

# THE KING OF THE SEA MONKEYS



MARK E. CULL

THE KING OF THE  
SEA MONKEYS



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*Remember us — if at all — not as lost  
Violent souls, but only  
As the hollow men  
The stuffed men.*

PART I



*At the hour when we are  
Trembling with tenderness  
Lips that would kiss  
Form prayers to broken stone.*

— 1 —  
THE DAM SPOT



**AS PAUL WAKES** he remains under the covers and tries to imagine what time it is. He listens to his wife's breathing. She is still asleep. Pretending she is awake he tries to guess the time before looking at the clock. He thinks she guesses the wrong time deliberately so he can win their little time game.

In the family room his six-year-old daughter is watching Sunday morning cartoons.

"Hi Daddy," she says, leaving cartoons for the attention of her father. He smiles but says nothing as he has not had coffee yet. Jessie watches her father pour himself a cup. She eats a handful of grapes before saying another word. Paul does not believe that his mood is connected so closely to caffeine, though it seems his daughter has figured out that coffee is her father's version of breakfast.

"Is today the fishing day?" she asks. Of course he has not forgotten. There is a short list of things which Paul will get out of bed early for on Sunday.

Jessie helps him load the car. In his day pack he has a couple of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, apples, granola bars, and water.



In the car Jessie asks her father if she can tell her mother that they went to the dam. For a moment Paul wonders what Jessie means by this. He remembers that Lilian, his wife, asked her if she was going to catch big fish at the lake. It occurs to Paul that Jessie is unsure about the name of the place they are going. She's been told it's a lake, a reservoir, and a dam. He has no doubt that she is worried that "dam" is something she shouldn't repeat at home.

"Because I've been calling the lake a 'dam'?" he asks. She nods. "You know, honey, some words sound the same but mean different things. The dam we're going to is something that holds back the water of a stream. It's a reservoir. It saves up water and makes a lake so farmers will have water for trees. 'Dam' sounds like a bad word though, doesn't it?"

"So where we are going isn't a bad word?" she asks.

"No it's not. You know, there are dams all over. The one in Big Rock is about as old as Grandpa Phil."

"A dam's like a giant bathtub, huh?" Jessie is in the front seat next to Paul. She is too short to see out the window. Lilian does let her sit in the front.

"You know," he says. "We're lucky to even have the dam."

"Because it saves up water?" Jessie asks, kicking the bottom of the glove box.

"Well, it does do that, which farmers need. But I mean that we are lucky it is there at all. A few years ago they were going to tear it down."

"Why?"

"It was about safety. Most dams have one side that curves into the water. That's called an arch and it helps to

make it strong. Ours looks like a bunch of little arches, which wasn't such a great idea. Also, they lost some of the drawings of how the dam was made and so they didn't know if there was enough steel inside to be safe in case of earthquakes and floods."

"Did they look inside of it?"

"The dam is made out of concrete and so you know, you really can't look inside."

"But they could look with x-rays to see if it was made out of steel? Or maybe they could use magnets."

"You know, it's not all steel on the inside, but there are supposed to be lots of steel bars tied together. I don't think x-rays would have worked. Anyway, they were worried that it would not be safe in a flood."

"So they don't let it get flooded during earthquakes? Is that why it's still there? Is it a dangerous place? Does mommy know the dam's got no steel?"

"Mommy knows all about the dam. I think all dams have steel, sweetie. The problem is when this dam was built they might not have used enough steel or the right kind of steel. They looked at other drawings of dams made by the same man who made the drawings that were lost. You know what they found?"

"What?"

"Some of the drawings had the right kind of steel and some did not. Just as they were getting ready to tear it down, somebody found some old photographs of it being built, and there was lots of the right kind of steel in it."

"Really?"

"That's right. So like I said, we are lucky to have that dam at all."

opposed to tossing out a baited hook and sitting back waiting to see what happens next. At least she will have a choice. It is at this point Paul's attention returns to the counter where there is some commotion between the old man and his new customers.

"Get the hell out of my store! I don't allow you kinda kids in here," the old man shouts at a couple of teenagers near the display of candy. "I ain't going to put up with you trouble-bastards running around here stealing stuff."

"Hey mister, we're just buying some candy," one of the kids says.

The other pulls a dollar from his pocket. "Lookie-lookie-lookie," he says waving the bill in the air. "Money-money-money! Probably the first dollar you seen all day, huh pops?" The old man stands on tip-toe trying to peer around the boy waving the money to see the other boy who is looking at the candy.

"Get out here where I can see you, you thievin' little shit!" The old man comes out from behind the counter waving a pistol. Paul would prefer to keep clear of the situation at this point, but he cannot bear the idea of the old man tossing these boys out simply because he does not care for the way they look. He steps forward from behind the display of fishing tackle to see if he might be able to get a better sense of the situation.

