

SIN EATERS STORIES

CALEB TANKERSLEY



University of Alaska Press
Fairbanks

Copyrighted material
Not for distribution

© 2022 by University Press of Colorado

Published by University of Alaska Press
An imprint of University Press of Colorado
245 Century Circle, Suite 202
Louisville, Colorado 80027

All rights reserved
Manufactured in the United States of America.

Cover photo by Ian Dooley, <https://unsplash.com/photos/v9sAFGJ3Ojk>.
Cover and interior design by Krista West.



The University Press of Colorado is a proud member of the
Association of University Presses.

The University Press of Colorado is a cooperative publishing enterprise supported, in part, by Adams State University, Colorado State University, Fort Lewis College, Metropolitan State University of Denver, University of Alaska, University of Colorado, University of Northern Colorado, University of Wyoming, Utah State University, and Western Colorado University.

∞ This paper meets the requirements of the ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992
(Permanence of Paper).

ISBN: 978-1-60223-451-2 (paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-60223-452-9 (ebook)
<https://doi.org/10.5876/9781602234529>

Cataloging-in-Publication data for this title is available online at the
Library of Congress.

Copyrighted material
Not for distribution

CONTENTS

Swamp Creatures	1
Candy Cigarettes	13
He Told Me a Story	37
Apparitions	39
The Feed Corn Sea	55
Branson	73
Never Been More in Love	77
Ghosts on TV	101
In the Clouds	107
A Cross is Also a Sword	113
Trains	125
Uncle Bob	133
You're Beautiful	147
Sin Eaters	149
Acknowledgments	169

SWAMP CREATURES

While we're eating dinner or when we're tired of fighting, my husband and I stare at the swamp behind our house. Gary sips beer as he watches the festering water with awe, like an important piece of architecture. "How far down does it go? Fifty feet? Do you think?" He asks and answers his own question before spearing a chunk of beef and swallowing it whole. I grill steaks every Thursday, cook them just right with little bits of juice and blood pooling on the plate. Gary never pauses to taste his food, always slops it in. Like it's all the same.

The swamp is impressive, a gargling pool stretching as far as we can see from our backyard, tall ghostly trees sticking out of it and obscuring the horizon. We've been renting the same house two years but never explore too far back, some sense of reverence holding us.

It's been three months since I lost my job at the dry cleaners. Business was down, they said. Nothing personal. I just wasn't needed. Gary works computers for a bank, stays inside all day. But he likes to pretend it's back-breaking labor. He comes in, takes off his pants, and falls on the couch with a big sigh. "Another day, another dollar."

The swamp is like a bustling kingdom, so many different animals. Dragonflies, timid snakes, hundreds of tiny fish darting around like little bits of cellophane, gutsy but barely there. Bubbles stream up to the surface of the swamp, sometimes in one spot, other times forming trails. "I bet there's some kind of creature down there. We're too far north for gators, aren't we? Do

you think?" I've got in the habit of ignoring Gary's questions. He doesn't seem to notice.

I spend most of my days watching movies in bed. We have a big flat screen in the living room, but the couch and entertainment center feel more like Gary's. His smell is on them. Years ago I loved that smell, used to crumple his clothes to my nose when he was away. But time melts the view of people you love, like leaving a painting out in the rain.

I prefer black and white movies. The classic feel. I watch detective stories, narrow my eyes and hold a pen to my mouth like I'm smoking. I want to be Humphrey Bogart's "dame."

I call my sister Amy every afternoon. The calls would be unbearable if she were happy, if her marriage was wonderful but thankfully she hates her husband too. Donny. We talk about laundry, what's on sale, our old friends from high school, mostly the ones doing worse than us. But I keep circling back to the swamp. "Yesterday I watched two snapping turtles fighting. Each one was bigger than my head. You wouldn't think it about turtles but their fins have these massive claws. For three hours they struggled until they were covered in blood and muck. Eventually one dove and never came back up. It was so brutal. And exhilarating."

