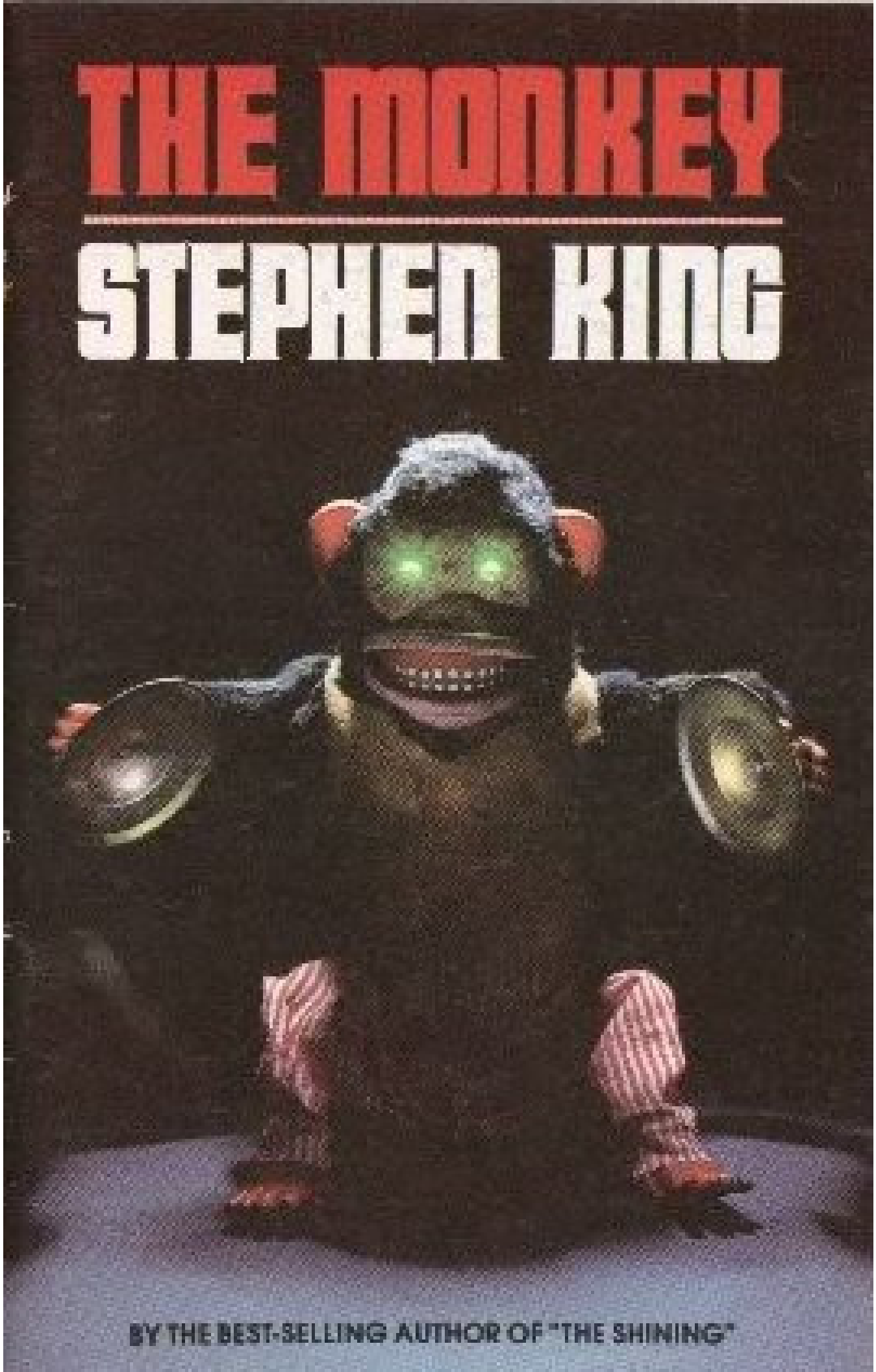
THE MONKEY

STEPHEN KING



BY THE BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF "THE SHINING"

THE MONKEY

Stephen King

When Hal Shelbum saw it, when his son Dennis pulled it out of a mouldering Ralston-Purina carton that had been pushed far back under one attic eave, such a feeling of horror and dismay rose in him that for one moment he thought he would scream. He put one fist to his mouth, as if to cram it back … and then merely coughed into his fist. Neither Terry nor Dennis noticed, but Petey looked around, momentarily curious.

“Hey, neat,” Dennis said respectfully. It was a tone Hal rarely got from the boy anymore himself. Dennis was twelve.

“What is it?” Peter asked. He glanced at his father again before his eyes were dragged back to the thing his big brother had found. “What is it, Daddy?”

“It’s a monkey, fartbrains,” Dennis said. “Haven’t you ever seen a monkey before?”

“Don’t call your brother fartbrains,” Terry said automatically, and began to examine a box of curtains. The curtains were slimy with mildew and she dropped them quickly. “Uck.”

“Can I have it, Daddy?” Petey asked. He was nine.

“What do you mean?” Dennis cried. “I found it!”

“Boys, please,” Terry said. “I’m getting a headache.”

Hal barely heard them. The monkey glimmered up at him from his older son’s hands, grinning its old familiar grin. The same grin that had haunted his nightmares as a kid, haunted them until he had—

Outside a cold gust of wind rose, and for a moment lips with no flesh blew a long note through the old, rusty gutter outside. Petey stepped closer to his father, eyes moving uneasily to the rough attic roof through which nailheads poked.

“What was that, Daddy?” he asked as the whistle died to a guttural buzz.

“Just the wind,” Hal said, still looking at the monkey. Its cymbals, crescents of brass rather than full circles in the weak light of the one naked bulb, were moveless, perhaps a foot apart, and he added automatically, “Wind can whistle, but it can’t carry a tune.” Then he realized that was a saying of Uncle Will’s, and a goose ran over his grave.

The note came again, the wind coming off Crystal Lake in a long, droning swoop and then wavering in the gutter. Half a dozen small drafts puffed cold October air into Hal’s face—God, this place was so much like the back closet of the house in Hartford that they might all have been transported thirty years back in time.

I won’t think about that.

But now of course it was all he could think about.

In the back closet where I found that goddammed monkey in that same box.

Terry had moved away to examine a wooden crate filled with knickknacks, duck-walking because the pitch of the eaves was so sharp.

“I don’t like it,” Petey said, and felt for Hal’s hand. “Dennis c’n have it if he wants. Can we go, Daddy?”

“Worried about ghosts, chickenguts?” Dennis inquired.

“Dennis, you stop it,” Terry said absently. She picked up a waferthin cup with a Chinese pattern. “This is nice. This—”

Hal saw that Dennis had found the wind-up key in the monkey’s back. Terror flew through him on dark wings.

“Don’t do that!”

It came out more sharply than he had intended, and he had snatched the monkey out of Dennis's hands before he was really aware he had done it. Dennis looked around at him, startled. Terry had also glanced back over her shoulder, and Petey looked up. For a moment they were all silent, and the wind whistled again, very low this time, like an unpleasant invitation.

"I mean, it's probably broken," Hal said.

It used to be broken … except when it wanted not to be.

"Well, you didn't have to grab," Dennis said.

"Dennis, shut up."

Dennis blinked and for a moment looked almost uneasy. Hal hadn't spoken to him so sharply in a long time. Not since he had lost his job with National Aerodyne in California two years before and they had moved to Texas. Dennis decided not to push it … for now. He turned back to the Ralston-Purina carton and began to root through it again, but the other stuff was nothing but junk. Broken toys bleeding springs and stuffings.

The wind was louder now, hooting instead of whistling. The attic began to creak softly, making a noise like footsteps.

"Please, Daddy?" Petey asked, only loud enough for his father to hear.

"Yeah," he said. "Terry, let's go."

"I'm not through with this—"

"I said let's go."

It was her turn to look startled.

They had taken two adjoining rooms in a motel. By ten that night the boys were asleep in their room and Terry was asleep in the adults'

room. She had taken two Valiums on the ride back from the home place in Casco. To keep her nerves from giving her a migraine. Just lately she took a lot of Valium. It had started around the time National Aerodyne had laid Hal off. For the last two years he had been working for Texas Instruments—it was $4,000 less a year, but it was work. He told Terry they were lucky. She agreed. There were plenty of software architects drawing unemployment, he said. She agreed. The company housing in Arnette was every bit as good as the place in Fresno, he said. She agreed, but he thought her agreement to all of it was a lie.

And he was losing Dennis. He could feel the kid going, achieving a premature escape velocity, so long, Dennis, byebye stranger, it was nice sharing this train with you. Terry said she thought the boy was smoking reefer. She smelled it sometimes. You have to talk to him, Hal. And he agreed, but so far he had not.

The boys were asleep. Terry was asleep. Hal went into the bathroom and locked the door and sat down on the closed lid of the john and looked at the monkey.

He hated the way it felt, that soft brown nappy fur, worn bald in spots. He hated its grin—that monkey grins just like a nigger, Uncle Will had said once, but it didn't grin like a nigger or like anything human. Its grin was all teeth, and if you wound up the key, the lips would move, the teeth would seem to get bigger, to become vampire teeth, the lips would writhe and the cymbals would bang, stupid monkey, stupid clockwork monkey, stupid, stupid—

He dropped it. His hands were shaking and he dropped it.

