

A LUMBERJACK'S TALE

Phase One, A Birthing

Lumberjacks of the North woods were men of hardened muscles and strong bones. They were among the most rugged of humankind, with true grit rigor to withstand natural elements of cold, heat, mosquitos and long work days. And they were men of humor and wisdom acquired thru quiet contemplation that naturally comes to forest dwellers, and thru the nearly hypnotic state one feels when engaged in deep concentration and useful work. While they harvested wood, they also were caretakers and archivists of rustic knowledge and native insight.

No one was sure how Hodags came to be...how these large, mystical and physically frightening beasts emerged in the North Woods. There are guesses and myths, of course, as there are with that which is mysterious in the entire Universe.

One legend has it that an experienced lumberjack, after being engaged in worthwhile and satisfying logging for years, had been experiencing vivid dreams of unknown creatures...perhaps monsters. He told his fellow log harvesters about the beasts he saw in his dreams, arousing some sympathy, as well as some laughter. A few of them secretly responded by telling him about similar dreams they had over the years, and he was a little comforted. But his dreams...so real...continued for many more nights.

While his sleepy chimeras always seemed very real, one nocturnal adventure was unusual, more intense than the others. In this dream he became one of the creatures. He blended within its skin. He smelled

2/11 what it smelled...and he smelled like it. He brushed close to fellow creatures, listening to them snort, breath and exhale while hearing their heartbeats.

When he awoke in the morning he found it very difficult to arouse himself from bed. The warmth of his sheets and pillow were comforting...keeping a hold on him. As consciousness cleared his brain he noticed that he was not alone in that bed. As he slowly opened his eyes his gaze fell upon a small sleeping creature lying next to him under toasty covers. Quietly startled, he looked down on this animal *(if that is adequate to describe it) and he was not frightened...all the scare had gone out of him.*

He need not think about what this was. He knew that this elemental force, this exotic organism, this near ugly tiny living beast...was a small version of the huge creatures he had been dreaming about so intensely. Apparently his last dream state must have been so brilliant and vibrant, so life giving...that the vivid creature of his dreams became reality...tumbling out of his brain on to his pillow.

As he gazed upon this novelty, it opened its eyes and looked back at him, not as a monster to bite or harm, but as an infant, a nursling, a newborn in a world that was unknown to it. It looked into his surprised eyes as babies look into the eyes of their mothers and fathers, with a mixture of awe, unspoken questions and with admiration. After all was considered, without the Logger and his dreams, this new living thing would not have entered the real world. The creature and Logger recognized that they belonged to one another.

The Logger immediately assumed he must nurture this wee creature. He also recognized that besides

3/11 being bizarre, it had its own form of beauty. Of course he knew well this tiny living thing because of the many dreams that had preceded its creation that night. It was not at all frightening to him, and its strangeness was in itself enough reason to study it, to appreciate it for its “differentness”. Its large eyes captured his gaze, and the color of those eyes seemed to change from brown to grey to green to shimmering blue, with the light responding differently moment to moment. Did he see some red? Those eyes might be round at one moment, and oddly oval the next.

Its broad head was a bit human-like, a trifle broad and round, not long like dogs or deer...perhaps more like Chimpanzees, but it was unlike any head the Logger had seen before. The skin could transform sometimes appearing scaly, sometimes looking like beaver fur...but it was always warm to the touch. His hand stroked the crest of vertical plates that ran along its back, these suggestive of those found on dinosaurs that he had seen in books, and perhaps looking a bit like the horns of cattle. They were not rigid, rather yielding, bendable, and on the newborn always warm. On the very end of its tail there were the beginnings of pointed spikes, just like those artists would sometimes put on drawings of ancient beasts...but in this youngster those spikes were yet nubbins. And, to add to the assortment of odd decorations on this hodgepodge, he also noticed there were the kernels of two spikes appearing on its juvenile cranium.

