



## **POSEIDON COMES TO HEAL**

By Sidney Stevens

BARRY DEVRIES STOOD ON the viewing platform overlooking Waukunah Springs. It was his favorite time of day—after the busloads of tourists left, just him and dozens of West Indian manatees floating still and silent like portly submarines in the aquamarine waters of their warm winter sanctuary.

This evening, though, the scene brought no peace. Barry stuffed down irritation. This was his winter sanctuary too—here at Henry T. Moss Lagoon State Park—his home from January through April for the past three years, where he volunteered as a guest greeter and park

maintenance man. His job was to answer endless questions about manatees, preserve the park's natural "old Florida" ambiance, and hopefully teach his wife a lesson.

Clearly, that last task wasn't working. Deb's indecision about retiring seemed no closer to resolution. Barry sighed loudly. Just the latest maneuver in her accelerating turn against him.

From across the springs, a large manatee began moving in his direction—the one he called Finn, nearly thirteen feet long and probably upwards of three thousand pounds. The creature slipped through the water, flippers and tail steadily propelling his corpulent body as if Barry's furious thoughts had sounded a silent summons. He surfaced once, snorted gently, and resubmerged. A masterclass in equanimity.

If only Barry's life could remain so unruffled. Brats—that's what Deb called her middle-school students. Brats, for God's sake. Yet she lived for them. Hell, Deb lived for them more than she lived for him.

Barry's jaw clenched. Of course, he'd return to Michigan to resume his marriage at the end of April, as he always did. He wasn't a quitter or turncoat. Not like so many others who'd thwarted and belittled him over the years. He had a list—one that increasingly included Deb. His wife was the one person he'd always counted on, the center of his everything. Where had that Deb gone?

Barry's throat filled with something bitter and hard. He quickly gulped it down and watched Finn floating burdenless in the clear water below. God, what he'd give for that life. Not possible, of course. There was no question he'd go back to Deb—be the bigger person, the better person. Take the high road. But he'd also continue devoting his winters to warmth and manatees. What else did Deb expect him to do? She'd be sorry one day if she let him go.

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Barry squeezed out of the shower the next morning to a text from Deb. Why the hell did he buy this cramped old Airstream, anyway? Used piece of junk. He donned his gold-rim glasses—the same rectangular style he’d worn since high school—and skimmed the text: “Parent meeting and book group tonight. Talk at nine?”

Barry ran a hand over his balding head. Just how was he supposed to respond? “No problem—I’ll wait dutifully and patiently till you’re free.” Was that what she wanted to hear?

Barry yanked on khaki cargo shorts that hung to his knees (damn stumpy legs), black ankle socks, worn leather hiking boots (size 5), and a large olive-green polo shirt bearing the Waukunah Springs logo of a grinning manatee. He tucked the extra length into his shorts, tightened his belt under his round belly, and slapped on his Waukunah Springs cap (emblazoned with the same grinning manatee). Then he texted a curt “Sure” and trudged from the campground to the park office to help Carl, the park ranger, open for the day.

Deb would definitely be sorry she played so fast and loose with their nightly calls. Not that Barry couldn’t do more to nurture their connection—grant greater flexibility in their call schedule or occasionally fly home for face-to-face communion. But then Deb would win. He couldn’t—wouldn’t—allow that, not after she’d thwarted his dream to move to Florida. Once, it had been their dream together. Then it stalled. She stalled.

Barry’s boots crunched on the mulch path, each step escalating the tension in his head. “Not ready to retire.” That’s what Deb said just last week. “Still have something to give...Can’t imagine anything more meaningful.” She’d planted her flag—yet again—and now he was supposed to just watch it wave in the wind? Like a damn sheep?

This is what ‘blowing your top off’ felt like. Getting steamed up. Feeling your blood boil. Seeing red. Barry felt them all deep inside—and so much more. He could barely suck in enough air sometimes to keep his lungs inflated. Like he was suffocating, drowning in his own life.

Barry paused to collect himself before pushing open the office door.

Carl glanced up. “Good, you’re here ... Manatee coming today from Jacksonville Zoo for release.”

Barry felt himself lighten. His favorite task: Helping recovering manatees acclimate back to the wild.

“Unusual case,” Carl said. “Got tangled in a fishing line ... lure hooked its flipper to its face.” He shook his head and shrugged.

