

THE HODAG

A short story

You gotta float the bobber just to the edge of the weeds. That's where the big lunkers are.

Jack rolled his Dad's advice over once more in his mind before he thumbed the button on his Zebco reel and floated a near perfect cast over the edge of the lily pads. He stared at the red and white plastic cork for endless minutes before he started to reel in closer.

He reached back and scratched at the sunburn on the nape of his neck. The hot sun was beating down, unabated in the clear July sky. Small niblets of peeling skin rolled in his fingers as he tried to sense where the fish were in his mind, picturing an endless array of bluegills, bass and crappies all hovering slowly around the base of the lily pads, darting in and out of the small drops of sunlight that fell between the weeds. Each fish hungrily examining the broken piece of night crawler wriggling at the end of his hook. They were going to strike at any moment, and he was at the ready. The big one was coming any second now.

Over his shoulder was a pair of dragonflies hovering in tandem, connected together in some kind of bizarre mating ritual in mid-flight. They swung a few passes around his head, then started off over the pond, skimming only a few inches off the top of the water.

It wasn't really a pond, although that's what everyone in the neighborhood called it. It was kind of a fry pan shaped inlet to a larger lake, with the handle of the pan leading out to the main body of water. But by the time early summer rolled around, the weeds and bull rushes became so thick that the thin channel leading to the lake became virtually obscured by the growth. Large willow trees lined the shore opposite the channel, so the whole area had the feeling of a small pond. Even Jack could swim across it if the weeds weren't so thick. The trees and bull rushes blocked any amount of wind, so even during a tornado the water would remain as smooth as glass.

And this is where the fish were. For the entire Summer Jack could be found casting a night crawler or a wax-worm or a helgramite or any number of metal, plastic and wood lures that would attract those delicious, scaly creatures to his hook. It was his own, private obsession. A twelve year old's version of Zen; contemplation and meditation. His mind would find its place of calm, endlessly dancing his bait between the openings in the weeds, waiting patiently for the big one to hit. It didn't matter what it was as long as it was a fish and it was big.

Jack concocted heroic fantasies as he cast his pole over and over again. He saw images of himself; photographs in *Outdoor Life* or *Fishin' Facts Magazine*. In them Jack would be standing on the shoreline trying desperately to hold up some monstrous thing from the deep. A twenty pound bass, with Jack gripping it by the gills, the weight of the mighty fish nearly knocking him over. The headline under the photo would read, *Amazing Young Fishing Master Does It Again!*

"Jack-ee!"

The fantasy was broken. Jack shook himself out of his meditation with a start. He felt a twisted knot rise in his stomach as he looked back over his shoulder. He saw the brambles and tall shafts of goldenrod start to shake and crack, a stream of grasshoppers and mosquitoes flew up into the waves of heat that rose from the chaos in the bushes. Jack wanted to run and hide, but a sickly sense of responsibility gripped him and held him in place. The shriek rose from the bushes once again.

"Jack-ee!"

He slowly reeled in his bait for another cast, contemplating his options. He couldn't run. Couldn't hide. There really was no other way out. He flipped the night crawler over the lily pads once more, took in a labored breath, then reluctantly called out.

"Over here!"

There was a stillness in the bushes, then a very deliberate movement in Jack's direction. The thistles and goldenrod cracked and fell like they were being charged through by a mad bull. Then, from out of the weeds came a scrawny, scratched, pathetic excuse for a little boy.

"Mom said to wait for me!"

It was Jack's little brother, Ricky.

He carried a fishing pole similar to Jack's on his shoulder, only the end of the rod was a tangled mess of fishing line, leaves and twigs. He was eight years old, but he behaved more like a helpless toddler. His hair was a tousled mat of brown, his sneakers constantly untied and his slight frame made him look as if any mild wind might pick him up and carry him away. Jack openly regretted asking for a little brother after Ricky came along. Ever since Ricky was an infant Jack had to constantly watch out for him. He was forever tripping or falling or getting lost or bumping his head or tearing his pants. When he was four he fell down a telephone post hole. At five he trapped himself at the top of a thirty foot oak. Last year it was his head, stuck in the stair rails at the downtown history museum. And whenever something inevitably went wrong he would call out in that screeching, whiney annoying voice...*Jack-ee!*

That galled Jack to the core, that syllabizing of his name. *Jack-ee*. Everyone from his best friends to his Grandma always knew him as Jack...or Jackson...or Jack the Man. But not Ricky. Ricky always referred to him as Jack-ee. *Jack-ee, wait for me! Jack-ee, I split my pants! Jack-ee, where are you?! Jack-ee!* And always in that whining, insipid, nasal voice. It made Jack's skin crawl to hear it. And he heard it countless times every day.

