

Chapter 2

Work a Month, off a Month

*You are never given a wish without also being given
the power to make it come true.*

—Richard Bach



Dubbed the last pirate of the Caribbean, the Keeper of the Wrecks by the Queen of England, the Oldest SCUBA Diver by Guinness Book of World Records and a national treasure by the Governor of the British Virgin Islands, Bert Kilbride welcomed Winston and Cynthia to his island, Saba Rock.

San Diego to Saba Rock, British Virgin Islands

August 1994 - November 1994

We get the nudge

Only a few months after returning from our sailing trip in the British Virgin Islands, with its tour of Saba Rock, my position as vice president of my public relations firm suddenly disappeared. I was laid off and devastated. To make matters worse, Winston's work

was stagnant, typical of the construction industry, which was either chicken or feathers.

In the normal panic most people go through when thrust into unemployment, I dove into searching for my next position, naturally in my expertise—PR and marketing. A driven, type-A personality, I could think of nothing else. My clients had been in high tech, dairy, banking, and, serendipitously, the tourism industries. By the grace of God and constant networking, I was offered a marketing position at one of the most prestigious resorts in Southern California. I breathed easy again.

As I was negotiating the employment contract for the next leg of my career, destiny intervened. Passionate Italian, Sandra, heard about my layoff and had witnessed the stress of my career over the years. One afternoon, she piped up with a bizarre request. “Hey,” she said, “show me that photo album from your last Caribbean sailing vacation.”

She zeroed in on the photo of me with a small, typed advertisement tacked on a rustic wall. (Winston had taken that photo on the day we moved the hot tub as a joke for me to show my boss.) The ad headlined, “Come and work in Paradise.” The ad continued, “Must have good math skills, common sense, willing to work long hours in split shifts, patient with the public and willing to live on Saba Rock. Spanish language is a plus. See the manager.”

“This is it. This is what you should do,” Sandra prophesied. With the animation of a little child eyeing an amusement park for the first time, she blurted, “You’ve always talked about living in the Caribbean. Here’s your chance. Just go.”

“Cynthia and I both just stared at her, befuddled. We sat there in our glass condo, with that breathtaking view of the boulder-strewn, sandy beach, surrounded by our “life”—big screen TV and grand piano, antiques and original paintings, closets full of clothes, miles of Cynthia’s shoes, (Got to sneak in a dig, whenever I can, about all those shoes!), king-size bed, the dresser I’d owned for thirty years, our glass

dining table fingerprinted as usual and a kitchen stocked with every known gadget invented.”

“And the best-looking dishes I’d ever owned,” I piped in.

Sandra told us her story. She was raised in Northern Italy, a land she cherished. She left as a young professional and made a career in the United States, mostly in California. Several times she could have returned to Italy, but she’d continually postponed her trip. “Duty called,” she said, “but I dreamed of the day when I would get back there again.”

As life often does, it hindered living. Sandra never made it back to Italy. She had a friend beckoning her to come back to her beloved roots, but she let the invitation pass her by. When she retired and finally could take the time, “I had too much baggage to leave.” Sandra was laden with personal challenges, bad health, lots of “stuff,” a huge mortgage on a big house that wouldn’t sell and meager financial options.

“I missed my chance, kids,” she sadly warned us. “Don’t miss yours.” We let her message sink in.

People often say, “Maybe next year . . .” But they’ll be older next year. “Someday . . .” But what if someday never comes? We never would have moved to the islands if it had not been for Sandra’s kick in the butt. To this day, when people ask how we did it, she’s the first person we credit.

Armed with Sandra’s confidence and our own exuberance, we looked out at the ocean, took deep breaths, and dialed the island.

The interview

Gayla answered the phone—yes, the same Gayla whose picture stood shoulder to shoulder with ours in that doctored photo on our kitchen wall—and, yes, the Pirates Pub management job was still open. She had been advertising it in the local *Beacon*, as required by law, but had no qualified takers.

In more encouraging news, she had a place for Winston too. She needed someone to handle island operations such as cisterns that leaked, water makers that went awry, and generators that needed

service in the middle of the night. There were bars to be built, stools to be hammered, and the whole top of the island to be cleared.

The icing on the cake was that Gayla informed us that the position managing the restaurant was work a month, be off a month. What more could we ask for? Gayla employed another woman, who would work opposite months. She said job sharing went very smoothly, plus, she said with a smile, “The island’s problems sometime can be so intense (like employee drama, food shortages, or empty cisterns), you’ll need thirty days to recover!” Hmmm, a red flag?

