

hull caps and a little beginner's luck. I wiped my eyes and dipped my palms in the water, baptizing them in New Jersey salt. I sent out a few casts, letting my line disappear before strapping the fly through the foam at my ankles. With every two casts, I stepped five paces to the left, letting the tide swing my fly. The fly line grabbed at my legs, crawling in the salty spray like vines. Dohbeart-ened, I kept casting into the vastness, praying for a grab. This was not the same as casting a size 22 blue-winged olive to the brown trout that inhabit the South Branch of the Raritan.

After continuing my unsuccessful casting pattern, I bumped into two people standing on the beach with conventional tackle plugged into the sand with PVC rod holders. Their postures were stiff as they stood on the beach in silence, hands

man asked. "That's right," I said, confidently toting my 8-weight around like a carnival prize.

"You're crazy," the younger man cackled as he tossed a juvenile fluke back into the ocean. After explaining that I'd never fished the salt before, the men congratulated me and consoled me at the same time. The younger man showed me some pictures on his cracked phone screen—stripers and fluke—a gallery of memories that brought a smile to his face.

"The fluke, they like yellow," the older one barked through a haze of cigar smoke, "and the stripers, they like white." In a frantic fit of para-

croaked excuse for a Chooser Minnow from the Styrofoam grip of my fly box. Expecting ridicule for the strange, cartoonish monstrosity, I was surprised by a wrinkled smirk and, "That'll fish!" from the older man. His smile was as wide as the Atlantic itself, and his eyes were swallowed by the crew's feet wrinkles that formed at the sight of my fly. He had smiled a lot in his life, I could tell. I spoke with both men for several minutes, watching the tide roll and break.

We tracked fish stories, backgrounds, and strate-

to talk. I tied the yellow monster to my leader while thanking the men, who warmly welcomed me to their saltwater addiction and quietly waited for that perfect fish. After tying a firm knot, I threw the bushel of backhaul into the crashing surf. I stripped my fly slowly, quietly, reminding myself of the sporadic tendencies of beginner's luck, hoping to get struck by a blessing. After a few more casts, I saw my fairfish imitation twitching aimlessly through the chilly water, and like a kite, a white-bellied saucer sailed to the fly, floating in the peak of the small wave. It took me by surprise, and I didn't expect such a violent

share of the beach to see if anyone was looking, and to my dismay, no one was. The fish fought like a bear, yanking the end of my line. After the lazy, tugging battle stopped and the bend in my rod ceased, there was a fluke sliding to my feet.

I raised in euphoria, raising my arms in triumph like a prize fighter. I waved my arms to get the attention of the two men I'd talked to, but they were too far into the mist to see me. Although I'd seen photos of fluke before, I was taken aback by the oddly contorted creature at my feet. The adrenaline charged through my fingertips, and I had trouble steadying them long enough to re-

Some anglers claim that catching fish is merely an extra benefit of going fishing—that the tug on the end of a line is a consolation prize—that they really packed their cars to escape the speed of their lives, to revel in creation, solitude, and the art of casting a fly rod in a beautiful setting. However, when an out-of-stater like me fished the salt for the first time, I realized that breaking bread on the shores that sit under the watch of New York City is not a hobby, but a way of life. Stripers are holy, and fishing spots are as precious as family heirlooms. Fishing on these shores is not a hobby, but a necessity. ←

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