

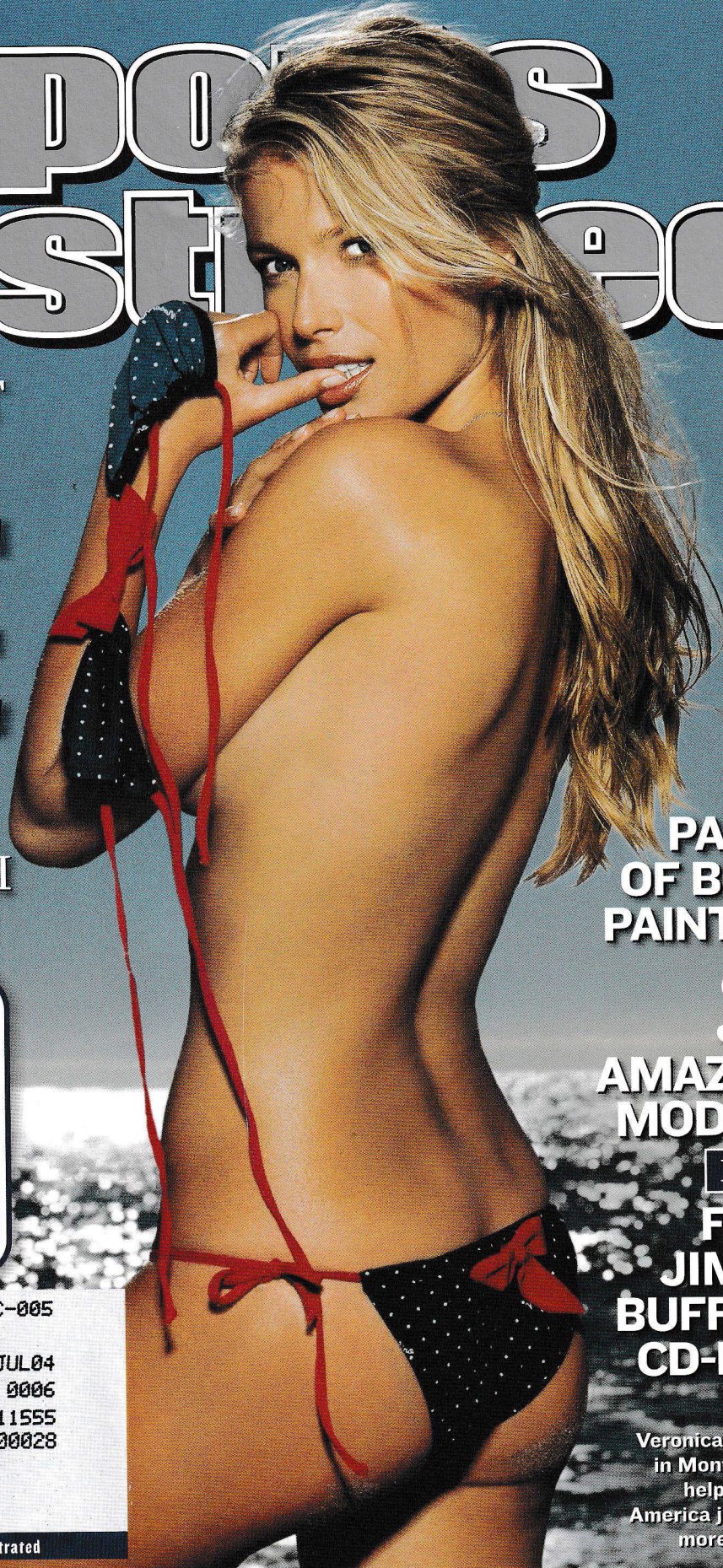
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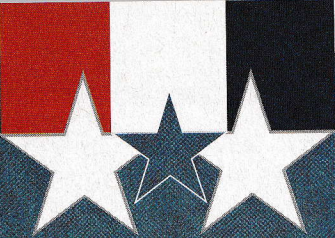
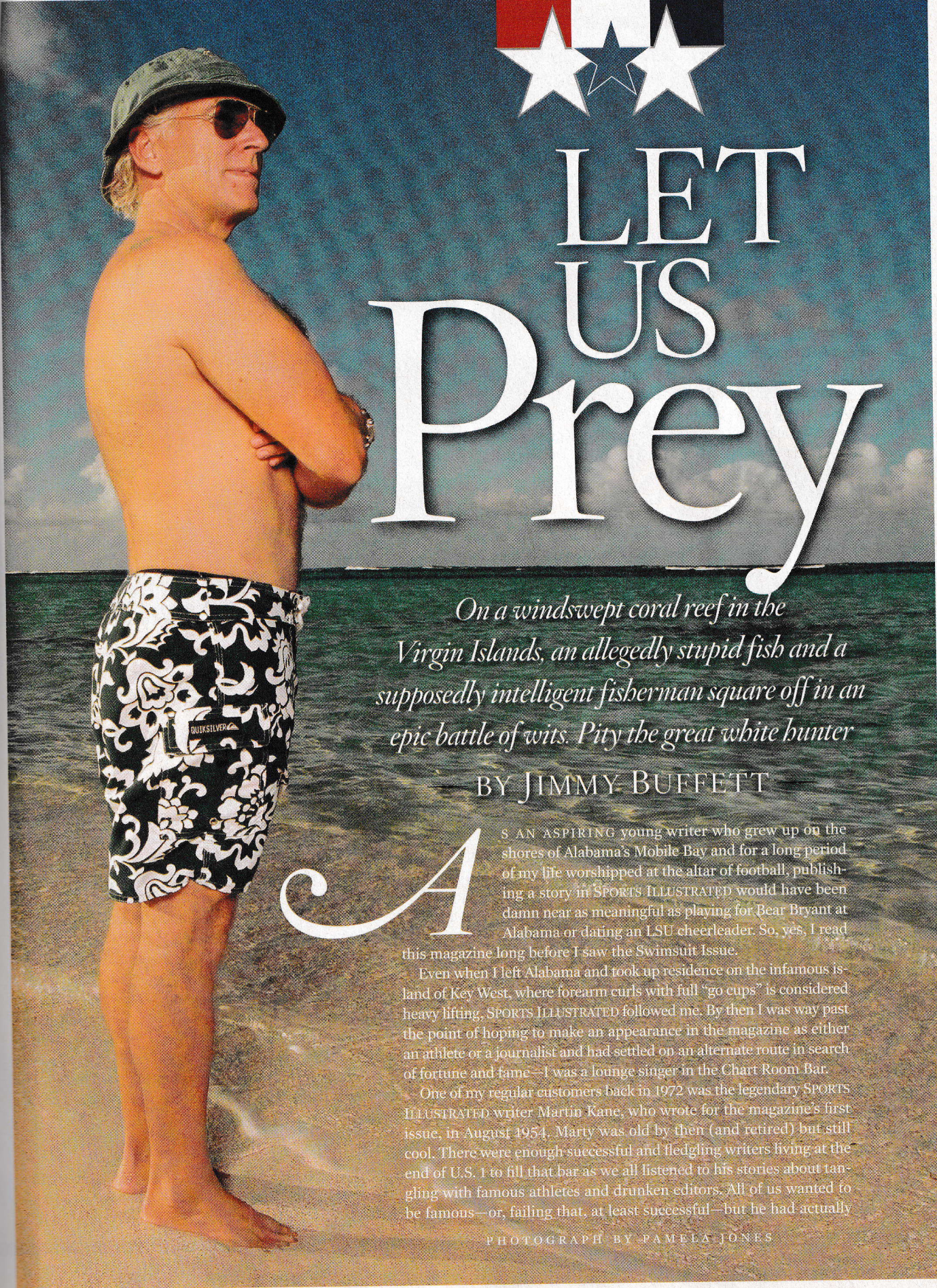
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LET US Prey