Barry wanted to shake Carl sometimes—so nonchalant. Apathetic, really. Manatees arrived almost weekly with lacerations and infirmities too gruesome to imagine: boat propeller strikes that sliced through tough hide like creamy butter, extreme emaciation from loss of seagrass, illness from toxic red tide algal blooms. And that young male with “FUCK YOU” etched on his back. Scumbag actually took a knife to him, for God’s sake.

Barry shuddered. Nothing but evil, and all he could do was usher these astonishing creatures—so remarkable, so endangered, so trusting—back to their mutilation and slaughter. Powerless to do more. Powerless like always—the kid who didn’t get a coveted toy for Christmas that his sister got instead. The scrawny teen who never gained respect from other kids. Bullied. Stymied in his career, frozen as assistant township manager, forever passed over by younger—taller—colleagues. Couldn’t even manage to father offspring. Powerless against life’s injustices. Just as he was no match now for the menacing rise of Deb’s cantankerous independence.

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Poseidon hardly resembled the mighty, hot-tempered Greek god of the sea. He was on the small side. Not yet fully grown, but almost. A teenager, hanging lethargically in the shallow water beneath the cypress trees at the quiet western edge of the springs, still confined to a holding pen reserved for recovering manatees.

Doctors at the zoo had removed the lure from his flipper and face, and the wounds were nearly healed. He was almost ready to be released into the main springs with the other manatees, free to venture into surrounding waterways. But Barry had rarely seen a rehabbed manatee so unresponsive, seemingly defeated. Most revived during their time here and quickly resumed life in the wider world, seemingly without fear of the dangers they might meet, without resentment or bitterness. But Poseidon had barely stirred since arriving.

Barry reached for his walkie-talkie. Carl should know. But his phone buzzed first. Deb.

“Hey,” he growled.

“Oh good, I got you.” Her voice sounded rushed, breathless.

“Everything okay?”

“Good news ... I won a teacher’s award.”

Barry watched Poseidon. Neither moved.

“Did you hear me?”

“I did.” Barry steeled himself. The morning air was already close and warm. “What award?”

“Michigan Teachers’ Association ... I’m Teacher of the Year!”

Perspiration formed on Barry’s forehead. “Wow.”

“Is this a bad time? You sound tired.”

“No, just busy.”

“Oh ... I won't keep you.” Deb paused. “I was hoping you'd come up for the ceremony... In three weeks.”

Poseidon rose to the surface and drew in air through his bulbous snout, hovering before gliding slowly away, then circling back, suddenly coming to life. He repeated this several times.

“Maybe,” Barry said.

“It'd mean a lot.”

Poseidon circled faster, round and round, water churning. Barry felt dizzy. No, crazy. Furious. Like he was swimming in circles, too. Everything felt wrong.

“I'll try,” he said, closing his eyes and massaging the back of his sweaty neck. Releasing tension, scattering annoyance, deflecting guilt. Yet another waymark on Deb's solo path to self-glory. Why should he feel guilty?

“I want to come,” he said, struggling to sweeten his voice and make it sound true.

“There's just a lot on my plate ... Injured and sick manatees every day.”

“Okay, we'll talk tonight.” Deb's voice was hurt. “I love you.”

Barry nodded without a word as if she were there to see his response. Then he jabbed the “End Call” button and shoved the phone in his pocket. His body trembled all over. Did Deb really expect him to drop everything and run to her side? When she wouldn't come here? It truly was outrageous—her lack of regard for his dreams and desires.

Poseidon slowly drifted back toward Barry, hanging again just below the water's surface, spiritless. From mad-crazy to calm in seconds. How did he do it? Barry turned and spit on the ground behind him, still shaking. Why did Deb's life always go her way? Always.

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Barry popped the cap off his fourth Florida Cracker IPA, made by a local microbrewery. He loved the tongue-in-cheek name, flipping off the high and mighty. A real hoot. He downed half the bottle and dug into the Cheetos bag beside him on the narrow Airstream bed, staring at the rapid-fire montage of soundless images flashing on the muted TV—shiny people, gleaming sports cars, bounding tigers, toilet paper, jets, chocolate bars, you name it. It was nearly midnight.

His earlier call with Deb had ended quickly—parent meeting, book group, nothing more about her upcoming award ceremony. Barry didn't mention Poseidon either. Why should he? She was the one who'd started this whole rupture—still too fresh, even after three years, to fully replay in his mind.

Barry crunched the thought away and rubbed his gut, which had grown tubbier in the weeks since his arrival. No Deb to bug him about his health. Hell, maybe he'd swing by the Sweet Spot tomorrow, his one Saturday off a month, for mint fudge ripple ice cream heaped with a scoop of maple bourbon. Barry let out a belch. He'd pick up more microbrews, too, and maybe even some cigarettes. He'd quit those for Deb years ago, but what the hell. She'd sure be sorry for giving him his rope.

