

Fish Stocks Limited

Michael Summers

A Tale of Fish, Love and Copious Quantities of Rum

Part One of the Infinity Fish Trilogy

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Table of Contents

[Chapter 1 - Piscogenesis](#)

[Chapter 2 - The Fall](#)

[Chapter 3 – An Apparition and A Resurrection](#)

[Chapter 4 – A Challenge Is Set](#)

[Chapter 5 – Preparation](#)

[Chapter 6 – Fish on!](#)

[Chapter 7 - Exodus](#)

[Chapter 8 – Caught](#)

[Chapter 9 – The City With No Name](#)

[Chapter 10 - Sightseeing](#)

[Chapter 11 – One Fine Day](#)

[Chapter 12 – Next Week](#)

[Chapter 13 – Next Month](#)

[Chapter 14 – Next Year](#)

[Chapter 15 – The History of Fish Stocks Limited](#)

[Chapter 16 – Wining and Pining](#)

[Chapter 17 – The Beast Within](#)

[Chapter 18 – The Boy Who Rode The Fish](#)

[Chapter 19 – In Tuition](#)
[Chapter 20 – The Skeleton](#)
[Chapter 21 – From Bad To Worse](#)
[Chapter 22 – All At Mist](#)
[Chapter 23 – The Fish's Tale](#)
[Chapter 24 – The Taffrail](#)
[Chapter 25 – A Sea of Mist](#)
[Chapter 26 – The Shout – A Brief Discourse On The Will O' The Fish](#)
[Chapter 27 – The Relativity of The Stylites](#)
[Chapter 28 – The Same Boat](#)
[Chapter 29 - Sargasso](#)
[Chapter 30 – Asymptotic Freedom](#)
[Chapter 31 - Hunger And A Roar](#)
[Chapter 32 - Into The Maelstrom](#)
[Chapter 33 - Er...](#)

Chapter 1 – Piscogenesis

Go to the Fish, O sluggard; consider her ways and be wise!
- Ancient Piscador saying

Expiscor. Run that name over your tongue, let it drip like the branches of the great Hook Trees in the morning dew, let it shine like the Smug (that conceited little star), let it go out and catch a meaning like the Piscadors who bait and cast and wait. Expiscor. To fish out, to find out, to discover - and what discoveries! Let us imagine ourselves falling in upon this most implausible globe from a great height, from the orbital path of Xiphias, its scimitar shadow moon. We see the curve of the globe. No blue to be seen on this sphere; like an emerald of deepest green and bearded wisps of cloud-white our little planet traces its ellipse through the black blanket of night. We fall further and discover the great Mist Sea, the pea-soup ocean that covers the globe and hides its maternal soil from view. Like islands the green swathes of the Hook Tree forests stand with their canopies above the mist. Falling further we can see individual trees, their foliage of myriad jade crochets riffling and rippling at the casualness of the lukewarm breeze. We see movement in the canopy of the Hook Trees – monkey men on the hop and skip and, of course, the cast and reel. Look a little further and we might even catch a glimpse of something elusive and sinusoidal in the Mist Sea below, that happy medium.

How frivolous the Creator's hand, or blind, for either such adjective would perhaps provide the explanation for the incongruous nature of this mist-bound world. Then again, perhaps it is wisdom in its purest form which pervades this land, like the Mist, and makes its true design so murky to the mortal eye. With this in mind, let us study the bizarre primary ecosystem that must surely catch the attention of any observer incident to Expiscor. We have mentioned in passing its three main species already, but let us go into some greater detail.

First, then, looms the stately Hook Tree (*Termes camur*). It is difficult to describe the dimensions of the Hook Tree, other than to say it is vast, for what familiar reference point should one use to describe its size? To say that the trunk of a Hook

Tree is ten times as wide as a cloud and as tall as a small hill leaves much latitude for the imagination, but no better sense of scale can be given. Perhaps the most salient feature of these arborescent giants is, apart from their size, their foliage. Each leaf of the Hook Tree is a marvel, forming as it does that most useful of trinkets, the Hook, complete with a loop at the top which just so happens to allow the passage of a thread made from the fibre of the Hook Tree's outer skin. Just why the trees bear such convenient features is as yet unsolved by any thinker on the planet of Expsicor, or any other planet for that matter. Certainly it is difficult to see what evolutionary advantage the tree could gain from its Hooks. It could be speculated that they aid in transpiration, deter herbivory, facilitate gas exchange and various other more or less plausible explanations. Perhaps there is little advantage to them at all and they merely represent a very likely shape, a low-lying peak in the local fitness landscape. Roll the dice enough times and such things will emerge, so it is said. Just who it is who does the rolling is, of course, beyond the scope of science and reasonable speculation.

But what of the movement in the boughs of the Hook Trees? What creature lives in so precarious a fashion, far above the veil of the Mist Sea, lofty in habitat and nimble of feet, hand and tail? Our next species, *Homo piscador*, surely does, and does it well. Medium stature and wily, stupid, noble, base, sophisticated, crude, aloof and worldly (as all dominant species tend to be), the Piscadors are defined by their contradictory nature and their sole passion; Fishing. To pursue this activity they first take a Hook from the Hook Trees. They then take fibres from a nearby young bough, the skin of which must still be greenish, strong and lithe, and strip this to an improbably thin fibre. They do this many times and weave these fibres together until they have a thin cord of such high tensile strength that it could easily bear the full weight of two portly Fishers. To make the cord stronger they trample it with their feet for three days, a process known as "treading a fine line". This fine line they pass through the convenient loop in the top of a Hook, tie it in a complicated figure called a Love Hitch (which takes a dexterous Fisher at least five years to learn how to tie), and wind the other end round and round the end of a severed Hook Tree branch of small or medium girth, depending on their preference, which is in the shape of an L. The next step is to drill holes in two other hand-sized pieces of Hookwood and slot the bail of twine into this fitting. In such a way, if something were to bite and pull on the Hook and move away very fast, the twine would pay out at a rate that the Fisher could control by pushing the two other pieces together to create friction on the bail. The unfortunate quarry could then be reeled in by rotating the end of the L. This is the basic apparatus of the Fishers, and it has remained unchanged for countless generations.