On a windswept coral reef in the Virgin Islands, an allegedly stupid fish and a supposedly intelligent fisherman square off in an epic battle of wits. Pity the great white hunter

BY JIMMY BUFFETT

AS AN ASPIRING young writer who grew up on the shores of Alabama's Mobile Bay and for a long period of my life worshipped at the altar of football, publishing a story in *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* would have been damn near as meaningful as playing for Bear Bryant at Alabama or dating an LSU cheerleader. So, yes, I read this magazine long before I saw the Swimsuit Issue.

Even when I left Alabama and took up residence on the infamous island of Key West, where forearm curls with full "go cups" is considered heavy lifting, *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* followed me. By then I was way past the point of hoping to make an appearance in the magazine as either an athlete or a journalist and had settled on an alternate route in search of fortune and fame—I was a lounge singer in the Chart Room Bar.

One of my regular customers back in 1972 was the legendary *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* writer Martin Kane, who wrote for the magazine's first issue, in August 1954. Marty was old by then (and retired) but still cool. There were enough successful and fledgling writers living at the end of U.S. 1 to fill that bar as we all listened to his stories about tangling with famous athletes and drunken editors. All of us wanted to be famous—or, failing that, at least successful—but he had actually

PHOTOGRAPH BY PAMELA JONES

done—it—he had been a writer for a great magazine and then retired to paradise. Most of the rest of us had skipped the *job* part and gone directly to *retired to paradise*. I never would have admitted it then, but I envied Marty and his real job.

My alternate route to success was music, which worked out pretty well. However, I still love to write, so I can't tell you how happy I was when SI's managing editor asked me to do a piece for the magazine. When told I could write about anything I wanted to—from fishing to football—the first words that came out of my mouth were, "I want to write for the Swimsuit Issue." (My friend Carl Hiaasen had written for the issue last year, and I was envious.)