This small animal (if animal is adequate to describe it) was always warm to the touch...happy to be resting in a warm bed, close to the Lumberjack, while purring like a contented cat. Well...purr is barely close to an adequate word to describe it. The murmur, which one simply must call a purr, and which was made at each exhalation of breath, was a harmony of several sounds mingled. There was the low rattling of damp healthy lungs, the sonorous depth of a distant lion's roar, an ancient echo emerging

4/11 from a dark cave...plus the quiet memories of heartbeats. The Logger knew that purr was reassuring, strangely comforting and warmly pleasant. This new creature could not help but make the sound. The utterance was a natural declaration of its true nature.

Phase Two, More Dreams, More Tales

During the course of a few weeks the Northwood camp began to resemble a nursery. It seems that one dream-wrought Hodag was enough to influence several more of the hardened lumberjacks into having their own intense dream states, with the resultant morning appearance of many more tiny creatures lying upon pillows or under bed covers.

The first Logger, with his tagalong recently new companion, was almost agog to see the wealth of these extraordinary quadrupeds bumping along behind their new mates in the bunkhouse, the cookhouse and out the doors into the lumber yard. While outside they rarely moved more than twenty feet from their lumberjack Makers, waddling and sniffing and snuffling the forest floor, nudging the trees...and consuming a great deal of sawdust.

So, it was! They clearly had a craving for the remnants of fallen trees, lapping up the sawdust, chewing on stumps, nuzzling the damp ground locating mushrooms, moss, lichens and any of the many tiny many legged creatures that were turned up as they nosed around the dirt and residue. *(Worms learned to be very careful and fast). And, of course, the several lumberjacks who now found themselves as delighted Caretakers would not hesitate to drop table scraps on the cook house floor, or hide a couple pieces of flap jack or bacon somewhere on their person only to offer it later to their affectionate, appreciative*

and growing young mates.

It was soon after these astounding and bizarre animals found their way into the hearts of these rugged woodsmen that they collectively and unwittingly found a name for this absurd new species. The name just sort of emerged instinctively and without conscious planning. There it was. "Hodag". Like the arrival of the creatures themselves, the name sort of fell out of the Loggers' minds and into conversation. Now Hodag was not a name that any lumberjack had ever consciously known before, nor had such a word appeared in any written language on any continent at any time. But it did have an echo of an ancient Native American language. It was acceptable, and it was just right.

Weeks moved on, with the present becoming the old and the future unknown becoming the new now. The Loggers mingled into the forests, wielding their axes and saws, being amazed at the agility of their small followers as they dodged and avoided the tools of a lumberjack's trade. There was never a Hodag getting nicked or poked or sliced or finding itself in the way of a falling tree. The Loggers recognized that those small beings had plenty of magic in reserve, as well as other peculiar habits and characteristics that were revealed over the course of months.

Some of these traits had to do with the other non-human warm blooded inhabitants of the camps. There had always been a few dogs and cats around to entertain the loggers and to keep the numbers of pesky vermin to a minimum. Such pets were more than mere furred distraction for the men; they were important members of the logging brotherhood that served a useful purpose.

6/11 Well...it became pretty obvious to loggers that Hodags and dogs got along really well, with hardly any scuffles or hard feelings between them, and usually with both species delighted at being close. But *(and this is not an easy thing to say if one is a cat lover) it appeared there was some mistrust between felines and Hodags...the two species skirting around one another like reverse magnets pushing each other away. The Hodags would be looking suspiciously out the corners of their multicolored eyes at the camp cats while the cats would go crouching and hissing as they are prone to do when not feeling comfortable with associates. It is at least necessary to say that there were suspicions going on between those two life forms and therefore some degree of caution was required by all concerned.*

Besides the more tame mammals in camp there were the woodland wild creatures to fascinate the young Hodags. After being impressed by the rapid speed of Whitetail deer, the climbing ability of squirrels, the wiggling of rabbit noses, and the ability of birds to fly, the inquisitive Hodags were seen trying their best to do the same. As might have been expected, despite many attempts, they soon learned that deer were unbeatable in races, squirrels had very sharp claws and agility unlike themselves, and that jumping from stumps without wings produced bruises and sore bones. But *(and this is a story one rarely hears about) they all did learn the nose wiggling trick really well.*

Hodags certainly did have their unique habits and quirks. As an example, the lumberjacks who worked near Lake Superior noticed that the creatures rarely ventured on to the shore line, and they always were cautiously looking out on to the lake as if expecting that some “thing” might emerge. This behavior was out of the usual carefree way they usually acted around water. But while it seemed that Lake Superior held a mystery causing some Hodag prudence, the opposite occurred when they were near the inland streams and lakes. They loved to dive and swim those waters, playing tag with numerous fish forms just

as much as their lumberjack companions.

