

Swamp Disorder

by Jim Gold

Stan and Molly were lovers of a premier order. Their roars, cries, laughter and general bedroom antics were the talk of the neighborhood. People heard their joyous screams miles away and often called the police or fire department when their howls of delight and rapture became too cacophonous.

“A noisy bunch,” complained Lesley Parsnip, their next door neighbor.

“Shut them up!” grumbled Gaylord McCullough, the neighbor across the street. “We can’t sleep a wink”

“I wish they’d watch TV,” said their itinerant mailman Peepod Poley.

Stan and Molly burnt up the neighborhood with their loves cries, causing friction, jealousy, and hatred among neighbors and destroying the very fabric of society.

One day, Stan read an ad in the New York Scenes:

Are you looking for happiness, satisfaction, and inner peace? Does your stomach turn every time you go to work? Do you detest your home and hate your neighbors? If you suffer from these debilitating conditions, come to Henry’s Place!

We’ll give you a cool beer, tasty pretzels, and a glimpse of the afterlife. Some people say we’re Heaven on Earth. We say we’re Earth in Heaven. Either way, you’ll want to experience our joy connection for yourself.

We’re located on Pharoah Island, just across the causeway. To reach us, drive down Route 16, pass the Great Swamp on your right, and see our blue sign straight ahead.

Stan put down his morning coffee. “Read this,” he said, looking up at Molly. “Sounds good. Let’s go this afternoon.”

Molly turned from her soup bowl, picked up her reading glasses, and read the ad. “I love you, Stan,” she crooned. “I’ll do anything to make you happy. But frankly, this Henry’s Place sounds stupid. What’s this happiness, bliss, and higher powers stuff? Who believes in that? Sounds like whitewash from the Sixties.”

“Thank you, dear. Always trying to please me! You’re so selfless. I don’t think you even have an ego, but if you do, it must be the size of a shoe.”

“I can’t go now,” Molly continued. “I, seeing my therapist. But still, having beer and pretzels might be a fun way to celebrate our love. How about Sunday?”

“I thought you’re working on spontaneity in your sessions. How about today?” Stan stamped his foot to emphasize the point. “This is practice time. How about right now?”

Molly reconsidered. “Okay. Okay” she said, loving the wild excitement in Stan’s eyes. “Dr. Abramowitz can wait. Let’s do it.”

They climbed into their Mercedes. Stan turned on the ignition and the car sputtered to life. Snippets of Götterdämmerung sounded through back-door speakers.

They headed for Route 16, passing red brick houses, cattle farms, and a Congregationalist graveyard.

Soon a forest of maples lined with hydrangea beds framed their path. When they turned onto Route 16 a sudden wild gust of wind from the West drove the scattered clouds across the sky with jack-booted speed. The sun broke through.

They passed Murphy’s Drug and Food Mart and came to an open farmland field. A wide-open road and two miles of nothingness stood before them. They drove on and suddenly, the Great Swamp appeared.

“Look, there’s the Great Swamp,” shouted Stan.

“Where?”

“On our right.”

Molly looked. “That’s our left.”

“Right.”

“Left,” she countered.

“Can’t we agree on anything this morning?” Stan grunted. “That’s our right.”

“You’re wrong. That’s our left.” Molly rolled up her window and pouted. “Let’s call Dr. Abramowitz. He’ll know.”

“You don’t have to consult your therapist for everything. It’s on the right. No doubt about it.”

Molly sighed, then softened. “Okay, you win. What’s the difference? Right or left, who cares? I’m an up-and-down person, anyway. Stop the car. I want to check out this swamp.”

“Molly, don’t you want to spend some real time at Henry’s Place? It’s only a swamp. Check it from the car.”

“You must be kidding. I never pass up a swamp opportunity. You know me better than that. I must see it!”

Stan pulled the car to the side of the road. When they got out he gazed at the sky. Molly stared at the swamp, totally transfixed. “This is a swamp!” she said in disgust. “I’ve rarely seen one like it. I can’t stand it. It must be eradicated. I hate swamps! All swamps!”

“Oh, let this one go, Molly. We’ll never get to Henry’s once you start.”

