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Fish Story

Joe Kloc

I don't fish, but I enjoy being around those who do. They're easy to find in New York, leaning against the railing of a Brooklyn pier or resting on the rocky banks of the city's rivers. In Sheepshead Bay, the fishermen are often jolly and sun-beaten, as if they've just returned from a long voyage. By early afternoon, they fill the local bars, swearing off red meat and bragging about not taking their medications. The Battery Park esplanade is more relaxed. Sometimes the only sign of a fisherman is an unmanned rod cast out to sea; a passerby might assume that fish in the Hudson catch themselves.

One August morning a few years ago, I went out to Coney Island to clear my head on Steeplechase Pier, where fishermen gather in the summer months to fill their buckets with flukes, stripers, and porgies, much as they did a century ago. Coney Island is slow to change. Its busier blocks still have working pay phones on both sides of the street, and until recently, broken signs dangled off the facades of abandoned buildings, unmoored from their bracings by Hurricane Sandy. On hot days, the main stretch of Coney Island's two-and-a-half mile boardwalk is crowded with visitors from the nearby amusement park. They eat mango on a stick as they navigate the performers dancing with snakes and rainbow-colored poodles. Down by the fishermen's pier, the boardwalk quiets down. Elderly residents of the nearby towers read paperback novels and check the time on their digital wristwatches, and kids gather in the shade beneath the arches of an old terra-cotta building with a flaking portrait of Poseidon on the front. In the painting, the sea king is sitting alone in a rowboat, paddling toward the Atlantic.

I joined a group of fishermen on the pier who were digging through ten-gallon buckets and tackle boxes. A man named Sonny was sitting on a Rascal scooter, baiting his hook with chopped-up fish and squid he kept in the vehicle's front basket. Another man, David, who looked to be in his late fifties, was leaning against the railing. As I sat down on a nearby bench, David noticed a tug on his line. He pulled up a fluke maybe ten inches long, too small to keep in New York State. He warned the others that city officials were known to inspect the fishermen's bags and buckets when they came in from

the pier at the end of the day.

As David removed the fish from his hook, a teenager sitting next to me on the bench jumped up. "Let me buy it from you," he said.

David looked around. "Just take it."

The teenager shoved the fish, which was flapping wildly, into a plastic bag. When the bag stopped moving, he put it in his backpack and sat back down.

"That's the last one for you," said David. He walked over to a bag tied to a nearby railing post and pulled out a bluefish, only a few inches long. He flattened it on the railing and sliced it into four pieces. He placed three of them back in the bag and baited his hook with the fourth.

The teenager began to panic. He pointed to two men in yellow vests walking down the pier.

"Don't worry," said David. "They're not from the city." The teenager struggled to hide his backpack beneath the bench. "I'm telling you they are not with the city," David repeated. "I can read their bodies. They're drunk on warm beer."

Moments later the men sat down and removed two cans of beer from their bag.

"I know everything!" David laughed. "This is my corner. I've been fishing here for thirty years." Looking out over the water, he told me about an evening, years ago, when thirty or so people arrived from Haiti to get baptized in the ocean. "It was very interesting."

I asked if he had thought about joining them.

"No. Out here, my spirit is free."

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David was born into a family of undertakers, but he never took up the profession. He served in the navy and later worked as the superintendent for several buildings in his neighborhood in the Bronx. His wife died a few years before we met, and since then he had spent much of his time fishing. It had been years since he knew the time. "I don't ask people the time and I don't keep up with the time," he said. "I'm on my time."

The men on the pier referred to David as Pop, one of many nicknames he's acquired over the years. The owner of his favorite pizza shop called him Mr. White for the white scruff that grew on his chin when an early morning tide required him to leave his house without a shave. A fishing-boat captain in Sheepshead Bay knew him as Joe, for reasons David did not himself know.

As he and Sonny fished, David told me he'd once caught a fifty-one-pound striped bass in the East River, a record

at the time.

Sonny laughed.

“You can look it up,” David said, adding that a bait shop named Stella Maris in Sheepshead Bay kept records of the biggest catches. He leaned toward me. “Still, it’s best when the guys see it for themselves. So they know it’s not no fish story.”

He was hoping for a big catch today. For years, he’d been using fish to settle his tabs at various shops in his neighborhood, and a payment was due. “I have accounts all over the neighborhood,” he told me. “I have a big account at the pizzeria. But I keep my bills. You’ve got to pay your way in life. Because nobody won’t give you nothing for free. Believe me. I’ve tried.”

Now and then, I’ve come across stories of other fishermen who survived like David. At a bar in Clinton Hill, a man named Robert once told me about some fishermen who decades ago sold bluefish on his block. “This was back in the day. They fish in the morning. Really early in the morning. Come back one, two, three, four in the afternoon. They would open up the fire hydrant and clean the fish on the corner. I’d go down right away and buy it. Fresh fish! People turned up,” said Robert. “They made a rule that you’re only supposed to bring in five pounds. Anything after that you have to throw it back in. But some fishermen used to take it and hide it because they needed money. A whole fish was five dollars.” Back then, the police never bothered the fishermen. “The government didn’t care too much about this neighborhood. People got shot on the corner. There were bodies, drugs, all over. Everyone selling drugs made five to six thousand a day. It stopped when the cocaine started coming into the neighborhood. The government started making strict rules in the community. Then white people came.”

