

Dead Swamp

By Stephen Beckwith

Every small town that we'd drive through when I was a kid, my father would make the same stale joke, "This is a nice town...wasn't it?"

Ekonsville was the one hump of dry land in the middle of Michigan's great Dead Swamp, a forty square mile bog without streams or rivers. For sixteen thousand years this same brackish, black, primordial water had frozen and thawed, undisturbed by fish or fowl. Even the scrawny reeds and skunk cabbages growing along the roadside were stunted, the colors of faded camouflage - khaki and olive grey. I couldn't wait to reach the other side, to see living trees and green fields again.

The business district of the village consisted of three buildings, all on the northwest side of the only road through the Dead Swamp.

On the southeast side of the county road were two yellow brick ranch houses, built some time after the Second World War. A faded, sea-foam green aluminum house trailer spanned the two front yards. The black swamp waters had reclaimed what little backyard the houses might once have had. The trailer looked like the only habitable structure.

I pulled my pickup into the half-sunken parking lot of the little bait shop and grocery store, directly across from the house trailer. Next to the bait shop was a one-story brick Post Office building. On the other side of the Post Office was a one-room schoolhouse. Thirty years ago or so, an ad hoc gas station had been cobbled together in the old schoolyard. It looked like the pump jockey was living in the decaying schoolhouse.

I sat in my truck for a long time looking across the road at the trailer. I was imagining a pale blonde teen, a trailer-trash Lolita, all legs and budding new breasts. I imagined she would step outside, barefoot, wearing a torn, cotton dress two sizes too small, look across the street with a practiced pout and wave me over.

An old man of eighty or more hobbled out of the trailer instead. Maneuvering his walker through the narrow doorway, he made his way down the three steps and stood, teetering slightly, staring across the road at my truck. I got out, waved at the old coot, and went into the store.

I made my way to the back and pulled a bottle of Glacier Springs water from a small Pepsi cooler. The bait shop end of the store smelled like rotten tomatoes. The grocery end smelled of dead fish. The main aisle was lit with a single, sallow green, florescent bulb that was flickering, ready to blow. The floor bounced and moved under my boots. I half expected to see the swamp's black ooze seeping up through the floorboards.

A short, thin man in his late thirties stood behind the counter. The man wore the most unwelcoming expression I'd ever seen. He grimaced and took a step back when I sat the water bottle on the dusty counter. My proximity seemed to cause him pain. He grimaced again and raised his shoulder defensively.

"Nice town," I offered.

The man behind the counter stared at me.

"So, how many people live here?"

The man continued to stare. Finally he said, “Two sixty-five.”

“That’s a bit pricey for expired water.”

“Two sixty-five, take it or leave it.” He turned his back on me and began counting cigarette packages, marking the quantities on a dog-eared yellow legal pad.

“No problem, pardner.” I slapped three bucks down on the counter and walked out. I was sure now.

I got in my truck and pulled out onto the two-lane blacktop. I turned at the gas station in the old schoolyard.

A kid in grease-covered overalls, mid-twenties with an innocent, boyish face, sauntered out of the small pump attendant’s booth and leaned against my door. “Whadda ya need?”

“You the mechanic?”

“Yeah, if it’s got a motor, I’m the guy. What’s wrong?”

“It’s been running rough for a few miles, then it started to stall out like something’s plugged. I don’t want to get halfway through the swamp and have it crap out on me.”

“It’d be a long walk. Let me take a look, might be a cracked distributor. Moisture in the swamp can set it off.” He ran a greasy hand through his already grease-streaked blonde hair.

The gas pumps were old, early fifties maybe, and the booth was covered in white aluminum tile, yellowed now by weather and swamp gas. The boy smiled and the grease smear under one eye reminded me of high school football games, and cool, smoky autumn evenings.

“Try to keep it reasonable, I’m not a rich man.”

I looked around. Almost all of the schoolhouse’s red paint had flaked off and the wooden building was mottled asphalt gray now. Pale pink lichen covered the foundation stones. The air was heavy with the rancid sweet odors of decomposition.