Thirdly and finally, we have already caught a glimpse of movement in the mist below out of the corner of our eye, and are no doubt wondering what it is. It is scaly and silver, whiplash quick and a muse of grace, a little like the light of Xiphias. Its name is *Pisces infinitum*, the Infinity Fish. It is good to know how such a peculiarly beautiful thing came into being, for the Infinity Fish is as old as Expsicor and older. Indeed, the Infinity Fish is as old as the Universe (and it would be meaningless to say older), for in the chaos that preceded the Big Bang, in that maelstrom of improbability, into that bubbling, broiling, bumptious broth there came into being by sheer chance the archetype of fishiness.

This first Fish was heavy with roe, and it waited for its spawning place to form as it swam through the icy blackness of space, to the world of Expsicor. When this ball

of rock had first coalesced, cooled and given birth to life, the Infinity Fish dove gladly into the new shrouds of steaming hot Mist and deposited its roe at the base of the progenitor of the Hook Tree. The Infinity Fish grew in numbers until the sea of mist was full of darting shoals, as numerous as the stars in the sky from where their mother had journeyed. The fish wallowed and bucked, the pisconification of joy.

The aeons passed and from the primordial mist emerged the first animalcules indigenous to Expiscor. Billions of years saw these microscopic movers and shakers grow until they were big enough to scale the rough trunks of the Hook Trees and proudly crawl the branches. And to crawl branches takes skill and a large brain. So the Piscadors became clever, and with cleverness came inextricably the ability to fish.

So the Infinity Fish had a predator, yet a sensitive one. The Piscadors fished only what they needed to cook their favourite dish, a sort of gumbo made with a good strong stock and thickened with the pulped starchy fruit of the Hook Tree. The stock was by far the most important part of the dish, and competitions have been and are still held each year to see who can make the best. It is said that the longer a fish takes to catch, the better the stock, and good fishers would deliberately spend hours teasing a fish to try and make the perfect ingredient. Perhaps they deceive themselves and the whole thing is a myth, but in a treetop world above the clouds without the slightest hint of science, myths are a form of truth. Whatever. The belief that a long battle with a fish leads to a good stock meant that for most of their history the Piscadors caught fish at a relatively gentle rate, for they savoured quality over quantity in their culinary endeavours. A balance emerged.

So the Infinity Fish still enjoyed its asymptotic freedom, the Piscadors were well fed, and Hook Tree seeds were spread far and wide by the discardings of the gumbo makers. It seemed that everyone was happy. It seemed this way, that is, until one young Piscador fell out of a tree.

This is his story.

Chapter 2 – The Fall

It is said that when you are about to die (or very nearly so), your life flashes in front of your eyes. This was indeed the case for a young Piscador called Ambrosius Codwich as he fell from a branch of one of the tallest Hook Trees after slipping on a carelessly discarded rotten Hook Fruit. And what better place to take up his story, for we can use his fall and its associated recollections as a kind of slide-show of his life. An excellent way of becoming acquainted with him as a character.

As Ambrosius started his fall he was overwhelmed by terror and his mind did a sort of very fast rewind until he was in the womb again. He was given the unique experience of being able to replay his very first thought. Bizarrely, this was “I deny absolutely everything.” It occurred to Ambrosius that perhaps he had committed acts of such scurrilousness in a previous life that his embryonic musings were still centred around escaping their consequences. This would explain a lot, in terms of bad karma, about the misfortunes of his current life, and perhaps about the unfolding of its end. But more on both of these in a short while.

Passing the utmost branches of the Hook Tree, Ambrosius' mind jumped forward several months to the day of his birth. The labour was a long one. On the birthing

bough, the doctors and nurses gathered, using subtle simples of herbs to alleviate the mother's pain and speed the birth. At last the child was born, and in the tradition of the Piscadors, the baby's second name was chosen according to the first thing the mother saw. Well, it had been a long labour and one of the doctors had become peckish. On the sill of a window, pooled in a golden circle of sunlight that made it quite unmissable to a woman seeking inspiration, there it was: a half-eaten codwich (the codwich is the second most favoured culinary creation of the Piscadors and consists of a fillet of Infinity Fish between two slices of bread made from the ground husk of Hook Tree fruit.). After that, the first name was simply chosen as the child's father's second name (whose mother had allegedly seen the much more glamorous light of the divine as she lay back with babe in arms, for Ambrosius means "divine"), and so it was that Ambrosius Codwich came into the world.

Ambrosius fell through the canopy, Hookleaves whipping at his skin. His next earliest memory hit him like a slap in the face. He was two years old, and just starting to learn to fish (at about the same time as he was learning to walk, but that is comparatively inconsequential). All the other boys and girls were catching small fry and reeling them up dancing and glittering in the morning sun, like jewels of happiness. But Ambrosius' line dangled empty from the tree into the mist. No fish would bite. He stayed long after all the other young Piscadors had left, hoping that he would catch something, but the Fish shunned his Bait. Even at such an early age he felt useless.

The fall continued and in his recollection Ambrosius was six years old. He had by now learned that his uselessness at fishing was something permanent and not, as he had hoped, something he would grow out of. He was on the broad playbough at school and the other children were dancing round him, singing and chanting.

"Oi, Codwich, caught a fish yet?" That was Hook Fist, the school bully. Ambrosius could take that. "No, didn't think so. You better give me all your dinner today otherwise I'll punch you on the nose!" Ambrosius gave him all his dinner and got punched anyway.