The last fisherman Robert remembered seeing on the block was known as Cabo Rojo. “He was old but he was strong. He was afraid of nothing, short with tattoos all over.” On summer evenings, people would line up around the block, waiting for Cabo Rojo to arrive. “He would take the money he made, buy a big bottle of liquor at the Puerto Rican grocery store, and we’d all share it. Maybe take another fish and throw it on the barbecue. It was good times. He used to invite us to Far Rockaway to go to the beach. He used the money to rent a boat. We’d jump in the water and drink beer.” According to Robert, Cabo Rojo disappeared from the neighborhood sometime in the late nineties.

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“Some guys didn’t come back this year,” David told me as he cast his line into the water. “Strokes, heart attacks. We all came out to throw roses into the water.” On

Steeplechase Pier, he said, it's a tradition to remember the dead by venturing out to their fishing spot, saying a prayer or two, and tossing a bouquet of flowers into the sea. "Everybody wants to be remembered in some kind of way," he said. "Me? I want to be remembered up on this pier. They'll say, Remember Pop?"

At the far end of the pier, two fishermen accidentally caught a stingray. After much effort, they pulled it up over the railing and freed their line. They watched the creature suffocate for a moment and walked away, leaving it in the center of a growing crowd. Seeing this, Sonny drove his Rascal over to the commotion. He and another fisherman grabbed the ray by the fins and tossed it back to sea. A group of onlookers lined up along the railing to watch the ray as it composed itself beneath the water and vanished.

"It looks like a bird," a small girl said.

"You would think it could fly," said an older man in a Hawaiian shirt. "But it cannot."

By dusk, David and I were alone. He had only caught one good-size fish, a fluke he kept in his bucket. "The ol' boy's about dead," he said.

I asked if it was a problem if the fish died.

"No," he said. "But of course, in a way, it's a terrible thing."

David reeled in a small bluefish, about six-inches long. As he took it off the hook, he noticed he'd caught it using a piece of another bluefish as bait. "They eat their own," he said as he tossed the fish into the center of the pier and watched as it flopped its way toward the edge, in search of ocean. "The bluefish is a very ferocious fish," he said. "They don't believe in letting go."

David was interrupted when a couple showed up on the pier, arm in arm. Behind them a short old lady was crying, keeping watch over three children. One of them was carrying a bottle of Corona. Another held a bundle of balloons. As they approached David's corner of the pier, he bowed his head and hustled me out of the way. The family said what sounded like a prayer in Spanish. The family passed around the Corona, each taking a sip. "Fourteen miserable years!" the man shouted out to the Atlantic as he tossed the bottle into the water. They huddled together on the edge of the pier and one of the girls released the balloons.

After the family walked away, David noticed the bluefish he'd caught a few minutes ago had made considerable progress toward the edge of the pier. "I've had an interesting life," he said. "I've had days when a guy next to me outfished me with a string and a soda can. Now I'm just figuring out how I want to be buried. Put in the ground? Or scattered in the ocean?" He walked over to

the fish, now only inches from the water, and picked it up. "Okay, Mr. Snapper," he said as he flattened it out on the railing. "I'm about to do sushi on you." He took out his knife and sawed through its tail and fins, flicking each into the water. "They die so fast," he said, as he sliced the finless body into four pieces. Blood pooled in the knife grooves scaring his section of the rail. He fixed a chunk of flesh on his hook. "Let's try this again," he said, casting his line into the water once more.

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A few weeks later, I went to Sheepshead Bay to visit Stella Maris, the bait shop where he told me he kept his fishing records. On my way down, I stopped in a nearby cafe, which advertised cheesecake, cappuccino, and "gelato from Italy" on its awning. I was hoping to find some fishermen returning from a day out on the charter boats, but the place was nearly empty. An old man was hunched over at the bar, tallying receipts and mumbling to himself as he poured a Budweiser into a small glass, downed it, and repeated. A bartender walked into the room. He saw me glance at an empty gelato case. "We don't have food here," he told me. I asked for a beer. He handed me a Budweiser and a small glass. A movie called *The Fog* was playing on a television mounted on the wall. The old man at the bar turned to me and said, "What I can only imagine is that the fog kills everyone."

When the movie ended I made my way to Stella Maris, a narrow, one-story brick building with fishing gear piled in the backyard. A few fishermen were lingering in the side alley, washing some equipment with a hose. Inside, a man with tattoos and a beard was standing behind a glass case full of tackle. I told the man about David and his fifty-one-pound catch that was once the largest on the East River. That made sense, he said, because striped bass liked the river's brackish water. I asked if I could see the records. He looked confused, so I explained that I wanted to confirm David's story, and to find out the name of the person who bested him. He laughed. "Oh," he said, looking over at the two fishermen now arguing with one another in the alley. "We don't write anything down."

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