



PHOTO BY SCOTT SOMMERLÄTTE

The Happiest Man in the World

✿ By Monte Burke

[Dear Thoughtful Reader: A brief word of warning. The word “fuck” is used a lot in this story. If you are easily offended, under the age of 18, live in a state with weird sodomy laws, or happen to be sitting down with this magazine on a Sunday before noon, you might want to consider skipping this piece. If, however, you appreciate the artful employment of the word by a man who happens to be among its most skillful users, then by all means read on. Or as Captain Frank would say, “Fucking go for it, man.” —Eds]

HERE'S THE SCENE: I'M 25 AND NEW TO GOTHAM, A CITY I SWORE UP AND DOWN THAT I WOULD NEVER, EVER INHABIT. I OCCUPY THE SMALLEST room of a gigantic loft apartment near Chinatown shared with three roommates who have seemingly bottomless appetites for takeout and pornography, both of the Asian variety. They all work on Wall Street. I work as an administrative assistant (read: secretary) at an outdoor sports magazine, a job for which I had spurned the yellow-brick road of business school. I live with my 10-year-old Golden Retriever who, somewhat surprisingly, takes to the city well, what with its olfactory riches and legions of overfed, sluggish rats. I am desperately homesick for the life I have left behind, the endless hours, days, months spent tramping the woods and wading the waters of Alabama, North Carolina, Virginia, and Vermont, a type of life that seems impossible to find in this city. Fishing, to me, becomes something unattainable except by proxy, and thus desired with more intensity, much like real Asian women are to my new roommates.

Then one day the phone rings at work. The voice on the other end says there's a fishing tournament coming up in Manhattan. The voice is wondering if I want to do a pre-fish, to check out the New York Harbor and all its glory, you know, “give it a fucking whirl.” I immediately think this is a prank call from a college buddy. It's not. It's Captain Frank Crescitelli of Staten Island, New York.

A week later, in the darkness of an early morning, I'm standing at the southernmost tip of the Isle of Manhattan, the site of the original 16th-century Indian trading outpost, a place of commerce then and now. I'm with a New York City photographer named Brendan, who has little, if any, fishing experience. We jump on the Staten Island Ferry, a big orange behemoth that smells like a giant urinal mint. The 25-minute ride to the forgotten borough costs 25 cents. A few years later, this ferry would ram into the Staten Island docks, killing eleven people and nearly adding another when the captain tried in vain to commit suicide, slitting his wrists in the cockpit just moments after the accident he caused.

We get to Staten Island in one piece. It's still dark as we walk through the terminal to the parking area. There I lay eyes on Captain Frank for the first time. With his hands in his pockets, he's leaning against his big black Cadillac Escalade with a license plate that reads "FINCHASR." He has a waterman's solid build. He has jet-black hair that cascades down the back of his neck into a perfect mullet. A shit-eating grin is spread across his face, stretching the handle-bars of his black mustache.

We hop in. Captain Frank puts the key in the ignition, and we are immediately blasted by Angus Young's opening guitar riff from "Back in Black." Captain Frank doesn't even as much as glance at the volume knob. We communicate like mimes. Brendan and I nod and smile and arch our eyebrows while giving the "thumbs-up" sign. Captain Frank plays air guitar. We are a noise bomb launched through the dark, sleepy streets of Staten Island. I picture our wake rippling through the darkened apartment bedrooms we pass by, the housewives in hairnets and faded terrycloth robes elbowing their snoring husbands in the ribs, imploring them to do something, those damn kids are making that racket again. At one point during the drive Captain Frank grabs hold of my arm and yells over the music: "I FUCKING LOVE AC/DC!" It's 5:00 a.m.

We stop at a bagel shop. Inside, the bagel man stands behind the counter and a group of men sit in plastic chairs, wearing plaid flannel shirts and Carhartts and drinking black coffee. For a fleeting moment, I feel like I could be in, say, Wisconsin, surrounded by men—electricians, construction workers—who gather for joe and bullshitting before putting in an honest eight. Captain Frank greets the group with a "How you doin', fellas," then picks up some bagels. As we're leaving, one of the coffee drinkers saunters up to the counter and leans on his elbow like a barfly. He looks the bagel man in the eye and says, "I got a joke for you, buddy. So there are these two guys in a canoe, fucking a mon-goose..." Just then the door shuts, forever depriving me of the punch line.