"Stop being so horrible to him," came a voice from one side as Ambrosius cowered on the floor. "Are you okay?" The voice was directed at Ambrosius. The owner was Sunbeam Lightning. This was the first time she had spoken to Ambrosius and it would be the start of a long lasting friendship. She was a strange girl, plain looking, with a good heart, although stormy as her name would suggest. At the time Ambrosius had been glad of someone to feel sorry for him, but later he would rue such sympathy. The memory faded.

Ambrosius was clear of the canopy now, and could see the bare trunks of the Hook trees that stretched down starkly into the floating blanket of mist far below. He reached for a passing branch but just succeeded in taking the skin off his fingertips. With the pain came another echo from the past, floating wraith-like in front of his eyes. Ambrosius was twelve years old and standing crying in the gimcrack treetop hut his forefathers had built many moons ago. All his relatives were there for this most sombre day. His father had choked to death on a fish-bone, so the doctor had said, and today was his funeral. Ambrosius knew that the doctor's pronouncement was only partly true – his father, Rainstorm Ambrosius, was a partaker of the Stone (the Stone of the Hook Fruit contains a potent drug which, when ground up and insufflated or smoked induces wild visions and a sweating, all-encompassing feeling of power. It is ironic that this feeling of power is accompanied by a great weakness of body and

mind which leaves the user quite useless), and had died from the habit to which he had dedicated so much of his life. There was a fish-bone found in the back of his mouth, it is true, but the question of whether he would have choked on it were it not for his heavy intoxication remained unanswered.

Whatever Rainstorm's habits, Ambrosius still loved him as a young son does his father. It was with sleepless, tearful eyes that he approached his father's casket. He had been dreading this moment. All eyes were on him for the fulfilment of the sacred tradition of the Laying On Of Fish, which fell to the next in the family line. As the only child and heir, that meant Ambrosius. The Fish had to be caught by him and placed on his father's chest, otherwise his father's spirit would not be able to rest. Ambrosius had been up all night with his Hook and Line, desperately trying to catch something. But it seemed the Fates would have no mercy on him even now. No Fish had bitten, and it was with unspeakable shame that Ambrosius approached his father's casket.

"Father, I'm sorry," he said with a trembling voice. All around him heads shook and tongues clicked in disapproval. "This was all I could get. Please, forgive me..." Ambrosius lifted something small out of his pocket and placed it on his father's chest. It was an intricately carved fish made of Hookwood.

"I carved it myself."

He knew it was not good enough, and so did everyone around him. His mother tried to smile at Ambrosius to say it was all right, but the tear at the edge of her eye told of her disappointment. They rolled his coffin off the funeral bough without a real fish to pacify his father's soul and the Mist enveloped him for eternity. From that day on the Mist held a special terror for Ambrosius, for somewhere in it lurked his father's restless soul. This terror pressed upon him like a knife point as he fell now towards the wispy whiteness below.

The wind whistled in his ears and his memory threw another bite at him. Suddenly he was fifteen. He was sitting in the darkness of his family's hut, a look of intense concentration on his face. He was carving again.

"What are you making now?" came a voice the doorway. It was Sunbeam, and she made Ambrosius look up from his work.

"Nothing," he said curtly and carried on working quick strokes across a piece of Hookwood.

"If it's nothing, why are you wasting a day like this indoors? You should get out more, you know."

Ambrosius sighed. "If you must know," he said pompously, "it's an adding machine. You have rods like this," (he held one up), "and beads like this," (he held some up), "and the beads slot on the rods and you can move them across to represent different numbers and do sums on them. I read about how to make it in an old book that I borrowed off Wiseman Cobweb.

"Wiseman is a crazy old coot. You know, there's a new codwich bar opened on tree seventy. I thought you might feel like inviting me along sometime..."

But Ambrosius hadn't heard. He was too busy carving.

"Then again, maybe not," said Sunbeam after a while. "I may not have many potential suitors, but I'm not going to ask you on a date twice if you can't even acknowledge me the first time. Maybe I'll ask Fathead Treegirth instead. My dearest Fathead. At least he can fish."

Ten seconds later this comment sunk into Ambrosius' consciousness with a sting and he looked up, but Sunbeam was gone already. He felt a sensation of loss, for some part of him realised he had missed something important. But the shame that comes with years of fishlessness had forced him to quickly subdue his emotions, and he went back to his carving without really realising just what had passed him by.

The feeling of loss hit Ambrosius as he fell past the middle branches of the Hook Tree, and he realised he had been a fool. He had spent hours at his abacus and reading his books, and he had acquired an ethereal, useless type of wisdom. He could predict the movements of the stars, calculate the number of fish required to feed the population of Expiscor for the next ten years or even work out how many stories high a shack could be built without it collapsing, yet he had nobody to share these things with. If only he had set aside more time for Sunbeam...

The next memory was on him before he had much time to be sad. He was eighteen and it was the Great Dance that marked the end of his formal schooling. Everyone had a partner to go with. Ambrosius had left it until the last minute to ask Sunbeam to accompany him, for he knew that she was plain and clever and so unpopular with the other boys, so he wouldn't have much competition. So he had taken her for granted and not asked. He was mistaken. Fathead Treegirth was her partner, so no, she couldn't come with him. Ambrosius stayed at home with his abacus.

Ambrosius could see the Mist Sea rolling vast and opaque below him now, and he was terrified. He had never really spent much time thinking about death, but now he was making up for lost time. It seemed to him that if there was some kind of judgement for his soul then he would probably be found wanting. As he watched his life play out before his eyes he certainly felt like a failure.

"You're getting married?" he remembered himself saying, one eyebrow raised and a look of disbelief on his face. He was twenty two years old.