We told her we were part of that crew who’d helped install her hot tub, and she instantly knew us—or at least our muscles. She invited us to fly down for an interview (on our dime). We agreed.

We had just passed the first hurdle. One of many, it turned out.

Gayla’s first advice to us over the phone was to read *Don’t Stop the Carnival*, by Herman Wouk. She said if we still wanted the jobs after that, they were ours. That book is still required reading for anyone considering moving to the islands. We laughed our way through the entire thing, reading about a middle-aged, New York press agent who, on sudden impulse, leaves behind the rat-race and runs away to reinvent himself as a resort owner in the Caribbean. The jaw-dropping, poignant, and hilarious misadventures of his career change turned out to be the precursor for our life on Saba Rock, more realistically than we could imagine.

Reconnaissance

Since we were paying for this trip to the islands, we made it a reconnaissance mission, learning everything we could about working and living in the British Virgin Islands. We chartered a small sailboat out of Spanish Town, Virgin Gorda, and played detective. We sailed to North Sound, Virgin Gorda, and anchored off Bitter End Resort, across from Saba Rock. It was the off-season, with few tourists, which gave people time to talk to us.

We gingerly spoke to some Bitter End personnel about the good, bad, and ugly of working and living in the BVI. One particularly candid guy told us that interacting well with the islanders was the biggest key to working there. “Life here is a certain way,” he said. “You can’t bring your American hotshot business attitude and think it will work.

“The folks who work at these resorts are not motivated by money,” he continued, “like Americans. They don’t need fancy clothes and thirty pairs of shoes or have mortgages and car payments. Several families usually share a car and just park it on the street with the keys.”

More advice: “You have to figure out other ways to get your employees to do what you want. If you can master the art of managing islanders here and earn their friendship,” he said with emphasis, “you can work anywhere in the Caribbean.” We took his advice to heart.

We also looked up the uncle of a friend who had lived for years in Leverick Bay, on the island of Virgin Gorda, right down the water from Saba Rock. (Leverick was a community of ex-patriots who settled in for the long term.) We sat in the cockpit of Tom’s boat and listened to story after story of island life reality.

Tom suggested being discreet about research; islanders, understandably, didn’t want outsiders taking their jobs. However, our computer and engineering skills set us apart from most of the available workforce applying to Saba Rock. That’s why Gayla could justify hiring us.

Our “godfather,” as we nicknamed him, encouraged our new adventure. He helped us create a list of things that would be completely unnecessary, what we needed to bring with us, and how to get it there. Godfather Tom would be giving us valuable clues to island living for many years to come.

Off we went to meet Gayla on Saba Rock. We tied our sailboat’s ten-foot dinghy to the wobbling dock and walked through the bar.

Gayla greeted us with cigarette and sea breeze cocktail in hand. She took one look at us and could tell we were serious.

Next came the tour.

Previewing our new home

First, walking behind the Pirates Pub bar down a dock and up a flight of stairs, we toured the restaurant office and met my counterpart, a friendly and cheerful artist from St. Louis, like me. The businesslike computers, printers, and phones were matched with a colorful, Caribbean backdrop that Gayla had created herself. Beautifully faux painted walls, trimmed in yellow and aqua, showcased her collection of ceramic masks. Above the desk was a picture window that lived up to its name; its picture was the graduated shades of pale greens to deep aqua, crystal-clear Caribbean Sea, the reef, and neighboring islands framed by gently waving coconut palms. Also tucked into the lower corner of the picture was that tiny grass hut we'd sneak previewed on our hot tub delivery, just four months earlier.

Gayla gave us a choice of where to live. Weird that on this tiny island there would be more than one choice. We could choose the apartment below the office, a small, oddly shaped room similar to a crawlspace under a staircase but with a shower, toilet, and hot plate—not our romantic image of life in the Caribbean. “Dark and dingy,” Winston labeled it under his breath.

Then the other choice—the hut.

We walked toward it, across some rather bouncy planks, trying to stay upright and not fall in the water. The tiny, wood-framed hut balanced itself half on a floating dock, half on that horizontal sailboat mast. Palm fronds nailed to the frame kept the wind out—or most of it. A gray, corrugated tin roof kept the rain out—or some of it. A Dutch door, a piece of unfinished plywood sliced in half and hanging on rusted hinges, announced the entry.

Even before we entered, we'd made it home.

Inside, the walls were made of colorful, cotton fabric stapled to two-by-fours. That's it for walls—no drywall, no paneling, no fiberboard, just 100 percent cotton fabric. It was like material for a summer dress. The windows were basically a sheet of plywood on a hinge you kept propped up with a stick when you wanted to see out and closed when it rained. There were high openings near the roofline for air and light.