Among other entertaining and interesting characteristics of these still small creatures, as observed by the Loggers themselves, was the unarguable fact that the growing Hodags shared some of the qualities of their Dream Makers. If a Logger was a bit large... *(let's say overweight)...his new and growing companion had a bit more heft than he really needed. If the Caretaker was a bit grumpy, his snuffling charge had a bit of the grumpiness as well (though that did not require anger management classes or hard discipline). Just a bit stronger word, a louder voice, and often a light hearted joke and affection would quell unhappiness and dissipate the grumps.*

In these early logging days around the 1880's and 90's, those men taking up the profession of harvesting the great northern forests were by their ancestry from nations such as Germany, Ireland, Poland, Norway and other old countries of Europe. They carried in their oral accents and habits their old country ways of speaking and turning a phrase. It was an amazing part of this Northwood culture that these many men from many countries worked largely in harmony with one another, all respecting their pasts, their shared destinies and a commendable work ethic.

And so it was the same with their strange small offspring. Each of these little beasts seemed a lot like their special Loggers. Their purring and snorts had accents like their human counterparts while physically they seemed to be made a bit in the image of their logger Creators, perhaps tall or thin or broad, maybe well groomed or grizzled...a form of imitation which was really not so strange considering how intimate was their genesis out of those nocturnal reveries. And, while there were some squabbles just like any human family, they generally got along just fine.

So the birthing and growing continued for a while near the northern towns of Rhineland, Red Cliff, Devil River, and March Rapids. The newly minted creatures cavorted about the lumber camps and woodlots to the joy of the Loggers, but without much notice at all from those not conversant with the ways of logging camps. The farmers and townsfolk remained oblivious for quite a while. But what about eventual discovery of these mysterious beasts?

Were there any fears or concerns expressed by farmers or town folk? The towns up that way were the sort in which the lumberjacks could get their supplies, let off steam, pick up recent issues of small town newspapers, and converse with townsfolk in a civilized manner about myriad subjects. While the non-lumberjack citizens of those small lumber towns never managed to spot a Hodag, it did become known that something novel had entered the northern counties. And it is likely that despite the lumberjacks generally being tight lipped about the magical appearances of their Hodag charges, there was a growing awareness by the town's people, and of strangers passing thru, that something of unusual nature was going on in those woodlands.

Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter all shared seasons during which a lumberjack worked, laughed and used his muscles and brains, enjoying companionship with the recently appeared rapidly growing creatures that grunted in the sawdust and dirt. These relationships were greatly important to the lumberjacks, but for them it made no difference if the town folk knew about Hodags, or even believed in them. The stories were merely more inscrutable tales to lodge alongside other reports such as axe wielding giants and blue colored oxen. The tellers of these tales, Loggers and non, could comfortably live with such accounts, repeating them to all those willing to listen around stoves and campfires.

Then too it was the Hodag habit, with good result, to sort of evaporate...dematerialize if you will, into what loggers called the Ether. When a stranger's eyes would be cast in their direction they would quickly become the nearest shadow, camouflage their hides to look like tree bark, slip away with a single deft movement to dart behind the would-be observer. If the looker then glanced back to the rear there was a rapid sound, like the wind blowing, and naught could be seen.

To be sure, sensitive strangers would sometimes detect a movement, or hear a scuttle or gasp, but the natural condition of woodlands and rustic places always yielded sounds like that. There was always rustling of dried plant matter and the tiny voices of hidden voles and chipmunks, so the passer-by folk immediately overlooked the sounds and encounters as the common hidden activities of forests.