"Yes," said Sunbeam. "I shall be Mrs. Sunbeam Treegirth this time next year, when the Smug is out and the Hookblossom falls."

"But Treegirth..." Ambrosius thought hard about how not to be offensive. "You're sure he's right for you?"

"Yes. Well, sort of sure. As sure as one can be. How can one ever be sure of anything? I mean, nothing's sure. But as sure as anything can be sure, I'm sure. Sure."

Ambrosius' expression must have spoken volumes, because Sunbeam didn't wait for a reply.

"I didn't expect you to understand. I just thought I better let you know, that's all. As a... as a friend."

"Okay," said Ambrosius.

"That's all you've got to say? Okay?"

Ambrosius shrugged.

"I'll never understand you!" spat Sunbeam, and Ambrosius winced in his recollection as she stormed out.

And that was it. Ambrosius hit the mist and felt the moisture condense on his skin. He didn't think to scream. It was over. Dead. He was the late Ambrosius Codwich. He felt the sickening jerk and a pain shot through his body. That must be the ground, he thought.

I'm a goner.

But that wasn't quite the case. There was a terrifying ripping noise, a quick but non-fatal deceleration and then a further fall of about ten feet, during which he was

decidedly chilly. Ambrosius lay still on the damp, mossy ground for a good thirty seconds before he realised what had happened. By good fortune and the mysteries of Providence, a Piscador's Hook had caught on his trousers a short distance above the ground. Had he stopped instantly because of this he would have died, for such a quick stop would have had the same effect as hitting the ground. The Hook, however, had torn a line up his trousers, had caught on his waistband and with one final jerk pulled the trousers clean off him. The speed of the fall had been checked and, whilst knocking the wind out of him, his final contact with the ground was not fatal.

Recovering his breath, Ambrosius stood up shakily. The Mist was cold and damp, and he shook with the terror of it. Shapes coalesced and meandered at the edge of his vision, threatening spectres of things he could not describe. In his mind the tendrils of mist formed bats, rats, wolves, spiders, terrible monsters that were beyond classification. Above all other imaginings, however, he trembled because he knew that in the mist, somewhere, his father was coming for him. Was that really a fork of mist in the distance, or was it the fumes from a Stone pipe? His blood ran icy in his veins.

For the first time in his life he had his feet on the ground, and the bone-trembling, spine-chilling horror of it was indescribable. It was taboo to even talk about the ground up above, but he had heard the occasional furtive comment or whispered allusion. People said that the Mist was the ghosts of the dead, and that if you breathed it in you turned into a flesh-eating zombie. Ambrosius didn't feel like a zombie. He patted himself down. Only a few bruises. His father was there in the mist somewhere, high on Stone and displeased at Ambrosius' puny parting gift. He didn't want to meet him. How could he look him in the eye after his fishless funeral? Suddenly Ambrosius was very eager to get away, to run away from his failure to his father, to escape this world of fish and death. Panic did not come naturally to him, but certainly there was a more than pressing desire in him to get back to the safety of the canopy. The Hook Trees had rough bark, easily climbed by the strong hands, prehensile feet and tail of the well-adapted Piscadors. He could be back up in the land of the living in ten minutes.

Ambrosius turned to the nearest tree trunk and found a hand hold. He was just about to start his ascent when something made him take one last glance over his shoulder. Just what made him do this he would never know. Could such a careless movement of one's head change one's life for ever? What did those swirling mists hold that could channel the full force of fate into such a lowly outcast? He looked through the coiling vapours and blinked, trying to dispel the sleek vision that had materialised before him. But there was no mistaking the streamlined shape that undulated through the mist.

For just one millisecond, Ambrosius made eye contact with the Infinite in its own habitat. It is difficult to describe the effect of this. Suddenly every single atom of the world had meaning; all was connected and living; everything was pain and rapture all at once. The swirling of the mist was the swirling of stars, the scales of the fish reflected a thousand different Ambrosius' back at him. But most of all Ambrosius could see in that fish's eyes an everlasting blackness, a void of such unmentionable depths that it seemed to suck in Ambrosius' very soul. Suddenly the blood rushed from his head and the world swam fishlike before his eyes. Before he knew what was happening, Ambrosius collapsed onto the ground and the Mist rolled deathly pallid around him.

Chapter 3 – An Apparition and A Resurrection

Just how long Ambrosius lay there he could not tell, but when he woke he was freezing and disorientated. The diffuse light that filtered down through the mist from the invisible Smug stung his eyes. The fish was gone, but that moment of eye contact...

The thought was severed by a terrifying noise juddering through the mist that froze Ambrosius on the spot. There was a low base rumble that shook his belly and made his knees weak, a teeth-jarring clang and a high-pitched wheeze. It repeated rhythmically and seemed to be getting nearer. There was no time to climb. Instinctively Ambrosius dived into the fronds of some slimy green Mist Kelp at the foot of the nearest Hook Tree and lay trying not to move, but shivering in fear and coldness nonetheless. Through bulging eyes Ambrosius peeped out from under the mercifully thick straps of the kelp that hid him.

At first there was just Mist and noise; a terrible rhythm as if the devil himself were playing drums and a chorus of his demons were humming threateningly in between the beats. The ground pulsed. The mist parted and suddenly all Ambrosius could see was yellow. The vast yellow shape rumbled and guttered through the churning fog and then, without warning, stopped in front of the kelp. It was as though the ground itself was trembling at this monster's presence.

Now Ambrosius could read, and read very well. At this moment though it seemed as though this faculty were somehow inappropriate, even though it engaged automatically and shouted at him from the side of the nicotine-yellow leviathan in big black letters:

“Fish Stocks Limited”

Oh. What did that mean? If ever a sentence had harmonics, this one did. It made something flare up in Ambrosius, something which had been communicated to him by the eye-to-eye with the Infinity Fish before his faint. Fish Stocks Limited. Infinity, it seemed, was under threat.