"Karen, you can't keep doing this to yourself," Her kids are screaming and running in the background. "You need more in your life." It's never occurred to me that what I have isn't enough, doesn't constitute an existence. I turn up the volume on the TV.

I met Gary when I was sixteen and he was twenty-two. My mother had just died from a tumor along her spine. She was traditional, never used a microwave and didn't believe in modern medicine, in the weakness of pain meds. She spent an entire winter in bed, moaning constantly, the small knot in her back growing from a raisin to a cherry to a lime to an apple, a giant lump, hard as rock and covered in thick purple veins. It took Mom months to die, long enough for this lump to break her, become her. Of course I cried for days, but as soon as the last shovel of dirt fell on her grave, my tears dried up. I walked the streets of our neighborhood

at dusk, stopped at the first house party, drank the first beer handed to me, said yes to the first boy.

I often sit out by the swamp in the hottest part of the day. There's a smell to it, musty, rank, and satisfying all at once. A post-sex smell. At first I didn't like it, was out there to offend my own senses. But after a few weeks I thought about that smell all the time, especially when Gary was on top of me. Gary never calls it sex, always "making love." When we do it I can always tell by the way he scrunches his face that it's not going to take him very long.

The swamp has so much to offer if you're willing to wait.

Gary comes home and asks again if we can have a baby. I'm in bed knitting and watching *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, my favorite movie. The black and white makes everything look harsh and sharp as rocks.

"We could name him after me. Or her after you. Whichever." The creature's eyes are bright against its dark slimy skin, fangs pulled out as it watches a woman swimming from below. I adjust the sleeves on the sweater I'm knitting. I've made it too small for Gary but I'm knitting it anyway.

"You'd have someone to keep you company. While you're here." I can't remember him ever wearing a sweater, which seems weird, to never wear a sweater. "Or we could adopt. Some little girl from a troubled home. I've always wanted a little girl. Don't you think we'd make great parents? Believe you me I'd raise her right."

I keep knitting as I watch the creature, fish lips open, webbed claws extending toward the woman. She doesn't know. The creature swims next to her now, just beneath where she can't see. The music rises dramatically. "I used to love you." I say it without moving my face from the screen.

Gary puts his hands in his pockets, gives the bedpost a light tap with his foot. "I know."

I'm not surprised he knows, just surprised he would say it. We rarely show our real selves. I work hard not to look at him.

"Just think about the baby." He leaves the room.

I have a dream about the creature from the black lagoon. It's swimming beneath me and of course I enjoy it. Then I dream about my mother. At first she's herself, the mother I knew when I was five. Then it's only my mother's tumor, a sack of throbbing skin that never stops growing, now larger than our house, now covering the horizon. I ask myself Gary's question: How far down does it go?

"I want you to talk to somebody," Amy says.

I take a small bite out of a piece of toast, tear off small chunks and toss them to the fish. The way they twist and curl is so elegant, like following the strokes of a clock. "We're talking right now."

"You know what I mean." I hear dishes clanging. Amy's good at house stuff. My counter is full of old pots that are starting to stink.

"I wouldn't know what to say."

"You know you don't have to be unhappy, right? You could do something else. Find someone else." She's scrubbing so hard I can hear it through the phone. "I want you to be happy, okay?"

"I know." The fish scatter as a giant turtle pops up. He bobs and looks at me. We watch each other for a while. I've only taken that one bite, but I throw in the rest of the toast, watch as the turtle jabs at it, his beak striking so fast you can hardly see his neck extend three times its normal length. I could stand here forever, watching this turtle eat. That would make me happy.

"Hey, Karen, can you tell me again how to get wine stains out of silk?"

When we get off the phone I don't go back inside, keep standing by the swamp. If I slipped I could slide right in, right under. A log drifts far off next to one of the tall, white trees. The log's covered in moss so it looks like an alligator. It might be an alligator, but I won't tell Gary about it. There are so many noises coming from the swamp but I have no idea what they are.

