

WHEN SWAMP LILY MET SWAMP THING

by Jaime Formato

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I WAS SUPPOSED to sign up for an after-school activity today. Club, sport, whatever—it didn't matter. Mom said if I was going to make friends at my new school, then I was going to have to “put myself out there” and “get involved.”

Could there be two more terrifying phrases in the English language?

I tried. I really did. I made it all the way to the gym before I freaked out. The double doors were flung wide open, but there might as well have been an invisible force field. Tons of people I don't know? Fluorescent lights? Squeaky shoes? Yeah...I'll pass.

Turning to flee, I ran smack into Kevin. Literally. Bounced off his chest and landed butt-first on the sidewalk. “Excuse me, uh...,” he trailed off, a puzzled look on his face.

He had no clue what my name was, even though I'd been sitting next to him in Science for the past two weeks. Like Lily-the-lab-partner was so hard to remember. I couldn't find my voice to even remind him, though. I just jumped to my feet and mumbled a lame “sorry.”

The closer I got to the swamp, though, the better I felt. It's so chill there—exactly what I needed. I couldn't wait to get there. The warm brown water always rests calmly against the grass, never in a rush like it is at the beach. Cypress trees sprout straight out of the wetlands, with roots than run deep beneath the surface. They have these huge, fat trunks that fan out at the bottom like one of my grandma's skirts. The outstretched branches form umbrellas overhead, capturing the heat and glow of the Florida sun. The burning rays soften as they mix with the cool, bladed leaves, and a mellow greenish gold light drips down.

I spent the summer at the edge of that swamp, molding the mud like clay. Little people, animals, and plants all sprung to life in my hands, sculptures born from the earth. Lined up on the grass, they dried and hardened in the sun. I thought about taking

them home, but it just seemed wrong, so I always gave them back to the swamp. It seemed to like it.

It's a pretty weird hobby, I guess. My sister started calling me Swamp Lily and asked me why a twelve-year-old was still making mud-pies. I called her Cheerleader Kelly and asked her why a sixteen-year-old was so stupid. Not my best comeback, but whatever.

Today, the swamp perfectly reflected my mood. And not in a good way. Wrinkled candy wrappers and crushed soda cans had invaded the still waters; a jumbled mess, like my jumbled brain. Shaking my head, I waded into the shallow part, picking up the trash and tossing it onto the nearby grass.

Leaning forward to get a particularly stubborn honey-bun wrapper, I lost my balance and fell face-first into the murky water. Thin, finger-like reeds brushed my face and tadpoles tickled my eyelids. I tried to push myself up, but my hands slipped on the muddy bed, plunging me back down into the water. My nose and mouth filled with hot, liquid dirt that stole my breath and burned my throat. My heart raced, and I let out a bubbly, smothered shriek.

The mud shifted beneath me, encircling my wrists and gripping them with the strength of human hands. In one rough movement, I was yanked to my feet, sputtering and dripping. By the time I'd wiped my eyes and looked around, no one was there. Just the slightest ripple in the ever-still swamp.

I had no idea what had grabbed me. Helped me?

I ran all the way home.

I did *not* go to swamp to next day. I'm just not down with creepy hands that rise up from the depths of the earth, no matter how helpful they are.

I also did not have an afterschool activity to go to, so I kinda just rode my bike around and around the neighborhood until I got bored and went home.

Kelly met me at the door. Her face was flushed with rage, and she shook her cheerleading uniform at me like a mad and filthy pompom. "Seriously, Swamp Lily," she hissed. "What is wrong with you? It's like living with a toddler."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

“You know what I’m talking about. You wrecked my uniform, and you knew I had a game tonight.”

“I didn’t touch your uniform.”

“Really? Then whose muddy handprints are all over it? Mom’s? Yeah, okay” She rolled her eyes.

“I don’t know,” I answered slowly. “But it wasn’t me. I just got home, and I didn’t even go to the swamp today.”

“You’re a liar.”

“Am not.”