The kitchen area was clothed in vibrant aqua and white floral cotton. It resembled a miniature kitchen, with a tiny sink, stove and fridge. A weathered driftwood shelf made a cabinet for a few plates. One pot and one skillet hung on hooks under the shelf—about as basic as you could get. The bedroom was another treat, a square room set off by bright, royal blue and white hibiscus fabric walls and graced by a gently curving, brown wicker headboard facing a double bed. That headboard was the only real furniture in the room, the focal point of the hut unless you counted the breathtaking view.

The hut had a closet, to my surprise, tucked right in front of the toilet—and I mean *right* in front. Speaking of toilets, our little shack included running water (from the cistern) plus a light bulb, or two, powered by the ever-humming generator that created the island's electricity.

I was in heaven. Winston was in shock.

“Well, maybe it had some potential, but, man, was it rough,” he muttered. “Considering I came from a background of building beautiful, custom homes, in Southern California, this felt like a major setback. But what the hell, it was paradise.”

Gayla got us back on track by outlining the next steps. She would apply for work permits allowing us to work on Saba Rock. We would have to leave the islands until those permits were approved, possibly sixty days from then. Meanwhile, we had to get physical exams, drug tests, AIDS tests, and police records saying we were good citizens, with no history of arrest.

Back to reality

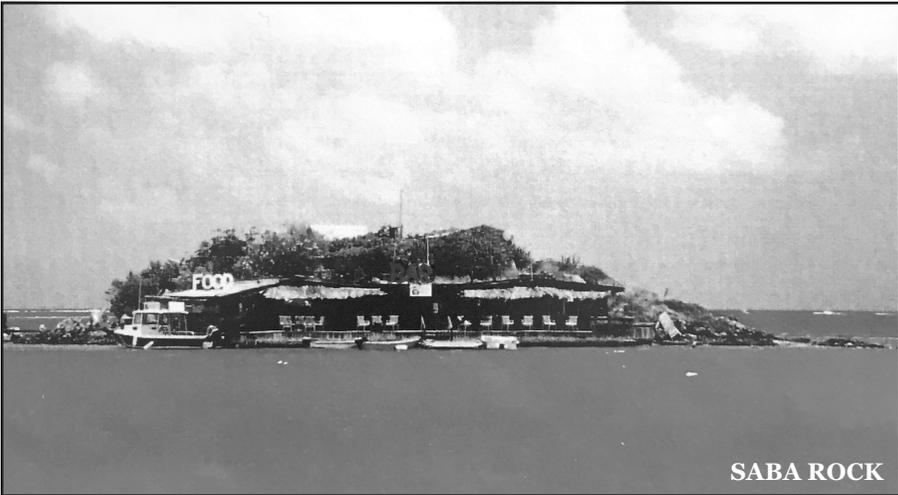
We returned our chartered sailboat to Spanish Town, bid good-bye to Godfather Tom (after a few more million questions amid some rum and tonics), and boarded the plane back to San Diego. As we flew at thirty thousand feet, we made plans, to do lists, what-to-bring lists, and what-would-actually-fit lists.

Our minds seemed to fly way higher than we were.

The wait

We toasted Sandra with champagne as soon as we returned to Windansea. Telling the kids we were moving was easy; they saw it as their new holiday option. Prematurely, Ray and Kellie planned a farewell party, and we drafted our moving announcement.

Then we waited. And waited. And waited.



We passed our physical exams and drug and AIDS tests with no complications and applied for our police reports.

One day, Winston sheepishly mumbled that he was concerned he might have a bevy of unpaid parking tickets, from years gone by, that could keep him from having a clean police record.

Now he tells me! I read him quite the riot act. If his antics kept us from going to the Caribbean, I'd never get over it. A few days later, Winston got a call saying his report was fine and ready to be picked up. When Winston asked about my report, the policeman responded mysteriously, "Have her give us a call."

It seemed, after harassing Winston to no end about his lackadaisical responsibility to himself and his government, I was the one with a warrant out for my arrest. Turns out I had a taillight violation from two years before that I'd never reported fixed. (Note: when a cop tells you to report a repair, do it.)

You must know Winston to imagine his reaction at hearing this news. "Well, well, well, what do you know? Miss Goody Two-Shoes has a record! After all that crap about me being the villain around here. Soooo, the San Diego Police Department has been looking for you, eh? Boy, I'm going to remember this one for a long, long time. You'll be paying, girl, and paybacks are hell." He hasn't let me forget it to this day.

