

GAVIN
GOODFELLOW
The Lure of Burnt Swamp

GAVIN

Dumbfounded

“Dragon breath!” Gavin wrinkled his nose at the smoke that hung above the woods.

“Who you calling dragon breath?” Eric frowned. “I’ve been brushing. See?” He pulled his lips back and bared his teeth so the wire of his silver retainer glinted.

“Not *your* breath, Eric—Burnt Swamp. I’ve been trying to figure out what it smells like.”

“Dragon breath, hmm?” Molly twirled the walnut-brown curls at the end of her waist-length braid. “I like that.” She dug into her backpack for her ever-ready notebook.

Gavin watched the smoke’s feelers slither up the path as it had for ten of his twelve years. But today the wispy tongues flicked at him and his cousins as if to say, *Back off. The road to Uncle Warney’s is off-limits.*

“Why would you want to describe swamp stink anyway?” Eric raised an eyebrow. “A su u-u-mmer scho-o-o-l assignment from Woebe?”

“That’s not funny.” Gavin’s good mood faded. His cousin’s summer school dig expanded the gap between them that labeled Gavin a dunce. *What’s the deal? Eric used to be my best buddy. Now he’s Mr. Cooler-Than-You-Could-Ever-Hope-To-Be.*

“*Why can’t you be more like Eric? Sometimes he feels more like my son than you.*” His dad’s words at breakfast struck a bitter chord in Gavin’s tender heart. He was tired of competing with his not-so-perfect cousin.

“You want funny? How about this?” Molly assumed her favorite radio announcer voice and pinched her nose so hard it looked like her freckles would pop off. “Burnt Swamp smells like a fireplace burning cheap cigars and Billy Bragg’s sneakers.”

“The ones that got soaked when the boys’ toilets overflowed.” Gavin chuckled. At least she got them off the subject of summer school. He didn’t feel like discussing his reading problems today. Or ever.

“Good one, Molly!” Eric slapped his sister on the back. “Billy Bragg’s sneakers are smellier than dragon’s breath any day.”

Gavin smiled to see Molly and Eric goofing around together. He couldn’t remember the last time he felt like they were a “family.”

No one would guess those two were twins. They’d been at odds with each other for two years and didn’t even live in the same house! Molly was so upset when her dad remarried, she begged her stepfather to adopt her. Since they had different last names, Eric told Gavin it was easier to forget they were brother and sister. Gavin thought they were both being stupid.

“Maybe dragon’s breath doesn’t smell so bad, after all.” Gavin grinned, trying to keep the happy momentum going. He raked his fingers through his hair, pushing back stubborn red locks that tickled his eyebrows.

“You know what else is funny?” A puzzled expression clouded Molly’s face. “The ground seems spongy. And it feels like we’re going in the wrong direction. Shouldn’t we be closer to the edge of the swamp by now?”

Eric kicked a twig that would be cinder by nightfall. “Nah, you’ve just lost your bearings.” With that, he slipped, slid into an awkward sprawl, then straightened up. “Good save, if I do say so myself.” He flexed his muscles and grinned. “When you’re a jock, you’re a jock.”

“Shouldn’t a jock know how to walk without tripping?” Molly punched him in the arm.

Eric scowled back at the twig. “*Harrumpf*. First the ground turns to spongy moss and trips me up, and then you try to push me down.”

Gavin offered a humorless laugh, but his gut continued to churn. *Yeah. Eric’s turned into a jock—or is it a jerk? And Molly’s got brains. What have I got to show for my stinking life? Summer school.* The oppressive guilt weighed him down, agitating him more than ever. And the ground *did* seem weird and spongy. There were no chattering birds or scampering squirrels in this place—only the mournful sound of a hoot owl.

“*Hoo-hoo, hoo-WAAAHH, hoo-WAAAHHH.*”

As the threesome rounded a bend, heading deeper into the woods, the underbrush seized Gavin’s ankle. *Eeeee-rie!* If Gavin didn’t know better, he’d think the scraggly forest wanted him to feel alone and friendless.

With his next step, a dark-green patch of moss gave way beneath his sneaker. Dropping to one knee, Gavin pushed with his hands on ground that felt squishy and warm, then shoved himself upright and took a deep breath. Big mistake. The air smelled of spores, and the smoke made him gag as though a hand grabbed him by the throat.

