

Sketch

Volume 42, Number 3

1977

Article 19

Silent Cries of the Conch

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Silent Cries of the Conch

by
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Journalism 4

A thousand tiny suns skipped from the surface of the morning sea. Birds from the clustered mangroves sparred with the breeze, a westward wind cutting white tops from waves that ushered the dawn to the shallows and sand of the island. Fishermen, who had been on the ocean long before the breaking of the horizon, pulled hard on the nets, heaving the burden of rope and flashing scales into the boats, the wood of which was as brown as the sweat-streaked skin of the pilots. Adrift against the blue-black sky and white horizon, the crews worked the water.

Sitting up in bed, Willi Franklin watched through the window as the sun sharpened the silhouettes of the fishing boats. His wife was gone from the bed, and he could hear her softly humming in the next room as she prepared breakfast. The smell of eggs blended with the breeze from the window, as Willi moved to the closet and felt again the ache of thirty years of fishing as he pulled on his pants and shirt.

It was a familiar, sometimes friendly pain, a companion common to most of the islanders. For the salt in their sweat came from the sea, and the ache in their limbs was caused by the same intangible force that drove the fins of fish that flew from boat-bound nets. On their small island, tucked in an obscure corner of the Caribbean, they had led an unencumbered life that was balanced by the sea and, until recently, untouched by poverty, prosperity, or a crush of white tourists from the north.

Willi moved from the closet to the kitchen of his small, cinder-block home, as his wife was setting breakfast on the table. He said nothing in reply to her soft, "Good morning," but returned her smile. What a beautiful smile Elizabeth has, he thought, as wide and pure white pink as the lips of a queen conch. She was forty, yet the lines of age had not yet creased the curves of her cheeks, which shone in a golden brown under

the glow of her coral-black eyes. She was wearing on her head one of several new Western-style scarves she had bought recently, and her dress, though simple, was of a color Willi still squinted at.

As Elizabeth was setting the plate of eggs on the table, she asked her husband how many fishing groups he was taking out.

"Two. One in the morning, and another late in the afternoon, if the weather holds."

The couple stared out the window, gazing past the beach and the barrier reef to the clouds gathering on the horizon.

"I'm going out to the east end to have lunch and to talk with father," Willi continued. "After I helped him work the nets yesterday, he asked me to come back and fish with him again. I told him we would talk about it today." Willi cut a slice of bread from the loaf.

"You're not going back, are you?" Elizabeth asked.

"I said we would talk about it. I told him no more than that."

"But do you *want* to go back with him?" She leaned across the table, her eyes growing even darker under a furrowed brow as they searched her husband's face. "Willi, working for the resort we are making much more money than we did when you were fishing with your father. Do you want to give up all that it has given us and move back to the east end?"

"We have more money, Elizabeth. And we have more things, a better home. But are we as happy as we were before? I'm not so sure."

"Willi, *you* were the one who wanted to leave Turtle Bay. It was you who said we could never find any happiness there after what happened to Bill. Now you want to go back?"

"I don't know, Elizabeth. I don't know anymore. So much has changed, so quickly . . ."

The couple stared at each other, blinked in silent acknowledgment, and finished their meal. Willi left by bicycle for the resort dock.

Pedaling past the rows of shops pressed together along the cobblestone streets of the island's only city, Port Philip, Willi left a wake of opening doors and windows, as the town slowly

came to life. A brown, wrinkled ghost of a man labored under the weight of two hinged shingles that covered his vegetable stand. Waddling down the cobblestones with a bundle of palm leaves and straw under each arm, an obese woman headed for her familiar curbside perch, where she would weave and peddle purses and hats. One of several new motorcars on the island squeezed Willi off the street and up against a pink, stucco building. It was taking its white driver to the only bank, a four-room affair, on the island. After the near-miss with Willi, the car sent a woman scurrying out of the way, the basket of bananas she had been balancing on her head crushed under the tires. The driver hastily stopped and paid for the damage before driving off.

Willi arrived at the beach and had just finished preparing the boat and poles for the morning trip when the resort owner walked onto the dock. He was escorting a guest and two young boys.

“Mr. Arnold,” the owner was saying, “this is our fishing guide, Willi Franklin.”

Willi extended his arm, and the guest, after hesitating, suddenly found a friendly smile and shook hands.

“Now I’ll have you know,” the owner continued, placing his arm around the guest’s shoulders, “that in the two years that Willi has worked for us, he has never taken anyone out and returned without a catch. So you and your boys are sure to see some action out there!” The owner slapped the guest square in the back of his flowered shirt and flashed a wide grin. “Go get ’em, Willi!”