The next day, though, reality ran down my fantasy, and I panicked. What did I have to say about swimsuits? That's fashion, something I know almost nothing about because I have been fortunate enough to live on or near a beach for most of my life.

Once I had thought about it, though, I realized I *am* kind of a bathing suit expert, because I spend half my life in one. In fact, I was wearing a bathing suit as I banged this article out on my computer while sitting on a beach in the British Virgin Islands in January. So sure, I could blow a lot of sweet-smelling smoke about the social significance of bikinis, but what I really like to do is fish.

A LATITUDE ADJUSTMENT

BACK WHEN I was taught how to fish the flats of Key West, I would rarely see another boat. There was enough water for everybody, and maybe just a dozen full-time guides. Today there are more than 100 guides in Key West and at least a half-dozen TV-fishing-show hosts in an armada of state-of-the-art skiffs. Fishing in the outposts has become a big business—there are high-dollar fishing lodges in



*The wind churned up long foam lines on the water, which usually means you are more likely to **HOOK YOUR EAR** than a fish.*

Patagonia and helicopter drops to chase salmon in the far corners of Russia.

The fish do not appreciate all this attention. Tarpon in the Keys, which used to be so aggressive that they would leave their mating circles—known as daisy chains—to snap at a fly, are now totally unpredictable in their eating habits. I have seen them rise on my fly, then turn toward the boat and look at me as if to say, Where's the mullet, you dumb-ass? Bonefish and permit, both naturally neurotic, are now twice as hyper; I don't know if they are having a reaction to all the cocaine dumped overboard into the Straits of Florida over the last 20 years or if they are changing their behavior because of all the fishermen. Whatever the reason, though, the fish in the fabulous Florida Keys are getting smarter.

A few years ago I was fishing a favorite flat of mine just north of Cottrell Key. I was standing on the bow, casting and reeling and doing that wonderful thing that fishing is all about: not thinking about a damn thing other than fishing. All of a sudden I spotted a fish out by the reef—the sunlight had marked it with a split-second flash on the dark tail of what looked like a permit. At first I thought it too big to be a permit and that a small black-tip shark had tricked me, but when the tail came up again, I knew that it was attached to the biggest permit I had ever seen. This monster was meandering along

the reef, looking for his mid-morning protein fix of baby blue crabs.

I cast, and my fly landed in front of the big fish, exactly where I wanted it to be, and I started to strip the line in short tugs that—I hoped—would make the fly look like a tasty appetizer for this hungry fish. As my line moved across his path, he locked on my fly. My heart started to race as I pulled the line closer to the boat, but the fish wouldn't bite. My fly was now no more than 20 feet from the bow of the boat, but the permit still hadn't eaten it. I didn't give up. I kept casting . . . and kept getting nothing. My leader rattled as it hit the tip of the rod, and I was now out of options.

The big fish swam into the shadow of the boat, which will spook any normal flats-dweller, but this fish just cruised on by, rolled a little to one side and stared at me with a big eye. I flashed on that scene in *Moby-Dick* when the White Whale gives Captain Ahab the evil eye as the big permit swam into green water on the deep side of the reef and disappeared. It was then that I decided it was time to change latitudes and look for a few stupid fish.

GOING DOWN TO THE DROWNED ISLAND

STUPID FISH ARE not really stupid. They just happen to prefer as much distance between themselves and *Homo sapiens* as possible, and once they achieve that goal, they let their guard down a little.



That's all I wanted—a fish that wasn't on orange alert—but finding flats that haven't felt the crunch of a human foot is pretty near impossible.

My endless wanderings—and damage done to my sailboat by a bad storm—finally took me to the British Virgin Islands in the mid-'70s. I parked my sailboat for a couple of winters in an idyllic place called Cane Garden Bay, where I learned to play cricket in the boatyard and chased all six cows on the island, looked for magic mushrooms and wrote a song called *Cheeseburger in Paradise*. The picturesque islands that line the deep waters of the Sir Francis Drake Channel were my sailing playgrounds during those years. There wasn't much out there you could hit with a boat—except for Anegada, the most northerly and isolated of the Virgins, which is surrounded by coral heads and jagged reefs that have claimed more than 300 ships.

In the winter of 1997 I arrived in St. Barts for my annual visit. My first morning there, I was sitting at the Bar de l'Oubli with my old friend Jerome LeFort. Jerome now had a real job—as a fishing captain. His specialty was going offshore after big marlin, but flats fishing had always intrigued him, and he knew that's what got me salivating, which is why he told me about a guy who had just fished for bonefish off Anegada.

That afternoon, after my nap, I called the Anegada Reef Hotel. “Oh, Mistuh Buffett,” the man said, “we all been wonderin’ when you would finally get around to comin’ to Anegada.”

I asked about guides and boats, and he said, “Oh, yes. Garfield has a real flats skiff—you won't be bustin' your ass around in no whaler on Anegada.”

