

Haley Souders
Lake Hook

In a medium sized lake known by the local fish population as Lake Hook, after the highly respected gods, a fish named Gilbert swam along with his school. They were on a midday food break, hunting for all the typical snacks: shrimp, crayfish, eggs. Gilbert quite enjoyed this part of the day, especially because his job consisted of supervising the young fish as they ate their zooplankton. The water was warmer, the lighter atmosphere quite nicely illuminated his yellow scales, and he was free to chat with his friends. Today their conversation was tinged with sadness, marked by the loss of his close friend Perch. But loss was not the right word for it. Perch had finally ascended, and was no doubt joyful in the afterlife.

When older fish, and sometimes younger, had lived enough life they ascended to the highs. No one knew what waited for them there, but the sight of a fish being raised up toward the brights that overlooked the water was quite something. Gilbert himself had only ever seen it happen a few times.

Of course, some fish have been raised up and then reappeared. Those fish tended to be grumpy, having missed the chance for the peaceful afterlife that awaited kind fish. The school even whispered about fish that, upon their return, became disillusioned with the gods. They asked, how can they be all powerful if they threw me back? The high priests were always ready with answers. The gods had simply deemed the fish not ready for the afterlife, and put them back on their track to enlightenment. The grumpy fish would tell about how the gods pulled them up with a previously-invisible hook, flashing a scar in their mouth. The priests explained it away as the tool of the gods — after all, how could the hook be invisible if not by the work of higher cosmic beings? This was many decades ago, before Gilbert's time, and this act of heresy caused the change in their lake's name. A way to honor the gods' chosen tool.

Then the fish would come back with another question: how could such higher beings make such a drastic mistake as taking a fish before its time? Surely they should know better. Gilbert would admit, this question gave him pause. Even the high priests took more time than usual to deliberate, only finding the answer during Gilbert's lifetime. But when they finally had their answer, it dispelled all ill beliefs. Fish were created in their gods' image, an image which they then must follow. Such simple things as being kind to others, helping their school, and performing their tasks to the best of their ability. However, fish made mistakes. There was no arguing that. Even Gilbert had made a huge mistake once when he left his group of younglings alone to feast and several had wandered away. All returned but one. Yet she simply ascended sooner than the average fish, so all was well. So if fish make mistakes and fish are made in the image of those benevolent higher beings, then those beings must also make mistakes sometimes. Nothing they couldn't fix, of course. They had a supreme intelligence that fish lacked.

Not all returned fish became angry with their religion, one even came back with a renewed faith and became a highly respected priest. See, the

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fish of Lake Hook lived a simple life. Nothing like those ocean water fish who lived such spread out lives they sometimes rested on the top of the water instead of being lifted to the heavens. That happened here sometimes, but in much fewer numbers. The fish here were good fish. They did their part for their communities, stayed away from rivers that would carry them off, and waited for the day they could ascend.

"Some day, huh?" Gilbert's friend asked. Her eyes were pointed downward as they swam along.

"Very bright out," Gilbert agreed.

Unlike her, he looked up. He'd always admired the way that bright light shone on them. As a youngling, he had a habit of swimming from ray to ray that cut through the water. Such acts were beneath him now, though he did enjoy the occasion respite in a sun beam. The warmth was good for his scales.

"Hey, look, a worm!" Gilbert exclaimed.

Gilbert's friend looked up at it. "Lucky day. Well, you spotted it."

As she looked back down for her own snack, Gilbert pumped his fins hurriedly. The worm was still, rocking slightly back and forth from the water's movements, but there was a rhythm to it. Gilbert paused briefly, thanking the gods, as was customary. Then he pushed forward, mouth open, and took the worm in one giant bite.

Except, he couldn't move backward. He flailed, unsure of what had seized his body. When he opened his mouth to shout to his friend, he saw it. A hook. He looked up and down, then did it again, and sure enough, he was rising.

Excitement took over. He hadn't expected his time to come so soon! He supposed he had been performing his duties as expected — more than expected, he would say — for a long time now. Still, it came as a great shock that the gods deemed him worthy. He was flattered, the last feeling that passed through him before he broke the surface of the water.

The sight that greeted him was something he'd never seen, never even heard about from returned fish. Above him seemed to be a second body of water, much lighter and with some type of white foam. The water was vast, as vast as he'd imagined the ocean to be, and it only came to a stop with a brown line. Dirt. That he'd known, though he'd only seen it wet. And, what were those? Some type of large plant with a brown stem expanding from the dirt. Everything was larger in the land of the gods. The gods!

He flipped around on his hook to catch a sight of them, and sure enough. They were huge, and nothing like fish. But they had a mouth that grinned at Gilbert. He gasped at them — their beauty and intelligence, the judgment that had granted him access to his afterlife.

But as he gasped, he realized he couldn't quite breathe. He tried again, sure he was just in shock at the gods. Nothing happened. His gills contracted and expanded at rapid speed, but he couldn't seem to feel anything. He felt his body shutting down, eyesight fogging, eyes bulging in desperation.

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Yet as he realized these were his final moments, that his death was imminent, he asked himself, was this not what the priests had foretold? Sure, they thought that this area would be the afterlife. But there was just one more step.

Gilbert didn't look at the large plants, the dirt, or even the floating second body of water. Not directly anyway. Instead, he stared at his lake, his home, as his body convulsed, and saw some of the sights of the land of the gods reflected on the surface of Lake Hook. With his dying breath, he felt the pride of a life well lived, and watched the light reflecting on the top of the water from a new point of view until that light expanded, and all he saw was brightness.