Barry cracked open another microbrew and took a long swig, savoring how it slid down his throat and smothered all feeling, like a manatee embraced in soothing waters. He was pleased with his plan—no harm in an occasional indulgence. He downed the rest of the bottle, waking at daybreak halfway off the bed, muted TV still on, empty IPA bottles cluttering the floor below him.

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Three weeks later, at sundown, Barry found himself again at the western edge of the springs, watching Poseidon. He'd opened the gate to the main springs days ago, but Poseidon remained in the holding pen, listless as ever. The evening was muggy. Barry flashed to Deb in frigid Lansing, dressing to receive her award tonight. He'd forced himself to congratulate her that afternoon—texted a quick applause emoji as he wolfed down an Italian sub on break. Big clapping cartoon hands. A show of support. There in spirit. Deb promised to send pictures. What more could he do? Poseidon still hadn't recovered. They counted on him here.

Barry squatted by the water and dipped in his hand. Poseidon stirred.

“Why won't you heal?” he whispered. Someone should be hanged for this disgrace. And for Deb's treachery, too.

Poseidon surfaced briefly, giving a low, watery snort. Barry snorted, too. Hell, Deb didn't love him; it couldn't be clearer. He wasn't asking for much. Tropical warmth, saving manatees—these things moved him. Why couldn't she grant him this one wish?

Barry squeezed his eyes shut. He'd said as much that awful evening three years ago. Memories flooded his brain,, a mammoth deluge he'd struggled to blockade since then. Unstoppable.

“I've always gone along with everything you wanted,” Deb said, a tear slipping down her cheek. “I just don't like Florida.”

“But we planned it ... together ... you're saying you never meant it?” His voice sounded pleading, strangled.

“I thought I could go. I'm so sorry, Barry.”



He clenched his fists, unable to look at her. “We were a team...”

“Barry, please.” Deb came toward him. “Listen to me.”

Barry backed away, pressure building inside his skull. “So everything you’ve ever done was to please me?” The words felt like jagged chunks in his throat. “Is that right?”

“Barry, no.”

He sank to the sofa and stared at Deb. Her skin looked almost green in the dying light. Shadows cut lines across her face. This wasn’t Deb. Not his Deb.

“I think I tried to make you happy,” she said, sitting beside him. “So you wouldn’t leave.”

“My God, Deb... What are you saying...?”

“I wanted this to work—us.” She clutched his knee. “Not be like my parents. Create a better family. Then we couldn’t ...” Her voice almost disappeared. “I did what I thought would keep us together.”

Barry couldn’t speak, couldn’t move.

She pressed closer. He could feel her heat. Damp, vaguely fetid. “Maybe I was also trying to make up for you never getting a fair shake,” she whispered.

Barry flinched and shoved her hand off his knee. “You felt sorry for me?”

“No. Barry ....” Deb scrubbed away tears.

“You still feel sorry for me ... don’t you!” Certainty overwhelmed Barry.

“No, Sweetie ... I love you ... I just forgot to make myself happy, too.” Deb’s face was unrecognizable. “I’m only asking for us to stay here. That’s all. Please. For me.”

At that moment, an emptiness filled Barry, so vast he was sure he’d never find his way through. Deb’s true M.O. couldn’t be clearer: She was no different from all the others. She felt

superior and viewed him as hopeless, a charity case. She was done trying to help. She was looking out for herself now. Abandoning him, focused only on what pleased her.

Barry stared at Poseidon, then removed his boots and socks and waded into the water. Deb's every action since then was only further proof of his terrible realization that night. Not only did she not leave Michigan, but she also took up tennis, a pottery class, tai chi, lunches with friends, and a book group. She continued working, refusing to stop.

God knows Barry tried to applaud her growth, viewing it as something that would enhance his life, not leave him behind. But Deb's list of interests and demands seemed inexhaustible, each one another grotesque, unrelenting reminder of her aim to surpass him, outgrow him. His brain simply refused to accept any other interpretation.

Barry inched into the springs, water up to his knees, thoughts rumbling ominously like an approaching army. He could barely keep his balance. Deb was rejecting him. There was no denying it any longer. A rejection like no other. Leaving behind a bloody trail of flesh—his flesh—in her unwavering march toward the inevitable end.

*Please help me!* Barry heard the cry in his head. Or maybe out loud. A roar. Poseidon descended to the floor of the springs.