The yellow monster turned and started off in another direction. Ambrosius watched as the mist enveloped it and the noise grew fainter. His mind still reeling from his encounter with the great chugging jaundiced beast, Ambrosius extracted himself from the fronds of kelp and quickly started his ascent of the Hook Tree. As the ground left him he felt safer somehow, more alive. In a matter of minutes he was out of the ghostly mist and breathing fresh, dry air that tasted like summer and Hookblossom. The feeling of well-being that the clear atmosphere brought stood in sharp contrast to the terror of the ground. Ambrosius put all the energy he had into climbing and scaled the tree as though he were running up it.

“You're dead!” came the shrill accusation of young Moonrise Husk, as Ambrosius covered the last few feet and at last sprawled on a branch again. “I saw you fall! You're dead!”

Ambrosius was too out of breath to talk. Instead he lay panting, feeling the last dampness of the mist drying off his clothing along with the sweat of his exertions in the afternoon sun.

“I'm telling Leatherskin Wrinkly that you fell!”

“Don't make a fuss,” managed Ambrosius. “I'm alive now aren't I? Come and feel my pulse if you want, listen to my breathing.”

“But you've been down in the mist! The mist is for the dead and...” the colour suddenly drained from Moonrise's face. She put a hand up to her mouth in terror.

“Zombies! You're a zombie!”

“I'm not a...” started Ambrosius, too late. Moonrise was all ready running, a shrill frightened squeal emitting from her throat that warbled with the rhythm of her pounding feet. Ambrosius sighed. He had never understood the superstitions of his people. If something had a pleasing ring to it they believed it, no matter how absurd. Fish were the souls that hadn't been born yet. The Smug is a great ball of fire where all the evil burn. The last dregs of each pint of Hook Beer has to be tipped off the tree for the souls of the departed. Codswallop! The writings of the great philosopher Bellyfat Chinbeard had thrown all that out centuries ago, if only people would read his books (which were, admittedly, unfathomably boring and written in a largely illegible shorthand). No, Ambrosius knew the truth. He knew that all the matter in the universe was made of tiny Fish. Each Fish swam in a straight line unless it was otherwise disturbed. All the interactions in the universe were mediated by tiny invisible lines with Hooks on the end, that would catch the Fish and yank them out of their trajectories. Indeed, the area of Quantum Fishics was one in which Ambrosius had a special interest in, and, he told himself, gave him deep insights into the nature of reality.

It did not take long for Moonrise to gather a group of worried looking Piscadors together, lead by the elderly statesman Leatherskin Wrinkly and the frankly senile professor Wiseman Cobweb. Some of the younger and more volatile Piscadors who rallied behind them held sharp pointy sticks in the fashion favoured by young and volatile mobs everywhere.

“First things first,” bellowed Leatherskin in a voice that carried authority and a fine aerosol of phlegm. “Are you a zombie?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?” asked Wiseman from next to him, consulting a battered volume which he had produced from under his long flowing blue robe. His parchment brow creased in sympathy with the velum as he read the text. “Any thoughts of a cullinary nature regarding brains or other such cerebral tissues?”

“No,” said Ambrosius.

“Any uncontrollable moaning or other involuntary atonic vocalisations?”

“No,” said Ambrosius.

“Increased salivation and non-Pavlovian spittle-based responses?”

“No,” said Ambrosius.

“Do you have any sudden urges to participate in a motion picture with a very high gore-to-budget ratio?”

“No,” said Ambrosius.

“Good,” said Wiseman. “You score zero on the Zombification Index, which means that, assuming you don't try anything funny, we don't need to proceed with the standard Angry Mob Protocol as defined by Smallfry et al.”

There were murmurs of disappointment from the more enthusiastic members of the congregation, after which the crowd started to lose interest and disperse.

Leatherskin beckoned for Ambrosius to come closer.

“You're in your underpants, boy.”

"I fell out of tree number eleven. My trousers got caught on a Fish-hook."

"Ah. And you're sure you're not dead?"

"No."

"No you're not dead, or no you're not sure?"

"I'm not dead."

"Glad to hear it. Well, you better be going. Can't have you standing around all day in your scruds now can we?" Leatherskin was a seasoned statesman and had excellent control over his expressions, so the smile that crept over his face showed just how ridiculous Ambrosius looked.

Ambrosius bowed his head deferentially in as dignified a way as possible. He was just about to make his way back to his shack when there came a chesty cough from Wiseman. "Actually I don't think you should go just yet." Wiseman turned to the nervous looking skivvy who attended him. He was a short Piscador of about fifteen by the misleading name of Stipule Longlegs, with a pimply face and greasy hair.

"Stipule," said Wiseman, "go and fetch this young man a pair of trousers. Bring them to my residence, quick now.

The pimpled youth nodded politely and dashed off on his errand.

"You are to follow us to my hut," said Wiseman. "I think you should come along, too, Leatherskin."

There were mercifully few giggling gawkers along the way. Wiseman, Leatherskin and Ambrosius reached the seclusion of the hut just as Stipule came running panting (pardon the expression) with a pair of trousers. Ambrosius quickly put them on and, at the invitation of Wiseman, both he and Leatherskin sat at the large Hookwood table in the middle of the hut.

"I have grave news," said Wiseman, leaning heavily on the table, face down and staring at the wood as if he had discerned something interesting in the grain. All of a sudden he looked up, his old rheumy eyes lighting up with something indistinguishable. This unfathomable emotion was curiosity, and it burned bright. "But first," he said, his mucous-filled lungs giving his voice a purring, bubbling enthusiasm, "in the interests of philosophy, you must tell us of your venture into the mist. We have never had anyone survive an experience such as yours. Is it true that the dead who were fishless at their funeral walk in the mist?" he stopped, surveying Ambrosius' expression for a second, before shaking his head. "No, that is an old fishwives tale, of course. Quite ridiculous for an educated man such as myself to suggest such a thing. No, I must be more sensible. Is Wrigglything's seminal treatise on mist stratification correct? Was the whiteness of the mist an illusion produced by multiple layers of coloured gasses?"

