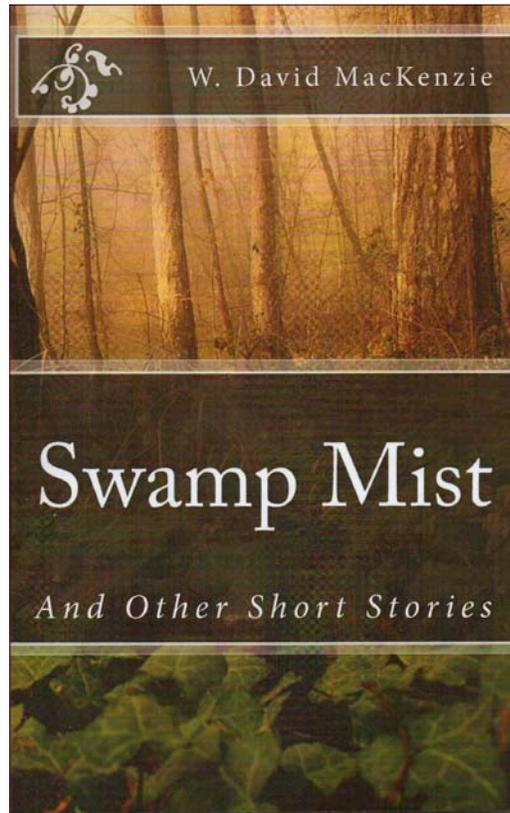


Swamp Mist

And Other Short Stories



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Swamp Mist

Steve crawled out of the small tent on all fours twisting and stretching his neck as he dog-walked toward the Coleman stove to start the coffee. The bones cracked and popped but it felt good and he did it again just to make sure all of the vertebrae had a chance to move around a bit. The tent was just too small for two big bearish guys — not much more than a glorified cub scout pup-tent, really. Steve loved spooning with Jeff as they drifted off to sleep, but actual quality sleep only happened for Steve when he could stretch out and move around as the night progressed — when he could really occupy the bed. Last night had been more like occupying a bread box.

As he pumped up the pressure in the stove's fuel tank Steve looked around at the mist rising from the swamp just a stone's throw from their tent. The early morning light turned the mist into a translucent curtain, blurring the scraggly pine trees beyond and muting the swamp's colors. As president of the Gays And Guns Club, Jeff had scored a coveted permit to bag two alligators in the Everglades and given it to Steve for his birthday. Now, camped on the edge of the swamp and staring into the gator's home territory, Steve was eager to get started. Somewhere out there in that mist and muck were Steve's birthday presents and he couldn't wait to find them.

With the coffee on the fire, Steve turned his mind to devising the most enjoyable way to wake Jeff up. A devilish grin flashed across Steve's face as the erotic possibilities danced through his mind and he moved

stealthily toward the tent. When Steve was crouched in front of the tent flaps and about to slip inside like a prowling kitten a tremendous roar erupted from within the tent and two hundred and fifty pounds of hairy, naked, laughing, man rocketed out of the tent directly at Steve. Jeff collided with Steve and in a playful tangle of limbs they rolled around the campsite, half wrestling half hugging until they were both gasping and laughing uncontrollably.

“You damned Yankee!” Steve chided playfully, once they had both calmed down enough to speak between the wheezes. “Are you gonna lay there and goof around all mornin' or are you gonna get dressed and go find my gators?”

“Keep your pants on boy,” Jeff snapped back, then started laughing all over again as he noticed for the first time that Steve was just as naked as he was.

Steve tossed a stick halfheartedly at Jeff and crawled into the tent to find his pants.

A few minutes later both Steve and Jeff were dressed and working on their second cups of cowboy coffee. The first cups weren't bad, but as you got to the bottom of the pan the thick black mixture was more grounds than beverage and it was a real trick to separate the two. Steve had actually tried to filter the sludge once a few years ago, like proper southern coffee, but Jeff had boxed his ears and tossed the filter into the latrine pit then poured himself a steaming cup and drank it down, grounds and all.