“No! There’s no stopping me, Stan. I must. It’s my calling. The call of the Hebrew prophets was mild compared to this. My calling comes directly from God. We cannot move another inch until this entire mess is cleaned up!”

“But--but it will ruin our day. We’ll never make it to Henry’s Place.”

“The hell with Henry’s Place. I’m on fire! I don’t care a damn about Henry’s Place. I want to improve the environment and create world peace!”

Stan pulled back, reflected a moment. “Well, all right,” he said, his voice low in resignation. “It doesn’t look that big. Let’s give it a try.”

“Good. Thank you, dear, for being so understanding. The world will be a better place after we clean this up.”

They opened the trunk, took out two shovels, a pair of scissors, three Band-Aids, and started clearing out the Great Swamp.

“This shouldn’t take us more than a day or two,” said Molly cheerily.

“I hope you’re right, but I think it’ll take at least a week. We’ll see. Whatever it takes, do you still want to go to Henry’s Place when we’re finished?”

“Of course, dear. Isn’t that why we came in the first place? I never break a commitment, although sometimes there are delays.”

“Swamp cleaning can do that.”

Four weeks later, Stan said, “This is huge. We’ll never get it cleaned up by ourselves. We need help.”

Molly sat on a log, wiping the sweat off her forehead. “Sadly, I have to agree,” she murmured in a low voice heavy with exhaustion.

“I’m glad you do,” Stan said. “I know a few swamp experts. They’ve been cleaning out bogs for years—peat, sycamore splinters, soda cans, plastic bottles, everything. I ran into them on a demolition job. Want me to give them a call?”

“I’m ready,” Molly sighed. “I’m on the verge of defeat.”

“Defeat? Molly I’m surprised at you. Never give up! But we do need some help.”

He searched the contacts in his cell phone. “Ah, here it is!” He punched in the number. “These guys can clean anything.”

After a couple of rings, he heard a voice “Hello. Gus Weed here, president of Swamp Therapies. What can I do for you?”

“Hello, Gus. This is your old friend Stan.”

“Who’s Stan?”

“We met at the Tree Stump Removal Convention in Atlantic City. Do you remember?”

A long silence. “You’re the rodent salesman.”

“No, that was another Stan. I’m the walnut guy.”

“Oh, yeah, the one with the nut hat.”

“Right.”

“Okay. What’s up?”

“My wife and I are here in the Great Swamp, We’re trying to clean it up, but having a helluva time and not much success. We need some help.”

“You mean Long Bog Swamp?”

“No, Great Swamp. The one next to Long Bog.”

“Oh, yeah, the one with milk cartons.” Gus turned in his swivel chair. “Hey, Larry, take over the office. I’m on a road call.” He returned to the phone. “Okay, Mr. Stan. No problem. Be there in under an hour.”

Gus put on his green Make New Jersey Great hat, rose from his desk, grabbed a tuna sandwich from the refrigerator, and hopped into his Swamp Truck.

When he reached the swamp site, Molly was sitting on a log, crying. Stan stood beside her, helplessly waving a handkerchief.

Gus opened the back of his truck, and pulled out his Swamp Repair Kit. He ambled over to Molly, patted her head, and sat down next to her. “There, there, dear client,” he said in a low soothing voice. “Lie back. Rest. Relax. Feel the llg support beneath you. Let the branches be your pillow. Easy. relax. No worries. Gus is here.”

“I cleaned, cleaned, cleaned,” she bawled. “And nothing happened! No matter how many roots and branches I pulled out, I kept finding more.”

“That’s the nature of a swamp,” Gus commiserated.

“I hate the flies and rats. I hate them all!” Molly sat up in terror. “And the bog never ends.”

“I understand. Relax. . .relax.” Gus guided her back to prone position and looked in her eyes. “But there is good news.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Bogs can make you feel good. They can even create health.”

“They can?” Molly wiped away a tear.

“Yes, bogs are the way to go. Most folks around here live in or near a bog. They pay good money to do so. Living near, or, even better, in a bog is your first step to salvation.”