A sudden, prickly sensation numbed his arms and legs. When the feeling reached his brain, he grew light-headed, and his ears rang. Gavin closed his eyes. A thousand pinpoints of white light sparkled, spun, and swirled, then disappeared into a pitch-black vortex. A strange thought rippled through his fear. *Round and round they go; where they stop nobody knows.*

As soon as the stars vanished, the vortex unleashed a hot, moist, hideous odor. Gavin opened his eyes and stared into—the yawning jaws of a dragon! Goopy drool stretched like rubber bands between razor sharp teeth and dripped from nostrils at the end of a long, bony-crested snout.

Gavin screamed, or at least he thought he did, but he couldn't hear the sound of his own voice. In what seemed like slow motion, the dragon disappeared. *What was that? This is too weird.*

Blinking his eyes open, Gavin caught a glimpse of Molly and Eric's alarmed faces before again closing his eyes and doubling over.

So this must be what it feels like to faint . . . or die.



Gavin caught his breath. But instead of fear, he felt wrapped in something so safe he thought it must be his down feather sleeping bag. Reaching out for it, his arms touched only air. His body felt buoyant. Flashing his eyes open, all security vanished. One huge, purple dragon eye glared at him . . . then the monstrous head slowly vanished, as before.

It was a dragon, wasn't it? Couldn't be. The Burnt Swamp dragon was only a legend.

Where am I? What day is this? He tried to picture the kitchen wall calendar and decided it must be Wednesday. July. *Yeah, July 20th. The 20th? Oh, no! I'm supposed to be getting a haircut! Dad's going to kill me—if something else doesn't get me first.*

“Molly? Eric?” Silence.

Gavin was alone in the mist. In all the years the swamp had been burning, it had never looked like this. Gavin had stepped into a land of fog, glittering with flashes of white light.

He could see *through* everything, including the human figure that glided toward him. Gavin swallowed hard, taking in the man's features. It looked like his great-uncle Warney. As the image floated closer, Gavin decided this was definitely not another daydream.

The man had the same unnaturally straight posture, the same sincere smile, even the same gnarled wooden cane and bald head as his great-uncle.

“Uncle Warney?” Gavin coaxed out a whisper that echoed in reverse with each syllable getting louder than the first before cresting and fading into the mist.

“Yep, Gavin, it's me, all right.” Warney's ghost-like lips moved, while his hazel eyes stared straight through Gavin.

“If you're Uncle Warney,” Gavin's insides writhed, “then what's with the robes?” *Shouldn't he be wearing his worn-out jeans and faded T-shirt?*

Warney chuckled. “Robes? You're one to be talkin' what with your wearin' the same striped shirt three days in a row.”

Only the real Uncle Warney could come back at him like that. “But how can you be here? You're supposed to be in your shack—I mean your

house. Molly and Eric and I are—” Gavin swiveled around— “I mean *were* on our way to see you. Where in the world are we, anyway?”

Gavin felt the old man peer into his soul, drawing him into the unthinkable.

“Did I . . . die? Did you die? Did we die together? Is this heaven?”

Uncle Warney’s eyes crinkled into a smile. “Nah, ya didn’t die. I didn’t die. Not yet, anyway. Yer havin’ a vision.”

“A vision? You mean I’m . . . No! I don’t have visions. Maybe daydreams, but they never talk back. No! *Visions are too weird*. People think I’m stupid now. If they see me having visions . . .” Gavin’s knees buckled. “No! I *can’t* have visions.”

“T’aint yer choice, Gavin. At least not yet, anyways. God has some revelatin’ he wants to do, so pay attention.” The moment Uncle Warney spoke of God, he glowed brighter.

“G-G-God?” Tears pooled in Gavin’s eyes as he slowly turned around in this ethereal realm, searching the swirling mist for a hint of Molly or Eric or anything *normal*. Completing his circle, his eyes again rested on Uncle Warney who stood there, but was not there—seen, but unseen. Gavin reached out. His hand passed right through the old man’s belly.

Ohmigosh! Gavin jumped back.

“Whoa thar, young feller. Some things are fer touchin’, some not.”

His uncle’s nearness made Gavin feel almost at home and, for an instant, he longed to feel the roughness of the old man’s unshaven face upon his cheek.

Uncle Warney opened his fist and revealed an object about the size of a Fig Newton. On closer inspection, Gavin could see that it wasn’t a

square cookie at all but a book. Bound with cracked leather straps, the miniature object looked even more ancient than its owner.