Barry roared again, animal agony. He'd show Deb, damn her. Burn everything to the ground. Divorce her. Leave her nothing. Nab someone younger, more adventurous. Fitter. Sad how Deb had let herself go. She'd probably die alone. If only... Barry slammed off the vision, but not before savoring its jolt of thrilling satisfaction.

He sank into the water to his chest, still clothed, heart pounding. Where did these thoughts come from? So overwhelming in their detail and persistence, out of his control: fantasies of revenge, rampaging down mountains into villages, pillaging, plundering, murdering.

Rage. A ghastly thicket inside him, too immense and almighty to dismantle—like dark energy in the universe. Even if Barry managed to push in and parse its individual strands, how would he withstand the obliterating gravitational pull of what he discovered, all the ugliness and anguish? How could he release it? There was simply too much.

Barry braced himself as a new revelation nearly sucked him underwater. My God, this great ball of ire wasn't new. He'd felt it all before, so many times. But the fury sparked by each affront wasn't unique to that incident, including Deb's many betrayals. Barry's outrage, he now realized, was generic, always there, waiting in dark corners to lunge at the next indignity and then the next. Same wrath, new offenses.

Tears dropped one by one. Deb's refusal to retire was simply the bullseye du jour for his perpetual umbrage. So was the plight of manatees. More targets would arrive, and then more. And on and on.

Barry slipped into the depths and went limp beside Poseidon. They watched one another, a deepwater dream of kinship, united in their shared ambivalence on the merits of a future. What if Barry never met someone new? Who would he talk to? No kids. No intimate friends. No Deb. What if he was the one who died alone?

Poseidon rose for air, then dropped again. His tiny eyes radiated wisdom. At least, that's how it seemed to Barry. Serenity spread across his odd and kindly face. What a relief to simply stop warring, to let go into nothingness.

Poseidon circled Barry slowly, grunting ruefully as if in a mournful song. Then he nudged him with his great whiskered snout, steering him through the dark water. Barry's body relaxed, roly-poly, comical, absurd, like Poseidon. He surrendered to the creature's tender navigation, buoyed by his ancient sea-god lullaby.

Sunrise colored the eastern sky when Barry woke at the edge of Wakunah Springs. Poseidon hung nearby, flippers gently stirring the water as if waving. Both of them still here. Not blissfully eradicated as Barry expected.

Poseidon turned finally and swam through the gate slowly back to life.

“Goodbye,” Barry murmured. He dragged himself out of the water, dripping, and retrieved his boots and socks. Another loss, but somehow different. There was no time to dwell, though. Poseidon’s departure needed to be reported. His healing. It would be a hectic day. Barry lingered, not quite ready. Rage rumbled deep in his belly, but not as forcefully as before, edges tinged with something softer.

Why were ancient gods so angry anyway? Forcing humans to cower and obey. What good did it ever do? Barry had swum with Poseidon, not mighty at all—unable to sustain anger. Not like the real Poseidon. Simply petrified. Frightened and wounded, powerless against humans, yet willing to forgive.

Perhaps angry gods weren’t all that different. Pitiful and scared like Poseidon, but bolstered by a stubborn layer of rancor and combativeness. Like Barry. Not heroes to emulate but cautionary tales. Terrified of losing control and status, tempers masking fear of worthlessness, rage that might be transformed for more productive use.

Barry had seen it floating below rage with Poseidon, beneath tales he cherished, under grievances and pain, down to dread. Dread that he wasn’t enough, an insignificant and useless man, alone. Impotent to pilot his own life, unworthy. The root of all anger. Poseidon had found the will to heal. He’d saved Barry, offering him the same chance. Summoning love. Real love. Transforming love. Barry had glimpsed it. The lightness and weight of love, life’s shine. He could do better.

Barry wandered toward the park office, enveloped by birdsong. He was calm—perhaps just for now—alien but sweet. He loved himself here by the springs. He loved Deb. He did. He knew what healing required. Forgiveness for the man he'd been. Compassion for a new man finding his way. Candor and clarity with Deb—my God, she loved what she loved too, buried for too long. A laying of cards on the table—his and Deb's both—every humiliating fear, appalling thought, hurtful reverie, souls bared. Perhaps love could grow, a love big enough for all possibilities, compromise, and transformation. Poseidon flowed in those currents.

Barry swatted at a cloud of gnats. Rage reverberated again in the distance—a familiar path, easy. Love would require so much. Almost too much—the currents ran deep there but not beyond reach.

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