That was all I needed to hear.

TOTALLY WRECKED Many a dream has crashed and burned, but the author (above) was dogged in his pursuit of Mr. Tarpon.

PUTTING A HOOK IN YOUR EAR

THE NEXT MORNING Jerome and I took off from St. Barts for the short flight to Anegada. About 40 minutes later we settled at an altitude of 500 feet and circled the island. From the air the reef resembled a giant garden of large, brightly-colored coral heads. To a sailor on a moonless night, Anegada would raise the flag of caution, but to a fisherman the island looked like a salty version of Emerald City. Below us we saw flamingos in the large salt pond in the center of the island, and like a local welcoming committee, a large school of bonefish cruised by under our starboard wing. The combination of large schools of fish, miles of flats and the mangrove-lined shore got my heart pounding. Rounding the island's east end, we saw a long stretch of shallow flats and a mangrove-lined shore, and I sang an updated version of that Iron Butterfly hit from the '60s: *Anegada-vida, baby!* I had a feeling that somewhere down there swam a few stupid fish.

We landed, loaded our gear into a pickup truck and headed for the hotel. The pungent aroma of low tide hung on the breeze, but to me it was perfume. As we pulled up to the hotel, I saw a pristine flats skiff tied to the dock nearby. I stepped out of the truck, and was introduced to a tall black man who looked like Evander Holyfield. He held out his hand and said, “Garfield.”

Years ago when I was in Cuba for the first time, I stumbled into a meeting with Gregorio Fuentes, the famous captain of Ernest Hemingway's fishing boat *Pilar* and a major inspiration for Papa's *The Old Man and the Sea*. As Gregorio and I walked and talked for near-

ly two hours, I couldn't take my eyes off his scarred and callused hands. They conjured up images of him alone in a small boat on a large ocean, bracing his feet against the ribs of his vessel to counter the pull of the big fish at the end of his line as a blue marlin exploded skyward from the foam like a submarine-launched missile and blocked out the sun. When I shook hands with Garfield, I felt that same magic.

"Ready to go?" he said.

"You bet," I said. We climbed into his skiff, and were off.

In his skiff Garfield was as quiet and deliberate as the tide. Since I am basically a quiet and shy altar boy from Alabama, I did not try to engage him in trite conversation—he had his fish radar on, and anything I said would only distract him.

When we reached the spot Garfield had chosen for us, I showed him my flies. "Try that pink Charlie," he said, so I tied it on and climbed up on the bow. At this point Garfield had no idea what kind of an angler I was, but it will take a guide just a few seconds of watching you cast to calculate your chances of getting a fly to a fish that day. I pulled 60 feet of line from my reel and coiled it neatly behind me, then made several practice casts. When I heard Garfield say, "Nice cast," I wasn't able to suppress a small smile of relief. With that, we eased down the edge of a broad flat, looking for bonefish.

We fished for about an hour, then anchored the skiff, got out and walked the flats. The fish were spooked, and Garfield said that there

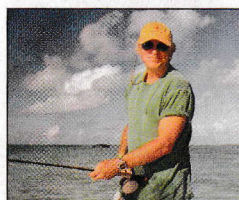
who can do it don't guess where the fish are—they know where the fish are, because they *think* like a fish. I knew Garfield ran on that frequency when I saw him walking across the bonefish flat that morning, stepping toe first into the water like a giant heron to minimize the sound of his movement. Now, poised atop the skiff's poling platform in the stillness of the tiny cove, he whispered, "There are tarpon around here." Those words sent my stomach rumblings into instant remission.

I was totally unprepared for tarpon, though. The only thing I had in my bag that even resembled a tarpon fly was a large silver blob—a gift that had lain dormant in the bottom of my fly box for years. Now I stood on the bow gently casting with it while Garfield was perched on the poling platform and Jerome scanned the water behind the skiff. Three men from different countries and different cultures all tuned in to some strange wavelength.

I finally spotted a long shadow in the water off in the distance. Suddenly the water exploded and a 100-pound tarpon flashed momentarily as he pounced on whatever poor baitfish he was chasing. "Three more behind him!" Jerome shouted. Garfield poled the boat around to put me at the perfect casting angle to the approaching fish. I looked at my poor excuse for a tarpon fly, then looked at Garfield and said, "Maybe?" He flashed a smile.

I cast long and forward of the lead fish and brought the fly to within range. Two of the fish moved toward it, then turned away.

I instantly made another cast, but again the fish at the edge of the



*I dreamed of Gregory Peck, as Captain Ahab, pinned to **MOBY DICK**. I hoped it wasn't an omen.*

must be weather coming. We moved across several more flats, catching just one small bonefish, but by then the wind had churned up long, thin foam lines on the water, which usually means you are more likely to hook your ear than a fish.

