

Why the Woodpecker Laughs

by Gita M. Smith

Once upon a time, before there was Prairie, before there was Mouse and Hawk to eat him, there was Swamp.

Therein lived Salamander and Snake. High above them, in the tops of Cypress trees lived Woodpecker, a chattering bird with an ascot of brilliant red. Frog and Mosquito sang at night; all manner of Flies sang by day, and water was plentiful. Alligators laid their eggs in it and taught their young to swim.

Time passed, much time, and one day the Human arrived. He saw the Cypress standing in water, but not rotting. He wanted to build his boats with Cypress and came back bearing saws and chains. He saw the water, and because it was dark with tannins and not pretty, he thought it useless. So he came with pumps and pipes to drain it.

The animals held a meeting. All came, and they conferred late into the night at the base of the wisest, oldest Cypress with arthritic knees.

“We are too small to fight them,” said Mosquito.

“Yes,” said Cottonmouth, “but we can make their lives a misery.”

“You betcha,” said Stinging Fly, and ‘Gator opened wide his jaws to show where Human might end up, were he not respectful.

Human returned at first light, ready to threaten Cypress, set to clear the swamp of its primordial components. He was descended upon by black clouds of mosquitoes. Snakes with huge white mouths reared up from their holes and bit Human. Alligator, whom men had never seen before, slithered out of the depths and showed its stalagmite incisors.

Human fled from Swamp, spreading word of its dangers and discomforts to all corners of the land. And so it is today that only the foolhardiest of people dare to step around palmetto stop signs

guarding the borders of every swamp and plunge ahead into the ancient pools.

More enter than return. Gator, Snake and Fly make sure of it. And that is why Woodpecker laughs.