The key clicked on the bathroom tile as it struck the floor. The sound seemed very loud in the stillness. It grinned at him with its murky amber eyes, doll's eyes, filled with idiot glee, its brass cymbals poised as if to strike up a march for some band from hell. On the bottom the words MADE IN HONG KONG were stamped.

“You can’t be here,” he whispered. “I threw you down the well when I was nine.”

The monkey grinned up at him.

Outside in the night, a black capful of wind shook the motel.

Hal’s brother Bill and Bill’s wife Collette met them at Uncle Will’s and Aunt Ida’s the next day. “Did it ever cross your mind that a death in the family is a really lousy way to renew the family connection?” Bill asked him with a bit of a grin. He had been named for Uncle Will. Will and Bill, champions of the rodayo, Uncle Will used to say, and ruffle Bill’s hair. It was one of his sayings … like the wind can whistle but it can’t carry a tune. Uncle Will had died six years before, and Aunt Ida had lived on here alone, until a stroke had taken her just the previous week. Very sudden, Bill had said when he called long distance to give Hal the news. As if he could know; as if anyone could know. She had died alone.

“Yeah,” Hal said. “The thought crossed my mind.”

They looked at the place together, the home place where they had finished growing up. Their father, a merchant mariner, had simply disappeared as if from the very face of the earth when they were young; Bill claimed to remember him vaguely, but Hal had no memories of him at all. Their mother had died when Bill was ten and Hal eight. Aunt Ida had brought them here on a Greyhound bus which left from Hartford, and they had been raised here, and gone to college from here. This had been the place they were homesick for. Bill had stayed in Maine and now had a healthy law practice in Portland.

Hal saw that Petey had wandered off toward the blackberry tangles that lay on the eastern side of the house in a mad jumble. “Stay away from there, Petey,” he called.

Petey looked back, questioning. Hal felt simple love for the boy rush him … and he suddenly thought of the monkey again.

“Why, Dad?”

“The old well’s back there someplace,” Bill said. “But I’ll be damned if I remember just where. Your dad’s right, Petey—it’s a good place to stay away from. Thorns’ll do a job on you. Right, Hal?”

“Right,” Hal said automatically. Petey moved away, not looking back, and then started down the embankment toward the small shingle of beach where Dennis was skipping stones over the water. Hal felt something in his chest loosen a little.

Bill might have forgotten where the old well was, but late that afternoon Hal went to it unerringly, shouldering his way through the brambles that tore at his old flannel jacket and hunted for his eyes. He reached it and stood there, breathing hard, looking at the rotted, warped boards that covered it. After a moment’s debate, he knelt (his knees fired twin pistol shots) and moved two of the boards aside.

From the bottom of that wet, rock-lined throat a drowning face stared up at him, wide eyes, grimacing mouth. A moan escaped him. It was not loud, except in his heart. There it had been very loud.

It was his own face in the dark water.

Not the monkey’s. For a moment he had thought it was the monkey’s.

He was shaking. Shaking all over.

I threw it down the well. I threw it down the well, please God don’t let me be crazy, I threw it down the well.

The well had gone dry the summer Johnny McCabe died, the year after Bill and Hal came to stay with Uncle Will and Aunt Ida. Uncle Will had borrowed money from the bank to have an artesian well sunk, and the blackberry tangles had grown up around the old dug well. The dry well.

Except the water had come back. Like the monkey.

This time the memory would not be denied. Hal sat there helplessly, letting it come, trying to go with it, to ride it like a surfer riding a monster wave that will crush him if he falls off his board, just trying to get through it so it would be gone again.

He had crept out here with the monkey late that summer, and the blackberries had been out, the smell of them thick and cloying. No one came in here to pick, although Aunt Ida would sometimes stand at the edge of the tangles and pick a cupful of berries into her apron. In here the blackberries had gone past ripe to overripe, some of them were rotting, sweating a thick white fluid like pus, and the crickets sang maddeningly in the high grass underfoot, their endless cry: Reeeeee—

The thorns tore at him, brought dots of blood onto his cheeks and bare arms. He made no effort to avoid their sting. He had been blind with terror—so blind that he had come within inches of stumbling onto the rotten boards that covered the well, perhaps within inches of crashing thirty feet to the well's muddy bottom. He had pinwheeled his arms for balance, and more thorns had branded his forearms. It was that memory that had caused him to call Petey back sharply.

That was the day Johnny McCabe died—his best friend. Johnny had been climbing the rungs up to his treehouse in his backyard. The two of them had spent many hours up there that summer, playing pirate, seeing make-believe galleons out on the lake, unlimbering the cannons, reefing the stuns'l (whatever that was), preparing to board. Johnny had been climbing up to the treehouse as he had done a thousand times before, and the rung just below the trapdoor in the bottom of the treehouse had snapped off in his hands and Johnny had fallen thirty feet to the ground and had broken his neck and it was the monkey's fault, the monkey, the goddam hateful monkey. When the phone rang, when Aunt Ida's mouth dropped open and then formed an O of horror as her friend Milly from down the road told her the news, when Aunt Ida said, "Come out on the porch, Hal,

I have to tell you some bad news—" he had thought with sick horror, The monkey! What's the monkey done now?

There had been no reflection of his face trapped at the bottom of the well the day he threw the monkey down, only stone cobbles and the stink of wet mud. He had looked at the monkey lying there on the wiry grass that grew between the blackberry tangles, its cymbals poised, its grinning teeth huge between its splayed lips, its fur rubbed away in balding, mangy patches here and there, its glazed eyes.

"I hate you," he hissed at it. He wrapped his hand around its loathsome body, feeling the nappy fur crinkle. It grinned at him as he held it up in front of his face. "Go on!" he dared it, beginning to cry for the first time that day. He shook it. The poised cymbals trembled minutely. The monkey spoiled everything good. Everything. "Go on, clap them! Clap them!"

The monkey only grinned.

"Go on and clap them!" His voice rose hysterically. "Fraidycat, fraidycat, go on and clap them! I dare you! DOUBLE DARE YOU!"

Its brownish-yellow eyes. Its huge gleeful teeth.

He threw it down the well then, mad with grief and terror. He saw it turn over once on its way down, a simian acrobat doing a trick, and the sun glinted one last time on those cymbals. It struck the bottom with a thud, and that must have jogged its clockwork, for suddenly the cymbals did begin to beat. Their steady, deliberate, and tinny banging rose to his ears, echoing and fey in the stone throat of the dead well: jang-jang-jang-jang—

Hal clapped his hands over his mouth, and for a moment he could see it down there, perhaps only in the eye of imagination … lying there in the mud, eyes glaring up at the small circle of his boy's face peering over the lip of the well (as if marking that face forever), lips

expanding and contracting around those grinning teeth, cymbals clapping, funny wind-up monkey.

Jang-jang-jang-jang, who's dead? Jang-jang-jang-jang, is it Johnny McCabe, falling with his eyes wide, doing his own acrobatic somersault as he falls through the bright summer vacation air with the splintered rung still held in his hands to strike the ground with a single bitter snapping sound, with blood flying out of his nose and mouth and wide eyes? Is it Johnny, Hal? Or is it you?

Moaning, Hal had shoved the boards across the hole, getting splinters in his hands, not caring, not even aware of them until later. And still he could hear it, even through the boards, muffled now and somehow all the worse for that: it was down there in stone-faced dark, clapping its cymbals and jerking its repulsive body, the sound coming up like sounds heard in a dream.

Jang-jang-jang-jang, who's dead this time?

He fought and battered his way back through the blackberry creepers. Thorns stitched fresh lines of welling blood briskly across his face and burdocks caught in the cuffs of his jeans, and he fell full-length once, his ears still jangling, as if it had followed him. Uncle Will found him later, sitting on an old tire in the garage and sobbing, and he had thought Hal was crying for his dead friend. So he had been; but he had also cried in the aftermath of terror.

He had thrown the monkey down the well in the afternoon. That evening, as twilight crept in through a shimmering mantle of ground-fog, a car moving too fast for the reduced visibility had run down Aunt Ida's Manx cat in the road and gone right on. There had been guts everywhere, Bill had thrown up, but Hal had only turned his face away, his pale, still face, hearing Aunt Ida's sobbing (this on top of the news about the McCabe boy had caused a fit of weeping that was almost hysterics, and it was almost two hours before Uncle Will could calm her completely) as if from miles away. In his heart there was a cold and exultant joy. It hadn't been his turn. It had been Aunt Ida's Manx, not him, not his brother Bill or his Uncle Will (just two

champions of the rodayo). And now the monkey was gone, it was down the well, and one scruffy Manx cat with ear mites was not too great a price to pay. If the monkey wanted to clap its hellish cymbals now, let it. It could clap and clash them for the crawling bugs and beetles, the dark things that made their home in the well's stone gullet. It would rot down there. Its loathsome cogs and wheels and springs would rust down there. It would die down there. In the mud and the darkness. Spiders would spin it a shroud.

But … it had come back.

Slowly, Hal covered the well again, as he had on that day, and in his ears he heard the phantom echo of the monkey's cymbals: Jang-jang-jang-jang, who's dead, Hal? Is it Terry? Dennis? Is it Petey, Hal? He's your favorite, isn't he? Is it him? Jang-jang-jang—

"Put that down!"

Petey flinched and dropped the monkey, and for one nightmare moment Hal thought that would do it, that the jolt would jog its machinery and the cymbals would begin to beat and clash.

"Daddy, you scared me."

"I'm sorry. I just … I don't want you to play with that."

The others had gone to see a movie, and he had thought he would beat them back to the motel. But he had stayed at the home place longer than he would have guessed; the old, hateful memories seemed to move in their own eternal time zone.

