

The Monster

by Con Chapman

We were coming home from the Lake of the Ozarks, and I wanted daddy to stop for ice cream, but I didn't want to say so. I wanted him to stop by himself, or because somebody else asked him. If I asked him, Delia would make fun of me. She'd look at my sister Sally and say "You're gonna get fat," then look at me and say "And you're gonna get fat-ter." She did that all the time.



We were listening to Bob and Ray on the radio and I wanted daddy to switch to the Cardinals, but it was August and they were out of it and he said there wasn't any point in paying attention to them anymore, so he and mom wanted to listen to something else.

"Why don't you see if you can get KYDJ?" Delia asked. She watched American Bandstand every day and was a good dancer.



"See if you can find 'Hound Dog'," I said. That always made her mad.

"Elvis isn't as good as Frankie Avalon," she said.

I arranged my Cardinal cards on my lap like they were playing in the field. Curt Flood on my knees in center, Bill White at first and Julian Javier at second on my right thigh, Ken Boyer at third on my left. My Dick Groat card still had him in a Pirates' uniform, so he didn't fit in but I put him at shortstop anyway.



"You're on my side," Sally said to me. She was sitting in the middle, on the hump, because she was the shortest. My territory extended over to the crease in the seat.

"Sorry."

"Can we stop for ice cream, daddy?" Sally said.

"Let's keep going-I want to get home," Delia said.

Probably hoping some boy would ask her to go out to Dog 'n Suds.



"I'd like to stop," my mom said.

"I need gas anyway," my dad said, so it was settled. Delia let out a puff of air like a balloon, to show she was unhappy.

"We'll be home soon enough," my mom said to no one in particular, but she meant it for Delia. Mom was trying to keep things pleasant.

We pulled into the store with the gas pumps out front and mom took me and Sally in for ice cream. "Get me a butter brickle," my dad said.

"You want anything, Delia?" my mom asked.

"No thank you," she said. She was always on a diet.

Mom took us to the bathroom first, and when we came out we got our ice cream, one scoop apiece, including dad. "I don't

want anybody to spoil their dinner," she said. "We have a lot of crappie to eat."



"I want a hamburger," Sally said.

"We'll see," mom said.

We got back in the car and dad drove slowly for awhile so he could eat his ice cream cone and drive with one hand.

"Can we please change the radio station?" Delia said after a while. "This is boring."

"I'll change it after the news comes on," dad said.

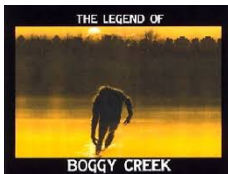
We passed under an overhead traffic light that flashed orange on the road we were on, and red to the sides for the people coming from the side roads.

"Beaman, 5 miles," Delia said as she read the sign with an arrow that pointed off to the right. "That's where the monster lives."

"What monster?" I asked.

"The Beaman Monster, stupid," Delia replied.

"There's no need to be unpleasant, Delia," my mom said.



"There is no monster," my dad added.

"Yes there is," Delia said. "They've found dead dogs and cats, and big paw prints in the mud."

"Really?" Sally asked.

"Yes. Linda Carroll has relatives down there—she told me all about it."

"It's probably just a wolf or a coyote," my dad said.

"The monster doesn't have little feet like that," Delia said. "It has big feet like an ape."

"How would you know what kind of feet an ape has?" I asked. "You've never seen one."

"You can look it up in an encyclopedia, smarty pants." She lowered her voice so that mom and dad couldn't hear her being mean to us.

"Does it eat people?" Sally asked.

"They don't know yet," Delia said. "I don't want to be the one that finds out."

"You and your girlfriends have been watching too many monster movies," I said.

"For your information, I don't watch monster movies. They're stupid."



"Better than your stupid beach blanket movies."

The sun was getting lower in the sky out the left windows, and it was getting dark out the right side. Sally started looking over me to see if she could see the monster.

"Is he big and furry?" she asked Delia.

"Nobody's seen him, so they don't know," Delia answered. "My guess is he looks like the abominable snowman."

"What's that?" Sally asked.



"It's a half-ape, half-man that lives up in the mountains in Alaska."

"Is there a picture of him in your encyclopedia?" I asked.

"Shut up," Delia hissed at me.

