

## Section 4: Peace River Park

Swimming downstream, Missy enters a swamp. Bald cypress trees stand tall above the water. Streamers of Spanish moss hang from their branches.

An egret perches on a cypress knee. It dips into the water and catches a mosquito fish. Missy eats one too. The fish, as small as a guppy, eats the larvae of mosquitoes.

A hurricane in 2004 blew down branches and trees. Missy hides beneath one and another as the ground becomes more mud than water. She follows the rise of the land toward the scent of sun-baked sand and plants.

Missy wiggles through Virginia creeper and swamp fern. She sees a sidewalk. Across the road is a tall hill. It is taller than the riverbank or a cypress tree.

Missy hears footsteps and dogs panting. She hides in the ferns.

A woman holds her son's hand. She tells him, "That big hill where we parked used to be a clay settling pond from a phosphate mine. It's dried up now, but when it was first made, the watery stuff inside it was really yucky. My friend told me that one time some of it leaked into the river. It killed all the fish."

A man holding the leashes of two dogs says, "Pardon me, ma'am. It's what they now call reclaimed." The dogs pull toward the boy. "Don't worry. These dogs won't hurt you."

Then he turns to the mother. "The hill's planted in grass, and it makes a big, open field. The dogs love it."

The dogs sniff the ground, pulling against their leashes. They whine toward Missy. She holds still.

The man says, "You should walk the boardwalk. It winds through the swamp to the river."

She says, "There's only about an hour of daylight left."

"You have time to walk to the river. You'll want to stop and look at everything. You can even see the high water mark on the tree trunks." The man pulls on the leashes. The dogs bark and whine and tug harder.

"I will — thanks." She smiles at him.

He yanks the leashes. "C'mon, boys," he says to the dogs.

Before she turns to the river, Missy waits until the footsteps fade away.