The sun's gone down by the time Gary comes home. Or maybe he's been home for a few hours but he waited to come out behind the house and get me. I haven't moved, even though I really need

to pee. It's just so peaceful. Part of me thinks if I don't move, if I stop and listen I really could stay here forever.

He walks down and stands next to me, doesn't talk. He's drinking a beer, offers it to me then pulls it back when I do nothing. Every once in a while Gary knows what to do, or at least what not to do. It makes me think of all the times when he was caring and charming. But they're old memories now, turned like soured milk. My stomach rumbles and I taste acid in my throat.

"We have a guest coming over."

I can't remember the last time we had anybody over. Amy and Donny maybe six months ago. "Who and when?"

Gary shuffles his feet. "You know Murray from work? He takes his kid to a Lutheran preschool. They're closed tomorrow for some religious holiday. He didn't know what to do, so I said she could stay here for the day. With you."

I grab the beer from Gary's fingers, take several gulps.

"Look, it's helping out a friend. And it might be good for you, for both of us to get some practice, don't you think? In case we want to have that baby."

"How old is she?"

Gary looks back at the house. "Five."

"She should be in kindergarten."

"They decided to hold her back a year."

I look out at the swamp and can't see anything, no fish or snakes or tiny bugs breaking the surface. The water's a flat shell so pristine I could almost step out on it, take it at a run, shoot off into the dark. "What's her name?"

"Starla."

I finish the beer and hand the bottle back to Gary. "Okay."

"Wonderful. It'll be fun having a kid around for the day, right?"

Gary grins as I step back and into the house, grab the sweater I'm working on then go pee. I stay in the bathroom for two hours, knitting a section then ripping it out and knitting it again.

When Gary's asleep, I step out to the back porch and call Amy. She's in the bathtub, where she spends a lot of her evenings.

“What’s up?”

“Are you glad you have children?”

Some kind of Depeche Mode music plays in the background. “They’re the only real reason I get up in the morning. That and good whiskey, which I’m sipping now.”

“Gary wants to have a baby.” Amy doesn’t respond. “If it’s a boy we’re naming it after him. A girl, I guess she’ll be little me.”

“Don’t do that.”

“You’re happy with your kids, right?” I’m watching the swamp as I talk. Lightning bugs and all kinds of glowing things float around, a million tiny eyes shining out at me.

“A baby isn’t a fucking Prozac pill. It would probably make things worse for you. Sure, you might enjoy a kid. But you wouldn’t enjoy it with Gary.”

“We’re having a test-run tomorrow.” My nails are getting long. I use them to pick at bits of wood sticking out of the porch. “Gary told his coworker I would watch this guy’s daughter. He named her Starla. Gary never even asked me.”

I hear Amy stand up from the tub. “Just leave him, Karen. It’s time.”

“And go where?” Off among the trees and the slipping water, I can see this enormous tapestry, all these animal lights like a pulsing map of stars. It’s beautiful. “I think this swamp is the love of my life.”

“Jesus.” Amy hangs up. The swamp sings and chirps, deep and dark and full of heat. I’m at peace, but inside I can feel myself changing.



Out of bed much earlier than normal, I fix my hair and put on real clothes, make myself presentable. Gary’s slurping cereal for breakfast while I sit across from him and sip coffee. I’m knitting on that sweater. It’s growing smaller and smaller. The doorbell rings. He stands up, looks slightly embarrassed. I don’t move,

keep looping those big needles in and out of the string, building something unusable.

Gary leaves the room, I hear muffled voices, fake laughter. He comes back in with a little girl. She's walking in front, Gary behind her, bent down and gently pushing her forward. "Karen, honey, this is Starla. Starla, this is Ms. Karen." Starla stands still with a disgusted look. Her hair is thin and blond, done up in two pigtails. My mother used to give me pigtails. I didn't think kids got pigtails anymore. Starla wears a white shirt and bright pink pants, shoes with cartoon flowers on the sides.

"Hi." Starla gives me a blank stare. She's a big girl, round and surprisingly tall for five, comes up to Gary's waist.