Terry was sitting near Dennis, watching The Beverly Hillbillies. She watched the old, grainy print with a steady, bemused concentration that spoke of a recent Valium pop. Dennis was reading a rock magazine with Culture Club on the cover. Petey had been sitting cross-legged on the carpet goofing with the monkey.

“It doesn’t work anyway,” Petey said. Which explains why Dennis let him have it, Hal thought, and then felt ashamed and angry at himself. He felt this uncontrollable hostility toward Dennis more and more often, but in the aftermath he felt demeaned and tacky … helpless.

“No,” he said. “It’s old. I’m going to throw it away. Give it to me.”

He held out his hand and Peter, looking troubled, handed it over.

Dennis said to his mother, “Pop’s turning into a friggin schizophrenic.”

Hal was across the room even before he knew he was going, the monkey in one hand, grinning as if in approbation. He hauled Dennis out of his chair by the shirt. There was a purring sound as a seam came adrift somewhere. Dennis looked almost comically shocked. His copy of Rock Wave fell to the floor.

“Hey!”

“You come with me,” Hal said grimly, pulling his son toward the door to the connecting room.

“Hal!” Terry nearly screamed. Petey just goggled.

Hal pulled Dennis through. He slammed the door and then slammed Dennis against the door. Dennis was starting to look scared. “You’re getting a mouth problem,” Hal said.

“Let go of me! You tore my shirt, you—”

Hal slammed the boy against the door again. “Yes,” he said. “A real mouth problem. Did you learn that in school? Or back in the smoking area?”

Dennis flushed, his face momentarily ugly with guilt. “I wouldn’t be in that shitty school if you didn’t get canned!” he burst out.

Hal slammed Dennis against the door again. “I didn’t get canned, I got laid off, you know it, and I don’t need any of your shit about it. You have problems? Welcome to the world, Dennis. Just don’t lay all of them off on me. You’re eating. Your ass is covered. You are twelve years old, and at twelve, I don’t … need any … shit from you.” He punctuated each phrase by pulling the boy forward until their noses were almost touching and then slamming Dennis back into the door. It was not hard enough to hurt, but Dennis was scared—his father had not laid a hand on him since they moved to Texas—and now he began to cry with a young boy’s loud, braying, healthy sobs.

“Go ahead, beat me up!” he yelled at Hal, his face twisted and blotchy. “Beat me up if you want, I know how much you fucking hate me!”

“I don’t hate you. I love you a lot, Dennis. But I’m your dad and you’re going to show me respect or I’m going to bust you for it.”

Dennis tried to pull away. Hal pulled the boy to him and hugged him; Dennis fought for a moment and then put his face against Hal’s chest and wept as if exhausted. It was the sort of cry Hal hadn’t heard from either of his children in years. He closed his eyes, realizing that he felt exhausted himself.

Terry began to hammer on the other side of the door. “Stop it, Hal! Whatever you’re doing to him, stop it!”

“I’m not killing him,” Hal said. “Go away, Terry.”

“Don’t you—”

“It’s all right, Mom,” Dennis said, muffled against Hal’s chest.

He could feel her perplexed silence for a moment, and then she went. Hal looked at his son again.

“I’m sorry I bad-mouthed you, Dad,” Dennis said reluctantly.

“Okay. I accept that with thanks. When we get home next week, I’m going to wait two or three days and then I’m going to go through all your drawers, Dennis. If there’s something in them you don’t want me to see, you better get rid of it.”

That flash of guilt again. Dennis lowered his eyes and wiped away snot with the back of his hand.

“Can I go now?” He sounded sullen once more.

“Sure,” Hal said, and let him go. Got to take him camping in the spring, just the two of us. Do some fishing, like Uncle Will used to do with Bill and me. Got to get close to him. Got to try.

He sat down on the bed in the empty room, and looked at the monkey. You’ll never be close to him again, Hal, its grin seemed to say. Count on it. I am back to take care of business, just like you always knew I would be, someday.

Hal laid the monkey aside and put a hand over his eyes.

That night Hal stood in the bathroom, brushing his teeth, and thought. It was in the same box. How could it be in the same box?

The toothbrush jabbed upward, hurting his gums. He winced.

He had been four, Bill six, the first time he saw the monkey. Their missing father had bought a house in Hartford, and it had been theirs, free and clear, before he died or fell into a hole in the middle of the world or whatever it had been. Their mother worked as a secretary at Holmes Aircraft, the helicopter plant out in Westville, and a series of sitters came in to stay with the boys, except by then it was just Hal that the sitters had to mind through the day—Bill was in first grade, big school. None of the babysitters stayed for long. They got pregnant and married their boyfriends or got work at Holmes, or Mrs. Shelburn would discover they had been at the cooking sherry or her bottle of brandy which was kept in the sideboard for special

occasions. Most were stupid girls who seemed only to want to eat or sleep. None of them wanted to read to Hal as his mother would do.

The sitter that long winter was a huge, sleek black girl named Beulah. She fawned over Hal when Hal's mother was around and sometimes pinched him when she wasn't. Still, Hal had some liking for Beulah, who once in a while would read him a lurid tale from one of her confession or true-detective magazines ("Death Came for the Voluptuous Redhead," Beulah would intone ominously in the dozy daytime silence of the living room, and pop another Reese's peanut butter cup into her mouth while Hal solemnly studied the grainy tabloid pictures and drank milk from his Wish-Cup). The liking made what happened worse.

He found the monkey on a cold, cloudy day in March. Sleet ticked sporadically off the windows, and Beulah was asleep on the couch, a copy of My Story tented open on her admirable bosom.

Hal had crept into the back closet to look at his father's things.

The back closet was a storage space that ran the length of the second floor on the left side, extra space that had never been finished off. You got into it by using a small door—a down-the-rabbit-hole sort of door—on Bill's side of the boys' bedroom. They both liked to go in there, even though it was chilly in winter and hot enough in summer to wring a bucketful of sweat out of your pores. Long and narrow and somehow snug, the back closet was full of fascinating junk. No matter how much stuff you looked at, you never seemed to be able to look at it all. He and Bill had spent whole Saturday afternoons up here, barely speaking to each other, taking things out of boxes, examining them, turning them over and over so their hands could absorb each unique reality, putting them back. Now Hal wondered if he and Bill hadn't been trying, as best they could, to somehow make contact with their vanished father.

He had been a merchant mariner with a navigator's certificate, and there were stacks of charts in the closet, some marked with neat circles (and the dimple of the compass's swing-point in the center of

each). There were twenty volumes of something called Barron's Guide to Navigation. A set of cockeyed binoculars that made your eyes feel hot and funny if you looked through them too long. There were touristy things from a dozen ports of call—rubber hula-hula dolls, a black cardboard bowler with a torn band that said YOU PICK A GIRL AND I'LL PICCADILLY, a glass globe with a tiny Eiffel Tower inside. There were envelopes with foreign stamps tucked carefully away inside, and foreign coins; there were rock samples from the Hawaiian island of Maui, a glassy black—heavy and somehow ominous—and funny records in foreign languages.

That day, with the sleet ticking hypnotically off the roof just above his head, Hal worked his way all the way down to the far end of the back closet, moved a box aside, and saw another box behind it—a Ralston-Purina box. Looking over the top was a pair of glassy hazel eyes. They gave him a start and he skittered back for a moment, heart thumping, as if he had discovered a deadly pygmy. Then he saw its silence, the glaze in those eyes, and realized it was some sort of toy. He moved forward again and lifted it carefully from the box.

It grinned its ageless, toothy grin in the yellow light, its cymbals held apart.

Delighted, Hal had turned it this way and that, feeling the crinkle of its nappy fur. Its funny grin pleased him. Yet hadn't there been something else? An almost instinctive feeling of disgust that had come and gone almost before he was aware of it? Perhaps it was so, but with an old, old memory like this one, you had to be careful not to believe too much. Old memories could lie. But … hadn't he seen that same expression on Petey's face, in the attic of the home place?

He had seen the key set into the small of its back, and turned it. It had turned far too easily; there were no winding-up clicks. Broken, then. Broken, but still neat.

He took it out to play with it.

“Whatchoo got, Hal?” Beulah asked, waking from her nap.

“Nothing,” Hal said. “I found it.”

He put it up on the shelf on his side of the bedroom. It stood atop his Lassie coloring books, grinning, staring into space, cymbals poised. It was broken, but it grinned nonetheless. That night Hal awakened from some uneasy dream, bladder full, and got up to use the bathroom in the hall. Bill was a breathing lump of covers across the room.

Hal came back, almost asleep again … and suddenly the monkey began to beat its cymbals together in the darkness.

Jang-jang-jang-jang—

He came fully awake, as if snapped in the face with a cold, wet towel. His heart gave a staggering leap of surprise, and a tiny, mouselike squeak escaped his throat. He stared at the monkey, eyes wide, lips trembling.

Jang-jang-jang-jang—

Its body rocked and humped on the shelf. Its lips spread and closed, spread and closed, hideously gleeful, revealing huge and carnivorous teeth.

“Stop,” Hal whispered.

His brother turned over and uttered a loud, single snore. All else was silent … except for the monkey. The cymbals clapped and clashed, and surely it would wake his brother, his mother, the world. It would wake the dead.

Jang-jang-jang-jang—

Hal moved toward it, meaning to stop it somehow, perhaps put his hand between its cymbals until it ran down, and then it stopped on its own. The cymbals came together one last time—jang!—and then

spread slowly apart to their original position. The brass glimmered in the shadows. The monkey's dirty yellowish teeth grinned.