At Garfield's word, we were back in the boat, easing our way up to a narrow flat parallel to the shore. The flat didn't seem to be large enough for bonefish, so I asked Garfield what we were looking for. "Sometimes a permit or two come up," he said. "There's tarpon around as well." Garfield was a bonefish man, so chasing other fish didn't excite him much, but I asked if we could check out the tarpon flat.

We kept one eye on the weather and one eye on the flats as we worked our way along the shore's edge, but we saw nothing and the sky got darker and darker until we finally lost our light.

Some fishermen feel they have to spend every minute of their allotted time with a guide in pursuit of fish. I am not one of them. When Garfield asked if I wanted to check a spot on our way back to the hotel, my fishing radar was being jammed by images of a beef patty on a grill, a cold beer and the rope hammock I had seen hanging between two coconut trees back at the hotel, but something about the way he asked told me I should say yes.

SOME DAMN HAPPY TARPON

IF YOU SPEND enough time on flats and allow yourself to flush all the trappings of modern existence from your mind, you will begin to tune in to your surroundings. It's called *feeling the fish*, and guides

school turned it down. They were what I call happy tarpon—not spooked by the boat, not zigzagging at high speed, just cruising along the shore in front of a clump of mangroves in five feet of clear water. They cheerily swam right by us, and were gone.

That was okay, because I was hungry now, and clouds were blocking out the noonday sun, so we packed our gear and implemented our backup plan—to hook some big, fat cheeseburgers.

Later that evening, after my coconut tart and before my Calvados, I had a vision of those tarpon back by the mangroves, having a party, belly-laughing about the stupid humans they had driven crazy. I stared up at the stars that lit the Caribbean sky and made a silent toast to a few smart fish, confident that I would see them again.

DROWNED ISLAND, THE REMATCH

I RETURNED TO St. Barts the following spring, this time with my family. I think I speak for all fishing fathers when I say that there are many times when our priorities get out of whack and family duties are sometimes overlooked for the love of fishing. After making this mistake many times, I have learned to attend to my husbandly and fatherly duties with as much devotion as I can muster and then wait, like a sailor returning from sea duty, for shore leave. So, after I had played shark and dolphin, went cave diving, built sand castles, rigged the rope swing from the spreaders on the aft deck of the boat, taught my son, Cameron, to paddle a sea kayak and taken my daughter, Delaney, bottom fishing, it was time for Dad to

get his just reward. I was returning to Drowned Island.

At dawn the next day the wind was up, and there were whitecaps just beyond the harbor. I tuned in the weather report from St. Thomas; the scratchy voice on the radio spoke of a low-pressure cell moving in. Of course it is, I thought—I'm supposed to go fishing.

A few hours later, when I climbed into the plane, the weather had not improved. This news normally would have been the falling guillotine blade that ended any flats-fishing expedition, but I wasn't going back to Anegada to squint and stare at clear water searching for the shadows of bonefish. I was going back for tarpon—big fish that roll on the surface, gulp air and jump out of the water like humpback whales. I had new rods, and new flies I had tied just for this trip, so damn the bad weather, I thought, full speed ahead.

HARD-MAN FISHIN'

AS I WALKED down the dock at Anegada, I saw Garfield approaching in his skiff. He was clearly bothered by the weather—he knew too well that this was not a bonefish day. "I guess we be looking for tarpon?" he said with a slight smile.

"I guess we be," I said.

The normally clear, shallow water was milky, and the morning cloud cover showed no sign of breaking up. Small swells rolled our skiff from side to side as I watched the surf break on the shore. And then it began to rain.

Garfield struck a familiar pose. He was frozen in place, staring toward the shore like a pointer on a covey of quail. "There's a push of nervous water up there," he said softly. "Could be permit?"

I followed his gaze and saw what he was looking at. I flashed for a second on poor Captain Ahab, then reached for my harpoon—the 10-weight rod. As I moved toward the nervous water in my oversized waders, it was like walking on bubble wrap as the coral crunched beneath my toes. There was still no sunlight, and the sky looked more like winter in Maine than spring in the Virgin Islands, but the wind had slackened. Garfield drifted back to the edge of the flat, then stood on the platform, trying to spot the fish.

Pelicans were dive-bombing a school of small jacks near the beach. I laughed at the way the birds threw their entire bodies at the surface when they attacked and I called back to Garfield that they reminded me of kids diving into a mosh pit, but I immediately shut up when I saw the flash of a tail about 50 yards ahead. After catching a glimpse of that dark, pointed tail, nothing entered my brain but thoughts of stalking my prey.

I crept toward the fish. The surface of the water was flat gray, and in that light I wasn't going to be able to see the permit, so I was hoping that a tail would pop up again. A few minutes later I spotted a big push of water off to my left. It was now or never.

