



POTHoles AND PIGEONS

BY SETH L. FIELDS

PORTIONS OF THE QUEEN'S HIGHWAY IN THE BAHAMAS RESEMBLE WHAT YOU MIGHT IMAGINE THE ROADWAYS LOOK LIKE IN FALLUJAH. THE POTHOLES MAY NOT HAVE BEEN FORMED BY MORTARS AND IEDS, BUT THE WOBBLY TIRES AND SQUEAKY STRUTS OF THE LOCAL CARS TELL A STORY OF THEIR OWN TYPE OF WAR. ON THESE ROADS, YOU DODGE ONE HOLE ONLY TO HIT ANOTHER, AND IN SOME PLACES THE TRAFFIC SIMPLY GOES OFF ROAD AND ONTO THE SANDY SHOULDER TO AVOID THE ROAD ALTOGETHER. OUR DRIVER SAYS, "IF YA WANT TO SEND A CAR TO HELL, YA SEND IT TO ANDROS!"



ABOUT TEN MINUTES INTO our drive, I begin spotting handwritten signs stapled to telephone poles reading, “No hunting within 150 feet of the road.”

“What are people hunting?”

“Ah, das for the pigeon hunting.”

“The what!?”

“It’s white-crown pigeon season, and da hunters been shooting up da power lines.”

Though much more an angler than a hunter, I enjoy the occasional bird. Ducks are a welcome winter distraction when the water is too cold to fish, and I like a wild turkey for Thanksgiving. Yes, this was going to be a bonefish trip, but after we arrive at our lodge, I decide to try my luck with the club’s owner and operator. I mention the white-crown pigeons and that I’m interested to see what it’s all about. After all, we’ve got one DIY day on the books, and I never turn down an adventure or a chance for a cast-and-blast. She tells me she will look into it for us.

My trip buddy Scott is just as interested as I am, but he has already headed to the room for a nap. In fact, Scott borders on narcoleptic: by trip’s end I will have seen him fall asleep on three separate flights, two car rides, and in the middle of one impossibly bumpy boat ride—during which at one point we thought he might slip overboard. Despite the siestas, Scott is the perfect trip buddy: calm, collected, and a good fisherman, he’s the kind of guy who rarely ever gets worked up, who brings mellowness to the table.

I am a bit more wide open. Yin and yang.

Despite the October winds, we make the best of our week in Central Andros, garnering more shots at bonefish than we deserve and managing to catch several nice fish. But this story really starts on our DIY day.

A day that, for me, will live in infamy.

Remember the pigeons? Well, the night before our last day, the hostess at the lodge tells me, “I’ve got a guy dat will pick you guys up in da morning and take ya hunting. Be ready an hour before sunrise. His name is Joe.”

Now we’re getting somewhere.

“So, sunrise is at...”

“Be ready at six o’clock.”

“We’ll be there!”

This would be my first pigeon hunt since I stalked pigeons on the grain silos of my family farm, Red Rider BB gun in hand.

As I walk across the club grounds in the dark of the morning, I glance at the driveway for our guide. I don’t have a description of him—or anything to go off of, really—and there’s no one and nothing in front of the clubhouse except the owner’s car, a few boats around the shop, and one vacant and sketchy Dodge Durango with large chrome rims and tinted windows. No guide.

I enter the clubhouse in search of coffee and our guide, but the only other soul stirring at this hour is Scott, who’s still half asleep. We pour ourselves some coffee and mutter to each other for a few minutes before heading back to the driveway to wait.

Sipping hot coffee and standing around, I notice the orange glow of a cigarette coming from the passenger side of the Durango. I stare at the truck for an inappropriate amount of time before I walk over.

As I approach, I can make out the silhouette of a man in the driver’s seat. “Are you Joe?”

An answer emerges from the dark truck cabin: “Ya.”

Suddenly, both front doors open and our guide and his associate both step out. Swathed in a navy blue mechanic’s jumpsuit, Joe is a big guy. I mean he’s a really big guy: Joe towers over us. His handshake is even more alarming. He has hands the size of baseball gloves, and though I try to administer a strong grip like grandpa taught me, his hand wraps around mine and diminishes the effort.