"Hi, Starla." I meet her stare but keep knitting. I'm getting very good at setting my body off on its own path.

Gary pats Starla on the shoulder, smiles at her. "I'm sure you'll both have fun today. I have to go to work." He walks over to me, leans his face toward mine. We almost bump foreheads before I realize what this is, that he's trying to kiss me, pretend we're this blissfully married couple, put on a big fucking show for a five-year-old girl. I want to jam a knitting needle through his eye, shove it in and hammer until it comes out the back of him. Instead I grab his cheeks, squeeze as hard as I can and push him away, give him a soft brush with the fingertips. Just enough to let the girl know I don't always want to kill him. Gary's surprised, stands and leaves in silence. Then it's just us, me and Starla.

I keep knitting the sweater, weaving needles over each other. I prefer wood ones over plastic. I love the sound they make clacking together. Starla seems to enjoy it too. She doesn't move, doesn't say anything. Just watches my fingers twirl faster than I really know what they're doing.

"You want some coffee?"

"No."

"Starla. Where did that name come from?"

She sniffs, looks around the room as if she expects someone else to jump in and answer. "I don't know."

“You can sit if you want.”

Starla pulls out a chair, sits across the table, stares at me with her mouth open before looking out a window. I move the sweater around on my lap. The bottom four inches are missing but I hold it up. “Want to try this on?”

We drag a dining chair into the bathroom. Starla wriggles onto the seat, struggles to stand up. I steady her with a hand. She seems pleased. The sweater comes down over her. It’s a multitude of colors, red on the left sleeve, yellow on the collar, bright green near the bottom. I kept switching yarns, never bothered to start over. The collar is too wide, drags down her back, but the sleeves fit surprisingly well with her little fingers just sticking out from the ends. If anything, the middle seems snug. She really is big for five. I have no idea how big a five-year-old should be.

“It’s pretty.” She twirls around and watches herself in the mirror. I see myself and grin like an idiot for no reason, almost say “hello.” I don’t know either of these people, the ones in the mirror. Starla almost falls off the chair, steadies herself and jumps down.

“Do you like marshmallows?” She asks and grabs my hand.

“Not really.”

“I like the colored ones. Do you have any?”

“We might have some. Probably just white ones, though.”

Starla looks down, gives me this exaggerated sigh. “That’s okay. I’ll eat the white ones.” She lifts her head and smiles so wide it forces her eyes closed. “Please please please?” How dangerous. She knows how to be adorable.

“Okay. Let’s eat marshmallows. Do you want to watch a movie?”

Starla throws up her hands. “Yes!”

“Have you seen *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*?”



I’ve watched the film so many times, could repeat all the dialogue, know all my favorite parts by heart. I spend most of my time watching Starla, her tiny fingers delicately picking marshmallows from

the bag and moving them to her open mouth, eyes never leaving the screen as she wipes her hand on the sweater before reaching into the bag for more.

I want to touch her, run my hands over her tiny arms, the bridge of her nose. I want to ask her questions: *Can you swim? Can you feel all the bones in your mother's back? Do you know how turtles move? Have you ever watched a tumor grow?* But the one that comes out is "Do you know what it means to be fired?"

She turns her head, annoyed. "No." She waits for me to explain.

"It's just like in a gun, how people say 'I fired a bullet.' It's being thrown very fast, somewhere far away."

Starla stares with no emotion. She's so intricate. I love watching her think, the mechanisms turning behind the skin of her face. "I don't want to be fired."

"Sometimes I do. Sometimes I think it'd be nice."

"Yeah." She turns back to the TV, shoves three marshmallows into her mouth. We're watching on the big screen in the living room but it doesn't feel like Gary's room with Starla here.

The brass crescendos. A hand reaches from the water, sharp claws with webbed plates. Starla goes stiff and I worry about her choking on the marshmallows. It was an urban legend when I was young, some stupid kid in the neighborhood who died from too many marshmallows jammed down his throat.