I fired a cast in front of the nervous water, and the fish moved toward my fly. Unfortunately, he had moved directly behind the only piece of exposed elkhorn coral on the entire two-mile-long flat. My



The best guides don't guess where fish are, they know where they are because they **THINK LIKE A FISH.**

We headed back to the clump of mangroves where I had seen that school of tarpon several months before, and the conditions were even worse now. Raindrops stung our faces as we met them head-on at 30 knots. My guide friends back in the Keys call this *hard-man fishin'*. Even Garfield was ready to quit. In fishing terms, we'd been blown out. We did a 180 and headed back to the hotel, vowing to try again tomorrow.

The next day, I awoke before dawn to that haunting image of Gregory Peck, as Captain Ahab, pinned to the scarred skin of Moby Dick, his arm flopping back and forth. I hoped it wasn't an omen for my pursuit of tarpon on Anegada. I slipped out of bed and walked outside, into the dark. The wind had eased; there were breaks in the clouds, and a few stars were visible in the early sky.

Garfield arrived at 8:30, and so did the wind. Things didn't look promising, but when he said, "Whatcha wanna do, Jimmy?" I cheerfully replied, "Let's go find a tarpon."

There was not a lot of fishing magic in the air that morning. By the time we reached the end of the island, we had 20 knots of wind and rain in our faces. Garfield calmly surveyed the spot from the wheel of the boat, then said, "If you want, we can check the coral flat. My brother seen a coupla tarpon in there yesterday."

He didn't even wait for my answer; he knew I wanted to see any flat that had tarpon.

When we reached Garfield's spot, I laced on my wading boots. I then eased myself over the side of the skiff, stepped onto the razor-sharp coral reef and was about to reach for my big tarpon rod when

line had fallen into its branches, which meant I was screwed—if the permit was dumb enough to eat the fly and take off, chances were my line would be cut by the coral.

I still couldn't see my fish, so I thought about imitating a pelican and dive-bombing into the water and pinning the big permit to the sandy bottom, but instead I carefully freed my line from the coral. When it finally lifted skyward, I put another cast in front of the moving wake. In a loud whisper I asked Garfield if he could see the fish, but even from his perch on the poling platform, there was not enough sun to penetrate through the gloom and shed a ray of light on our prey. I stripped my line, but nothing happened, and I saw the fish swim off the flat at high speed. I was left standing hip deep in water, in the rain.

SINGIN' IN THE RAIN

SO FAR THE day had been a bust, but then the clouds opened up and let some sunlight break through. The mini-monsoon had passed. I scooped up a handful of seawater and tasted it. It was more fresh than salt—the cloudburst had dumped thousands of gallons of fresh water in just a few minutes. I knew that if I could taste it, the tarpon could too, and that was bound to confuse the hell out of them.

Up ahead jacks were splashing wildly at the shallow end of a large sandy pool, and the pelicans had launched another aerial assault. I started walking toward the pool. Suddenly, I saw a dark spot moving toward me and thought, Thank you, God . . . and Captain Ahab! Call it karma or the gift of a guardian angel, but I felt at that moment

that I was exactly where I was supposed to be—standing in a milky, freshwater sea, soaking wet, trying to balance myself in too-big wading boots atop a shallow flat of coral, about to go one-on-one with Mr. Tarpon. I turned to wave to Garfield, but he was already poling toward me, my tarpon rod in his hand. “That what you been lookin’ for?” he said with a grin.

Gear in hand, I moved toward the pool. It started to rain again, and I saw Garfield fold himself into a ball and duck under the poling platform. Through the downpour, though, I could still make out the dark shadow of my fish. I sneaked up to the pond as quietly as I could. The pelicans were as oblivious to the rain as I was. So there we were, four pelicans and one crazy fisherman, just playing in the rain. Who looked stupid now?

My impatient fishing voice told me to launch a blind cast at the pool. My patient fishing voice told me to shut up and be still. Fortunately, the latter won the debate. I waited. And waited. And then, like an object materializing in the transporter room of the starship *Enterprise*, the shimmering silhouette of a tarpon floated to the surface. My arm moved instinctively, and I cast. As I lifted the line off the water and began my back cast, I spotted an even larger shadow gliding into the clear water and then—*whammo!*—a 60-pound tarpon sprung out of the water and did a half-gainer. Nine-point-five on the dive, I thought as I shifted my aim to the acrobatic tarpon and laid my fly three feet in front of him.

I hadn’t hooked a tarpon in nearly two years, but I had not for-

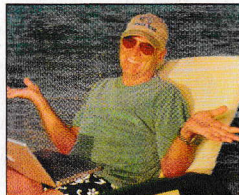
toward the mangroves for one last look.

We drifted along on those flats, scanning the surface for rolling fish, but saw nothing . . . except the sun, which had finally come out and lit the flat up like a neon sign.

For the first time that day, I looked at my watch. I knew that the good weather meant my plane back to St. Barts—and my family—would be returning on time. I was tempted to say, “Screw it,” and fish till sunset, but I had a feeling that the fishing gods had given me all I was going to get that day.