Ricky came limping towards Jack, his sneaker flopping off the side of his foot, large cockle-burrs nestled in his hair. He whined his way over to Jack and held out his pole.

"Jack-ee, I got all tangled!" he whimpered.

"So? What do you want me to do about it?" Jack shrugged.

Ricky stuck the pole closer to Jack's face.

"Untangle it, Jack-ee!" he sniveled.

Jack took the pole in disgust. Of all Ricky-isms that Jack hated, this had to top them all. Ricky was a professional tangler. He could make a mess out of a fishing pole by simply looking at it. Knot upon endless knot. Fish hooks or lures snagged in tree branches, t-shirts and weeds. Ricky once got the hooks of a lure imbedded in the laces of both of his shoes at the same time, causing him to flail and fall backwards off of a pier. It seemed Jack could never get any fishing done when Ricky was along. It would just turn into an afternoon of untangling Ricky's handiwork.

That's why Jack tried to ditch Ricky at home. He needed at least one quiet day of fishing without the little whiner tagging along. He thought he had it made this morning. It was Saturday and Ricky was lying in front of the T.V. munching on a bowl of Capn' Crunch and watching the *Scooby-Doo Show*, his favorite. Jack found his moment. He had oh-so-quietly dressed and tip-toed to the garage to collect his tackle and bait. He was almost home free down the driveway when the kitchen screen door flew open. It was the little sniveler, standing in the doorway with milk dripping from his chin.

"Jack-ee! Where are you going?!" he wailed.

Jack froze in his tracks, but he was determined. He held up his hand to stop Ricky.

"Fishing!" he said sternly, "Alone." He turned and started to walk to the pond.

"I'm coming, too!" shrieked Ricky, and he headed back into the house.

Jack didn't waste a beat as he sprinted toward the pond, hoping that the little creep would be too chicken to head out on his own. He was wrong.

"Jack-ee, let me use your pole."

Jack looked up from his latest de-knotting project. Ricky was looking at him, imploringly, leaves in his hair, snot running from his nose.

"No way." he said,

"You're not using it." Ricky whined.

"You'll make a mess of it." said Jack.

"No I won't, I promise! Pleeceese!"

Jack stood still for a moment, trying to find his calm place. He looked hard at Ricky, but the kid looked back at him with those big, green helpless eyes. That always got to Jack. That was the one thing that kept him from pushing Ricky into busy traffic or smothering him with his pillow while he slept. Those big green eyes. It was if they said to Jack, *I know I'm whiney and helpless and irritating. But I can't help it. And you're the only brother I've got. I'm sorry.*

It seemed no matter how hard Jack's heart would get, it would always melt when he looked into those damned eyes.

"Okay, go ahead. But don't tangle anything!" Jack sighed.

"Thanks Jack-ee." Ricky picked up Jack's pole and started reeling.

"Don't even reel it! It's fine where it is." commanded Jack.

Ricky stopped reeling and smiled clumsily at Jack, then he turned to keep vigil over the floating bobber.

Jack stared at Ricky and shook his head. As he set about untangling the line, he started to calm himself. He guessed that it really wasn't Ricky's fault. Ricky was just born that way. It wasn't conscious, malicious irritation, it was genetic. Instead of being anemic or spastic or diabetic, Ricky ended up being the whining little cretin that he was. That fact seemed to bolster Jack's tolerance of Ricky, and made his new untangling chore a little easier. Most of the minute knots were starting to come undone. Then--

"Jack-ee!!!"

Jack looked up. Ricky was standing with the fishing pole. The line was forming a chaotic web around his head and ending in a knotted stream at his feet.

"I just reeled it in!" he wailed.

The boiler blew in Jack's chest. Any small amount of warmth he felt for Ricky was extinguished. He ran over and slapped Ricky on top of the head.

"What the hell did I just tell you?! Didn't I tell you to leave it in the water and not tangle it?! You are such a little geek!"

"I was just reeling it in!" Ricky cried, defensively.

"Shut up! Just shut the hell up, you little wiener! You are one hundred percent retarded, I swear!" Jack bellowed as he grabbed the pole from Ricky and stepped him out of the snarled mass of filament.

Ricky's eyes began to well up and his lip quivered slowly.

"I was just reeling it in!" he sobbed quietly.