“Nice to meet you.”

A nod and one-finger wave across the hood of the Durango is all we get from his associate, who remains nameless.

“Get in.”

A man of few words.

We climb into the back seat of the truck, dark and cluttered, and I sit down on top of something hard. I reach down to see what it is. It’s a heavy, jumbo-sized crescent wrench.

That explains the mechanic’s uniform. What does one even use a wrench this size for? Do I really want to know?

We make our way down the driveway and out onto the highway in silence and without the aid of headlights for the first few hundred feet. The humidity and silence are stifling, so I press the window button for some fresh morning air. Nothing.

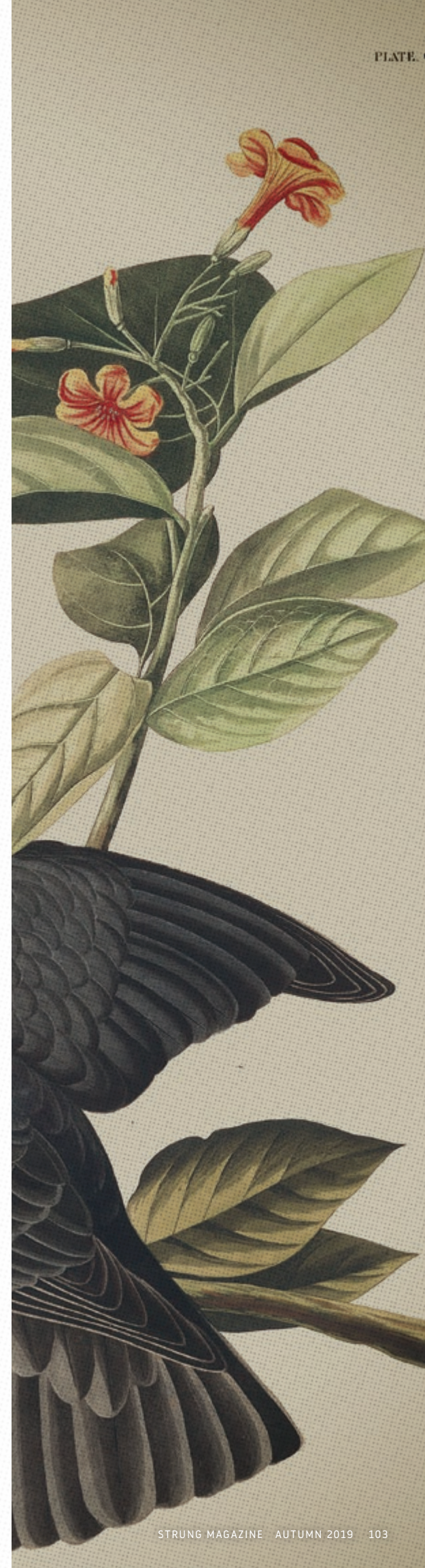
Does Joe have the child locks engaged? Or perhaps the windows just don’t work.

Best not to ask.

Minutes into our long and bumpy ride, Joe and his associate begin to converse in a jumble of broken Bahamian creole, unintelligible to us. Soon Joe’s phone rings, he answers, and he carries on a hushed conversation, saying very little, in true Joe fashion. The call ends abruptly, and we turn off of the Queen’s Highway.

We drive through parts of the island we have not seen before, the roads apparently even worse, crossing a shaky, one-lane bridge and eventually entering a shady residential area, where street lighting is sparse and clunker cars and dilapidated houses and buildings are plentiful. We slow to a stop alongside an empty lot, squeezed between houses and littered with old cars, where Joe and his associate mutter to each other and stare at the lot for a while. We leave after a minute or two. The situation replays itself minutes later down the road alongside what appears to be some kind of small quarry. Again we sit, wait, and eventually drive away.

What is this all about?





Driving slowly through the streets, we pull over at a small gas station, where Joe gets out and talks to an attendant. His associate remains in the front passenger seat.