Phase Three, Grown Ups

Furthermore, undoubtedly in the manner of most living beings, Hodags got bigger...and quite a bit bigger. After a year what were once tiny creatures hiding beneath bed covers had grown large enough to pull logs out of deep forests. In contests of strength they were challenging the oxen, mules and horses that had been so common and important to the Northwood loggers. They seemed to revel in the use of their increased muscle mass and their deep grip into the forest soil. They became determined and dedicated. They became something other than tots and teenagers. They evolved into grownups...adults of a species not seen on Earth before.

Time has a habit of passing, and changes come to those passing thru it. Small things get bigger, altering,

10/11 evolving...to become in other ways different from what they were before. So it was with Hodags. Over the years they got bigger, but no less agreeable or unpleasant. They still enjoyed the companionship of dogs and Loggers. They still snuffled the ground looking for their tasty treats and required nutriments, but they also began to spend more time off in the forests by themselves. If any word could best describe their change of personality, it might be introspection. They seemed to be deep in Hodag thought, and probably were experiencing some wanderlust.

They recognized their important place in the currents of the lumber camps, still coming in to share time with the men, though no longer fitting thru the bunk house doors. And they did not shirk their responsibilities such as hauling logs and turning over stumps that were in the way of progress. Despite their increased size they also held on to their ability to disappear from the eyes of nosey interlopers...all the while seeking the affections plied by their own Dream Makers. But, and this is important, they were also aging, just like their familiar Loggers.

Yes. Time passed and it was a natural thing for Loggers to gradually evolve too. Being mostly adult men, or near so, when they began their professions as lumberjacks, they usually did not get much taller or stronger, but like every living thing in the Universe *(as far as we know) there were changes. Such changes were seen in their muscles and rugged bodies, but also in their beliefs, desires, attitudes and philosophies about life and living. Not all of them remained in the camps. Not all of them could stay on the same course. Eventually some of them sought new directions, new jobs, leaving their fellows and venturing into new professions, on to new opportunities where they would learn and grow new thoughts, on to new terrain and climates.*

11/11 With their new plans and directions there was concern for what might become of the Hodags which had been linked so inextricably, bound to their individual Dream Makers, and which would necessarily be left behind. As the Loggers made their preparations to leave there were the sounds of murmur and grunt, hurried rustling agitation with hugs and secret languages. There were contemplative moments for both Logger and beast, with communications that could only be shared by individuals who knew one another intimately well. But amidst the potential strain caused by departure and separation, there were also expressed joyful feelings of thankfulness. There was some giggling and laughter, and lots of reflection. This was a time for new maturation and opportunity.

It was agreed. The Hodags would stay Up North. They were used to the environment with its wild pleasures, its heritage and its catastrophes. It was a place of birth and annual rebirth which they had been deeply part of, embedded into...and without that woodland genesis they would likely fade away forever. The Northwood without Hodags and other tall tales would be a disappointment, a loss for the future and the past.

The parting Loggers knew this intuitively. While the arrival of Hodags had been born out of their dreams and imaginations, the separation of Hodags from their northern woods, removing them from their native histories, would likely cause them to evaporate forever. They were created to work and play alongside determined men in forest settings, not skirting around noisy cities and taxi cabs and library shelves. Up there they were comfortable and happy, sharing in and being one with the natural elements...displaying aspects of the indigenous tribes of fairies, wood nymphs, and the good folk found elsewhere in the broad world.

Phase Four, Abiding Tales

Today, up in the Northwood, the remaining human occupants of towns and forests, as well as the passing visitors, can still sometimes feel the presence of large phantom-like woodland beasts which slip magically thru shadows, meadows and sun-dappled fire breaks. These scurry only as Hodags can around fallen logs and thru the musty remains of logging camps. There are stories still told. There are mysteries still proclaimed. There are shared histories to be respected and celebrated, with Hodags as the living proud representatives of a logging past.

Like the silent gazes of other hidden forest dwellers, deer and foxes and squirrels, there are multi-colored eyes of mythical creatures still peering out from shadow and den. These fellows, the Hodags, continue to live their long lives having been witness to the heyday of lumberjacks and logging crews...holding in their memories the collected experiences; the archives of many decades lived and shared with hard working men.