“Post Office looks closed.”

“Since 1965.”

“I don’t suppose there’s anywhere to get a drink?”

“Beer or MD20/20 at the store, that’s it.”

I nodded. The kid popped the truck’s hood and started to fiddle. I crossed the road and walked back along the shoulder toward the aluminum house trailer.

The towering dead stumps of old growth pine sticking out of the oily black water on both sides of the road framed a dull, grey muslin sky. There weren’t any bird sounds or squirrels in the brush. Only a distant woodpecker tapping out a secret code that no one was around to decipher. Even the crumbling tarmac seemed to float on some viscous sub-surface.

My job requires a certain amount of travel. I’ve seen some desolate places and I am not easily spooked, but this place - an uncontrollable shudder ran up my spine. I zipped my jacket and shook out my arms to get the blood circulating.

The old man was sitting in the trailer’s front yard, five feet from the road in an aluminum chair. Resort motel owners would sit these chairs outside each room in lieu of air-conditioning back in the ’50s. From these garishly painted chairs, tourists would watch the July through August sun setting over Lake Winnamucka.

I wrenched a Florida orange aluminum chair from the grass, which had wound

itself around the rusting steel legs. I carried it over and sat the chair next to the old man. “Do you mind if I sit and talk for a while. Mechanics looking at my truck.”

The old man said nothing. He didn't look up for several minutes. Finally, I caught him watching me out of the corners of his bloodshot, yellow eyes. This old bastard had survived the heavy booze, I estimated about a fifth a day for maybe fifty years, maybe more.

“Whad you want, boy?”

“Like I said, Pops, just a chat while I'm waiting for my truck.” I continued before he had a chance to protest. “So, how'd you end up in a desolate fuckin' place like this, anyway?”

“Not that it's any of your business, but my boy owns the store across the road.”

“Now see, that's interesting. Why would a fellow buy a store in a God-forsaken place like this?” I picked my chair up and moved it so I could look him in the eye.

“Like I said, what's it to you?”

“Don't get hot, Pops, you gotta admit,” I waved my hand at the tops of the dead trees surrounding the old houses, “this begs the question.”

“We like our privacy.” He made a move for the walker. I grabbed it and spun the walker around behind my chair, out of his reach.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” He wobbled in his chair. “What do you want, who are you?”

I sat there taking in the scenery. “I'm just a curious guy. I can't help wanting to understand certain things, ya know? Like why your son moved you way the hell out here.”

“Fuck off.”

“Say, who's the gas pumper, Pops? Just the three of you here?”

He stared at me under bloated lids for several minutes. I watched his eyes reflecting the late afternoon haze growing along the edges of the swamp. I'd never been in a swamp before where you couldn't hear bullfrogs. The silence was pervasive.

“He says he's my whelp by some gypsy whore I barely remember. He stays over there, the little creep. Says he won't leave 'till I acknowledge him. I don't know what that means, but if I did, then I'd have two worthless shits who blame me for their failures, instead of the one.”

“But let's face it, Pops, you haven't been a great role model.”

His eyes grew wide and his lip began to tremble. “Who are you? Whad you think you know about me? Fuck off, gimme that walker.”

“Let's start with your first question. See, now this is a conversation - you ask, I answer. I ask, you answer. Grew up in South Chicago, great place to learn a trade. You ever been to the South Side? My old man was a steelworker, hard working bastard. Poor guy couldn't keep me out of trouble no matter how he tried.”

“Never been to Chicago. We're from Pittsburgh. Never been west of here.”

“Ruins a conversation if we tell each other lies, Pops.” I shifted in my chair and he flinched. “For example, I did a nickel in Joliet. Stabbed a kid in a bar fight. He came at me, I had no choice. His friends testified that I started it.