Starla makes a little whimpering sound as the creature moves toward a tent. The occupants notice but it's too late. Gills contract around its face as the creature bellows like a dying bull, shoves its large claw over the faces of its victims. It's not clear whether they suffocate or their heads are ripped off. The movie leaves it to the imagination which is why I love the swamp so much, this enormous veil of water hiding the intricate lives of its creatures, the surface dotted with little impressions hinting at all that brilliance below.

Starla puts her hands over her ears, closes her eyes and starts screaming. Two marshmallows come flying out of her mouth. I don't know where the third has gone. Her scream climbs until its

bouncing off the ceiling, filling the whole room. I don't know how to calm her down. "Jesus. Stop it. Just stop it."

She gets up and runs out the sliding door to the back porch. I can hear the sweater swishing with every little stride. It's a good minute or so before I collect myself, decide to follow. So much for babies.



There are creatures in the swamp you learn to stay away from. Snakes with pointed heads or the old crawdads with bodies big and fat as apples, that bright little strip of blue on the edge of the claw. I'm not concerned when I first get up from the couch, but so many scenarios move through my brain—scenes with these creatures or possible alligators—by the time I reach the back porch that I'm moving faster and surprising myself with how worried I am. Maybe I could be some kind of mother.

It's strange how quiet it is, how the swamp reverberates my panic back at me when I step out on the porch and find the most normal scene. Nothing. No snakes or crawdads. No alligators. No Starla. She's just gone.

I start to say her name. It feels wrong but I keep saying it, louder and louder. Walking around the porch, the front and back yard, the swamp. I'm scanning for the sweater, a tiny scrap of colorful string that could lead me to wherever she's hiding. Or been taken. Only now do all the possibilities flood into me.

Every time I watch *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, I observe new details that change the way I think. Before Starla screamed I noticed how gently the creature moved its webbed hands, placed them over its victim's mouth as if to whisper "I'm here now. It's okay." Walking the swamps—screaming, even reaching in and feeling around—a story takes shape, the Creature looking in from the window, watching us watching him in glorious black and white. He sees little Starla, sees her run away, moves his soft paw over her mouth—"I'm here now. It's okay."—before diving with her somewhere deep and safe.

When I was a little girl I liked to hide from my mother in department stores. I'd hunker down in the middle of a rack of shirts and stifle my laughter as I heard my mother run around, desperately calling my name. One time I waited too long. I could hear the manager and all kinds of employees looking for me. When I finally emerged my mother slapped me, right there in the store, in front of everyone. I remember in that moment wishing my mother was dead, and of course a few years later she was.

After searching everywhere I can think of, I go stand out by the swamp, the edges of my toes sticking into the water. I'm covered in leaves and mud, like I'm part of this now. A tick crawls up my forearm but I don't brush it off. If I wait, I hope the swamp will let me know, give me a sign. If I can only stand still. Disappear enough to see into things.

I don't know how much time passes before Gary comes home, steps out on the back porch. I've heard nothing from Starla but I'm starting to believe it, the story of the creature taking her to a place where she can find a better name.

Gary races around the yard then comes back and shakes my shoulders, spit flying out his mouth. He keeps asking questions but I don't respond. I've turned the volume down on Gary, his lips moving so fast with no sound to them. I'm outside of sound. I push him aside and without hesitation step into the swamp. We've been waiting for this a long time, the swamp and me. I sink straight away, my whole body immediately under. I'm surrounded by mud and can't even feel a bottom. It disturbs me to think that this much Gary may have got right. My god, how far down does it go? I come up, hover my nose over the surface and breathe in the smell. Gary's splashing behind me but I'm moving away from the shore. I'm drinking in big heaping gulps. Something keeps scraping my legs, twigs or tiny fish, but I'm hoping its them, the creature and Starla. They're waiting for me, just below the surface. I'm not moving my lips but I'm talking so fast, communicating like an animal, telling the creature "I'm here now. It's okay. Take me down."