Molly stopped crying. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s a matter of perspective. Take the expression ‘bogged down.’ This expression was introduced by a Dutch anthro-medievalist in 1642. One day, a dike leaked and flooded his farm with sea water. After that he learned how walk with mud on his boots, lifting each foot high as he carried that extra weight. Such lifting built not only his leg muscles, but his character, inner strength, and fortitude as well. Once you can handle a bog, dealing with swamp disorder is easy. Our company has created a bog training manual and our Bog-and-Swamp doctoral program is the best in the nation.”

All Molly could do now was utter a soft, lame “Are you crazy?”

“Now, my dear,” Gus continued. “I can see from the pimples on your legs that you have worshiped swamps for many years. And that is good. But because you are so short, your diminished stature has caused you to on the worship of lower things. But, short or tall, it’s always better to aim higher. That’s what Swamp Therapy is all about. We lift you out of the swamp, put you on dry land, and once stabilized, lift your mental processes to a higher plane.

Molly blinked her eyes as a mix of disbelief and wonder passed through them.

“In the beginning,” Gus continued, “focusing on a toad or tree stump is considered a step up. But once the cells in your brain start the leavening process, your skills slowly increase and move even higher.”

Gus took Molly by the hand, pulled her to her feet. He pointed to the branch of a willow tree about one hundred feet away. “For today,” he said, “the best way to raise your perception will be to sit up there.”

Molly stretched her arms. “I don’t think I can do it, Gus. It’s hard for me to climb.”

“Of course,” he answered. “That’s why you’re in the swamp.”

He guided her across sand, twigs, and wet leaves. “You can do it,” he assured her. “It’s not easy to rise. But others have done it. And I know you can, too.”

Stan stood by his car, pleased with the progress of the process. “You sure know your stuff. I know a good communicator when I see one.”

Gus nodded. “Communication is good,” he said, looking Stan straight in the eye. “But watch out for those who force it on you. Such pressure can kill originality. Imagination thrives in freedom. That’s why Swamp Therapy works so well. We use our Swamper vacuum cleaner to suck out blockage, and clear the path of creativity. It takes about ten minutes to vacuum a mental mess. Our prices beat any therapist. You may want to pick one up. When we get to our office, speak to my partners.”

“Where’s your office?”

“Just down the road. Next to Henry’s Place.”

“Henry’s Place? When we started out a month ago, that’s where we wanted to go! But we were sidetracked by the Swamp.”

“Many are.”

“My wife insisted on cleaning it up. She wouldn’t leave until the job was done.”

“An impossible task.”

“Perfection is her mission.”

“I understand her sad situation. So many want perfection. But those who achieves never gets out alive.”

Molly, now awake and focused, listening intently. “Really?”

“Yes.” Gus took her hand, and looked deeply into her eyes. “The insistence on perfection creates utopia, and utopia is death.”

“I thought utopia was heaven.”

“Same thing.”

Molly seemed puzzled. “Then is Henry’s Place really a graveyard?” she asked.

“You could call it that.”

“But isn’t it beautiful, peaceful, serene.”

“It is.”

Stan stepped forward. “Maybe this is the wrong time to visit. We’re not ready for Henry’s Place. Let’s turn around and go home. We’re still young.”

Gus said, “Age is no problem. Folks visit us anytime. We accept all guests.”

Stan felt disappointed. Molly was crushed. “All my life, I wanted to clean things up, fix the swamp, make a perfect world.”

“Improving things is good.”

“But you say the end result of perfection is a visit to Henry’s Place.”

“Yes. It is the insistence on perfection that kills.”

“I’m an insistent person.”

“Yes, you are. Not a bad thing.”

“But I don’t want to die.”

“No reason for that.”

Stan looked at Molly. Molly looked at Stan. Both looked at Gus. “We want to go home,” they said in one voice.

“You mean back to the swamp?”

Wistfully, the couple nodded.

“Back to endless cleaning?”

“Yes,” Stan answered. “And I want to start clarinet lessons.”

“Then you’ll visit Henry’s Place sometime in the future?”

“Okay.”

Gus reached into his pocket, took his departure hat, and stretched his arms to the sky.

“Okay, I’m leaving. We’re finished for now. Life is a swamp. If you want to get out of it, you’re dead.”

Gus climbed into his Swamp Truck, started the motor.

“See you soon!” he said, and sped off.

from Carlos the Cloud

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