“So, do we have a game plan?” asked Steve as he folded up the stove. “Do we have to wait for this mist to burn off?”

Jeff stood up and looked out over the swamp contemplating

the mist. He was about to tell Steve it would be safer to wait when he spotted something moving a hundred yards or so off to the right of their camp. It was walking very slowly toward the swamp. It. That's all Jeff's mind could find to label it and he just pointed, silently.

“Oh my God” Steve breathed and reached out for Jeff. “I can't believe it. It's Skunk Ape!”

Jeff pulled his eyes away from It and looked at Steve with just as much incredulity. “What the hell is a skunk ape?”

“You damned Yankee! Sasquatch, Bigfoot, Skunk Ape — they're all the same.” Steve dashed back to the tent but came out a moment later cursing. “Didn't you pack the damned camera?”

“Camera?” Jeff spat and moved to the equipment locker and took out their hunting rifles. “Who needs a camera when we've got these?”

Jeff tossed one of the rifles to Steve, loaded his own weapon, then tossed the box of ammo to Steve. “Load up boy, we're gonna bag a real trophy!”

“What? We can't — you can't shoot Skunk Ape.” Steve looked back at Skunk Ape as it moved closer to the swamp. “What if it's the last one?”

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Sinister

The leafless trees and abandoned picnic tables reluctantly eased out of the cold night, casting sinister shadows as dawn forced its way into the snow-covered park. In a few hours kids would be playing noisily, but for now the silence was broken only by the soft crunching of my boots through the day-old snow as I walked toward the wooden bridge and the frozen tire tracks leading into the river. I was fairly sure what I'd find, but I needed to be certain so I could put this case to bed and then hit the sack myself.

There was a lot of disturbed snow at the river's edge but enough of it was frozen into crystal-clear tread patterns to give the crime lab boys some good solid evidence, if they could get to it before it melted. I shoved my hands deep into the pockets of my parka as a shiver passed through me and tried not to think of what must have happened here in the wee hours of the morning.

I'd made a night of it, going to the darkest bars downtown, making enough easily overhead comments to be certain my target knew I wanted to meet with him and where. Of course I was nowhere near there — here, when he arrived. I was home leaning over a steaming mug of coffee, reading the file on his grisly deeds and the months of police work that had finally pointed me in the right direction. I was reassuring myself that I'd made the right decision. I was leaving the dirty work to others better suited to it.

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Collection

The long line of parked cars disgorged the heartbroken and the happy in equal measure. They clumped about the vehicles in small knots, gossiping, sotto voce, or just standing in mute introspection. Then, at some unheard signal, they set out en masse, like caribou answering the call to migrate, and crossed the manicured lawn to the red canvas tent.

I stood apart from that crowd, watching, not wanting to wade through the emotions of loss and relief unless it was absolutely necessary. At my side the back-hoe crew leaned against the yellow machine making plans for a weekend cookout, and just over the knoll two men in black chattered to one another, passing vacation snapshots back and forth as they left the cemetery office. It was just an ordinary day for them. And for me.

As they neared the tent the photos disappeared into their pockets, masks of respectful solemnity damped their smiles. They greeted the widow reverently, assuming their roles of minister and funeral director, and she accepted their murmured words graciously. The adult children at her side teared-up on cue and a hush fell over the sorrowful and the joyous as the minister moved to the head of the casket. The ceremony began and everyone played their part according to custom.

I circled the tableau, navigating my way around it like a driver detouring around an accident, wanting to gape at the spectacle but knowing I could not stop. I had a job to

do and I'd wallowed in too many funerals to find anything new here... but the emotions were tempting. I pushed it aside and pressed on.

He was standing under a nearby tree when I spotted him — hands pushed deep into his pants pockets, staring at the funeral, struggling to hear the minister's words.