Garfield seemed to sense it too. He climbed down from the poling platform while I reeled in my line, but as I turned to drop my rod into the rack, I saw him frozen in place. He pointed with the sharp end of his pole and whispered, “Tarpon.” I turned and saw two very big fish, 70 to 90 pounds, cruising by in six feet of water. They were out of my range by the time I got my line stripped out, but several minutes later a second pair came by. I dropped my fly in front of them, and the inside fish turned toward the boat, followed the fly for a few seconds, then turned away. I saw another fish moving across the bow from right to left. I dropped a cast on him, but he too came and went.

While I hastily changed flies, several more big fish swam by. Garfield was up on the platform now, calling out the location of the oncoming fish like an auctioneer on speed. I took two more shots with my new fly but still got nothing. Then, as quickly as the fish had appeared, they were gone. “It’s just not da day,” Garfield said.



Garfield was now calling out the location of the
ONCOMING FISH *like an auctioneer on speed.*

gotten what to do. I stripped my fly in front of this big fish, and he altered his lazy glide toward the camouflage of the turtle grass that surrounded the pool and turned to follow my fly.

I figured it was only a matter of seconds before I felt a tug on my rod and the big silver fish would start to dance on the end of my line. I sang the chorus to *Singin’ in the Rain* as I shortened my strips; my fly neared the edge of the pool and the fish followed . . . and then made a sharp right turn and sprinted for the turtle grass. “S---!” I heard my echo bounce off the shore.

I looked at Garfield, and we both shrugged and laughed. Then, with that wonderful pragmatic assurance of a West Indian waterman, Garfield said, “Don’t worry—they be back.”

A PECULIAR KIND OF PARADISE

AND SO WE waited. The rain let up, and the ocean was as smooth as a runway. There was no wind, no noise, but still no sun. I was fishing the tropics as if in a black-and-white silent movie.

As Garfield had predicted, the smaller of the two big fish swam back into the pool about 15 minutes later. It moved along the far edge, then disappeared. There were no holes in the floor of heaven to let the light shine through, so I was still fishing blind, which meant it all came down to luck. I started casting. The fish would either be there or not. I covered the pool with long and short shots. Nothing.

The show was over. The fish had left, but my predator’s juices were still flowing. Big fish will do that to you. As one old guide put it, “Da war be over and you just started shootin’.” We decided to head back

“I know,” I said. “Let’s go get a cheeseburger.”

I should have been disappointed as we headed back to the dock, but instead, I counted my blessings. I don’t have to cram my fishing into an appointment book or a week’s vacation from the office, and I am lucky enough to pretty much go where I want when I want. I hadn’t hooked my tarpon, but I had gotten to know Anegada, which was now on my short list of places to run to if it all goes to hell one day.

POSTSCRIPT

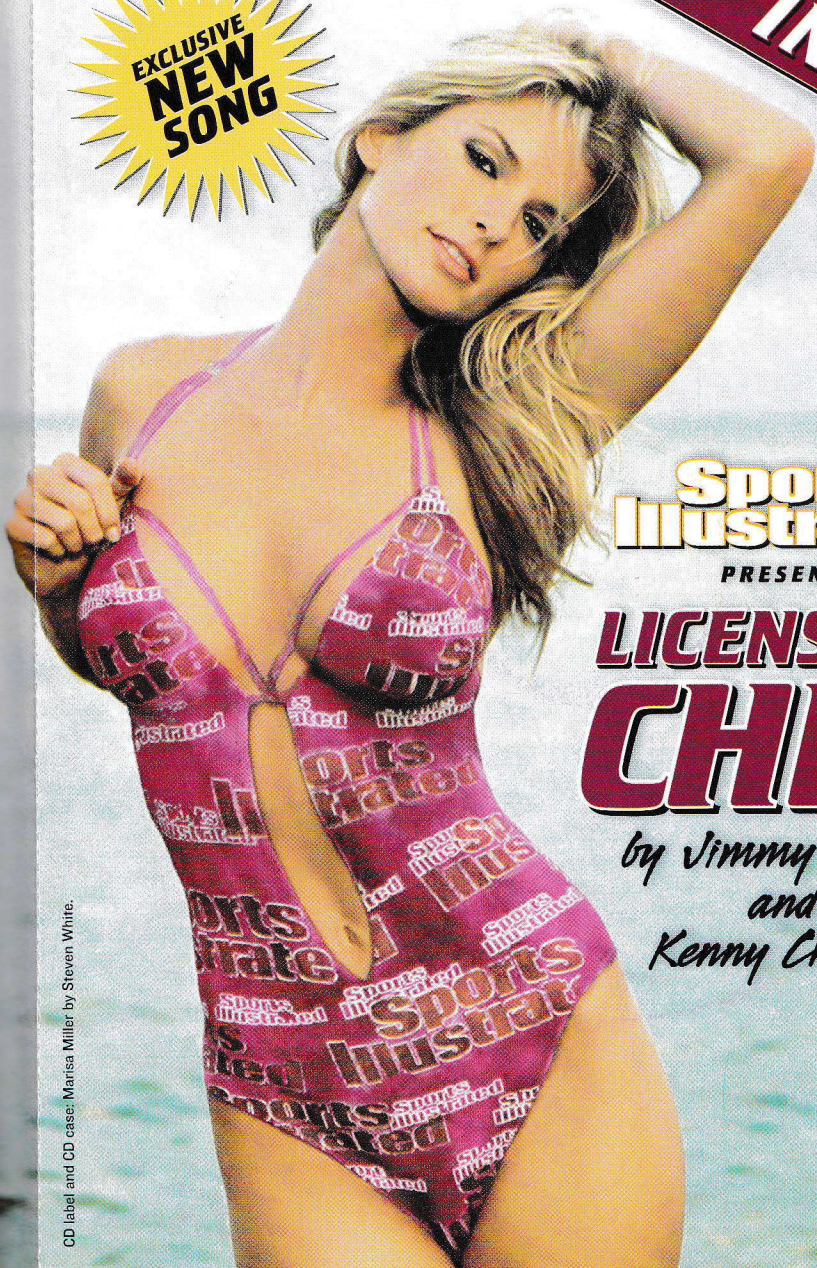
IT TOOK THREE years, lots of boat and airplane fuel, lots of glue, deer hair and feathers, and a lot of time on the water, but in April 1999, in that same spot by the mangroves on the eastern tip of Anegada, near a giant pile of conch shells, I finally launched a tarpon into the air. It was a small fish, and the aerial acrobatics took less time than it takes the space shuttle to clear the launch pad at Cape Canaveral, but my friend in the skiff was armed with a digital video camera and captured every second of it.

