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CUTBANK SAKURA

Words, Photos
and Captions:
Henry Hughes

AT 91, DAD STILL DRIVES, still lives in our old house on Long Island, still watches every Mets game, and is still curious. “So, what’s this flyfishing all about?” he asks during a summer visit. Dad never loved fishing, but he loved his kids and supported our interests. Maybe his career in barge cranes made it easier for him to get excited about rods and reels, which he jokingly called “booms and drums.” He was also skilled at repairing the cranky outboards and leaky boats we ran over Long Island Sound. Flyfishing, however, always felt “too artsy” for Dad.

My father, a combat veteran of the Korean War, spent a week of R&R in the seaside city of Kamakura, Japan, in 1952. When he wasn’t carousing, he walked the markets and shops, curious about the local wares. Although he would never purchase a fly rod, he’s delighted when my brother, who buys and sells antiques, presents him with a Sakura split-bamboo rod made in Japan in the early ’50s. Before their postwar electronics and automotive boom, Japan exported cheap toys, clothing, ceramics, crafts and tools. Japanese cane rods of this era were often hastily and cheaply made. Depending on how the nodes were stacked, the rod may be serviceable or junk; there are usually too few guides, and the glues surrender to heat. But this black-lacquered Sakura rod in its handsomely compartmented wood case invites an honorable bow.

Sakura means “cherry blossom,” signifying not only the renewal of spring, but also the brevity of life. Cherry blossoms don’t last long, so we waste no time in joining up the rod. “It’s like sex,” he says, slipping in the male

stalk. When my brother and I chuckle, he adds, “Hey, I still get horny.” Our mother died over 40 years ago and my father never remarried. He’s had a few girlfriends, none recently that we know of, but it seems the sap is still flowing. When we get the three-piece rod together and screw on a reel, he says, “Let’s go fishing.”

Dad hands me the keys to his pickup and we drive to Port Jefferson Harbor on a bright August afternoon. He practices his first cast sitting at a picnic table behind some riprap. Then, leaning on an oak cane, he moves precariously over the gravel and sand, warmly greeting two women pulling up their kayaks. They don’t seem to notice that he’s wearing striped cotton underpants instead of actual shorts. Later, when I tease him, he grins. “Who cares? They’re comfortable!”

At the high-tide waterline, I demonstrate a cast. The Sakura is as slow as a Kabuki play and as soft as an udon noodle, but functional nonetheless, delivering the 5-weight line and a little Clouser 50 feet from the windless beach. Dad gives it a shot. After a few messy tries, he makes a decent cast that entices a pack of small snapper blues. “It’s the rod and line, not the lure, that gets it out there,” he states, ever the student, though he dropped out of high school at the age of 14. Chirping when he feels the tiny tap of a silver snapper just a few feet from shore, he retrieves too quickly and beaches the fly. He makes another hasty backcast that nearly hooks one of the kayakers.

“You’re getting good,” I tell him. “Let’s head down the beach.”

“Maybe later,” he says. “It’s too hot. Let’s get a beer.” ☞



◀ LEFT TO RIGHT ▶

With late-summer sun streaming into his garage on Long Island, NY, Charles Hughes, comfortably attired in his Army T-shirt and briefs, assembles a Sakura fly rod. At 91, the Korean War veteran says he “feels great” and wants to “try this flyfishing thing people are crazy about.”

Sakura Fishing Tackle, established in Tokyo in 1888, survived World War II and turned to manufacturing inexpensive rods for export. This split bamboo model was produced in the early 1950s, sold at Army exchanges and tourist attractions, and exported by the thousands to the United States.

Charles makes his first cast with a fly rod at Port Jefferson Harbor, Long Island, NY. Snapper blues dimpled the harbor that August afternoon; after a couple shots with the rod, Charles was ready for a beer.