"I've come to collect ..."

He jerked his left hand out of his pocket and held it up, silencing me.

"Ya, I know why you're here," he said in a gruff Jersey accent then fell silent. He listened as the minister extolled the deceased's virtues as a father and husband and community leader. The man snorted. "Make's you wonder," he said, nodding his head skyward, "if He's listening to all that bullshit."

"I believe He listens," I said.

He nodded his head and the corner of his mouth curled up. "Then I'm fucked," he said and strolled off across the cemetery.

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Cool City Limit

Jimmy bounded out of the minivan as soon as his mom opened the sliding door and tugged at her jacket excitedly. "Did you see that sign back there, Mom?" he shouted as he pointed back down the winding road.

"This is where I wanna live. Cooooool!" He drew out the word into a whole sentence and stuck out his thumbs like Fonzie from Happy Days.

His mom tousled Jimmy's hair affectionately then met her husband at the front of the minivan where he was already stomping his feet for warmth.

"They sure named this place right," she said as she zipped up her jacket and looked around at downtown Cool. The sign showed a population of 235, but the isolated convenience store and the solitary clerk inside made her wonder where the other 234 people were hiding.

While his parents were talking, Jimmy slipped quietly into the shop. The clerk had his back to the counter as he tapped keys on his notebook computer and watched the array of colored dots swirl around in different patterns. Different keys strokes made different patterns and the clerk jotted down notes about each one, oblivious to the young boy staring over his shoulder.

Jimmy, too, was engrossed in the colorful display and noticed a pattern to the flying dots on the screen, a tendency for them to congregate in a certain way. When Jimmy said "Try pressing Control G three times then

Option W," the clerk jumped like he'd been bitten by a snake. He stared wide-eyed at the boy, but Jimmy just nodded at the computer. "Try it, I wanna see if they'll all line up."

The clerk, a twenty-something man with a buzzed haircut and smooth face, shook his head and drawled "Kid, I've been working on this simulation for almost a month and they ain't gonna do no such thing."

Jimmy arched his eyebrows and said, "Try it."

The clerk shook his head again, turned back to the keyboard and tapped out the key combinations Jimmy had rattled off. With each keystroke the dancing dots moved closer together; when he'd finished all four he gawked at the screen. The thousands of individual points had formed a solid column of light on the screen. Slowly, the clerk tapped two more keys on his own and the column changed from red to green. He flopped back into his chair and gawked at the boy. "How did you...."

"I hope Jimmy's not bothering you." the man and woman said as they entered the shop. They walked to the counter and the clerk pushed the notebook screen closed as he stood up, but his eyes never left Jimmy's.

"I'm just watchin' him play a computer game, Mom." Jimmy said.

"It's always computer games with you, kiddo," his dad snorted then turned to the clerk. "It's impossible to beat him on any computer game, even ones he's never played before."

"Ya, he just taught me a new move," stammered the clerk.

Jimmy's parents grabbed a few snacks and drinks, paid the clerk, and the three of them returned to the minivan. The clerk was watching them climb into the vehicle when the store's backdoor opened and a soldier walked in.

"What are you staring at, Lieutenant?" he barked.

The clerk snapped to attention. "Sir, that boy..." his gaze drifted back to the minivan as the family backed out of the parking lot and into the quiet road, then he turned back to the Captain. "He solved the cryo- stabilization simulation."

Both men turned to look out of the store's large front window just as a logging truck sped around the curve in the mountain road and barreled into the minivan sending flames and shredded metal flying every-where.

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Abducted

The prison is quiet at last and I am alone. I'm probably in shock over my abduction and torture because things just don't seem real to me. My amputated stump is only now causing me pain though it's been hours since it was... since I was... and I can now feel my life ebbing away like the steady drip of rain eroding rock.