Anyway, while I'm sitting out my time a lady from the neighborhood drives down to Joliet to see me. Like I said, a great old South Side neighborhood. The Polish brats at Tiny's bar, unforgettable. You ever had one of Tiny's brats? Oh yeah, you never been

west, I remember. Anyway, this nice old lady drives down to see me.”

The man was still staring, his jaw gaped open and a thin stream of spittle hung from his lip. “I never been to Chicago. You got the wrong guy, Bull.”

“Cop? Hell no. Just a guy getting his truck fixed, sitting here talking to a lying piece-of-dirt old man. So, you’ve got to hear this story.”

“Gimme my walker and get the fuck outta here. Get off my property.”

“Now I know, if you’ll just listen up, you’re gonna like this story. Even has one of those happy endings. So this neighborhood lady drives out to Joliet to see me. I’m doing a nickel like I said, and...”

“I don’t wanna hear no story. I want you to get the hell off our land.”

“OK, maybe I should start a little earlier in the story. I hear ya. I haven’t hooked you yet. So I grew up on 59th, East of Wabash. Tough neighborhood, but survivable. Six White families in a ten block area. Hell, Pops, if I hadn’t grown up there I wouldn’t have survived my first night in Joliet.

“My folks had a two-bedroom bungalow, more like a shack really, behind the U-Haul lot on Wabash. Probably a nice house when my dad bought it in thirty-six. My buddies and I would play pickup ball back of the Mount Moriah Baptist Church. I remember these two little girls would come to watch us play and they’d follow us home after a game. I used to spot them both a Popsicle on the really hot summer days. I didn’t know them or their families, just a couple of sweet kids ten years younger than us. Anyway...”

The old man’s face was as ash white as a three day corpse. “I told you, I don’t wanna hear your story.” His voice was weaker now, and it cracked on the word ‘story’.

“Naw, everybody says that when I start. I’ve gotta work on my beginnings, I’m a strong finisher though.”

“Please, leave me alone.”

The old man had slipped down in his chair. So I rambled on. “I get into that bit of trouble and end up in Joliet and this lady, turns out to be one of the girl’s moms, comes down to see me. Someone in the neighborhood suggested she see me. Thought I might be able to help, at the very least offer some advice.” I looked up from the old man’s haggard face to see the store owner standing over us.

“Look, pal, this is private property. I’m gonna have to ask you to leave.” He seemed to have lost his shy demeanor. The Louisville Slugger he was holding may have had something to do with that.

I apologized and stood up. “Sorry, my name’s Ray, Ray Gault.” I held out my hand. In my experience, people may tell you to go to hell, but they rarely refuse to shake your hand when it’s offered. Prison teaches you all about social conditioning. It’s an edge. When he reluctantly reached for my hand, I grabbed his firmly and tore the bat from his fingers. I shoved him into my chair and told him in a stern tone to sit. I retrieved another chair from along side the trailer, this one a bright, robin’s egg blue, and sat it in front of the two men.

“What the hell you want? Who the hell do you think you are?” He was cowering again, struggling to control the shakes. “Get off my land.”

“Already been through that with Pops here. I’m just telling a story while my truck is in the shop.” I shifted in the chair and crossed my leg casually. “So, where was I?”

The younger man stared wide-eyed at the older man slumped in his chair. Neither one looked at me.

“Like I was saying, this sweet old woman drove all the way down to the prison. I hadn’t had any visitors for a while. My old man got sick right after I was sentenced and died a few months later. My mom stopped driving down after that. It had probably been two years since I’d had an outside visitor.”

The son turned toward me, still avoiding eye contact. “Why the hell would we want to listen to your jailhouse stories?”

I swung the bat around like a baton. “A good story demands a certain amount of patience on the part of the audience. If you’ll just hold on, I think you’ll find it gets more interesting.”

The old man spoke for the first time since the son had appeared. “Just shut up and let him finish. I’ll be glad to be done with it. To be done with you.”

At that the son leapt up and struck the old man across the mouth. The old man reeled sideways and his chair toppled over, throwing him several feet to the soggy, gray grass.