The house was silent again. His mother turned over in her bed and echoed Bill's single snore. Hal got back into his own bed and pulled the covers up, his heart beating fast, and he thought: I'll put it back in the closet again tomorrow. I don't want it.

But the next morning he forgot all about putting the monkey back because his mother didn't go to work. Beulah was dead. Their mother wouldn't tell them exactly what happened. "It was an accident, just a terrible accident," was all she would say. But that afternoon Bill bought a newspaper on his way home from school and smuggled page four up to their room under his shirt. Bill read the article haltingly to Hal while their mother cooked supper in the kitchen, but Hal could read the headline for himself—TWO KILLED IN APARTMENT SHOOT-OUT. Beulah McCaffery, 19, and Sally Tremont, 20, had been shot by Miss McCaffery's boyfriend, Leonard White, 25, following an argument over who was to go out and pick up an order of Chinese food. Miss Tremont had expired at Hartford Receiving. Beulah McCaffery had been pronounced dead at the scene.

It was like Beulah just disappeared into one of her own detective magazines, Hal Shelburn thought, and felt a cold chill race up his spine and then circle his heart. And then he realized the shootings had occurred about the same time the monkey—

"Hal?" It was Terry's voice, sleepy. "Coming to bed?"

He spat toothpaste into the sink and rinsed his mouth. "Yes," he said.

He had put the monkey in his suitcase earlier, and locked it up. They were flying back to Texas in two or three days. But before they went, he would get rid of the damned thing for good.

Somehow.

“You were pretty rough on Dennis this afternoon,” Terry said in the dark.

“Dennis has needed somebody to start being rough on him for quite a while now, I think. He’s been drifting. I just don’t want him to start falling.”

“Psychologically, beating the boy isn’t a very productive—”

“I didn’t beat him, Terry—for Christ’s sake!”

“—way to assert parental authority—”

“Oh, don’t give me any of that encounter-group shit,” Hal said angrily.

“I can see you don’t want to discuss this.” Her voice was cold.

“I told him to get the dope out of the house, too.”

“You did?” Now she sounded apprehensive. “How did he take it? What did he say?”

“Come on, Terry! What could he say? You’re fired?”

“Hal, what’s the matter with you? You’re not like this—what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he said, thinking of the monkey locked away in his Samsonite. Would he hear it if it began to clap its cymbals? Yes, he surely would. Muffled, but audible. Clapping doom for someone, as it had for Beulah, Johnny McCabe, Uncle Will’s dog Daisy. Jang-jang-jang, is it you, Hal? “I’ve just been under a strain.”

“I hope that’s all it is. Because I don’t like you this way.”

“No?” And the words escaped before he could stop them: he didn’t even want to stop them. “So pop a Valium and everything will look okay again.”

He heard her draw breath in and let it out shakily. She began to cry then. He could have comforted her (maybe), but there seemed to be no comfort in him. There was too much terror. It would be better when the monkey was gone again, gone for good. Please God, gone for good.

He lay wakeful until very late, until morning began to gray the air outside. But he thought he knew what to do.

Bill had found the monkey the second time.

That was about a year and a half after Beulah McCaffery had been pronounced Dead at the Scene. It was summer. Hal had just finished kindergarten.

He came in from playing and his mother called, “Wash your hands, Senor, you are feelthy like a peeg.” She was on the porch, drinking an iced tea and reading a book. It was her vacation; she had two weeks.

Hal gave his hands a token pass under cold water and printed dirt on the hand towel. “Where’s Bill?”

“Upstairs. You tell him to clean his side of the room. It’s a mess.”

Hal, who enjoyed being the messenger of unpleasant news in such matters, rushed up. Bill was sitting on the floor. The small down-the-rabbit-hole door leading to the back closet was ajar. He had the monkey in his hands.

“That’s busted,” Hal said immediately.

He was apprehensive, although he barely remembered coming back from the bathroom that night and the monkey suddenly beginning to clap its cymbals. A week or so after that, he had had a bad dream about the monkey and Beulah—he couldn’t remember exactly what—and had awakened screaming, thinking for a moment that the soft weight on his chest was the monkey, that he would open his eyes

and see it grinning down at him. But of course the soft weight had only been his pillow, clutched with panicky tightness. His mother came in to soothe him with a drink of water and two chalky-orange baby aspirin, those Valiums of childhood's troubled times. She thought it was the fact of Beulah's death that had caused the nightmare. So it was, but not in the way she thought.

He barely remembered any of this now, but the monkey still scared him, particularly its cymbals. And its teeth.

"I know that," Bill said, and tossed the monkey aside. "It's stupid." It landed on Bill's bed, staring up at the ceiling, cymbals poised. Hal did not like to see it there. "You want to go down to Teddy's and get Popsicles?"

"I spent my allowance already," Hal said. "Besides, Mom says you got to clean up your side of the room."

"I can do that later," Bill said. "And I'll loan you a nickel, if you want." Bill was not above giving Hal an Indian rope burn sometimes, and would occasionally trip him up or punch him for no particular reason, but mostly he was okay.

"Sure," Hal said gratefully. "I'll just put the busted monkey back in the closet first, okay?"

"Nah," Bill said, getting up. "Let's go-go-go."

Hal went. Bill's moods were changeable, and if he paused to put the monkey away, he might lose his Popsicle. They went down to Teddy's and got them, and not just any Popsicles, either, but the rare blueberry ones. Then they went down to the Rec where some kids were getting up a baseball game. Hal was too small to play, but he sat far out in foul territory, sucking his blueberry Popsicle and chasing what the big kids called "Chinese home runs." They didn't get home until almost dark, and their mother whacked Hal for getting the hand towel dirty and whacked Bill for not cleaning up his side of the room, and after supper there was TV, and by the time all of that

happened, Hal had forgotten all about the monkey. It somehow found its way up onto Bill's shelf, where it stood right next to Bill's autographed picture of Bill Boyd. And there it stayed for nearly two years.

By the time Hal was seven, babysitters had become an extravagance, and Mrs. Shelburn's parting shot each morning was, "Bill, look after your brother."

That day, however, Bill had to stay after school and Hal came home alone, stopping at each corner until he could see absolutely no traffic coming in either direction, and then skittering across, shoulders hunched, like a doughboy crossing no-man's-land. He let himself into the house with the key under the mat and went immediately to the refrigerator for a glass of milk. He got the bottle, and then it slipped through his fingers and crashed to smithereens on the floor, the pieces of glass flying everywhere.

Jang-jang-jang-jang, from upstairs, in their bedroom. Jang-jang-jang, hi, Hal! Welcome home! And by the way, Hal, is it you? Is it you this time? Are they going to find you Dead at the Scene?

He stood there, immobile, looking down at the broken glass and the puddle of milk, full of a terror he could not name or understand. It was simply there, seeming to ooze from his pores.

He turned and rushed upstairs to their room. The monkey stood on Bill's shelf, seeming to stare at him. The monkey had knocked the autographed picture of Bill Boyd facedown onto Bill's bed. The monkey rocked and grinned and beat its cymbals together. Hal approached it slowly, not wanting to, but not able to stay away. Its cymbals jerked apart and crashed together and jerked apart again. As he got closer, he could hear the clockwork running in the monkey's guts.

Abruptly, uttering a cry of revulsion and terror, he swatted it from the shelf as one might swat a bug. It struck Bill's pillow and then fell on

the floor, cymbals beating together, jang-jang-jang, lips flexing and closing as it lay there on its back in a patch of late April sunshine.

Hal kicked it with one Buster Brown, kicked it as hard as he could, and this time the cry that escaped him was one of fury. The clockwork monkey skittered across the floor, bounced off the wall and lay still. Hal stood staring at it, fists bunched, heart pounding. It grinned saucily back at him, the sun of a burning pinpoint in one glass eye. Kick me all you want, it seemed to tell him, I'm nothing but cogs and clockwork and a worm gear or two, kick me all you feel like, I'm not real, just a funny clockwork monkey is all I am, and who's dead? There's been an explosion at the helicopter plant! What's that rising up into the sky like a big bloody bowling ball with eyes where the finger-holes should be? Is it your mother's head, Hal? Whee! What a ride your mother's head is having! Or down at Brook Street Corner! Looky-here, pard! The car was going too fast! The driver was drunk! There's one Bill less in the world! Could you hear the crunching sound when the wheels ran over his skull and his brains squirted out his ears? Yes? No? Maybe? Don't ask me, I don't know, I can't know, all I know how to do is beat these cymbals together jang-jang-jang, and who's Dead at the Scene, Hal? Your mother? Your brother? Or is it you, Hal? Is it you?

He rushed at it again, meaning to stomp it, smash it, jump on it until cogs and gears flew and its horrible glass eyes rolled along the floor. But just as he reached it, its cymbals came together once more, very softly … (jang) … as a spring somewhere inside expanded one final, minute notch … and a sliver of ice seemed to whisper its way through the walls of his heart, impaling it, stilling its fury and leaving him sick with terror again. The monkey almost seemed to know—how gleeful its grin seemed!