We shove off from Staten Island's Captain's Marina at 6 a.m. We fish all day, catching striper after striper, mostly on top with Gurglers. We cast flies beneath "the skirt" (the Statue of Liberty), by the United Nations building in the East River, and off of Hoffman and Swinburne Islands, used in the 19th century as a quarantine and crematorium, respectively, for sickly immigrants who landed at Ellis Island. At the end of the day, with the boat perched by a stanchion of the Verrazano Bridge, Brendan finally puts down his camera and picks up a spinning rod. He makes a cast. When he reels it in, he has something cream-colored, wrinkly, and cylindrical. Captain Frank quickly yanks the robusto cigar out of his piehole and bellows: "Brendan, fuckin' A! You caught a Coney Island Whitefish!" Which, of course, is a rubber.



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It's been many years since Captain Frank has seen one. Its capture brings his story full circle: When Captain Frank was "a little fucker," as he puts it, in the 1960s and 70s, casting from the shores of Staten Island or Brooklyn into waters as defiled as any in the nation, he caught four or five Coney Island Whitefish for every sickly striper. Eden was a mess, the Old Testament fall from grace complete. But Captain Frank held on to his hope that it would turn around, kept faith in the New Testament promise of redemption. He kept fishing. He bought a boat. He shrugged his big shoulders when people openly mocked him for starting a guiding service in the harbor. He founded his own fishing conservation organization. And the stripers came back.

A few years ago, Captain Frank and I decided, just for shits and giggles, to do a "hook and cook." We were, of course, fully aware of the health advisories that had been slapped on Hudson River stripers, the PCBs (thanks to General Electric plants upstream) that the fish hosted in their fatty tissue. But on principle, we felt it was something we had to do.

I met him early in the morning. We fished very hard. For once our goal was a striper for the table and not for sport. I hadn't fished for food in a long while, and that emphasis brought a whole new awareness, an animistic intensity to the day. We caught many bluefish, and kept a few in the cocktail size. We landed a handful of stripers, but no keepers. Near the end of the day, Captain Frank directed the boat to a rip off of Swinburne Island, his hon-yhole. It was our last chance for a keeper striper. He forsook the fly rod and picked up a spinning rod, tying on an enormous hook. He took a fat, shiny live menhaden, impaled it through the lips, and cast it out. Then he fell into a Zen-like trance, holding the slack line between his forefinger and thumb, watching the spot in the water where the menhaden swam in wild circles, staring with a middle-distance gaze like one does when driving at night, aware of all things within the halo of headlights and just beyond. I'd never witnessed Captain Frank in this meditative state before. I was used to his jawing and good-natured yelling. He spoke in low conversational tone, coolly giving me instructions on where to point the boat to keep it right on the rip. Live-lining is its own mysterious art. Suddenly he reared back on the rod with force and started

to pump and reel. It was a fun fight to watch. After five minutes, it was still a draw. This was a big fish. Eventually Captain Frank got the upper hand, and I helped him net a 20-pound striper.

We went back to his two-story house on a cul-de-sac in the Tottenville section of Staten Island. I'd never been to any purely residential part of Staten Island before, so I had no idea what to expect. There were kids' bikes lying on their sides in front yards. A Plexiglas backboard and hoop was set up on the street with a few worn basketballs strewn about its base. For some reason, it reminded me of the suburbs of Chicago.

"Hope you don't mind that I invited a few friends over," Captain Frank said as he filleted the big striper in his garage. Of course I didn't. I went up to the guest room to get cleaned up. When I came back downstairs, Captain Frank's "few" friends had shown up. Eight, to be exact. The Valentines, the Bittmans, the Sullivans and

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the O'Byrnes. They all called him "Frankie," and they all laughed and nodded and stuffed their faces with bluefish cake appetizers as he told off-color jokes between his own huge, messy swigs of Cabernet. His wife

Sharon frequently rolled her eyes in a good-natured, "that's my Frankie" kind of way. Captain Frank left the party for a few minutes to tuck his two young daughters into bed. The air seemed to have been sucked from the room. Then he reappeared, and the party ensued and we ate the striper, grilled to perfection, PCBs be damned.

After dinner, the men retreated to Captain Frank's basement, which is furnished exactly like a bar. In fact, there is an actual bar, with nearly every type of liquor stocked behind it and a tap that pours Budweiser. There's a pool table and a dartboard.

Captain Frank lit our cigars, then acted as the bartender. "You're on your own after the first one," he said. Then he turned up the Springsteen so loud that I really couldn't really hear it, I just felt it. "IT'S OK," he yelled. "THE BASEMENT IS SOUNDPROOFED." I was told I played an awful game of pool that night. I was also told that I took a private limo home. I recollected neither.

People genuinely like Captain Frank. They like being around him. He's an optimist and a positive thinker, which are good traits for a fisherman and even better traits for a fishing guide. He attends Tony Robbins seminars every year with Sharon. It helps him sell insurance (he does part-time work for State Farm). It helps him sell the fishing in New York Harbor. It helps him in general. He's much sought-after as an after-dinner auctioneer.