“What have you told him you old shit, you stupid, old, rotten piece of shit?” He hauled his leg back to give the old man a hard kick in the stomach, I tapped him on the shoulder with the bat and shook my head. I pointed the bat at his chair and the son sat back down. I could smell the adrenaline; every instinct was telling him to bolt, to run, to fight, to do something. But I knew from what the old woman had told me that he would do nothing - that he would do as he was told.

I picked up the old man and sat the soggy lump back in his chair. The son would not look at him, or at me. He kept his head down, his eyes focused on the dead grass at his feet.

“Let’s have a few less interruptions, fellows. So the old lady, she probably wasn’t really old at the time, maybe younger than I am now, but to a twenty-three year old kid, she seemed old. Of course we’ve known one another for twelve years now, so I suppose she got old and I just didn’t notice.

“She tells me her story. I don’t think she knew that I remembered her daughter hanging around the basketball courts. I’m sure she didn’t know I used to buy the girls Popsicles. Anyway, after I heard her story, she asked me what she should do. Now keep in mind here, I’m a twenty-three year old kid in the joint for manslaughter. Not a lot of people asking my advice. I wanted to help her, and I was blind angry after her story. Maybe that’s not the right time to make life-altering decisions, but I couldn’t help myself. I told her I’d handle her problem personally. She’d come prepared. She slid the deed to her house across the table to me. After what she told me, I’d have taken the job for free, just for her asking. But, between growing up on 59th, and the Joint, I’d learned the importance of a businesslike attitude toward all forms of work. And make no mistake, fellows, it’s been work.”

In the whipped intonations of a frequently beaten dog the younger man said, “I don’t see why you’re making us listen to this. If you want money we don’t have any. There’s less than fifty in the till over there,” he pointed toward the store. “You’re welcome to it if you’ll just leave.”

“Why thanks, that’s really very generous. But I have plenty of money. The job the old lady offered me that day in the visitor’s room turned into a career of sorts, a

lucrative career. It paid for my college, even put me through grad school. I still take the occasional assignment, but I spend most of my time now writing books.”

The old man began to breathe shallow, rapid breaths. Almost whimpering, he asked, “Why us, we haven’t done anything. Why...why me?”

“Now that’s not really true, is it? Everybody’s done something.” I looked at the son. The old man followed my gaze.

“59th and Wabash was a poor neighborhood, but safe. Safe for old ladies and little girls. We had gangs, sure, but the women and the kids were off limits. The men would send their wives to pick up their Social Security checks because the gang-bangers would boost the men but leave the women alone. Different world I suppose.

“Then this older guy, late sixties, and his teenage son moved onto the block. This bastard would beat the son mercilessly. Belittle him in front of the whole neighborhood. And the kid took it. Every insult, every slap, every punch.”

The younger man was squirming back and forth in his chair, his eyes still riveted on the mushy lawn. “Maybe this kid was waiting, like for an opportunity. Paybacks can be a bitch.”

“About three months after the man and the boy moved into the neighborhood the two little girls go missing. One of them is this woman’s daughter, the woman who came to see me in Joliet.”

I watched the old man begin to harden, resolved, ready.

“This man was a very sick bastard. I tracked him back four cities, in each he’d killed two or three little girls. In Topeka, he killed five before it got hot and he moved on. The two girls from my old neighborhood were missing eight days before their bodies were found. The girls were mutilated almost beyond recognition, but their bodies were still warm when they were found. The bastard kept them alive for eight days, torturing and raping them over and over. They were eleven.” I looked at the younger man. “Can you imagine what those eight days must have been like for two little girls who hadn’t even made their first Communion yet?”

The son started to come at me. I whacked his knee with the bat equivalent to a line drive double. He crumpled to the ground. After a few moments he eased himself back into the orange chair.