Jack looked down at Ricky. Those damned green eyes again. He squeezed his temples with the tips of his fingers, then took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry." he said as he handed Ricky's pole back to him. "Here's your pole. It's all cleaned up. Now go over there and fish and try not to make a mess of it, okay?"

Ricky looked down and kicked at the dirt.

"Okay." He said.

Then he looked up and smiled at Jack. Jack grinned, helplessly, then tousled Ricky's hair.

"Retard." he said, then turned Ricky and pushed him lightly toward the water.

Jack had sat himself on the rocks by the shore with his new macramé project for only a second, when he heard the familiar wail.

"Jack-ee!"

Jack hung his head, afraid to look up. *Why God?* he thought, *Why me?* He clenched his teeth and slowly turned toward Ricky. Something was clearly wrong.

Ricky was standing near the shoreline holding his pole and looking at Jack with that familiar pleading expression. But something was amiss. Then it hit him. There was no tangle. The line hung in a pristine, straight, simple curve down into the water. With Ricky in the picture it almost looked unnatural. Jack shrugged at him.

"What?" he asked, annoyed.

Ricky didn't answer. He just wordlessly pointed into the water. Jack sighed, got to his feet and headed over to Ricky.

"What?" he asked again.

Jack followed Ricky's point into the lily pads about twenty feet from shore.

"It came off when I casted it." whined Ricky.

Jack froze. Sitting nestled within the lily pads was a white, pointed, wooden stick bobber with bright blue and green trim. It was one of Dad's. And it was one of his favorites. Ricky had broken the one sacred, unchangeable law of fishing: Never, *ever* use Dad's stuff.

"Ricky," stammered Jack, "that's one of Dad's!"

"Well..." explained Ricky, helplessly, "You were running away so fast, and I had to get my stuff together and I grabbed it by mistake!"

"You little geek! You know we're not ever supposed to use Dad's stuff! That's his brand new bobber! He hasn't hardly used it yet!"

"Well you were running away so fast!"

"You're gonna have to go and get it." demanded Jack.

Ricky's face got paler.

"No." he mumbled.

"Yes you are!" shouted Jack. "I'm not taking the blame for this one! Every time you screw up, I take the blame because I'm always supposed to be watching out for you! Well I'm not gettin' my ass kicked because you lost Dad's good bobber! Now go in and get it or I'll throw you in!"

Ricky looked out at the bobber apprehensively. He turned back to Jack.

"But it's all mucky out there and stuff." he whined.

"I don't care. Go out there right now and get it." Jack pointed. "Now...go."

Ricky looked down at his feet.

"My pants will get all wet."

"Take 'em off."

Ricky paused for a moment, then started unzipping his pants, knowing that he had to do the right thing. Jack looked at him, surprised that he was actually going to go through with it. Ricky kicked off his shoes, slipped off his pants and stood bare legged by the shore. He looked back at Jack, then tip-toed into the water. He turned back again.

"Can't we just buy him a new one?" he asked.

"With what money?" answered Jack.

Ricky nodded glumly, then turned back out to the water. He slowly made his way up to his knees, stepping lightly around the thick patches of weeds.

"It's all gooshy, Jack-ee!" he complained.

"Stop being such a baby, you're almost there." Called Jack.

"It stinks like dog poop!" Ricky whined.

"You ought to know." Jack chuckled.

Ricky cautiously made his way out to the lily pads, being careful to keep his arms up out of the water. By the time he got out near the bobber, about chest high, his arms were twisted around like a mannequin. He reached out to the bobber, but it was just beyond his fingertips.

It was then that the thought crossed Jack's mind. He really didn't know what possessed him. Maybe it was the countless years of having to deal with Ricky's whining and complaining. Maybe for one brief moment Jack's sense of disgust at his continual responsibility for the little bugger caught up with him. For whatever reason, Jack suddenly felt these words leave his lips. Dark and slow.

"Hey, don't let the Hodag get you."

It was a story that Dad told on a camping trip to Buffalo Lake last year. He told the tale of an ancient lake monster called the Hodag. It was half alligator and half dinosaur, and it lived at the bottom of the lake. It had long spikey fangs and claws like rusty nails. It hid in the muck at the bottom of the water, waiting...waiting. It would rise to the surface and eat boats and swimmers and fishermen when it got hungry. But it's favorite meal was little boys. It loved little boys. It would grab them by the feet while they were swimming and pull them down to his underwater cave where he would bite their heads off and suck out the guts save the rest for a midnight snack.