Dad had finished his ice cream but he was still driving slowly, then slower still. "I think we've got a flat," he said to mom.

"Oh, dear. And we were just at the gas station."

After he pulled off on the side of the road, he said "Everybody out of the car."

I got out on my side, but Sally didn't move at first. "I don't want to get eaten by the monster," she said.

"You won't," my mother said. "C'mon and get out. Daddy has to jack the car up."

"No!"

"She can stay in," my dad said. "She's so little it won't make any difference.

"See what you've done with your silly story," my mom said to Delia.

"It's not my fault she's a big baby."

"Roll down the window so she gets some air," my mom said.

"No—the monster will get in!" Sally screamed.

"Sally, honey, there is no monster."

"Yes there is!" She was crying now, and red in the face.

My dad got the car jacked up fast enough but then had trouble getting the lug nuts off the wheel. He's an insurance agent, so he doesn't have many muscles.

"Dammit," he said as the wrench slipped out of his hands.

"Dad said a swear," I said to Delia.

"What do I care?" she said. "I've heard it before."

"Excuse me," I said. She's horrible.

Dad finally got the tire off. A blue Ford Fairlane came up beside us and the guy in the passenger seat rolled down his window.

"Y'all need any help?" he said. They were teenagers, and probably stopped because they saw Delia.

"Thanks, I think I've got it under control," my dad said.

The two didn't drive off. "That spare looks a little flat," the boy on the passenger side said. "How far you goin'?"

"To the next gas station, then on to Sedville."

"You won't find a gas station open between here and there on a Sunday night."

My dad looked at the boys for the first time as if he took them seriously.

"Then I guess we've got about eighteen miles to go," my dad said.

"We've got a pump in the back," the driver said.

"Well, sure, if you don't mind," my dad said.

The boys got out, took the pump out of the trunk and came over to look at the spare. "Yeah, it needs air," the passenger said.

The driver attached the pump to the nipple and began to inflate the tire. I stood there watching him and his buddy. The work wasn't as hard as they made it look—they were showing off for Delia.

"Do you guys live around here?" I asked the passenger.

"Yep."

"Have you heard about a monster that lives around here?"

"A monster?" the passenger said. He looked at his friend, who was pumping away. "What kind of monster?"

"Like an abominable snowman." I took a glance at Delia, and she was giving me the hairy eyeball.

"It's August-no snow around here."

"No, I mean like an ape."

"Something killed one of the Mergens' chickens the other night, but I don't think it was an ape," the driver said. "Probably a fox."

"So it didn't walk on two legs?"

"That would be one talented fox," the driver laughed.

"That oughta do it," he said and stopped pumping. He rolled the tire over to where my dad was and slipped it onto the wheel, tightened the nuts and lowered the jack.

"There you are," he said. "That oughta get you to Sedville."

"Well, thank you boys very much," my dad said.

"No problem," the passenger said.

"You didn't do any of the work," the driver said with a laugh.

"Here's something for your trouble," my dad said as he slipped the driver a bill. "Go have yourself a hamburger."

"Well, thank you very much," the driver said. He didn't turn it down like a lot of people would. He just put the money in his pocket, nodded his head and went back to his car.

"Nice to meet you," the passenger said. He took us all in, but he was really talking to Delia.

They got back in their car and drove off, the passenger hanging out his window to give Delia the eye. We got back in the car, where Sally was still sniffing.

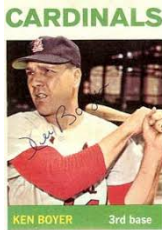
"I asked those guys, they said there wasn't any monster around here," I said to her. "Delia was just being mean, as usual."

Delia leaned over and put her face up to mine. "Why don't you mind your own business," she hissed at me.

"It is my business whether there's a monster roaming around," I said. "'Specially if it's gonna eat my little sister."

Sally started to cry again and I realized I probably shouldn't have said that. "I wanna get up front with you, momma!" she said.

"C'mere, sweetie," mom said, and Sally climbed over the front seat. "You're tired. You've had a long day."



We rode on into the darkening sky, Delia looking out her window like she was bored and disgusted with us all, scratchy sounds coming out of the radio.

"Can you try and get the Cardinals game?" I asked my dad, and he turned the dial until he found it.