“I haven’t even gotten to the strangest part of the story. Uncontrollable perversion may be a powerful, motivating catalyst, but it’s got nothing on raw hatred. It took me nearly three years to work out this part of the story. I figure that, at some point around the third day of the girls’ ordeal, the son stumbles onto the old man’s hiding place. The girls beg him to let them go, I believe he started to. But sending his old man to prison for the rest of his life wasn’t good enough. I think the boy reasoned he could hold this over his father. For the first time the boy had the upper hand. So he let the girls die.”

Now the younger man began to sniffle. Through the sniffing I could sense his hatred growing, bottomless, like the black waters of the surrounding bog, immeasurably deep. “Paybacks are a bitch,” he muttered under his breath.

“The hardest part for me was not the fate of those young girls. It was listening to that kind woman, that loving mother, instruct me as to the manner and viciousness of the monster’s end, telling me in words she’d never said before, never even thought before, exactly what she expected for her money. She would call me every week and ask if I was

still looking, if I'd made any headway. And every week for twelve years she would recite the details of what she expected when I found them. It was hard to listen to, even for me."

"What makes you think this pile of shit is your murderer?" the son stammered.

"Everybody leaves a trail. Sometimes they are hard to see, but if you keep looking, it's there. The world's too small, there's no place to hide.

"The woman who hired me died two months ago. I sold the house. Right to the end she kept insisting I report each gruesome detail of my inevitable encounter with her nightmares. I'm glad she isn't alive to hear my report." I slid the Berretta from under my jacket and laid it in my lap. I yanked my pant leg up and pulled a hunting knife from my boot. "This is going to get very ugly, gents. If there's anything you want to get off your chest, you'd better do it now."

The old man looked up. "I've put up with this whiny prick's abuse long enough. Just get it over with. I'm ready, asshole. Do what you gotta do." He tried to push himself upright, but his chair kept slipping in the wet grass.

The son looked at me. He stood slowly and stepped in front of the old man. He was limping from the smack to his knee. He turned around and gave Pops the hardest slap across the jaw I've ever witnessed. This time I didn't intercede. He began to pummel the old man with his fists. Again and again the old man's head whipped left, then right, as the son punched and slapped his father. I was four feet away when the old man's arthritic talons reached his son's neck and began to squeeze. The younger man fell backward with the old man on top of him. Neither would let go. They slid through the slimy grass screaming, coughing, flailing at each other. I had to give the old man his due, he was holding his own with someone fifty years his junior. Must have been an interesting twelve years to create that much pent up rage.

I looked around at the dead stumps, the rot and the decay. Three hours in this swamp was enough for me. I watched the two men rolling over and over, covered in black muck.

I slipped the Berretta back into my belt and the knife into my boot. I could hear them screeching at each other. I started back down the road toward the old schoolhouse.

"You stinking, sick freak..."

"I tried to make you a real man..."

I heard the old man scream. "*Don't leave. Do it you prick, do it...*"

Then the son again, "You're mine. You die when I say..."

I didn't hear where it went from there. I tossed the bat into the swamp and crossed the road. The blonde kid was sitting under an awning, reading.

"Your dad and your brother seem upset. I hope it wasn't anything I said."

"Aw, they're always going at it. No two people deserved each other more. Whack jobs, the both of 'em." A slight smile played across his lips, the kind that's turned inward and hard to spot if you're not looking for it. "That's forty bucks for wiping out the distributor. You should be fine now."

The sounds of breaking glass and aluminum chairs crashing against aluminum siding drifted down the street. The boy began to chuckle.

I paid the kid, then I played a hunch. "So, you going to let me in on the joke? I mean, why stay here if you don't give a crap about those two. What's keeping you here?"

“No deer in the swamp, but when you hit the edge of the swamp, be careful. It’ll be dark by then and there’ll be a lot of animals out. Drivers are always hitting deer along the edges of the swamp.” He smiled again, broader this time.

“Come on kid, you can tell me. Why? What are you up to? I know they don’t have any money, so what’s this about?” I shut the truck door and leaned back against the front fender.