He picked it up, tweezing one of its arms between the thumb and first finger of his right hand, mouth drawn down in a bow of loathing, as if it were a corpse he held. Its mangy fake fur seemed hot and fevered against his skin. He fumbled open the tiny door that led to the back closet and turned on the bulb. The monkey grinned at him

as he crawled down the length of the storage area between boxes piled on top of boxes, past the set of navigation books and the photograph albums with their fume of old chemicals and the souvenirs and the old clothes, and Hal thought: If it begins to clap its cymbals together now and move in my hand, I'll scream, and if I scream, it'll do more than grin, it'll start to laugh, to laugh at me, and then I'll go crazy and they'll find me in here, drooling and laughing crazy, I'll be crazy, oh please dear God, please dear Jesus, don't let me go crazy—

He reached the far end and clawed two boxes aside, spilling one of them, and jammed the monkey back into the Ralston-Purina box in the farthest corner. And it leaned in there, comfortably, as if home at last, cymbals poised, grinning its simian grin, as if the joke were still on Hal. Hal crawled backward, sweating, hot and cold, all fire and ice, waiting for the cymbals to begin, and when they began, the monkey would leap from its box and scurry beetlelike toward him, clockwork whirring, cymbals clashing madly, and—

—and none of that happened. He turned off the light and slammed the small down-the-rabbit-hole door and leaned on it, panting. At last he began to feel a little better. He went downstairs on rubbery legs, got an empty bag, and began carefully to pick up the jagged shards and splinters of the broken milk bottle, wondering if he was going to cut himself and bleed to death, if that was what the clapping cymbals had meant. But that didn't happen, either. He got a towel and wiped up the milk and then sat down to see if his mother and brother would come home.

His mother came first, asking, "Where's Bill?"

In a low, colorless voice, now sure that Bill must be Dead at some Scene, Hal started to explain about the school play meeting, knowing that, even given a very long meeting, Bill should have been home half an hour ago.

His mother looked at him curiously, started to ask what was wrong, and then the door opened and Bill came in—only it was not Bill at all,

not really. This was a ghost-Bill, pale and silent.

“What’s wrong?” Mrs. Shelburn exclaimed. “Bill, what’s wrong?”

Bill began to cry and they got the story through his tears. There had been a car, he said. He and his friend Charlie Silverman were walking home together after the meeting and the car came around Brook Street Corner too fast and Charlie had frozen, Bill had tugged Charlie’s hand once but had lost his grip and the car—

Bill began to bray out loud, hysterical sobs, and his mother hugged him to her, rocking him, and Hal looked out on the porch and saw two policemen standing there. The squad car in which they had conveyed Bill home was standing at the curb. Then he began to cry himself … but his tears were tears of relief.

It was Bill’s turn to have nightmares now—dreams in which Charlie Silverman died over and over again, knocked out of his Red Ryder cowboy boots and was flipped onto the hood of the rusty Hudson Hornet the drunk had been piloting. Charlie Silverman’s head and the Hudson’s windshield had met with explosive force. Both had shattered. The drunk driver, who owned a candy store in Milford, suffered a heart attack shortly after being taken into custody (perhaps it was the sight of Charlie Silverman’s brains drying on his pants), and his lawyer was quite successful at the trial with his “this man has been punished enough” theme. The drunk was given sixty days (suspended) and lost his privilege to operate a motor vehicle in the state of Connecticut for five years … which was about as long as Bill Shelburn’s nightmares lasted. The monkey was hidden away again in the back closet. Bill never noticed it was gone from his shelf … or if he did, he never said.

Hal felt safe for a while. He even began to forget about the monkey again, or to believe it had only been a bad dream. But when he came home from school on the afternoon his mother died, it was back on his shelf, cymbals poised, grinning down at him.

He approached it slowly, as if from outside himself—as if his own body had been turned into a wind-up toy at the sight of the monkey. He saw his hand reach out and take it down. He felt the nappy fur crinkle under his hand, but the feeling was muffled, mere pressure, as if someone had shot him full of Novocain. He could hear his breathing, quick and dry, like the rattle of wind through straw.

He turned it over and grasped the key and years later he would think that his drugged fascination was like that of a man who puts a six-shooter with one loaded chamber against a closed and jittering eyelid and pulls the trigger.

No don't—let it alone throw it away don't touch it—

He turned the key and in the silence he heard a perfect tiny series of winding-up clicks. When he let the key go, the monkey began to clap its cymbals together and he could feel its body jerking, bend-and-jerk, bend-and-jerk, as if it were alive, it was alive, writhing in his hand like some loathsome pygmy, and the vibration he felt through its balding brown fur was not that of turning cogs but the beating of its heart.

With a groan, Hal dropped the monkey and backed away, fingernails digging into the flesh under his eyes, palms pressed to his mouth. He stumbled over something and nearly lost his balance (then he would have been right down on the floor with it, his bulging blue eyes looking into its glassy hazel ones). He scrambled toward the door, backed through it, slammed it, and leaned against it. Suddenly he bolted for the bathroom and vomited.

It was Mrs. Stukey from the helicopter plant who brought the news and stayed with them those first two endless nights, until Aunt Ida got down from Maine. Their mother had died of a brain embolism in the middle of the afternoon. She had been standing at the water cooler with a cup of water in one hand and had crumpled as if shot, still holding the paper cup in one hand. With the other she had clawed at the water cooler and had pulled the great glass bottle of Poland water down with her. It had shattered … but the plant doctor,

who came on the run, said later that he believed Mrs. Shelburn was dead before the water had soaked through her dress and her underclothes to wet her skin. The boys were never told any of this, but Hal knew anyway. He dreamed it again and again on the long nights following his mother's death. You still have trouble gettin to sleep, little brother? Bill had asked him, and Hal supposed Bill thought all the thrashing and bad dreams had to do with their mother dying so suddenly, and that was right … but only partly right. There was the guilt; the certain, deadly knowledge that he had killed his mother by winding the monkey up on that sunny after-school afternoon.

When Hal finally fell asleep, his sleep must have been deep. When he awoke, it was nearly noon. Petey was sitting cross-legged in a chair across the room, methodically eating an orange section by section and watching a game show on TV.

Hal swung his legs out of bed, feeling as if someone had punched him down into sleep … and then punched him back out of it. His head throbbed. "Where's your mom, Petey?"

Petey glanced around. "She and Dennis went shopping. I said I'd hang out here with you. Do you always talk in your sleep, Dad?"

Hal looked at his son cautiously. "No. What did I say?"

"I couldn't make it out. It scared me, a little."

"Well, here I am in my right mind again," Hal said, and managed a small grin. Petey grinned back, and Hal felt simple love for the boy again, an emotion that was bright and strong and uncomplicated. He wondered why he had always been able to feel so good about Petey, to feel he understood Petey and could help him, and why Dennis seemed a window too dark to look through, a mystery in his ways and habits, the sort of boy he could not understand because he had never been that sort of boy. It was too easy to say that the move from California had changed Dennis, or that—

His thoughts froze. The monkey. The monkey was sitting on the windowsill, cymbals poised. Hal felt his heart stop dead in his chest and then suddenly begin to gallop. His vision wavered, and his throbbing head began to ache ferociously.

It had escaped from the suitcase and now stood on the windowsill, grinning at him. Thought you got rid of me, didn't you? But you've thought that before, haven't you?

Yes, he thought sickly. Yes, I have.

"Pete, did you take that monkey out of my suitcase?" he asked, knowing the answer already. He had locked the suitcase and had put the key in his overcoat pocket.

Petey glanced at the monkey, and something—Hal thought it was unease—passed over his face. "No," he said. "Mom put it there. "

"Mom did?"

"Yeah. She took it from you. She laughed."

"Took it from me? What are you talking about?"

"You had it in bed with you. I was brushing my teeth, but Dennis saw. He laughed, too. He said you looked like a baby with a teddy bear."

Hal looked at the monkey. His mouth was too dry to swallow. He'd had it in bed with him? In bed? That loathsome fur against his cheek, maybe against his mouth, those glaring eyes staring into his sleeping face, those grinning teeth near his neck? On his neck? Dear God.

He turned abruptly and went to the closet. The Samsonite was there, still locked. The key was still in his overcoat pocket.

Behind him, the TV snapped off. He came out of the closet slowly. Peter was looking at him soberly. "Daddy, I don't like that monkey," he said, his voice almost too low to hear.

“Nor do I,” Hal said.

Petey looked at him closely, to see if he was joking, and saw that he was not. He came to his father and hugged him tight. Hal could feel him trembling.

Petey spoke into his ear then, very rapidly, as if afraid he might not have courage enough to say it again … or that the monkey might overhear.

“It’s like it looks at you. Like it looks at you no matter where you are in the room. And if you go into the other room, it’s like it’s looking through the wall at you. I kept feeling like it … like it wanted me for something.”

Petey shuddered. Hal held him tight.

“Like it wanted you to wind it up,” Hal said.

Pete nodded violently. “It isn’t really broken, is it, Dad?”

“Sometimes it is,” Hal said, looking over his son’s shoulder at the monkey. “But sometimes it still works.”

“I kept wanting to go over there and wind it up. It was so quiet, and I thought, I can’t, it’ll wake up Daddy, but I still wanted to, and I went over and I … I touched it and I hate the way it feels … but I liked it, too … and it was like it was saying, Wind me up, Petey, we’ll play, your father isn’t going to wake up, he’s never going to wake up at all, wind me up, wind me up …”

The boy suddenly burst into tears.

“It’s bad, I know it is. There’s something wrong with it. Can’t we throw it out, Daddy? Please?”

The monkey grinned its endless grin at Hal. He could feel Petey’s tears between them. Late-morning sun glinted off the monkey’s

brass cymbals—the light reflected upward and put sun streaks on the motel's plain white stucco ceiling.