“Climb aboard, Mr. Arnold,” Willi said, reaching up to help the portly tourist step into the boat. The man’s bright white crew shoes slipped on the fiberglass step, but Willi guided him unembarrassed into the craft. “Easy does it! There you go. Boys? Here, let me take those cameras before you step across. That’s it. Now then, what are your two names?” The youngsters smiled sheepishly from under white, lotion-covered noses.

“The tall one is David, the pudgy one, Robert,” Arnold said. “They’re good boys. They’ve seen a lot, although neither one of them has ever been deep-sea fishing before. Is it true what he said about you never being skunked?”

“Well, Mr. Arnold,” Willi said, starting the boat, “the sea, she likes me. We have an understanding. She has always given me what I need, and I have always tried to give her back what I can.”

“What’s that?” David asked.

Willi just smiled. He untied the bow line and told his passengers to sit in the three fishing chairs fastened to the deck near the stern. He stood behind the steering column of the twenty-two foot launch and put the motor in gear.

The craft skipped smoothly over the calm waters inside the barrier reef, the small waves slapping rapid hollow thumps against the fiberglass hull. Willi gazed back toward the long green groves of banyan trees, their branches lapping in the breeze like waves against the beach. Pipers scurried along the root-strewn sand, dodging driftwood as they searched for crabs. A few hundred yards down the beach from the resort dock and the edge of Port Philip, the yellow paint of a bulldozer flashed in the morning sun. Willi could hear the choked, diesel cough of the machine as it cleared the trees and shrubbery where a new hotel would soon stand.

At the channel in the barrier reef, Willi turned the boat out to open sea. The white sand bottom dropped away under the crystal waters, and the depths swallowed the shapes of coral, until all that Arnold and his sons could see as they peered into the water were the flickering rays of the sun that seemed to converge to a fine point ten feet deep into the blue. The three passengers gripped the short arm rests of their chairs, and Willi widened his stance behind the steering column, as the growing swells heaved against the boat.

Out on the horizon, the clouds seemed thicker to Willi than they had earlier that morning. Clouds in the Caribbean were ever-present, and seldom posed a threat, especially when witnessed from a distance. Storms were few, though slow-moving curtains of rain sometimes draped the island as grey knots of clouds drifted with the trade winds. For Willi, the only hurricanes were two long past, existing only in the stories of his father and other elders on the island. None had hit in his lifetime, although he had heard strange talk of a silent storm, a creeping hurricane of the spirit, the old ones called it. He had passed it off as the babblings of fools—until recently.

Since the pain and memories had begun to creep up from where they had been so hastily buried, the tales began to make sense, and Willi looked harder at the changes that were occurring on the island, and the longer he looked, the more cluttered and confused his life became.

About two miles out from the island, Willi turned the boat on a course that ran directly along the edge of a deep trench in the ocean floor, where he knew they would catch plenty of fish. He fastened a small hook to the wheel and turned to his passengers.

"We can only fish two poles at a time. Who wants to go first?"

"Let the boys have the first crack," Arnold said. He pulled off his jacket and donned a fishing hat draped with lures and plastic worms. "I'll sit up front and take movies of all the action."

Willi moved to the stern and took from a rack two fishing poles, handing them to the boys.

"Wow! Look at the size of this reel!" David exclaimed. "And the hooks. We're gonna catch something big!" His younger brother, however, looked less than enthusiastic as Willi fastened a harness around him and slipped the pole into the swivel in his chair.

"All we need is some bait on those big hooks and you boys will be set." He opened a styrofoam cooler and took from a plastic bag two small silver fish. Threading the hooks through the eyes of the fish, Willi tossed them over the sides of the boat and pulled out the proper amount of line from each boy's reel.

"I got one! I got one already!" David shouted almost immediately after Willi let go of his line.

The guide smiled. "No, not yet. That's the pull of the boat you're feeling."

The other boy, Robert, did not look over the stern to where his line sliced the water; he was very pale, his cheeks and chin puffing out as he bent his head down and stared at an errant fish eye that had landed on his sneaker. The smell from the bait cooler was making matters even worse.

"Dad, I think I'm gonna get sick."

"All right, Robby. I'll take your pole. You come sit up front."

The two switched positions, Willi instructing Arnold how to fasten the harness and hold the pole. Robert didn't quite make it to the bow gunnel before he barfed his breakfast.

"That's all right, son," Willi said. "It happens to the best of them. You'll feel better in a minute. Just hang your head over the side and try to relax." Willi sponged off the bow seat and had just finished washing down the floor with a bucket of water when David's reel exploded in a whine of running line.

"I got one! I got one! Help me, Willi!"

"Keep your tip up," the guide said, cutting off the motor and helping the boy pull back on the pole. He loosened the drag a few notches. "Just keep pulling on him." The heavy rod was bent almost ninety degrees. Arnold was whooping.

"Get the movie camera, Robby!"

"Where is it?"

"On the seat, under my jacket. Hurry up! Go get him, David! Fight him hard!"