Ambrosius looked blank.

"No, I never liked Wrigglything's work anyway." said Wiseman. "Tell me, what did the mist taste like? You see there is a theory by Glaucous et al. that posits that the taste of fish is determined by the medium in which they swim. Did the mist taste of fish?"

Ambrosius still looked blank.

"No, of course not, a ridiculous idea."

"Look," interjected Leatherskin, "I am a busy man. I have a meeting scheduled in for one o'clock and it's half twelve now. Can we skip this rubbish?"

Wiseman looked hurt. "Well, okay. Unless there was anything important you saw?"

"Actually," said Ambrosius, "there was. Very important, and this concerns you too Leatherskin."

"It better be good," said the statesman. Leatherskin had little respect for a youth such as Ambrosius, even less considering his reputation as a recluse and a hopeless Fisher. Be that as may, from years of experience Leatherskin had learned never to dismiss people with something to say, especially those who were normally quiet.

"I don't know about good. It might be quite the opposite. I saw the future," said Ambrosius.

Leatherskin and Wiseman each raised an eyebrow in unison.

"Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof, son," said Wiseman.

"I looked an Infinity Fish in the eye."

"Ah," said Wiseman. "Now there has been much written about this. Every Fisher knows that by the time Infinity Fish are reeled up and out of the mist they are dead. They need the mist to survive – all but the Progenitor."

Wiseman made the sign of the fish across his chest.

"Nobody has ever looked a living Infinity Fish in the eye before," continued Wiseman. "Most of the texts say that such an encounter would send one irretrievably insane. That is, all apart from Petiole et al. who say that one would absorb the knowledge of the fish and become lost in what is known as a Perspective Vortex."

"I fainted," said Ambrosius.

"Can we call that a Perspective Vortex?" asked Wiseman.

"If you like," said Ambrosius. "I think there might be some truth in what you said about absorbing the knowledge of the Fish. I suddenly had this amazing feeling of... clarity. I can't think of any other words to describe it. When I fell my whole life flashed before my eyes. When I looked into the Fish's eyes all those events were sort of connected and directed. In that moment I knew suddenly that I had a purpose."

"What was that purpose, boy, what was that purpose?" Wiseman asked, leaning forward eagerly on the edge of his seat.

"I... I can't remember. Well, sort of can't remember. It's in my head somewhere but it's too vast to fit into my consciousness all at once."

"Interesting, interesting," said Wiseman. "Such is the nature of the Infinite."

"Well, anyway," said Ambrosius. "When I woke up I saw something else."

"What?" asked Leatherskin. He did not seem at all interested in Ambrosius' experience with the Fish. Fish were an everyday thing. There was nothing special about them.

"When I awoke there was this terrible noise. I saw this great yellow thing come through the mist, and suddenly there in front of me there was this huge ugly monster."

"Ah, this is more like it," said Wiseman. "The literature is full of huge ugly monsters."

"It had writing on its side."

"Most unusual," said Wiseman in his rasping lilt. "Do carry on."

"It was in big black letters. It said 'Fish Stocks Limited'. That was all."

This made Leatherskin pay attention. "Fish Stocks Limited'? What does that mean?"

"It means what it says," put in Wiseman. "It is a message from beyond the mists. Our fish stocks are limited."

“Limited?” asked Leatherface. “Preposterous.”

“I think Wiseman's right,” said Ambrosius. “There was something in that fish's eyes. It looked incomprehensibly sad. Infinitely so.”

Leatherskin's face was set into an unreadable mask. “You do realise the weight of what you are saying? The entire of Expiscor depends on Fish. To suggest the Infinity Fish is actually finite is political dynamite. Blasphemy even.”

“We cannot simply ignore such a portent,” said Wiseman.

“I don't believe it. I think this youth has been running round in the mist for too long and gone bonkers. He's quite literally out of his tree.”

“Ignore the word of God at your peril!” exclaimed Wiseman. “The message is clear: we have sinned, and for this we will be made fishless!”

“Oh stop that at once,” said Leatherman. “This is nonsense. Now at the start of our meeting you said there was some bad news. Bad news is important news, so out with it man, then I really must be off.”

“Yes, quite,” said Wiseman smoothing down his beard and composing himself. “Got a little carried away there. The bad news is for young Ambrosius here.”

“Yes?” asked Ambrosius.

“Well, as soon as young Moonrise came shouting her head off about Ambrosius being back from the mist, it immediately made me think of Pinnate Rivet's 'Booke of Ancient Law'.”

Leatherskin audibly sighed. “Not more about your books, Wiseman.”

“No, this is important. We have lived according to the law for generations immemorial. We cannot break a law that is in the literature.”

“I know very well the importance of law,” said Leatherskin, “but I am not aware of any having been broken.”

“With respect, that is where you are sadly mistaken,” said Wiseman. “Young Ambrosius here has unwittingly broken a most weighty of statutes.”

“Cut to the chase, please,” said Leatherskin.

“It says here that any Piscador who so happens to fall from the heights of a Hook Tree and comes into contact with the Mist must be expelled for ever from the company of the tree-dwellers and must walk the face of the bare earth forever. For the Mist is death, and the breather of Mist is dead to the world.”

Ambrosius' face dropped. “But that's unfair! I didn't fall from the tree on purpose.”

“Yes,” said Leatherskin. Despite his professional detachment he couldn't help feel sorry for this lanky, hopeless looking youth that stood before him in ill-fitting trousers. “It does seem a little harsh, don't you think, Wiseman? Perhaps we could just pretend that you never knew about that particular law.”