"What time did your mother think she and Dennis would be back, Petey?"

"Around one." He swiped at his red eyes with his shirt sleeve, looking embarrassed at his tears. But he wouldn't look at the monkey. "I turned on the TV," he whispered. "And I turned it up loud."

"That was all right, Petey."

How would it have happened? Hal wondered. Heart attack? An embolism, like my mother? What? It doesn't really matter, does it?

And on the heels of that, another, colder thought: Get rid of it, he says. Throw it out. But can it be gotten rid of? Ever?

The monkey grinned mockingly at him, its cymbals held a foot apart. Did it suddenly come to life on the night Aunt Ida died? he wondered suddenly. Was that the last sound she heard, the muffled jang-jang-jang of the monkey beating its cymbals together up in the black attic while the wind whistled along the drainpipe?

"Maybe not so crazy," Hal said slowly to his son. "Go get your flight bag, Petey."

Petey looked at him uncertainly. "What are we going to do?"

Maybe it can be got rid of. Maybe permanently, maybe just for a while … a long while or a short while. Maybe it's just going to come back and come back and that's all this is about … but maybe I—we—can say good-bye to it for a long time. It took twenty years to come back this time. It took twenty years to get out of the well …

"We're going to go for a ride," Hal said. He felt fairly calm, but somehow too heavy inside his skin. Even his eyeballs seemed to have gained weight. "But first I want you to take your flight bag out

there by the edge of the parking lot and find three or four good-sized rocks. Put them inside the bag and bring it back to me. Got it?”

Understanding flickered in Petey’s eyes. “All right, Daddy.”

Hal glanced at his watch. It was nearly 12:15. “Hurry. I want to be gone before your mother gets back.”

“Where are we going?”

“To Uncle Will’s and Aunt Ida’s,” Hal said. “To the home place.”

Hal went into the bathroom, looked behind the toilet, and got the bowl brush leaning there. He took it back to the window and stood there with it in his hand like a cut-rate magic wand. He looked out at Petey in his melton shirt-jacket, crossing the parking lot with his flight bag, DELTA showing clearly in white letters against a blue field. A fly bumbled in an upper corner of the window, slow and stupid with the end of the warm season. Hal knew how it felt.

He watched Petey hunt up three good-sized rocks and then start back across the parking lot. A car came around the corner of the motel, a car that was moving too fast, much too fast, and without thinking, reaching with the kind of reflex a good shortstop shows going to his right, the hand holding the brush flashed down, as if in a karate chop … and stopped.

The cymbals closed soundlessly on his intervening hand, and he felt something in the air. Something like rage.

The car’s brakes screamed. Petey flinched back. The driver motioned to him, impatiently, as if what had almost happened was Petey’s fault, and Petey ran across the parking lot with his collar flapping and into the motel’s rear entrance.

Sweat was running down Hal’s chest; he felt it on his forehead like a drizzle of oily rain. The cymbals pressed coldly against his hand, numbing it.

Go on, he thought grimly. Go on, I can wait all day. Until hell freezes over, if that's what it takes.

The cymbals drew apart and came to rest. Hal heard one faint click! from inside the monkey. He withdrew the brush and looked at it. Some of the white bristles had blackened, as if singed.

The fly bumbled and buzzed, trying to find the cold October sunshine that seemed so close.

Pete came bursting in, breathing quickly, cheeks rosy. "I got three good ones, Dad, I—" He broke off. "Are you all right, Daddy?"

"Fine," Hal said. "Bring the bag over."

Hal hooked the table by the sofa over to the window with his foot, so it stood below the sill, and put the flight bag on it. He spread its mouth open like lips. He could see the stones Petey had collected glimmering inside. He used the toilet-bowl brush to hook the monkey forward. It teetered for a moment and then fell into the bag. There was a faint jing! as one of its cymbals struck one of the rocks.

"Dad? Daddy?" Petey sounded frightened. Hal looked around at him. Something was different; something had changed. What was it?

Then he saw the direction of Petey's gaze and he knew. The buzzing of the fly had stopped. It lay dead on the windowsill.

"Did the monkey do that?" Petey whispered.

"Come on," Hal said, zipping the bag shut. "I'll tell you while we ride out to the home place."

"How can we go? Mom and Dennis took the car."

"Don't worry," Hal said, and ruffled Petey's hair.

He showed the desk clerk his driver's license and a twenty-dollar bill. After taking Hal's Texas Instruments digital watch as collateral, the

clerk handed Hal the keys to his own car—a battered AMC Gremlin. As they drove east on Route 302 toward Casco, Hal began to talk, haltingly at first, then a little faster. He began by telling Petey that his father had probably brought the monkey home with him from overseas, as a gift for his sons. It wasn't a particularly unique toy—there was nothing strange or valuable about it. There must have been hundreds of thousands of wind-up monkeys in the world, some made in Hong Kong, some in Taiwan, some in Korea. But somewhere along the line—perhaps even in the dark back closet of the house in Connecticut where the two boys had begun their growing up—something had happened to the monkey. Something bad. It might be, Hal said as he tried to coax the clerk's Gremlin up past forty, that some bad things—maybe even most bad things—weren't even really awake and aware of what they were. He left it there because that was probably as much as Petey could understand, but his mind continued on its own course. He thought that most evil might be very much like a monkey full of clockwork that you wind up; the clockwork turns, the cymbals begin to beat, the teeth grin, the stupid glass eyes laugh … or appear to laugh… .

He told Petey about finding the monkey, but little more—he did not want to terrify his already scared boy any more than he was already. The story thus became disjointed, not really clear, but Petey asked no questions; perhaps he was filling in the blanks for himself, Hal thought, in much the same way that he had dreamed his mother's death over and over, although he had not been there.

Uncle Will and Aunt Ida had both been there for the funeral. Afterward, Uncle Will had gone back to Maine—it was harvesttime—and Aunt Ida had stayed on for two weeks with the boys to neaten up her sister's affairs before bringing them back to Maine. But more than that, she spent the time making herself known to them—they were so stunned by their mother's sudden death that they were nearly comatose. When they couldn't sleep, she was there with warm milk; when Hal woke at three in the morning with nightmares (nightmares in which his mother approached the water cooler without seeing the monkey that floated and bobbed in its cool sapphire

depths, grinning and clapping its cymbals, each converging pair of sweeps leaving trails of bubbles behind); she was there when Bill came down with first a fever and then a rash of painful mouth sores and then hives three days after the funeral; she was there. She made herself known to the boys, and before they rode the bus from Hartford to Portland with her, both Bill and Hal had come to her separately and wept on her lap while she held them and rocked them, and the bonding began.

The day before they left Connecticut for good to go “down Maine” (as it was called in those days), the rag-man came in his old rattly truck and picked up the huge pile of useless stuff that Bill and Hal had carried out to the sidewalk from the back closet. When all the junk had been set out by the curb for pickup, Aunt Ida had asked them to go through the back closet again and pick out any souvenirs or remembrances they wanted specially to keep. We just don’t have room for it all, boys, she told them, and Hal supposed Bill had taken her at her word and had gone through all those fascinating boxes their father had left behind one final time. Hal did not join his older brother. Hal had lost his taste for the back closet. A terrible idea had come to him during those first two weeks of mourning: perhaps his father hadn’t just disappeared, or run away because he had an itchy foot and had discovered marriage wasn’t for him.

Maybe the monkey had gotten him.

When he heard the rag-man’s truck roaring and farting and backfiring its way down the block, Hal nerved himself, snatched the monkey from his shelf where it had been since the day his mother died (he had not dared to touch it until then, not even to throw it back into the closet), and ran downstairs with it. Neither Bill nor Aunt Ida saw him. Sitting on top of a barrel filled with broken souvenirs and moldy books was the Ralston-Purina carton, filled with similar junk. Hal had slammed the monkey back into the box it had originally come out of, hysterically daring it to begin clapping its cymbals (go on, go on, I dare you, dare you, DOUBLE DARE YOU), but the

monkey only waited there, leaning back nonchalantly, as if expecting a bus, grinning its awful, knowing grin.

Hal stood by, a small boy in old corduroy pants and scuffed Buster Browns, as the rag-man, an Italian gent who wore a crucifix and whistled through the space in his teeth, began loading boxes and barrels into an ancient truck with wooden stake sides. Hal watched as he lifted both the barrel and the Ralston-Purina box balanced atop it; he watched the monkey disappear into the bed of the truck; he watched as the rag-man climbed back into the cab, blew his nose mightily into the palm of his hand, wiped his hand with a huge red handkerchief, and started the truck's engine with a roar and a blast of oily blue smoke; he watched the truck draw away. And a great weight had dropped away from his heart—he actually felt it go. He had jumped up and down twice, as high as he could jump, his arms spread, palms held out, and if any of the neighbors had seen him, they would have thought it odd almost to the point of blasphemy, perhaps—why is that boy jumping for joy (for that was surely what it was; a jump for joy can hardly be disguised), they surely would have asked themselves, with his mother not even a month in her grave?

He was doing it because the monkey was gone, gone forever.

Or so he had thought.