When Uncle Warney moved closer to Gavin, a whiff of the book's musty smell assaulted his nose.

"Phew! What is that? It stinks."

Uncle Warney didn't answer. Instead, in slow motion, he placed his bony hand on Gavin's shoulder.

Gavin jumped back. "How'd you do that? How come I can't touch you but you can touch me?"

Again, no answer. Whatever that thing was, Uncle Warney handled it with deep reverence. Maybe it was a shrunk-up version of the New Testaments that preachers handed out on the streets.

The old man stepped closer. "Here, Gavin. Eat."

"Eat what? That?" Gavin gagged at the thought. "No way! I can't eat a book, especially not that grubby-looking thing!"

"It's no worse than them textbooks ya nibble on." Warney raised an eyebrow.

How could Uncle Warney know that? "Yeah, but I only do that when I'm nervous. Besides, it's just the corners. And that's chewing, not swallowing whole books."

Warney nodded toward the book. "Have it your way."

"My way? Well then, *my way is no way.*"

"Hear me, Gavin." The old man spoke with authority. "This private meetin's fer yer good and fer the good o' others. God wants ya to eat this book. It don't come from me but from the Holy One." He seemed to glow even brighter than before. "The Lord'll never force ya to do nothin' yer not willin' to do."

Gavin's heart raced.

"I know this is hard for ya. Jest 'member this—things ain't always what they seem. I know this book looks a mite unappetizin', but it'll be nourishin' to ya, I promise." Warney smiled. "More nourishin' than them cookies ya snuck from your mother's bakin' table after she told ya not to touch 'em'."

Guilt tracked a telltale red blush on Gavin's face and bore itself deep within his soul as surely as those chocolate chips had singed the roof of his mouth that morning. How'd Uncle Warney know *that*?

His uncle still offered the tiny book to Gavin. *Huh?* Were his wrinkles fading? Was his face getting brighter? Gavin looked over his shoulder, wishing Molly and Eric were there to tell him if he was going nuts-o or not. But all he saw was misty vapor in a world that appeared to have no beginning and no end.

"Do ya think God would ask anything of ya that wasn't good fer ya?" Warney's patient voice drew Gavin back to the real question.

Gavin trembled. Part of him wanted to run while another part needed to hear more. Besides, this place had no floor. How could he run with no floor? "I know God's supposed to do what's good, but none of this makes sense."

Uncle Warney nodded, and a slow grin spread across his face. "Ain't it yer heart's desire to do somethin' that makes a difference—somethin' that really *matters*?"

Gavin hesitated.

"This is yer chance, son."

Chewing on books, stolen cookies, his heart's desire . . . what else does Uncle Warney know?

“Nah, it’s more than jest a chance,” Warney said. “This book is yer destiny. Like I told ya, you can refuse to eat it if ya want. God don’t force nobody to do His will. It’s up to you. Fact is, He’s got someone else standin’ on the sidelines just waitin’ fer the call ta action. But if ya refuse, you’ll be losin’ the blessin’. Yep, and I shore don’t wantcha ta lose yer blessin’. That’ll be somethin’ you’ll regret the rest of yer life.”

Gavin closed his eyes. He didn’t know what to do.

I don't understand anything that's going on here, but Uncle Warney's never steered me wrong before.

Gavin opened one eye just enough to peek at the Uncle Warney who appeared to grow younger by the minute. He was starting to look like he did in Grandma Jibbers’ photo album before he got old—back when he had hair and his moccasins were new.

Pictures, smictures, a sarcastic voice taunted from the dark recesses of Gavin's mind. Don't do it. That old codger can't be trusted, and you know it.

It was the same voice that borrowed his father’s favorite saying, “seize the moment,” and told him no one would ever know about those cookies when he sneaked them and ran. The same voice that said he might as well forget the idea of playing ball or getting straight A’s. The same voice that reminded him a hundred times a day that he was less than pond scum.

If you eat that book, you're going to wake up in bed with a mouthful of pillow, feeling stupid as ever. Or worse yet, a mouth full of swamp moss.

Molly and Eric would never let him live it down if he woke up prying swamp slime from his mouth. He squeezed his eyes tighter.