Mom walked in at that exact moment. “You’re not what, Lily?” She looked from me to my sister, trying to figure out who started it this time.

Kelly answered before I could even get my mouth unglued. “Lily ruined my cheerleading uniform. I left it hanging by the door, so I could come home, grab it, and change real quick before our first game tonight. But just look at what that little swamp creature did—I can’t wear this!”

“I didn’t—“

“Enough, Lily.” Mom interrupted. “I don’t have time for this. I’ve got to somehow get your sister’s uniform cleaned up, try to eat something, and then get her down to the stadium by 6. I don’t have time for stories.”

“I don’t tell stories.”

“Really? So it wasn’t a story when you told me you signed up for the track team yesterday? And that you had practice today?” Mom’s mouth set in a thin, hard line.

This sounded like a trap. A trap of my own making, I have to admit, but a trap just the same. I wracked my brain for a way out.

There wasn’t one.

“Because I went by the track on my way home,” she continued. “And you were nowhere to be seen.”

Kelly gasped, like she was in absolute shock that someone would lie about their athleticism and school spirit. Then she shrieked and pointed to the white shag carpeting of the living room. “There’s wet, soggy footprints everywhere! Geez, Lily. Did you demolish the whole house?”

Mom’s head swung around, following Kelly’s accusing finger.

“I didn’t!” I shouted.

“Go clean it up,” Mom said through clenched teeth. “I’ll take care of Kelly’s uniform. Then go to your room. This is ridiculous. I’m not taking you to the game tonight.”

I don’t think that was as much of a punishment as she thought it was.

It took hours to clean up the mess. It wasn’t just footprints like I’d thought originally. The walls were splotted with grimy handprints and wisps of swamp grass covered the furniture like cat hair. And it all led straight to my room.

Kelly must have set me up.

I just couldn’t figure out why. Did she really hate me that bad? Was she scared I’d embarrass her in front of all her new friends, so she wanted to get me in trouble? Or maybe she’s just a psycho. I don’t know. The whole thing was really weird.

I felt bad for Mom, though. The split with Dad and the cross-country move had been pretty hard on her. She didn’t need any drama from us right now. And I shouldn’t have lied to her about signing up for track. I can’t believe she bought it in the first place, though. I mean, has she even met me? I tripped three times just going up the stairs to my room.

Which was also a mess. A thick layer of slimy earth paved a glistening, yet disgusting, trail to my closet. My arms ached from scrubbing, so I stepped carefully over it and threw myself onto the bed.

I was almost asleep when I noticed the closet was breathing.

Not like a human breathes—you know, that simple in and out sound of a passing breeze. This breathing was gurgles and snorts, sloshes and bubbling. Over the breathing, I heard a series of thumps. They were soft at first, a polite and gentle knock. Then it got louder and faster. *Something* pounded wetly against the door with the desperation of a trapped animal. A muffled, rippling sob escaped the closet and pierced my heart. My hands shook, and I was about to throw up my own stomach, but I flung open the door anyway.

And screamed. Then screamed again. After that, I screamed a little more. But then it got old, so I stopped. Whatever was hiding in the closet was much more frightened than it was frightening.

Cowering against a row of colorful skirts and dresses, was an obviously terrified creature. It was human in shape, but formed completely of mud and swamp reeds. Its damp skin glistened as filthy droplets of water ran down its legs, puddling on the floor. It looked like many of the figures I had sculpted this past summer—vaguely human, completely wild. I couldn't believe it. A real, live Swamp Thing was hiding in my closet.

Its eyes were sad, two deep pools set back in its face. The mouth opened like a gash and inhuman gurgles poured forth. It was trying to tell me something.

"It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you." It seemed necessary to comfort the poor monster, so I patted it awkwardly on the shoulder. My hand was disgusting after that, of course, and I'm pretty sure a water-bug skittered up my wrist, but it seemed like the right thing to do. I wiped my hand discreetly on my jeans.