Not three months later Aunt Ida had sent him up into the attic to get the boxes of Christmas decorations, and as he crawled around looking for them, getting the knees of his pants dusty, he had suddenly come face to face with it again, and his wonder and terror had been so great that he had to bite sharply into the side of his hand to keep from screaming … or fainting dead away. There it was, grinning its toothy grin, cymbals poised a foot apart and ready to clap, leaning nonchalantly back against one corner of a Ralston-Purina carton as if waiting for a bus, seeming to say: Thought you got rid of me, didn't you? But I'm not that easy to get rid of, Hal. I like you, Hal. We were made for each other, just a boy and his pet monkey, a couple of good old buddies. And somewhere south of here there's a stupid old Italian rag-man lying in a claw-foot tub with

his eyeballs bulging and his dentures half-popped out of his mouth, his screaming mouth, a ragman who smells like a burned-out Exide battery. He was saving me for his grandson, Hal, he put me on the bathroom shelf with his soap and his razor and his Burma-Shave and the Philco radio he listened to the Brooklyn Dodgers on, and I started to clap, and one of my cymbals hit that old radio and into the tub it went, and then I came to you, Hal, I worked my way along the country roads at night and the moonlight shone off my teeth at three in the morning and I left many people Dead at many Scenes. I came to you, Hal, I'm your Christmas present, so wind me up, who's dead? Is it Bill? Is it Uncle Will? Is it you, Hal? Is it you?

Hal had backed away, grimacing madly, eyes rolling, and nearly fell going downstairs. He told Aunt Ida he hadn't been able to find the Christmas decorations—it was the first lie he had ever told her, and she had seen the lie on his face but had not asked him why he had told it, thank God—and later when Bill came in she asked him to look and he brought the Christmas decorations down. Later, when they were alone, Bill hissed at him that he was a dummy who couldn't find his own ass with both hands and a flashlight. Hal said nothing. Hal was pale and silent, only picking at his supper. And that night he dreamed of the monkey again, one of its cymbals striking the Philco radio as it babbled out Dean Martin singing Whenna da moon hitta you eye like a big pizza pie ats-a moray, the radio tumbling into the bathtub as the monkey grinned and beat its cymbals together with a JANG and a JANG and a JANG; only it wasn't the Italian rag-man who was in the tub when the water turned electric.

It was him.

Hal and his son scrambled down the embankment behind the home place to the boathouse that jutted out over the water on its old pilings. Hal had the flight bag in his right hand. His throat was dry, his ears were attuned to an unnaturally keen pitch. The bag was very heavy.

Hal set down the flight bag. "Don't touch that," he said. Hal felt in his pocket for the ring of keys Bill had given him and found one neatly

labeled B’HOUSE on a scrap of adhesive tape.

The day was clear and cold, windy, the sky a brilliant blue. The leaves of the trees that crowded up to the verge of the lake had gone every bright fall shade from blood red to schoolbus yellow. They talked in the wind. Leaves swirled around Petey’s sneakers as he stood anxiously by, and Hal could smell November just downwind, with winter crowding close behind it.

The key turned in the padlock and he pulled the swing doors open. Memory was strong; he didn’t even have to look to kick down the wooden block that held the door open. The smell in here was all summer: canvas and bright wood, a lingering lusty warmth.

Uncle Will’s rowboat was still here, the oars neatly shipped as if he had last loaded it with his fishing tackle and two six-packs of Black Label yesterday afternoon. Bill and Hal had both gone out fishing with Uncle Will many times, but never together. Uncle Will maintained the boat was too small for three. The red trim, which Uncle Will had touched up each spring, was now faded and peeling, though, and spiders had spun silk in the boat’s bow.

Hal laid hold of the boat and pulled it down the ramp to the little shingle of beach. The fishing trips had been one of the best parts of his childhood with Uncle Will and Aunt Ida. He had a feeling that Bill felt much the same. Uncle Will was ordinarily the most taciturn of men, but once he had the boat positioned to his liking, some sixty or seventy yards offshore, lines set and bobbers floating on the water, he would crack a beer for himself and one for Hal (who rarely drank more than half of the one can Uncle Will would allow, always with the ritual admonition from Uncle Will that Aunt Ida must never be told because “she’d shoot me for a stranger if she knew I was givin you boys beer, don’t you know”), and wax expansive. He would tell stories, answer questions, rebait Hal’s hook when it needed rebaiting; and the boat would drift where the wind and the mild current wanted it to be.

“How come you never go right out to the middle, Uncle Will?” Hal had asked once.

“Look overside there,” Uncle Will had answered.

Hal did. He saw the blue water and his fish line going down into black.

“You’re looking into the deepest part of Crystal Lake,” Uncle Will said, crunching his empty beer can in one hand and selecting a fresh one with the other. “A hundred feet if she’s an inch. Amos Culligan’s old Studebaker is down there somewhere. Damn fool took it out on the lake one early December, before the ice was made. Lucky to get out of it alive, he was. They’ll never get that Stud out, nor see it until Judgment Trump blows. Lake’s one deep sonofawhore right here, it is. Big ones are right here, Hal. No need to go out no further. Let’s see how your worm looks. Reel that sonofawhore right in.”

Hal did, and while Uncle Will put a fresh crawler from the old Crisco tin that served as his bait box on his hook, he stared into the water, fascinated, trying to see Amos Culligan’s old Studebaker, all rust and waterweed drifting out of the open driver’s side window through which Amos had escaped at the absolute last moment, waterweed festooning the steering wheel like a rotting necklace, waterweed dangling from the rearview mirror and drifting back and forth in the currents like some strange rosary. But he could see only blue shading to black, and there was the shape of Uncle Will’s night crawler, the hook hidden inside its knots, hung up there in the middle of things, its own sun-shafted version of reality. Hal had a brief, dizzying vision of being suspended over a mighty gulf, and he had closed his eyes for a moment until the vertigo passed. That day, he seemed to recollect, he had drunk his entire can of beer.

… the deepest part of Crystal Lake … a hundred feet if she’s an inch.

He paused a moment, panting, and looked up at Petey, still watching anxiously. “You want some help, Daddy?”

“In a minute.”

He had his breath again, and now he pulled the rowboat across the narrow strip of sand to the water, leaving a groove. The paint had peeled, but the boat had been kept under cover and it looked sound.

When he and Uncle Will went out, Uncle Will would pull the boat down the ramp, and when the bow was afloat, he would clamber in, grab an oar to push with and say: “Push me off, Hal … this is where you earn your truss!”

“Hand that bag in, Petey, and then give me a push,” he said. And, smiling a little, he added: “This is where you earn your truss.”

Petey didn’t smile back. “Am I coming, Daddy?”

“Not this time. Another time I’ll take you out fishing, but … not this time.”

Petey hesitated. The wind tumbled his brown hair and a few yellow leaves, crisp and dry, wheeled past his shoulders and landed at the edge of the water, bobbing like boats themselves.

“You should have stuffed ‘em,” he said, low.

“What?” But he thought he understood what Petey had meant.

“Put cotton over the cymbals. Taped it on. So it couldn’t … make that noise.”

Hal suddenly remembered Daisy coming toward him—not walking but lurching—and how, quite suddenly, blood had burst from both of Daisy’s eyes in a flood that soaked her ruff and pattered down on the floor of the barn, how she had collapsed on her forepaws … and on the still, rainy spring air of that day he had heard the sound, not muffled but curiously clear, coming from the attic of the house fifty feet away: Jang-jang-jang-jang!

He had begun to scream hysterically, dropping the armload of wood he had been getting for the fire. He ran for the kitchen to get Uncle Will, who was eating scrambled eggs and toast, his suspenders not even up over his shoulders yet.

She was an old dog, Hal, Uncle Will had said, his face haggard and unhappy—he looked old himself. She was twelve, and that's old for a dog. You mustn't take on now—old Daisy wouldn't like that.

Old, the vet had echoed, but he had looked troubled all the same, because dogs don't die of explosive brain hemorrhages, even at twelve ("Like as if someone had stuck a firecracker in her head," Hal overheard the vet saying to Uncle Will as Uncle Will dug a hole in back of the barn not far from the place where he had buried Daisy's mother in 1950; "I never seen the beat of it, Will").

And later, terrified almost out of his mind but unable to help himself, Hal had crept up to the attic.

Hello, Hal, how you doing? The monkey grinned from its shadowy corner. Its cymbals were poised, a foot or so apart. The sofa cushion Hal had stood on end between them was now all the way across the attic. Something—some force—had thrown it hard enough to split its cover, and stuffing foamed out of it. Don't worry about Daisy, the monkey whispered inside his head, its glassy hazel eyes fixed on Hal Shelburn's wide blue ones. Don't worry about Daisy, she was old, Hal, even the vet said so, and by the way, did you see the blood coming out of her eyes, Hal? Wind me up, Hal. Wind me up, let's play, and who's dead, Hal? Is it you?

And when he came back to himself he had been crawling toward the monkey as if hypnotized. One hand had been outstretched to grasp the key. He scrambled backward then, and almost fell down the attic stairs in his haste—probably would have if the stairwell had not been so narrow. A little whining noise had been coming from his throat.

Now he sat in the boat, looking at Petey. "Muffling the cymbals doesn't work," he said. "I tried it once."

Petey cast a nervous glance at the flight bag. “What happened, Daddy?”

“Nothing I want to talk about now,” Hal said, “and nothing you want to hear about. Come on and give me a push.”

Petey bent to it, and the stem of the boat grated along the sand. Hal dug in with an oar, and suddenly that feeling of being tied to the earth was gone and the boat was moving lightly, its own thing again after years in the dark boathouse, rocking on the light waves. Hal unshipped the other oar and clicked the oarlocks shut.

“Be careful, Daddy,” Petey said.

“This won’t take long,” Hal promised, but he looked at the flight bag and wondered.