“Gavin, what will it be?” Uncle Warney’s voice blocked the taunter’s words. Love and approval flowed through Gavin’s

mind and soul. Better to make a fool out of himself in front of his cousins than to disappoint Uncle Warney. Sometimes a fella just had to hope with his heart.

With his eyes still closed, Gavin dropped his jaw to open his mouth, but his lips wouldn't part. *Come on, you can do this.* The harder he tried, opening his jaw as wide as he could several times, the tighter his lips pursed. Finally, in an incredible force of his will, Gavin's mouth flew open with a loud kissing sound.

Gavin heard Uncle Warney chuckle but didn't dare look at him or he would change his mind for sure.

"Taste and see," Uncle Warney said as he placed the tiny book on Gavin's tongue. "The Lord, He is good."

Whoa! It tasted sweet like honey. But, the instant Gavin closed his lips, the book swelled up like a roasted marshmallow, stuck to the roof of his mouth, and made him gag. He didn't dare spit it out, so he chewed. And he chewed.

His eyes flashed open in stunned surprise when bursts of flavor filled his mouth. It was delicious—better than chocolate. Chewing the book apart, his tongue discovered three textures. One part felt rough and tasted tangy like dried apricots. Another felt crisp and tasted like Granny Smith apple slices. The third was fizzy liquid that bounced on his tongue like 7-Up. The spray that filled every crevice of his mouth made him giddy. He managed to get the book down in three swallows.

A giggle party splashed in the middle of his stomach. Bubbling and tumbling, it worked its way up his throat, through his nose, and into his head. Woozy and off balance, Gavin suddenly wanted to dance. Just when he was about to jump for joy, the book turned sour in his stomach and made him feel like throwing up.

Gavin saw a mix of concern and pride in Uncle Warney's face.

So tell me But Gavin couldn't make his mouth work to voice the words aloud. *What's going on here?*

Uncle Warney answered as if he'd heard Gavin's every thought. "Them three textures and flavors is like the three parts of God—the Father's justice is sometimes tough to swallow; what Jesus done fer us on the cross, why, that's bittersweet and tender like them Granny Smith apples; and the living water of the Holy Spirit is refreshin' and energizin' like 7-Up, only it don't never run out or go flat. Ya conquered yer first hurdle by eatin' it. Yer on yer way."

In that fleeting moment, Gavin saw himself sprinting over the hurdles at school, just as Eric would. But the image fled as quickly as it came.

"This ain't no daydream, Gavin. It's fer real, fer keeps." Uncle Warney started to vanish, too. "Never fergit what the Good Book says:

'Neither death nor life . . .

neither angels nor demons . . .

shall separate you from the love of God . . .'"

"Where are you go—" Gavin's concern for Uncle Warney's fading image was interrupted by a sensation that someone who didn't belong in the mist was leering at him. Gavin knew it. Out of the fog, he heard a donkey braying. Then a loud buzz, like a thousand bumble bees, replaced the abrasive braying sound.

There *were* a thousand bumblebees! Gavin shook his head, convinced the insects were headed straight for him. Just as they raised their stingers to dive in, Gavin heard Molly say, "Lord Jesus!" At least it sounded like Molly. When she spoke, the bees formed into a long and steady stream

that exploded into a trillion confetti-like fragments. Gavin opened his eyes. No trace of the phantom bumblebees. His skin felt cold and clammy, and he gulped a mouthful of air that threw him into another coughing fit.

All that remained of the vision was a stale aftertaste. Someone was bending over him. At first, all he could see was a blob with a brown rope dangling from it. Forcing his eyes to focus, he recognized Molly's freckled, panic-stricken face. Glancing around, he saw that he was back on the path that ran the perimeter of Burnt Swamp.

"Are you okay?" Molly stopped shaking his shoulder to help Gavin sit up. "You look awful. You're white—chalk-white and splotchy!"

Gavin's face felt cold. His eyes watered. "I'm okay. Where's Eric?"

"Oh, he walked on ahead," Molly said. "He's totally oblivious to the fact that you just about choked to death. What brought that on?"

"I don't know. Maybe I swallowed my spit the wrong way. Maybe it's this stupid air." How could he explain something he couldn't comprehend?

"You wait here," Molly said. "I'll go get Eric."

At first, Gavin felt relieved to be sitting on the wooded path, alone with his thoughts. But, when a cloud passed over the sun, accompanied by a faint but shrill braying sound, a shudder ran through him from his gut to his armpits.