"Ease up a little, son," Willi said. "Now start reeling him in. Slowly."

"It must be huge!" David shouted. "My arms are killing me."

Willi wrapped his fingers around the line and felt the vibrations from the fighting fish. "It's a fair-sized dolphin, about fifteen pounds."

"You mean like Flipper?"

"No, David. There's a fish that's also called a dolphin. That's what you've got on your line, not a porpoise."

"How can you tell?"

"I just can," the guide answered. "Keep your tip up. That's it."

"Robby, GET THAT CAMERA!" Arnold almost lost his pole in the excitement.

"I got it, Dad, but it won't work."

"Jeeeesus! Bring it here. Hurry up, dammit! How're you doing, David?"

"All right, I guess," he groaned, gritting his teeth and

straining against the pole. "My fingers are getting awful tired, though."

"You've almost got him," Willi said. He took the gaff from the rack and leaned over the gunnel. "Keep reeling him in, David."

"Damn this thing!" Arnold had tied himself up trying to get out of the harness. "Give me the camera, Robby."

With a smooth sweep Willi gaffed the fish and swung it up over the side of the boat. Arnold got the movie camera running just in time to see Willi club the square-headed dolphin with an old cricket bat.

"That's a fine catch, son," Willi said. "Dolphin is about the best tasting fish you can find."

David just stood there, smiling, breathing hard from his first major battle with the sea. He stared at his brightly-colored catch, watching its gills desperately fan the sun-parched air. Blood, thinned by salt water and mucus, flowed from the gaff wound and spread across the scales. Within moments their brilliant greens and blues and yellows faded into the grey of an overcast sky. The gills gave a few final, crimson gasps, and were still.

"Dammit, Robert! I thought you knew how to run this thing." Arnold was standing in front of his chair, his fishing pole between his knock-kneed legs, the harness and camera strap hopelessly knotted together.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I forgot how to unlock the button."

Arnold grumbled and sat down to untie himself. David and Willi were still staring at the fish on the deck of the boat. "Do they always lose their color like that when they die?" the boy asked.

Willi nodded, silently cursing himself for feeling the pain again. He turned to start the motor. "As soon as I get us moving again, I'll rebait your hook and you can give it another try."

By the time the noon sun had shrunk the morning shadows of the fishing crew, Arnold had caught two small barracuda, David another dolphin, and Robert had learned how to use the movie camera. The resort owner beamed when

he saw the catch. "What did I tell you, Mr. Arnold? Our Willi sure knows where the fish are."

"He certainly does." Arnold faced the guide. "Willi, my boys and I can't thank you enough." He extended his hand. Willi shook it and felt the wet crumpled wad of money.

"Mr. Arnold, I don't take tips."

"Nonsense. Go ahead and take it. I want you to have it."

Willi looked at the owner, whose eyes urged him to accept the money. He took the wrinkled bills. "Thank you."

"Do you have enough gas for this afternoon's trip?" the owner asked.

"I'm going over to the marina right now," Willi said. "I'm going around the island to the east end for lunch. What time does the next group want to go out?"

"Three-thirty."

"I'll be back by then."

II

"Father, you are blind with that stuff," Willi said as he watched the gaunt man raise a bottle of rum to his lips to wash down the last of the conch chowder the men had eaten for lunch.

"Only blind to discomfort, Willi, to the things that make sleep tiresome." He licked his wide lips and pursed them, the wrinkles of his face folding together. His skin was the texture of the brown, twisted roots of a mangrove, and white whiskers were sprinkled across his cheeks and chin like the bleached, broken spines of a sea urchin.

"How have you been sleeping lately?" the old one asked. "Does a mattress ease your dreams any better than a hammock or a canvas cot?"

"My wife sleeps very well . . ."

"Yes, yes. Elizabeth would be sleeping well. She has a new home, new clothes, and a new husband."

Willi shot an angry look at his father.

"Give it up, Willi. Come back to Turtle Bay. Port Philip

is a long way from here. It will be years before the bulldozers reach the east end.”

“Years, father? How many years? There is already talk of paving the road to this end of the island.”

“Talk, talk, talk. At least it is still that. At least we are still left alone out here.”

“And that is why you are still wasting away, slowly killing yourself with rum and a poverty you accept like children.”

“Is that any worse than selling yourself off as some white man’s ‘sambo from the sea?’”

Both men shifted uneasily in the sand where they were sitting under the webbed shadow of a fishing net that had been hung to dry. After a long silence, the old man glanced toward the cluster of wooden shanties behind them.

“Look there.” He nodded toward three boys huddled under the hull of a small fishing boat, which had been placed upside-down on wooden supports. They were all about ten years old, wearing clothing sewn out of worn canvas, their dark skin even darker in the shadow of the boat. The two men watched as the tallest boy repeatedly put a discarded conch shell to his lips and puffed out his cheeks. The shell was silent.