"You can come out of there if you want. It's okay. Well, wait. Hold on, just one sec." I ran to the bathroom and grabbed an armload of towels. I laid them on the ground, forming a path leading out of the closet. I beckoned the Swamp Thing. "Okay, come on out."

It followed me slowly, leaving a trail of slime across the row of towels. A quick glance into the closet showed that my clothes might never be the same again, but there were more important things to worry about now.

"So. Um. You're from the swamp, I guess?" That was pretty obvious, I was just breaking the ice.

It nodded. Its thin line of a mouth turned up slightly at the corners.

"What are you doing *here*, though?"

A grimy finger raised and pointed directly at me.

"Me? You came to see me?"

It nodded again, the slit of a mouth turning downward. Sludgy water rolled like tears from deep-set eyes. I stopped thinking of the swamp creature as an *It* then. He was much too human and in too much pain.

"Do you need help?"

A low gurgling sound rose from his throat, sad bubbles forming and popping in his mouth. He ran a hand through his grassy hair, then felt around in his scalp as if searching for something. Wincing, he pulled a candy bar wrapper from his head and

dropped it on the towel at his feet. From his chest, he pulled a crumpled water bottle. From his palm, an empty tube of lip gloss.

His eyes met mine, pleading.

“That’s horrible,” I said, blinking back tears as I plucked a soggy, half-eaten cookie from his cheek. “I’ll help you. I promise. I’ll get it cleaned up. I’ll make it nice again. I mean it.” That wouldn’t be so hard, right?

The Swamp Thing croaked happily and nodded his head so fast filthy wet drops went flying and splashed my face.

“Okay. But you *have* to go back to the swamp tonight. I’m a little worried you’re going to dry out, and there is no way I’m putting you in my bathtub. I’m in enough trouble as it is.”

The next day, after school got out, I ran as fast as I could to the swamp. It was even worse than I remembered it. Fast food bags, soda bottles, and napkins floated in the water like rotting lily pads. It infuriated me—the way people could just come along and kill all the beauty.

“It’s okay. I’ve got you.” I whispered.

Frantically, I snatched up every bit of litter and tossed it into my trash bag. I had just finished and tied the bag off, when a battered Slushee cup came into view on the horizon. Now, normally I’m a big fan of the Slushee, but this one about sent me over the edge. I crept towards it, a hunter stalking her prey. Carefully, I kept to the grassline along the shallows—I was not about to fall in again. The offensive cup was just within reach when I heard a familiar giggle.

I followed it until I reached a small clearing along the opposite edge of the swamp. Kelly and a bunch of her buddies from the cheerleading squad and the football team were lounging on the grass. I got there just in time to see my sister laugh at something some guy in a trucker hat said, then chuck an empty soda can nonchalantly into the swamp.

I jumped out from behind a water oak and shouted at her. “Kelly!”

She squinted at me real hard, like she was trying to figure out who I was. “OMG, Swamp Lily. Is that you?”

“Knock it off, Kelly. You know it’s me. And I’d rather be a Swamp Lily than a Swamp Destroyer.”

“Ooh. Burn.” She laughed, but I could tell she was furious. Her cheeks flushed as she side-glanced at Trucker Hat. “What are you even talking about? Nobody’s destroying your precious swamp. Trust me, there’s enough mosquitoes and toads for everyone. Now, don’t you have a track meet or something to train for?”

“No. I don’t. You know I don’t care about that stuff. But I do care about nature.” As cheesy as it sounded, it was true. A couple of her little friends giggled, but I kept on ranting. I was too mad to care how crazy I looked. “This is a great place, you know that? It’s full of really special creatures, creatures that you’ve never even heard of, never even *seen*. And you don’t even care. You don’t even see how you’re messing it up. It’s disgusting. Why can’t you guys just clean up after yourselves?”

Kelly and I stood there glaring at each other. It must have gotten a little uncomfortable because Trucker Hat felt the need to step in.

“Okay, kid,” he said, in a tone that implied I was, like, four years old. “That’s enough. Why don’t you go play or something?”