Beneath the flickering yellow light of the gas station, I can see inside the truck cabin for the first time. I glance over at Scott, who is staring back at me with wide eyes, all pupil, unblinking. He whispers something to me blankly, but all I can make out is “back to the lodge.” Suddenly I feel—I *know*—that something isn’t right. Scott eyes the front passenger seat, and my eyes follow his. I see the shotgun leaning against the associate’s leg and the center console—not a hunting shotgun, but a pistol grip, pump-action with a tactical folding stock.

That’s not a bird-hunting gun.

Now everything feels not just wrong but threatening: the Durango, the headlights, the locked windows, the quarry, the associate—everything.

Is this guy really even Joe? Who the hell did we get in the car with?

My stomach is in knots. I’m officially in survival mode. I fight the temptation to check if the door is locked because I know that once I check, everything will change. My mind is racing: *If the door is locked we’re in big trouble—and if it’s unlocked his associate will hear me open it. And “Joe” is right out there!* I turn back to Scott whose head is bowed in his hands, eyes staring at the floor, apparently in an attitude of prayer.

Have we been kidnapped? Where on earth are we?

My palms begin to sweat as Joe fires up the Durango and we pull out of the gas station. In another mile we pull off onto a long dirt road. I remember the crescent wrench and slowly feel around for it in the middle seat between us.

After a few miles, the Durango comes to a halt and Joe says, “We get out here.”

I decide against taking the wrench with me, as it would likely only piss the big guy off.

Play it cool. That’s the ticket.

We slowly exit and Joe points me toward the back of the truck. The associate carries the gun around to Joe as we stand hesitantly at the back of the Durango.

I glance around at our surroundings to form an escape plan. The sun is beginning to peak over a mangrove swamp in an explosion of orange and blue—a magnificent sight.

Possibly my last.

Joe pumps a round into the chamber with a loud *CHA-CHUK*, and I look desperately at Scott. To my surprise and consternation, he has his camera in his hand and focuses it toward Joe.

Take their photos and we will definitely be killed!

Suddenly, I hear a strange noise from behind me. I turn and see Joe staring out over the mangroves, a shotgun in one hand and the other hand at his mouth. He emits an unbelievably perfect impression of a pigeon: *OOH-OO-OOOR!*

Joe calls a few times and then squints at the swelling horizon.

“Here one go!” he says, raising the gun. Seconds later I see the silhouette of a low-flying bird zigzagging over the tops of mangroves and heading right for us. Joe rattles off two quick shots and the bird crashes into the mangroves below us. His associate jumps into the bushes and grabs the bird.

I am dumbfounded.

What the hell just happened?

From kidnapping victim to participant in the world’s weirdest bird hunt in mere minutes.

People will never believe this.

Joe, as it turns out, is not a hardcore criminal but rather a hardcore pigeon hunter and local boat mechanic; his associate Percy is apparently just along for the ride.

In the light of the auburn sunrise over the mangroves, both men reveal warm, hospitable smiles and that uniquely Bahamian sense of humor. We shoot at a few more birds and laugh at Joe’s impression of a pigeon dodging bullets as if it were in *The Matrix*.

Back at the lodge, I corner Scott: “Dude, you freaked me out back there! What was that all about?”

“What was *what* all about?” “Back at the gas station you looked like you’d seen a ghost. You said something about getting the hell out of there and ‘back to the lodge.’ I thought we were being kidnapped or something!”

“What? No. I said I wished I hadn’t left my coffee ‘back at the lodge.’ You thought we were being kidnapped?”

“Well, yeah. You had your head down like you were praying.”

“I was just sleepy.”

What? I stare hard at Scott for a moment. Is he pulling my leg right now with the “sleepy”?

Ah well. I decide to let it go.

“I’m going fishing. Wanna come?”

“I think I’m gonna take a quick nap. I’ll catch up with you.”

I manage to catch a bonefish or two in front of the lodge before Scott joins me, and we close out the day spotting and stalking fish on the turquoise shores of the Middle Bight. As the sun grows heavy, we return to the lodge where our hostess informs us that Joe brought by a half dozen more birds while we were out, and that the cooks are preparing them for our dinner.

Struck once again by the kindness and hospitality of these people, we thank the hostess for introducing us to Joe in the first place.

“Yeah?” she responds. “So how was it? Did ya guys have fun?”

“Well, it’ll make a good story.”