He began to row, bending to the work. The old, familiar ache in the small of his back and between his shoulder blades began. The shore receded. Petey was magically eight again, six, a four-year-old standing at the edge of the water. He shaded his eyes with one infant hand.

Hal glanced casually at the shore but would not allow himself to actually study it. It had been nearly fifteen years, and if he studied the shoreline carefully, he would see the changes rather than the similarities and become lost. The sun beat on his neck, and he began to sweat. He looked at the flight bag, and for a moment he lost the bend-and-pull rhythm. The flight bag seemed … seemed to be bulging. He began to row faster.

The wind gusted, drying the sweat and cooling his skin. The boat rose and the bow slapped water to either side when it came down. Hadn’t the wind freshened, just in the last minute or so? And was Petey calling something? Yes. Hal couldn’t make out what it was over the wind. It didn’t matter. Getting rid of the monkey for another twenty years—or maybe

(please God forever)

forever—that was what mattered.

The boat reared and came down. He glanced left and saw baby whitecaps. He looked shoreward again and saw Hunter's Point and a collapsed wreck that must have been the Burdons' boathouse when he and Bill were kids. Almost there, then. Almost over the spot where Amos Culligan's famous Studebaker had plunged through the ice one long-ago December. Almost over the deepest part of the lake.

Petey was screaming something; screaming and pointing. Hal still couldn't hear. The rowboat rocked and rolled, flatting off clouds of thin spray to either side of its peeling bow. A tiny rainbow glowed in one, was pulled apart. Sunlight and shadow raced across the lake in shutters and the waves were not mild now; the whitecaps had grown up. His sweat had dried to gooseflesh, and spray had soaked the back of his jacket. He rowed grimly, eyes alternating between the shoreline and the flight bag. The boat rose again, this time so high that for a moment the left oar pawed at air instead of water.

Petey was pointing at the sky, his scream now only a faint, bright runner of sound.

Hal looked over his shoulder.

The lake was a frenzy of waves. It had gone a deadly dark shade of blue sewn with white seams. A shadow raced across the water toward the boat and something in its shape was familiar, so terribly familiar, that Hal looked up and then the scream was there, struggling in his tight throat.

The sun was behind the cloud, turning it into a hunched working shape with two gold-edged crescents held apart. Two holes were torn in one end of the cloud, and sunshine poured through in two shafts.

As the cloud crossed over the boat, the monkey's cymbals, barely muffled by the flight bag, began to beat. Jang-jang-jang-jang, it's you, Hal, it's finally you, you're over the deepest part of the lake now and it's your turn, your turn, your turn—

All the necessary shoreline elements had clicked into their places. The rotting bones of Amos Culligan's Studebaker lay somewhere below, this was where the big ones were, this was the place.

Hal shipped the oars to the locks in one quick jerk, leaned forward, unmindful of the wildly rocking boat, and snatched the flight bag. The cymbals made their wild, pagan music; the bag's sides bellowed as if with tenebrous respiration.

"Right here, you sonofawhore!" Hal screamed. "RIGHT HERE!"

He threw the bag over the side.

It sank fast. For a moment he could see it going down, sides moving, and for that endless moment he could still hear the cymbals beating. And for a moment the black waters seemed to clear and he could see down into that terrible gulf of waters to where the big ones lay; there was Amos Culligan's Studebaker, and Hal's mother was behind its slimy wheel, a grinning skeleton with a lake bass staring coldly from one fleshless eye socket. Uncle Will and Aunt Ida lolled beside her, and Aunt Ida's gray hair trailed upward as the bag fell, turning over and over, a few silver bubbles trailing up: jang-jang-jang-jang …

Hal slammed the oars back into the water, scraping blood from his knuckles (and ah God the back of Amos Culligan's Studebaker had been full of dead children! Charlie Silverman … Johnny McCabe …), and began to bring the boat about.

There was a dry pistol-shot crack between his feet, and suddenly clear water was welling up between two boards. The boat was old; the wood had shrunk a bit, no doubt; it was just a small leak. But it hadn't been there when he rowed out. He would have sworn to it.

The shore and lake changed places in his view. Petey was at his back now. Overhead, that awful simian cloud was breaking up. Hal began to row. Twenty seconds was enough to convince him he was rowing for his life. He was only a so-so swimmer, and even a great one would have been put to the test in this suddenly angry water.

Two more boards suddenly shrank apart with that pistol-shot sound. More water poured into the boat, dousing his shoes. There were tiny metallic snapping sounds that he realized were nails breaking. One of the oarlocks snapped and flew off into the water—would the swivel itself go next?

The wind now came from his back, as if trying to slow him down or even drive him into the middle of the lake. He was terrified, but he felt a crazy kind of exhilaration through the terror. The monkey was gone for good this time. He knew it somehow. Whatever happened to him, the monkey would not be back to draw a shadow over Dennis's life or Petey's. The monkey was gone, perhaps resting on the roof or the hood of Amos Culligan's Studebaker at the bottom of Crystal Lake. Gone for good.

He rowed, bending forward and rocking back. That cracking, crimping sound came again, and now the rusty Crisco can that had been lying in the bow of the boat was floating in three inches of water. Spray blew in Hal's face. There was a louder snapping sound, and the bow seat fell in two pieces and floated next to the bait box. A board tore off the left side of the boat, and then another, this one at the waterline, tore off at the right. Hal rowed. Breath rasped in his mouth, hot and dry, and then his throat swelled with the coppery taste of exhaustion. His sweaty hair flew.

Now a crack zipped directly up the bottom of the rowboat, zigzagged between his feet, and ran up to the bow. Water gushed in; he was in water up to his ankles, then to the swell of calf. He, rowed, but the boat's shoreward movement was sludgy now. He didn't dare look behind him to see how close he was getting.

Another board tore loose. The crack running up the center of the boat grew branches, like a tree. Water flooded in.

Hal began to make the oars sprint, breathing in great failing gasps. He pulled once … twice … and on the third pull both oar swivels snapped off. He lost one oar, held on to the other. He rose to his feet and began to flail at the water with it. The boat rocked, almost capsized, and spilled him back onto his seat with a thump.

Moments later more boards tore loose, the seat collapsed, and he was lying in the water which filled the bottom of the boat, astounded at its coldness. He tried to get on his knees, desperately thinking: Petey must not see this, must not see his father drown right in front of his eyes, you're going to swim, dog-paddle if you have to, but do, do something—

There was another splintering crack—almost a crash—and he was in the water, swimming for the shore as he never had swum in his life … and the shore was amazingly close. A minute later he was standing waist-deep in water, not five yards from the beach.

Petey splashed toward him, arms out, screaming and crying and laughing. Hal started toward him and floundered. Petey, chest-deep, floundered.

They caught each other.

Hal, breathing in great winded gasps, nevertheless hoisted the boy into his arms and carried him up to the beach, where both of them sprawled, panting.

"Daddy? Is it gone? That nastybad monkey?"

"Yes. I think it's gone. For good this time."

"The boat fell apart. It just … fell apart all around you."

Hal looked at the boards floating loose on the water forty feet out. They bore no resemblance to the tight handmade rowboat he had pulled out of the boathouse.

“It’s all right now,” Hal said, leaning back on his elbows. He shut his eyes and let the sun warm his face.

“Did you see the cloud?” Petey whispered.

“Yes. But I don’t see it now … do you?”

They looked at the sky. There were scattered white puffs here and there, but no large dark cloud. It was gone, as he had said.

Hal pulled Petey to his feet. “There’ll be towels up at the house. Come on.” But he paused, looking at his son. “You were crazy, running out there like that.”

Petey looked at him solemnly. “You were brave, Daddy.”

“Was I?” The thought of bravery had never crossed his mind. Only his fear. The fear had been too big to see anything else. If anything else had indeed been there. “Come on, Pete. “

“What are we going to tell Mom?”

Hal smiled. “I dunno, big guy. We’ll think of something.”

He paused a moment longer, looking at the boards floating on the water. The lake was calm again, sparkling with small wavelets. Suddenly Hal thought of summer people he didn’t even know—a man and his son, perhaps, fishing for the big one. I’ve got something, Dad! the boy screams. Well reel it up and let’s see, the father says, and coming up from the depths, weeds draggling from its cymbals, grinning its terrible, welcoming grin … the monkey.

He shuddered—but those were only things that might be.

“Come on,” he said to Petey again, and they walked up the path through the flaming October woods toward the home place.

From The Bridgton News

October 24, 1980

MYSTERY OF THE DEAD FISH

By Betsy Moriarty

HUNDREDS of dead fish were found floating belly-up on Crystal Lake in the neighboring township of Casco late last week. The largest numbers appeared to have died in the vicinity of Hunter's Point, although the lake's currents make this a bit difficult to determine. The dead fish included all types commonly found in these waters—bluegills, pickerel, sunnies, carp, hornpout, brown and rainbow trout, even one landlocked salmon. Fish and Game authorities say they are mystified …

*

"The Monkey"—I was in New York City on business about four years ago. I was walking back to my hotel after visiting my people at New American Library when I saw a guy selling wind-up monkeys on the street. There was a platoon of them standing on a gray blanket he'd spread on the sidewalk at the corner of Fifth and Forty-fourth, all bending and grinning and clapping their cymbals. They looked really scary to me, and I spent the rest of my walk back to the hotel wondering why. I decided it was because they reminded me of the lady with the shears … the one who cuts everyone's thread one day. So keeping that idea in mind, I wrote the story, mostly longhand, in a hotel room.