"Hey Mr. G! What's up?" calls the boy next to the candy. Paul recognizes him immediately though he is unfamiliar with the boy brandishing the money.

"Eugene," Paul says. "What's going on here?" The old man looks at him in surprise.

"That's right," he says waving the gun. "What *is* going

on here? You with these kids? Scouting my place out for them and making some kind of *di*-version so I can't see them grabbing merchandise with those sticky cotton-pickers of theirs?"

"Hey mister," Eugene says. "This is my teacher!"

"Like I said, get out here where I can see your hands. I ain't putting up with any more of your monkey-shines. You ...," the old man says waving the gun at Paul. "What the hell kind of name is *Mr. G*? You some kinda damned gang boss or somethin'?"

"I'm an English teacher. The name's Goldsmith. You know how kids are, they like to call me Mr. G."

"Goldsmith, huh? I know what kind of name that is. Better stick to the name your little rats call you by, I say."

The old man starts to close in on Paul. Eugene and his friend step toward the back of the store putting some distance between themselves and the man with the gun. Paul backs toward the door slowly, not wanting to leave the two boys alone in the store. He's not sure what the old man is up to. The old man's situated between Paul and the boys, and Paul's afraid he might suddenly think he's been surrounded. He doesn't want to imagine what this old guy might do if alarmed. As bad an idea it is to leave the boys alone, he thinks it might be better to step outside for a few minutes and let the old man cool down. Slowly and deliberately Paul turns himself around.

"Hey, you! Stop right there you son of a bitch!" the old man shouts.

Through the screen door, the sand of the lot outside seems strangely bright. Music from a pop radio station is barely audible. Paul looks up, remembers the sound of the

store's bell. He sees himself in the mirror that hangs on the wall above that two-handed engine at the door. There isn't time to be shocked by the image of his forehead spitting red all over the glass. In this instant he is deaf. It is as if God dropped the thread of his life and has forgotten his name.

PART II



*Between the idea  
And the reality  
Between the motion  
And the act  
Falls the Shadow*

— 2 —  
WHAT THE NEWS SAID



**WHAT APPEARED IN** the news concerning the shooting came from information made available through the Sheriff's Department and what reporters were able ascertain from the scene. The identity of the boys did not appear in the news, but the crime was otherwise covered in detail. According to one local paper, at approximately 9:45 a.m., Sunday morning, two teenaged boys, ages sixteen and seventeen, entered the Dam Spot at the Big Rock Dam & Recreation Area. The store's proprietor, William Simmons, had recently received and posted a leaflet distributed by a community group against gang violence. Based on information contained in this leaflet, he identified the youths as probable gang members. As he was attempting to notify authorities as to their presence, he observed the youths in the act of robbing the store. Despite his better judgment, the proprietor took a .38 caliber pistol he kept behind the counter and confronted the youths while they were in the process of filling their coat pockets with merchandise. A local resident, who was in the store at the time of the incident, unwittingly became engaged in the confrontation. Upon discovery that a robbery was in progress,

about who they were going to have-at next. The short one,” Simmons indicated Jimmy. “He’s a nasty fellow. Said he didn’t care for the noise of guns. Makes people come running to find out what’s going on. Yep, that one went on about how what he likes to do is stab people when they’re not expecting it. Even though they didn’t shoot me the way they did that poor feller, I just lay there like I was dead hoping they’d get out before it occurred to them to shoot me too.”

Jessie’s testimony confirmed Simmons’ account that the two boys fled from the store. She heard a number of shots fired, though she could not say exactly how many. The first shot made her sit up and look toward the store where her father went. She heard more shots fired after sitting up. She had no idea at the time that the sounds she heard came from a hand gun. She thought that somebody was setting off firecrackers inside the store. Shortly after she heard the gun shots, the two boys ran outside. First they attempted to get into a pickup truck, the doors were locked so they ran to the victim’s car, which was clearly unlocked as the windows were down. The keys were in the ignition, and they drove quickly to Palmville.

The boys said little despite the fact that Jessie cried the entire way. She told them repeatedly that her daddy was taking her fishing. At the time of her testimony, Jessie was unaware that her father had been shot. The court had been advised that she had been told her father was in the hospital because he had been in an accident. The additional charges of kidnapping to robbery and attempted murder were implicitly confirmed through Jessie’s testimony of what transpired following the shooting.



There was a period of some months between the initial arrest of the two boys and the actual trial. The district attorney delayed proceedings, waiting to see if the victim would succumb to the wounds received. Although testimonies varied concerning the actual number of shots fired, and the weapon contained four empty cartridges which had been discharged that day, only two slugs were recovered. One was found on the floor several feet from the victim. This slug exited the victim's forehead, shattered a mirror on the wall of the store and then bounced away. The second slug was removed from the victim's body. He was struck by this second bullet in the buttocks. This round struck the victim at an acute angle and traveled part way up his lower back just below the surface of the skin.