There are protocols to follow in situations like this, of course, but as a scientist I never thought I'd have any use for them myself and now I don't know if I can actually carry them out. Hope of rescue and the urge to cling to life are new emotions to me, but I need to be realistic and accept that I am probably as good as dead already, so, taking that last measure to ease my end should not be too difficult.

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A Hard Day

Blast, it was hot in this cornfield. You'd think they could have found a better place for me to work, someplace cooler or someplace with a stronger breeze, at least. No, it had to be here and the job had to get done today. The boss had been firm about that.

"It's vital that this field be completed before noon today," he'd said in his squeaky little voice. "The entire project hinges on this one field and you're our best man." Then he stretched out a spindly arm to pat me on the shoulder. Oh come on! What middle management seminar did that come from? My forced smile was reflecting his own when he dropped the real bombshell. "And you're going to have to get the job done on your own. Jed's called in sick."

Sick! Can you believe that? I tossed down the wide-bladed tool I'd been using since before sun-up and wiped the perspiration from my forehead. When was the last time I'd called in sick? Uh...NEVER! To tell the truth, I was glad that Jed wasn't here. He'd have just screwed things up anyway. If I didn't watch him constantly he'd work the wrong section of the field or just lay around watching the clouds drift by. I should have gotten his scrawny butt fired years ago.

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Disaster

The fleet of spaceships descended upon the Earth and spread out across the globe in ones and twos to hover over every major city on the planet like giant anvils poised to crush everything beneath them.

In Seattle, the attack began as soon as the sun went down. Following some unspoken agenda, they first destroyed the Space Needle. Energy beams sliced through the World's Fair leftover as if the aliens were afraid it might be some sort of anti-spacecraft weapon. And, truth be told, it did kind of look like a flying saucer on stilts. Firefighters tried to respond to the wreckage of the toppled monument but panicked citizens gridlocked every road and the fires were left to consume Seattle Center unhindered.

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Exorcism

Elijah Beck stepped down from the long, barrel-shaped caravan, closed the door, smoothed out his musty sackcloth habit, and snugged the rope belt tight around his belly. He walked up the length of the caravan, passing the faded yet still colorful sign painted on its wooden side. In bold flourishes, it proclaimed: *Brother Elijah, Exorcist and Confessor, Dispenser of Graces, Doctor of The Sacred Reliquary*. Elijah traced his hand along one weatherworn swirl of painted gaudiness and wondered again why these anti-tech fundamentalists found comfort in such audacious claims. It was the damndest thing, but each time he repainted the sign more troubled souls flocked to his caravan seeking relief from their torment.

As Elijah mounted the ladder and pulled himself up to the driver's bench, the rope belt rolled off the downward slope of his potbelly and settled loosely on his hips; he just left it there. It would be an hour before he pulled into Pinnacle and there'd be time enough to tidy up his costume before he got there. He picked up the reins, gave them a couple of brisk shakes to wake the four mules and yelled "Hey-yawh!" The animals dug in their hooves and the caravan bounced and rattled its way down the rutted trail.

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Prelude to Sacrifice

I bounced my shoulders several times to settle the ceremonial feathered cape into a comfortable hang as Seven-Rabbit tied the beaded loin cloth around my middle. I sucked in my belly self-consciously as he worked at the knots and made a mental note to cut back on the sugared maize cakes. I picked up the folded itinerary lying on the shelf and scanned down the glyphs drawn in Seven-Rabbit's meticulous penmanship.

"Looks like we'll finish the ceremonies today." I dropped the paper back on the shelf and checked my face paint in the mirror.

"Yes, Lord Priest, there are only a dozen outlanders remaining."

"I've told you many times, you need not be so formal when we're alone."

Seven-Rabbit hung his head slightly. "Yes sir, but you're wearing the holy cloak and the turquoise collar."