He's done it for years for his annual striper tournament in Manhattan. He's performed for the Yale Angler's Club and for the Redbone tournament in Montauk. His auctioneering style is one-of-a-kind. He starts off in sort of an upbeat conversational tone, speaking directly to the audience, making eye contact, imploring them to open their wallets. There's none of that rapid-fire, barely understandable stuff that the pros do. But when an item isn't receiving the bids he thinks it should, he'll finally breakdown and say: "C'mon people, somebody fucking buy this thing!" He's had one failure as an auctioneer. The folks at the Redbone, impressed with his Montauk performance, invited him down to Islamorada for the tournament there. On auction night Captain Frank stood up in his wide-lapelled black suit and white shirt and took the mic, barking out the items and their prices to a staid group of men in Nantucket red pants and women in blue hair and natural pearls. The audience just sat there, hands in their laps, in a stunned "Oh, the vulgarity!" silence.

"They didn't fucking get me," he says.

In case it's not already apparent, Captain Frank really likes to use the word "fuck." One day on the water I decided to count them. The "fucks," that is. I figured out, just based on a sample from a five-minute diatribe concerning an infamous striped bass poacher in the harbor, that Captain Frank uses the word "fuck," or some derivation thereof, once in every five spoken words. He uses it as a noun ("That dude is a fucker."), a verb ("He takes the fish when they're fucking, during the spawn"), and an adjective ("The fucking guy just poaches them all fucking day"). When I suggested he try using it sometime as an "-ly" adverb, he replied: "Fuck that."

Captain Frank and I fished together this past Halloween. Last year on this day, he dressed up in a full Santa Claus suit and fished all day in order to get what turned out to be an awesome grip-and-grin photo for his Christmas card. But this Halloween, he was dressed up in his normal guiding outfit: a fleece, jeans, and Vans skateboarding shoes.

We took off from Staten Island at around 7:00 AM and headed for Jamaica Bay, the huge marine refuge for fish and fowl that's directly in the flight path of airplanes taking off and landing at JFK. We motored by the subsistence fishermen on the Carnoustie Pier, all of whom gazed longingly at his boat, which seemed to promise access to fish just beyond the reach of their casts. The gathering of buildings in lower Manhattan—minus their huge twins, of course—was shrouded in fog in the near distance. No matter how you feel about urbanity—and I'm still on the fence—it's hard not to marvel at the majesty of its architecture, especially at this near distance. It's the feeling a knight must have had when ascending a hill for a first glimpse of a medieval castle.



"Oh, nothing much, just chillin' with Wade Boggs. What are you doing?"

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We stopped in the neck of Jamaica Bay when we saw working birds. The adrenaline of the city—that needle shot straight into the veins—is still very much present on the water in the New York Harbor. Freighters and tugboats passed nearby. An above-ground subway wended like a snake in the grass through the wind-whipped trees and shrubs of Far Rockaway. Helicopters buzzed overhead. The landing-gear screech of an incoming Lan Chile 747 soaked up all noise not was not its own. And on the water, the birds were going nuts. Bluefish were hitting everywhere, but they were doing so in pairs and singles and not in big voracious mobs, which somehow made them seem less menacing and more interesting, like the difference between cat burglars and arsonists.

Part of the adrenaline came from buck fever. Fish were hitting all around me. I couldn't figure out which one to cast to, so I tried in vain to cast to them all. As Captain Frank nudged the nose of the boat into the mayhem, he yelled from the cockpit: "One o'clock. Now three o'clock. Eleven, eleven!! This is fucking awesome!" I felt like I'd accidentally wandered into a green-lighted intersection of Broadway and 42nd at rush hour. One of my casts hit the boat's antenna and broke off the fly. On one drift, I lost the entire fly line when I somehow wrapped it around the propeller.

Then I finally relaxed. I got a cast near one duo that was busy chopping up a gathering of peanut bunker. One fish veered away from the assault, followed my fly like a bonefish, then inhaled it. "Fuck yes!" Captain Frank yelled, his dropped cigar hissing in the water. He netted the ten-pound blue and slapped my back with a big paw. I realized at that moment that I'd lived in this city now for nearly a decade. It hit me that Captain Frank was a big reason why. This never wears off for him: He's ebullient, evangelical, frothing at the mouth, loving the briny air, the boat, the cacophony of the harbor, the fish, the fishing, the company. He's more into it than anyone I know.

—Monte Burke is a staff writer for Forbes magazine. He lives in New York.

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