I appeared in court, loaded for bear. For Pete's sake, I'd never been notified about the outstanding warrant, even when I'd been stopped for a speeding ticket! I thought that a fair rebuttal. "This was so funny," Winston interrupts. "As she's sitting there waiting her turn and practicing all her arguments, the judge suddenly (and loudly) demands this gentle guy in front of Cynthia be carried away in handcuffs by the bailiff—for simply asking to go move his car. She was up next. 'Guilty, Judge,' she whimpered, and paid her fine. I loved the whole thing."

Meanwhile, I was still negotiating with the San Diego resort director who wanted to hire me. Feeling bad that I'd leave the resort stranded, if those work permits came through, I went to lunch with my potential boss and came clean. I explained the Saba Rock opportunity and that I was in limbo, having to wait sixty days for confirmation. I suggested he might want to hire another candidate rather than count on me. Thanking me for my candor, he said I'd be crazy to stay in

San Diego when the Caribbean beckoned so realistically. It was a risky conversation but worth it.

For forty-five days, we waited. Our emotions rode a roller coaster of anticipation and elation, trepidation and downright fear, eagerness to be gone, and then sadness to be leaving our family and friends. Could we do this or not? Should we, or shouldn't we? Would we be OK, or hate it? Did everybody think we were stupid, or did they wish they were us? How would we get along with only one bathroom? What was life with no TV news? Would we get island fever or never want to return to the States?

Then we got the call. Winston answered. "Your work permits have been approved." After a long silence, Gayla nervously questioned, "You *are* still coming, aren't you?"

She heard a quiet, unsteady "oh . . . yeah." Winston hung up, looked at me with that fifty-yard stare, and quivered. "Well, I guess we're moving to the Caribbean." After a few minutes of flat-out fear, we celebrated.

Dumping our stuff, cold turkey

We decided to store only our photographs, ski equipment, and a few pieces of artwork. Some people leaving the United States put everything they own in storage, thinking they would use it when they return, but we were not planning on returning.

We reviewed our "take with," "store at," "kids want," "give away to," "sell" lists and shed our belongings. Most people think this would be the hardest thing about moving to a remote place. But for us, it was relatively easy—probably because we were so ready to go.

First, we packed what we needed, fitting it into six UPS boxes. The only self-indulging thing I packed was a sampling of my prized, sunset-colored dishes. Most items were quite mundane: a few shorts and tops, swimsuits, flip flops, tennis shoes, boat shoes, snorkel gear and favorite tools. We collected some toiletries and medicines that might not be

available and three hanging caddies with various-sized plastic pockets for storing clothes and such, since there were no drawers in the hut. After much deliberation, we each packed one pair of jeans (which were never worn again).

Then we distributed the rest of our “stuff.”

My daughter, Andrea, the minimalist, chose to inherit little besides some photos. My son, Jason, was eager to fill his apartment and took everything he could cram inside and on top of our two hundred thousand-mile Honda station wagon, and off he went, happy as a musician with a new tune.

We shipped our antique Knabe grand piano (which wouldn't fit in Jason's digs) to friend, Betty, with the thought that if Jason wanted it someday, he could get it back. We shipped my parents' antique four-poster bedroom set to my brother in Texas and stored our family photos at my gracious sister's in St. Louis. Our clothes and probably sixty pairs of shoes got new owners, at battered women's centers and shelters. Our ski equipment took up residence, with our ski buddies, Ray and Kellie.

One of the toughest separations was selling our red, GT Mustang convertible. Watching it cruise away down Neptune Drive along the ocean and into the sunset with someone else in those white-leather seats was hard to take.

At a small garage sale, we sold many more things. Selling the old tarnished and broken trinkets from our traditional Christmas tree was the only thing that made me sad. The woman who bought them offered her phone number if I ever wanted them back. Though very comforting at the time, I never used it.

Last, we contracted with an estate sale company to take all that remained. We went to our old coffee hangout early one Saturday morning and came home that afternoon to an empty abode. Not even a paperclip in the junk drawer.

THERE'S A YACHT MORE TO LIFE

That night, our friends and kids threw a wild and wonderful farewell party, with lots of toasts and laughter and no tears. The next day, we flew off to our new life.



Winston and Cynthia's first Caribbean home on the tiny island of Saba Rock was situated in the North Sound of Virgin Gorda, in the British Virgin Islands, east of the U.S. Virgin Islands and south of Puerto Rico.

Winston and Cynthia eagerly adopted a permanent dress code of shorts, sarongs, t-shirts and flip flops as they learned the ropes of managing cheeseburger-in-paradise Pirates Pub and Grill.