I have watched that jump at least 100 times, but I still enjoy it as much as a good *Seinfeld* rerun. It is available for viewing by fellow maniac fishermen or other interested parties on the Internet at www.margaritaville.com.

Finally, a word of caution. Some of you readers may at this point drop this magazine, call your travel agent and immediately book passage to Anegada. Be forewarned—there *are* tarpon in Anegada, but they are not stupid. □



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envious.)
y ran down my fantasy, and I pan-
out swimsuits? That's fashion, some-
about because I have been fortunate
ch for most of my life.
though, I realized I am kind of a



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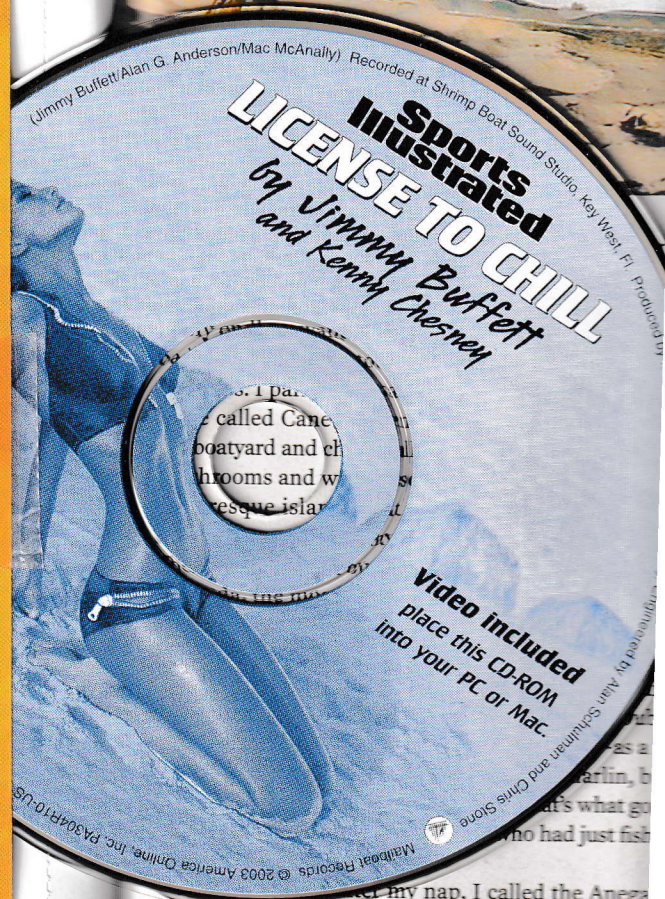
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...my nap, I called the Anegada
"Oh, Mistuh Buffett," the man said, "we all been waitin' for you you would finally get around to comin' to Anegada."
I asked about guides and boats, and he said, "Oh, you has a real flats skiff—you won't be bustin' your ass as a whaler on Anegada."
That was all I needed to hear.



Recorded at Shrimp Boat Sound Studio, Key West, FL. Produced by Mac McAnally and Michael Litley. Engineered by Alan Schifman and Chris Stone.

Sports Illustrated
LICENSE TO CHILL
by Jimmy Buffett and Kenny Chesney

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