It was improbable the victim could have survived the injury of a gun shot to the head. Doctors were amazed he was alive on arrival to the hospital. He would have died at the scene were paramedics not already at the reservoir attending to an off-road recreational vehicle accident that claimed the life of a young boy. Amazingly, the paramedics were less than a hundred yards from the store at the time of the shooting. It would have been impossible for an ambulance to transport the victim in time. A helicopter was dispatched within minutes of the shooting. According to doctors, the victim's survival was not credited just to the response time, but to the nature of the wound itself. Had the victim been shot at a slightly different angle, massive damage to both lobes of the brain would have been certain. As it was, doctors gave the victim less than a one in twenty chance of surviving a single day. Twenty-four

the store after hours I can't stop 'em. I'll have recorded 'em though. The camera's on a pole, and it ain't hidden. You can see it plain as day after dark. You see, I don't want 'em breakin' up the place. I keep the register drawer out on the counter at night with a twenty right on top to keep 'em happy if they do get in. If you don't do that they'll smash the register a good one outta spite."

The trial lasted a little more than six weeks. During the first week it was found that the victim and Eugene knew each other prior to the shooting. Due to an irregularity in preparation, neither the prosecution nor the defense had been aware of this fact. Court was adjourned shortly after this discovery. Instead of petty theft become armed robbery, it seemed likely the prosecution would propose that the crime was premeditated.

When trial re-convened the following week, the charges did not change. The discovered evidence was considered by the court to have no relevance concerning the charges made against the two boys. The boys' defender told them that it was in their interest that the district attorney requested that the proceedings continue unchanged. Soon, the fact that Eugene knew the victim was all but forgotten in court. Outside of court however, much ado was made of this knowledge. Eugene was a boy who had been raised by a single mother. Though he had no criminal record, he had a long history of struggling in school. Local media focused on the fact that it was documented that the victim had taken a special interest in the young man. It was speculated that a relationship had developed which Eugene wished to end. The media made no claim as to the nature of this relationship, but the articles

were certainly not unbiased and conclusions were easily made. It became rumored that Eugene had enlisted the help of his cousin to help him end a relationship he came to regret.

Six weeks was perhaps too short of a trial. The boys were individually found guilty of armed robbery, assault with a deadly weapon, and kidnapping. They were each given sentences totaling forty-five years. Eugene and Jimmy were to serve the duration of their sentences in adult facilities.

— 3 —  
HANGMAN



**THE TELEPHONE RINGS** as the noose around Paul's neck begins to tighten. He's playing hangman again. A stick-figure with four limbs and a missing head is on a piece of scratch paper lying on his desk. Three short lines hold the places for the letters he has been attempting to guess. So far he has guessed the letters "g" and "o," the word still a mystery.

Paul has never heard of anyone playing "hangman" alone. He has never told anyone, but he often loses. He imagines that it's something like playing tic-tac-toe alone; one side must always win.

When Paul was in school, they didn't have telephones in classrooms. He has often wondered why they are in the classrooms at all. Except for the occasional kid who decides to ditch class, it costs nothing to send a student to the office with a note. When Paul was in high school, he had a hall pass for every period stashed in different pockets so he could escape to the library without getting caught. *Be prepared* was his motto.

The sound of the telephone makes him groan. Paul guesses it is some parent calling to complain about their child's grade.

“Hello?” he answers.

“Paul? It’s Michael. On your way out could you stop by? We need to talk.”

The idea of meeting with Michael Goodson on a Friday afternoon is not appealing, especially while there are still papers left to grade. Paul would like the weekend off.

He examines a little plastic castle which lies at the bottom of the bowl of brine shrimp he keeps on his desk. He gives the bowl a tap with his pen to wake them up. Just to make sure they’re not dead. He doubts they actually sleep, but when it’s quiet they’ll all stop wiggling about in the water. Next to the bowl is a small ledger where his students have documented a lengthy genealogy of the creatures in the bowl. It isn’t really possible to distinguish between them. Paul has told his students that sea monkeys have a life span of up to two years, and so they invent dates of arrival and departure for the little creatures. The largest of the sea monkeys does stand out, however. The students say that he is one of the founding monkeys. He was hatched from an earlier, superior, batch of eggs and is far older than the other inhabitants of the bowl. The students call the large monkey Methuselah. They have since penciled his name in between two of the earliest entries in the ledger and put a question mark in the column labeled “Hatch Date.”