Wiseman shook his head furiously. “If this rule is broken, then the Fates will stop the fish from biting and the whole of Expiscor will starve. I'm sorry, Ambrosius. I know you are a man of learning such as myself, and I have a lot of respect for you because of that. But laws are laws.”

“So just like that, you'd throw me out into the mist again?”

Wiseman hung his head in silence.

“You're not going to let this happen are you sir?” Ambrosius asked Leatherskin. “Surely you can see this is madness?”

Leatherskin grunted. “I can and I do.” He turned to the old professor. “Wiseman old bean, is there any time limit on this thing?”

“Time limit?”

“Well, it says Ambrosius here must be expelled for having breathed the mist, but does it say when?”

“Er, not as such,” said Leatherskin.

“There we have it; an equable solution. I say we let Ambrosius stay here for a test period. If the Fish supplies dry up then we can throw him out into the Mist then and get our Fish back. There will be no great harm in a few weeks of fishlessness, we have plenty of supplies. Let us test the Mists, so to speak, before we do anything unnecessary.”

Wiseman shifted uncomfortably. “I don't like it. I don't like it one bit. But then, who am I to argue with you, Leatherskin? You are the leader, after all. I must stress though, that as soon as the catch shows the least sign of decreasing we must throw Ambrosius out, as unpalatable as that might seem.”

“Then we are agreed,” said Leatherskin. “We shall give this young man a probationary period. I hope for his sake this law is baseless.”

“Hang on a second,” said Ambrosius. “I've just told you what I saw. It was a message from beyond the mist telling me the fish stock *will* run out. Now you're saying that I'll get the blame for it!”

“Your message from beyond the mist was no more than a dream brought on by unwholesome vapours. The fish stocks are limitless, they always have been and always will be.” Leatherskin tapped his finger on the table, his eyes burning into Ambrosius'. “The one thing you can rely on is Fish.”

Chapter 4 – A Challenge Is Set

The one thing you can rely on is Fish. Ambrosius scowled as he walked dejectedly back to his shack. He had never been able to rely on Fish, so why should he start now? He looked up at the Smug. It was about one o'clock by his reckoning, and a lurid, diffuse heat filtered down from above. He thought about the madness of this fateful morning. His life had flashed past his eyes when he fell; his sad, fishless life. But he had learned something new as he plunged through the canopy towards the rolling mist: there are worse things than fishlessness. Fish can be bought or begged off other people whose catch is good. Missed opportunities are gone forever. And there it stood, a shining, gloating list of missed opportunities. Sunbeam Lightning or, more accurately, Sunbeam Treegirth, stood glowing in his mind's eye. He had never realised it before but she had been the only girl who had shown the slightest bit of interest in him. Perhaps she was the only friend he had ever had. Perhaps... well, even Ambrosius had a spark in him, a spark that longed to make flame. Yes, there were more things than a lack of fish that Ambrosius now regretted.

He got back to his shack thoroughly dejected, limbs heavy from his climb up the tree and with an immense feeling of tiredness weighing down on him. He had lived there for going on five years now, since he was eighteen, but he still hadn't bothered to decorate the place. The walls, made of rough planks of Hookwood, smouldered red and resinous in the lunchtime light of the Smug. There was a complex smell of wood smoke emanating from a small fireplace full of last night's ash and a few dying red-flecked embers, a smell as of burnt wisdom and old incense that begged for more fuel and a bass to roast. Ambrosius had neither, but he blew on the embers nonetheless.

Somehow, the fire still had life in it and mustered a few small yellow flames for a couple of seconds before sulking again into an angry red. Ambrosius breathed in the masculine musk of the hut, and felt a little better for being home. He moved away from the moribund fire and sat on a chair that he had carved himself.

And now he had to think. He couldn't help it, for he was a dweller. He dwelt on the memories that had swam so clear in front of him. He dwelt on his mother's tears at his father's funeral. More than anything, he dwelt on the sound of bells and shower of confetti as Sunbeam, *his* Sunbeam, had found her false true love. He had attended the wedding – how could he not? He had watched without any real emotion as she walked down the aisle, he had felt that millisecond of eye contact as she passed him, that millisecond that, had he been open to it, would have communicated a volume of emotion. But he had just not bitten the bait of reality – he had shied away, dissociated, for he felt that this was the logical thing to do. What point was there feeling love, pain, regret, loneliness? What point? Only a barbed one, like a Fish-hook. A barbed one that, once you had been caught by it, dug deeper and deeper. And now he had been snagged - by an unexpected fall, by the unknown, by the infinite. Yes, a fall had made him and broken him all at once.

He thought about his close encounter with the Fish. Such unfathomable sadness he had seen in those sparkling, whirlpool-black eyes; such infinite sorrow. Something was happening to the Infinity Fish, and he had to find out what. But first he had to get the girl.

“What do you want?” Sunbeam had come to the window after Ambrosius' third throw. He had read somewhere that suitors threw stones against their beloved's window, which he had diligently done. Sunbeam now had a round lump on her head where the Hookfruit stone had sailed through the glassless aperture.

“Can I come inside?” Ambrosius decided to ignore the angry tone in Sunbeam's voice.

“What's going on?” came a voice from inside the room. “If some fishing idiot is throwing things through the window he's going to feel the back of my hand!”

Sunbeam looked over her shoulder, then quickly back to Ambrosius. “Look, you can't come in. Whatever you've got to say, say it now and quickly.”

“But I can't say it,” said Ambrosius. “It would take a million words.”

Sunbeam's face dropped. “Oh Ambrosius, no. Not now.”

“Sunbeam, I lo...”

“No! Don't you dare! I have a life and I'm happy with it. Don't you dare try and ruin it.”