Go play. Seeing red, I turned on my heel and stormed off. Naturally, the mud was slick and I slid and fell flat on my face into the hot, murky shallows.

I wasn’t scared when Swamp Thing’s hands lifted mine, but I sure was embarrassed.

We were supposed to be studying pond water under a microscope, but instead Kevin seemed intent on studying me. And not in a “I just discovered my lab partner’s gorgeous” kind of way. More like a “Is my lab partner from Mars?” kind of way.

Not in the mood. “What?” I snapped.

He jumped a little, then goofy-grinned. “Did you really go off on a bunch of highschoolers yesterday?”

Not what I was expecting him to say. “What?” I snapped again.

“My brother said some new girl came charging out of the swamp, yelling at them for littering.”

“Trucker Hat,” I muttered, narrowing my eyes.

“Yeah, that’d be him. He always wears that stupid hat.”

Awkward silence.

More awkward silence.

“Anyway,” Kevin said. “I think what you did was pretty cool.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it takes a lot of guts to stand up for what’s right. And I’m real big into the environment and stuff.” He rolled his eyes. “Unlike my brother.”

“Really?” Ugh. One day I’ll be able to have a conversation with a boy that doesn’t consist of awkward silence, angry mutters, and repeating the word “really” over and over again.

“Yeah. I was actually thinking about starting an environmental club here at school. My dad keeps bugging me to, like, get involved or something, but I didn’t see anything I really wanted to do on sign-up day.”

“My mom does the same thing,” I said.

“You get it then. So, you want to?”

“Want to what?”

“Want to start an environmental club with me?”

“You don’t think I’m crazy? Yelling at everybody like that?” I couldn’t help but wonder if Trucker Hat had told him about my muddy face-plant or not. I’ll bet he did, but I sure wasn’t about to bring *that* part up.

“That’s a good kind of crazy. Come on, are you in?”

“Sure.” I gave him a goofy grin of my own. Swamp Thing would definitely approve.

Two weeks later I found myself back in the clearing with the high-schoolers. Except this time, I wasn’t alone. I was backed up by 10 other members of the North Florida Nature Preservers, our middle school’s newest club.

Every piece of litter created by the high-schoolers was snatched by a member of our posse and placed immediately into one of our big, black trash bags. The entire time they hung out we stared at them, as bug-eyed and obnoxious as possible.

When Trucker Hat finished his soda, Kevin was right there by his side. “Let me get that for you, bro,” he said politely, dropping it dramatically into his bag.

When Kelly popped a stick of gum into her mouth, I was there to get the wrapper. “I’ll take that,” I said, smiling sweetly up at her.

It went on like that for about twenty minutes before they got sick of being babysat. Trucker Hat was the first to cave. Glaring at Kevin, who had just relieved him of his unfinished beef jerky, he said, “This is boring. Let’s go to Denny’s or something.”

The rest of his crew jumped up, nodding their agreement. They seemed relieved to get away from us.

Kelly hung back for a moment, slowly tying her shoe. When her friends had gone, she sidled over and gave me a friendly shoulder bump. “I’ll tell Mom you found a real afterschool activity.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I’ll tell her it’s a good one, and that you’re, like, a leader or something.”

“Really?”

“Mm-hm. I won’t tell her how cute your Kevin is, though.” She winked and darted off to catch up with her friends.

I stole back to the swamp at sunset. The water was peaceful and warm, and the setting sun left orange tracks in the ripples.

“Hi,” I said softly.

The swamp swelled, and a muddy figure lurched to its feet. Swamp Thing stood, glistening in the day’s last light. Thick, murky water poured from his flesh and toads sung on his shoulders. Shaking his reedy hair, he grinned a deep crescent of clay.

“I’ll keep watching over you,” I promised.

He bowed, knelt, then plucked a swamp lily from the shallows. He held it out to me—its delicate, white petals glowing in the deep brown of his hand. The loveliness brought tears to my eyes. I took his gift and held it close to my heart. I think we understood each other.

He had always shared his beauty, and I would always share my strength.