Paul feeds the guppies in the aquarium that sits next to the chalkboard and then stuffs ungraded papers into his book bag. He’d like to get his meeting with Goodson over as quickly as possible before leaving. He heads to the main office, leaving the classroom unlocked, though he will not be returning. He thinks of the unlocked door as a courtesy to the custodian, who has asked Paul repeatedly to *not* leave it unlocked.

Stepping into the front office, Paul sees that everyone has already left for the weekend.

“Paul, come in,” Dr. Goodson’s voice calls after the door closes. “I’m glad I was able to catch you.”

Paul enters his office, but does not take a seat. The sooner he gets out the better.

“Sit down,” Goodson says. Paul approaches the principal’s half bookcase. He wonders if it isn’t technically a credenza. He would rather fidget with the bric-a-brac than be humiliated by taking a seat he knows is a few deliberate inches shorter than the principal’s own desk chair.

“I’m not very good at this,” Goodson says. “Please ...”

Paul turns around at this but does not respond. He half-sits on the short bookcase, knocking several small ceramic figurines onto the linoleum. One sharp *clink* sounds as if something has broken.

“I see then,” Goodson says. “Well, there continues to be complaints about your grading. It has also been suggested that you have particular preferences in terms of students.” Paul cocks his head to one side in response to this. “There’s one student in particular who’s been receiving higher marks than he deserves. He’s been bragging. You know how *they* are.”

“I grade on improvement,” Paul says, moving away from the bookcase.

“That’s not the issue here.”

“Then what is the point?” Paul asks.

“The point is I can’t take another Terrance Lee incident ... besides, I read much of the night, and go south in the winter.”

“What?” Paul asks.

Goodson is no longer looking at Paul, but studying a

painting of snow-covered mountains hanging on the wall next to the door to his office. Paul has examined this painting at close range previously and thought it rather ugly. It's right at home where it hangs in Goodson's office. He guesses it was meant to be the Alps. There is a small indistinct figure at the bottom of the painting with a four-legged blob at its side. Paul imagines the artist was thinking *goat-herd*, but didn't have the skill to cartoon in a couple of animals for the brown blob to help herd.

"That makes no sense. What are you saying?" Paul says.

"If it were me I'd let this whole thing go ... but between you, me, and the fence post ..."

"Yes?"

"This isn't the first time. You know that. The board demands this be taken care of immediately. This is a *situation* and it does need taking care of. I've bought you a little time. We've known each other for a long time. You have until the end of the semester, but that's the best I could do. At this point it's all over but the shouting."

On the way to his car, Paul meets Eugene loitering at the parking lot gate.

"Mr. G! What's up?"

Paul gives Eugene a high five.

"*Nada mucho*. Just heading out for the weekend," Paul says.

"Hey, that *Waste Land* poem you read us today in class, it sounded really cool, but it didn't make no sense."

"That's why I had you read the author's notes."

"It didn't make no sense to me with the notes either. I don't think I've got what it takes to figure this stuff out."

"*The Waste Land* is considered to be one of the most difficult poems in the English language. It's difficult for a

number of reasons. You know, the poet, Eliot, confessed some years later that it was an immense exposition of bogus scholarship. He wrote it to be as difficult to understand as he could.”

“Now, why’d he do that?”

“I think he was trying to hide something. He didn’t want people to know what it was that he cared about most in his life. I guess that it’s about something that had been taken from him. Instead of writing clearly what he had in mind, he filled the poem up with as many obscure literary allusions as he could dig up. They’re mostly about loss, but they seem pretty random to me.”

“Why’d you bother us with it then? If we can’t guess what he was thinking then we’re just wasting our time.”

“We’re going to discuss that Monday. There are some things you just can’t worry about. It’s literature. If you can’t figure out what it meant to the author, then make something up. Make up what it means to you. There are no wrong interpretations.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Mr. G, am I really doing okay?”

“You’re doing fine.”

“Look, I’ve got to know. I was told I don’t belong. My mother will kill me if my grades slip.”

“You know,” Paul says coming back a few steps to the gate. “You’re keeping up no problem and turning in some pretty fine stuff. What’s the problem? Is somebody telling you there’s a problem?”

“You know. People are always saying shit.”

“No, tell me. What are people saying?”

“Well, that last paper.”



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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mark E. Cull has a background in aerospace/defense which he left in 2001 in order to dedicate his time to literature. He has co-edited three anthologies of contemporary short fiction — *Anyone Is Possible*, *Blue Cathedral* and *The Crucifix is Down* — and is the author of the short fiction collection, *One Way Donkey Ride*. As well as serving on the advisory board of *WriteGirl*, he is the Founding Editor of the *Los Angeles Review*, and the publisher of Red Hen Press, which he founded in 1994 with Kate Gale.