Jack knew at the time that this was just a story. The kind of thing that Dads tell around the campfire at night. But Ricky really got spooked by it. He would wake up screaming in the tent every night, and refused to go swimming for the remainder of the trip. No matter what they said about it just being a story, Ricky and his monumental fears would not be swayed. The Hodag was real, and it wanted to eat Ricky.

Ricky froze as he reached for the bobber. A small, feeble whine started to grow in his throat. He looked around and down at his feet, fearfully.

"No, no, no. Oh my god..." wailed Ricky, quietly.

"Hey, take it easy." called Jack. "I was just..."

Ricky started to panic and thrash about in the water.

"Jack-ee! Jack-ee! The Hodag's coming! The Hodag's coming! Don't let it get me, Jack-ee! Pleeeeeease!! Don't let it eat me!"

Ricky's thrashing about caused him to get entangled in the thick weeds and lily pads. He started to go under.

"Ricky!" Jack screamed and ran into the water.

He slogged through the weeds and got over to Ricky, but Ricky's panicked flailing and the slime from the weeds made him hard to hold on to.

"Ricky, just calm down!" said Jack trying to sooth him. "I'll get you out!"

Ricky stopped flailing for a moment and held his hands out to Jack. As they touched fingers, Ricky's eyes got wide and he started to scream.

"Ahhh! The Hodag's got me, Jack-ee! It's got me! It's got me!!!"

In the blink of an eye Ricky was yanked under the water in a swirl of mud and weeds. Jack started digging into the slimy morass, screaming.

"Ricky! Ricky, where are you?! Ricky!"

After endless seconds Ricky's head broke the surface five feet from where Jack stood anchored in the mud. Black muck was coming from Ricky's mouth. His left arm was dislocated at the shoulder and was

twisted around unnaturally behind his head. His torso flopped to and fro like a waterlogged rag doll. His wide green eyes stared blankly, directly into Jack's. Then he was back under again, followed by what looked like a huge, shiny, black boulder. Jack had to twitch his head hard to believe what he was seeing.

It wasn't a boulder at all, but an enormous snapping turtle. It was the size of a chest of drawers. It's dark armor plating broke the surface and caused massive swirls and eddies in the water. It's head, as big as a volleyball, was dark and wrinkled, *like an old black man*, Jack thought. It held the ankle of Ricky's right foot in its jaws.

There was another violent thrashing of weeds. Then it was gone. Everything was silent as Jack stood trembling in the waist-deep water.

The dragonflies returned. The surface of the pond was calm again.

Folks at the funeral talked about the tragedy, the loss.

What was that boy doing swimming in such weedy water? Why wasn't his brother looking out for him?

Jack didn't say much of anything, but just kept staring at his feet or at his plate of food, whenever anyone talked to him.

Mom and Dad were different after that. Distant, vacant, lost in thought. They never took camping trips or vacations anymore. They hardly ever looked Jack in the eye, but when they did he could see their anguish, their anger and the blame sitting behind their dull stares. Jack never did talk about what happened. He wanted to, so many times. But who would believe him?

Everyone thought it was a simple, tragic drowning, but Jack knew different. He never went to the pond again as long as he lived there, although it was only a few blocks away. And he never went fishing again.

Ever.

Jack stands at the edge of the pond. Much has changed in eighteen years. The willow trees are gone and most of the empty fields have houses and yards with swing sets and trampolines and barking dogs tied to leashes.

Much hasn't changed. The water is still calm and filled with the familiar web of weeds and lily pads. Another tandem of dragonflies hovers nearby.

He used to be married.

He used to have a job.

Mom and Dad used to live nearby.

Dad used to be alive.

Jack solemnly kicks off his shoes and socks and feels the long, dewy Summer grass crawl between his toes.

"I know you're there." he whispers as he takes off his jacket, shirt and tie.

He unzips his pants, slips them off and lays them in the grass.

"Hey, you can't do that!" shouts a man with a weed-wacker across the way.

Jack turns, smiles, waves at the man and heads off into the water.

"I know you're there." He thinks as the mud squeezes between his toes and the water reaches up to his waist.

"I know you're there. I'm coming to your cave, you goddamned Hodag. I'll get you, Ricky. I'll get you."

There are the scratches of weeds on his arms and his stomach, the smell of rotting algae and the tightness in his ears as the water presses against his head. And then...darkness.

Cold, cold darkness.

"I'll get you, Ricky. I'll get you"

THE END