He leaned against the pump and looked down at his greasy hands. “Old story. My mom was a good lady, went to church, made sure I got to baseball practice on time, kept our house real clean, stuff like that. Then she met that shit-head. It started by him getting her to drink with him, she was part Indian, she couldn’t handle the booze. Then he started shooting her up so he could turn her out. I remember some of that pretty clear. She came home one night with a big razor slash across her cheek from some john. That bastard told her she was no good to him no more and he packed up that warped kid of his and split. She hung herself in the basement, in the coal bin. When I found her, she was barefoot. All I remember of her, what she looked like I mean, is how dirty her bare feet were when I found her there.”

“Where was this?”

“We lived just outside of Topeka.”

I nodded. “Then you really aren’t his son?”

“Naw, I was about five when he and Lyle moved in. Lyle was thirteen. I figured the booze musta rotted his brain pretty good by now so I told him he had to stop ditchin’ me. He bought it. Lyle knew of course, but if Lyle says anything, the old man is sure to think it’s a lie. They hate one another for sure. I came here to kill them, kill them both. The old man for what he did to mom, and Lyle for the way he tortured me when I was just a little kid.” He rolled up his sleeves and showed me the unmistakable scars of cigarette burns. “And that’s not the half of it.”

“Sounds like they both deserve everything they’ve got coming, so how come they’re still walking around this pleasant piece of earth?”

“I got to thinking, a bullet seems too good for the two of them. You know what I mean? I’m a great mechanic. My foster father taught me. There’s damn near nothing I can’t fix. I disconnected the water supply to the trailer, and the store too, and I hooked ‘em both up to a tank out behind the schoolhouse here. The water comes out of the middle of the bog. I had a friend down at the Michigan State Lab analyze it for me, he kinda freaked. Some new kind of parasite, attacks the brain somehow, swelling, abscesses, that sorta thing. My friend wanted to know where I got it, I told him Lake Erie. It’s driving them nuts. They’ve tried to kill each other twice in the last month.”

“They must have noticed.”

“Nope. The water’s a little green, but I get most of the big stuff out. They’re too far gone to notice now. I’ll pack up and leave the swamp when it’s over. But I gotta admit, it’s pretty entertaining to watch.”

I pulled five crisp, one-thousand dollar bills out of my wallet and slid them into the kid’s hand. He looked up for the first time since he’d begun to talk. “What’s this for?”

“I just sold a friend’s property, and I think she’d want you to have this.”

I climbed into the truck. As I started the engine he stepped over and leaned in my window. “What did you say to get them so riled up?”

“All I did was ask for a glass of water.” I smiled, and the kid laughed.

A few miles down the road I picked up the bottle of water I’d bought and held it up against the windshield. In the fading grey swamp light the water shimmered pale green. I rolled down the window and tossed the bottle into the swamp.

Stephen Beckwith spent thirty years as a Copywriter and Creative Director at advertising agencies in Chicago and Detroit. He has written thousands of ads and brochures, hundreds of trade magazine articles, dozens of speeches for Fortune 100 executives, and over forty articles for general interest publications. He has taught creative writing workshops for the past nine years at the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts in Grand Rapids, Michigan, (1999-2008) and advertising copywriting at Grand Valley State University (1988-1991).

PUBLISHING CREDITS:

Published three small press business books on marketing, a biography of Michigan pioneer, Louis Campau, The Last Voyageur (1988) published by the Michigan Historical Society, a book of poetry: Epiphamatic Moments (2001), published by Inland Seas Press. OTHER (read: as yet unpublished) WRITING PROJECTS: Three mysteries featuring, University of Michigan anthropology professor, Prester Dagonet: Blood and Stone (1998) Rood Awakenings (2000) and Dagda's Sword (2001) and Two hardboiled PI, Jack Boyle, historical thrillers: Boiling Point [set in 1919 New York] (2004) Alvarado Street [set in 1921 Hollywood] (2006). Also working on a new marketing book, tentatively entitled: Brand Planet: Branding & Cultural Decay