Everything changes, nothing remains the same.' She was suddenly sending off another prayerful but rather illogical plea.

"Please let St. Si progress, but don't let it change too much."

With a quick flip, she headed back to the beach, refreshed and ready for whatever the evening might bring.



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