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The Festival of Atlcualo

Chapter 1: Disaster at the Cenote

The cenote gaped wide on the jungle floor and the shafts of sunlight that struggled through the verdant canopy did little to illuminate more than the jagged edges of the cavernous opening to the underworld, but it was enough. The cadre of priests approached the cenote in slow measured steps. Their solemn gait and monochrome costumes were unnatural for men accustomed to brightly plumed and beaded finery and frenetic ritual, but during the five unlucky days of Uayeb they sought to avoid the attention of spirits. Three-Crocodile, the thirteen year old pupil of the First Priest of Tlaloc, had painted his skin with watered charcoal ash and clothed himself in a gray cotton tunic so as to call even less attention to himself than usual.

The First Priests of twenty gods and goddesses were arrayed around the cenote. Directly behind each was his Second, holding some precious statuette or decorated urn or basket of fruit. When an appropriate interval for calm reflection had passed, Lord Tayauh, High Priest of the city and First Priest of the war god Huitzilopochtli, stepped to the very edge of the cenote and spread his arms wide.

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Reckoning

At the touch of a button, the scene through the computer-assisted binoculars snapped into focus and glowing numbers displayed the distance to the target and the degrees off north, but those precision readings didn't concern the operative. He knew that he was far enough away to avoid injury and close enough to enjoy the mayhem to come.

A preschooler pressed his face against the glass partition as the ice cream artist behind the counter swirled the hand-blended ice cream mixture around on the slab. With a wrist-twisting flourish that was almost too fast to see, she scooped the entire concoction onto her mixing blade, and slid it into a chocolate-rimmed waffle cone. She handed the treat across the counter to the boy's mother and she led the boy out of the shop and out of the operative's field of vision.

The operative reached one hand into his jacket and retrieved a cell phone. He thumbed the 2 key then hovered his thumb over the SEND button.

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Romeo's Bakery

Romeo was a baker. He baked breads and bagels and pies and cakes, well, everything that any baker makes, really. But he was best known for his tarts. He could do an apple-cinnamon-caramel tart that made you weep with pleasure. His strawberry-kiwi-lemon curd tart was pucker power in a pastry shell. And his prune-black currant-treacle tart would make you so happy that you couldn't resist showing your black stained smile to the world. People would come from miles and miles away to stand in line for Romeo's delicious delights. He hated to see his baked goods leave the shop, but he knew that his treats made the people happy and he didn't mind sharing some of his happiness with his customers.

Romeo didn't have a life outside of his bakery. He never married even though dozens of women batted their eyelashes at him every day hoping to land such a successful baker as a husband. He never went to church but the minister came to him every Sunday at the crack of dawn for a dozen asiago bagels. He never dined out in the evenings because he spent every spare moment making decadent desserts that the restaurants sold by the slice for an enormous mark-up. He just stayed in his bakery ... and baked.

Every Christmas the mayor would ask Romeo to cater the city council's holiday party and every year Romeo politely declined because he didn't want to leave his kitchen. Every Christmas day, however, Romeo would send a delivery boy to the mayor's house with a basket full of his special Christmas tarts. The golden flaky crusts filled with spicy mincemeat and topped with rum-spiked eggnog whipped cream were the mayor's favorite.

Then, one day, the people stopped coming to the bakery. You'd think this would have made Romeo sad, or mad, or even a little curious, but Romeo never even noticed. He just kept right on baking. He turned out cakes and pies and demi-loaves all day — every day — and every night too.

The big window at the front of the bakery got dusty and dirty and blocked the bright sunlight that used to shine into his shop, but Romeo didn't care. There were cakes to bake and no time to go out in the sun anyway. The cheery bell on the spring at the top of the door tarnished and filled up with cobwebs but Romeo didn't miss the happy sound it used to make as mothers hurried into his shop to purchase his tarts for their family's desserts. Romeo didn't even notice when Christmas after Christmas passed and the mayor failed to ask him to cater the city council's holiday party. Romeo just went on baking and, as long as Romeo was baking, he was happy.

Then the unthinkable happened. The door that had been closed for years and years opened with a pop and a creak on rusty hinges.

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