“Remember when you were their age and first sounded the conch?”

Willi smiled at the children. “Come here,” he called. “You are forgetting something. I’ll show you.”

The boys scurried barefoot, kicking sand, up to Willi and gave him the shell.

“Watch closely.” Willi wedged the conch firmly between his legs and with a smooth stone, chipped at the crown tip of the shell. “Now try it.”

All three pairs of eyes widened with smiles at the sound of muted moan of the conch. The boys ran off down the beach, fighting with each other to blow through the shell, kicking water as they went.

All three laughed high, shrill, children’s laughs.

“In Port Philip,” Willi said, as the realization slowly sank in, “the children have forgotten the sounds a shell can make. They listen to these little radios. They hold them by their ears all day. That’s all they do. Even when they can’t understand the language — the Spanish — coming out of them.”

The old one was staring out to the horizon, which was now thick with knots of clouds. "How old would Bill be today, if he was still alive?"

Willi felt the pain kick hard inside his gut. "Let's not talk about the past, Father."

"Why not?"

"Nothing can change it."

"But it's there. Why not talk about it?"

"Let me leave it. Let me forget."

"You want to forget your only son?"

Willi closed his eyes and covered them with a callused hand. The knot in his gut burst as the memories swelled and crashed like waves in a storm. How long has it been? he asked himself. How long since the black and dented drums washed ashore from the schooner shipwrecked near the east end? Two years. Almost two years.

Willi had been sick like the others. The entire village had been taken sick, or worse, following the celebration that followed the opening of the drums. "It's rum! It's Jack Iron rum!" the cry went out as the sides were pierced and the urine-colored liquid wetted the sand. Willi swallowed a mouthful of what everyone had thought was a shipment of their island's contribution to Caribbean spirits. Others, including a group of boys who had been caught up in the binge, ignored the unusual burning in their insides and drank more than mere mouthfuls of what turned out to be unrefined alcohol. Willi's son, Bill, had been one of the first to die.

"Sometimes," the elder man sighed, with a bitterness to match his son's tears, "the old ones start talking of the gathering storm. And when we do, we look at each other and say, 'If the drums wash ashore again tomorrow, we'll be better off to drink the stuff again.' "

III

Willi untied the grey-stained cloth around his neck and mopped the sweat from his brow. It never fails, he thought, that the air seems hottest just before a storm. He turned to his trio of passengers in the back of the boat.

"The rain is going to hit any minute," he said to the men, all in their late forties, and all very drunk.

"The hell with the rain!" the loudest one said. His face was flushed under the bill of his golf hat, the back of his meaty neck cooked to a raw, deep red. "We still haven't caught a damn thing. We're staying out here until we haul something in."

"I thought you never got skunked," another of the men cracked over this shoulder. "Sam, how much booze we got left?"

The third passenger, a large-bellied fellow with wisps of hair failing miserably to cover a sun-burnt scalp, leaned forward from his center chair and opened the cooler at his feet. "Two more beers and a bottle of this local stuff," he said, holding up a small flask of rum.

"Me and Skinner got the poles," the fat-necked one said, "so we get the beers. You and our trusty guide, Willi-boy, can split the rum. Maybe if we juice him up a little, he'll find us some fish."

"What the hell, then," Sam said. "He can have the whole bottle!"

All three roared deep, gut-rumbling laughs.

"Here you go, Willi. Catch!"

The guide turned from the steering column just in time to grab the bottle. "No thanks. Not when I'm fishing."

"You call this fishing?"

No, Willi thought, he wouldn't call this fishing. The boat was nowhere near the edge of the trench, where the fish would be running thick because of the rain. The men would be lucky to catch anything around the sand flats the boat had been trolling over all afternoon.

Willi looked at the men and then down at the small flask in his hand. It was the same brand of rum his father and most of the islanders drank. He remembered the words of his father, and he saw again the picture of his son curled up in the corner of his shanty, Elizabeth sobbing over him, helpless. And then he realized that he could not go back, that he had never had the choice from the beginning.

"Goddamn rain," Skinner grumbled, as the first drops

began tapping on the plastic deck of the launch. "Hey, Willi-boy, is the fishing any better — what the hell are you doing?"

The man looked over his shoulder just as Willi pulled the empty bottle from his lips. Taking a short step backward, breathing in long and hard until his chest was huge under his shirt, the guide cocked his arm and flung the bottle, the throw rocking the small boat, the flask splashing far in front of the bow, near the edge of a grey curtain of rain.

Swallowing hard to keep the burning inside his gut, Willi put his back to the blinking men and turned the boat toward the island. "Fishing's no good in the rain," he said, knowing that it would not be good for a long, long time. And he wondered if the storm would ever pass.



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