“You know how I feel about you. We're meant for each other!”

“I don't believe in destiny, Ambrosius. Forget me, Ambrosius. Go back to your books.”

“What can I do to change your mind?”

Sunbeam seethed, before anger made her reply burst forth without thought.

“Ambrosius Codwich, the day I love you is the day... is the day... is the day you catch a fish!”

It is not possible to slam a glassless window, but Sunbeam drew her curtains with such ferocity that a bang was almost audible. Perhaps it was the sound of Ambrosius' heart breaking, but that is a cliché. Anyhow, Ambrosius' suit had failed and he was

left to plod mournfully along the boughs. He didn't know where to go, what to do. Suddenly all those years of carving and learning seemed useless, wasted. What had he gained from them? Grey matter. That was the best description. And grey matter was just that – grey. When he thought of Sunbeam he thought of colour.

Colour is a terrible thing, be under no illusions about that. Colour is a broken promise. When we see a field of flowers we demand beauty of it, but ask a botanist and he will tell you it is nothing but cut-throat competition. We see a Hooktree Frog display its vivid colours and are enticed by beauty to touch it, whereupon we collapse in a convulsing heap at its venomous feet. Colour looks nice, so we accept it as good without thinking.

Be that as may, Ambrosius longed for glorious, deceitful colour, the colour of no less than true love. And suddenly it came to him in Sunbeam's own angry words. “The day I love you is the day you catch a Fish.” How cruel she had been, but in that cruelty lay hope. Somewhere out there a Fish was waiting for him, he knew it. Fate could only have dealt him such an ultimatum for a reason. Jaw set in determination, Ambrosius went over to his book case and selected a volume that was his father's, a volume that had been collecting dust for a long time now. He blew and a whirlwind of grey fled into the air, revealing the hand-painted cover underneath. There was, picked out in silver against a white marbled background, a bass of prodigious proportions. Underneath this fine Fish was the following inscription:

*“A Piscador's Companion
by Gigantic Turbot”*

Ambrosius carried the book over to the chair and sat down. The book creaked open and Ambrosius flipped past the title page and the index. Just before the book started there was a page blank but for a single quote:

“A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.”

Ambrosius didn't quite know what that meant, but then there are many such puzzles in life. He flipped through the book a little until a heading caught his eye:

“The Philosophy of Fish

What is the meaning of the Fish? Piscadors have debated this point for millennia. What cannot be denied is that there is something intrinsically meaningful in Fish and Fishing. This meaning translates to the Fisher as what is known as The Game. The Game is the battle of wits between the Fisher and the Fished; it engages the utmost faculties of both to the extent that a sort of blissful dance is played out and the minds and bodies of both parties work in an antagonistic kind of harmony. Let us investigate this relationship further.

Firstly, consider the Fish. Swimming along happily through the mist one day, our friend sees a Hookworm apparently helpless in the water. An immediate moral dilemma is posed for the Fish. She is hungry and must eat to live, yet in doing so she must cause this helpless creature to suffer a most terrible fate. Some fish may swim away and go hungry at this point. Others, however, will make the judgement that they somehow have an intrinsic value higher than that of the worm, and will eat. Immediately they are hooked. It must then go through their minds that they are deserving of this cruel predicament they now find themselves in. They judged another creature to be expendable, now they too have so been judged. What cruel irony now

stings the Fish along with the pain of the Hook, but is there education there too? Surely the fish, if at all sentient, has learnt a huge moral lesson.

Now consider the Piscador. It may well be impossible to know what goes on in the mind of the Fish, but the Piscador must try. Information on the mind of the fish has been reduced to simple modulations of the tension in a string. Somehow two creatures, with completely different brains, connected only by a thread, are transferring complex notions such as fear, tenacity, free-spiritedness, the will to survive. The data are processed, reduced to changes in the tension in the line, expanded and processed again in an interactive process. This is just part of what we call "Fishing".

Ambrosius lost interest and flicked through the pages once more. He spotted several sections on Good Fishing Practice and Hooks, Baits and Lines which he mentally noted and earmarked for future reading. The leaves flipped past until he was only a few pages away from the end of the book. Something caught his eye.

"The One That Got Away

Every Fisher has experienced it. The tentative nibble. The bite. The Game. Then, without explanation, the line goes slack: the Fish has got away. Much lore exists about this phenomenon, but perhaps the most common story which young Fishers hear is the tale of the Progenitor. According to legend, the Progenitor is a giant Infinity Fish the colour of alabaster which taunts Piscadors by taking their bait, playing with them for hours on end, then either breaking the line or somehow unhooking herself. Some say the Progenitor strikes when the planets are in a special alignment, some that only sinful Piscadors are so teased, and some even say that all cases of a fish escaping are due to the same fish. It is unlikely that the true nature of the Progenitor will ever be discovered. Some say that this fish is the archetype of Fishiness created by God before the universe came into existence; the very same fish who first brought the seed of Fish to Expiscor."

More codswallop, thought Ambrosius. As far as Ambrosius was concerned fish were fish. All else was dangerous misdirection. He flicked back to the start of the book and started reading.

Chapter 5 – Preparation

Idiot. It was the word that struck Ambrosius like a hammer as he suddenly awoke with a jerk from his sleep. He could see through the open doorway to his shack that the evening was stealing in and the daylight slowly fading. He had read a good way through the *A Piscador's Companion* before his unintentional slumber, certainly far enough to refresh his memory concerning the theoretical underpinnings of fishing. Why, then, had this accusatory little word popped into his consciousness. He was offended by it, and rubbed his hand through his hair in consternation. Surely he was well educated - all the more so for today's studies - yet still it had come to him through the ether. *Idiot.* How could anyone call him such? More to the point, how could he call himself such? He could read the most high-brow books, work out the

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