

The Death of old man Hanson

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CHAPTER ONE

meet the enemy

Did you ever battle someone for so long that you just wished he was dead? I did. Now I wish I could take that wish back.

Old Man Hanson died about four weeks ago. That may not be world-changing news, but to the guys in the neighborhood, his death has become the single most important event in our young lives. But before I tell you about that, I need to give you some background on the old man and the neighborhood kids.

The old man lived in a tiny house all alone except for his mean, mongrel dog. Both of them must have been about a hundred years old. His little house is the only old house in the area. All the other homes were built by a big developer a few years ago. Those houses sit on half-acre lots. The old man's house sits way back off the road in the middle of a ten-acre apple orchard. His whole land is fenced in with an eight-foot-high chain-link fence—the kind with the heavy wire and the small, diamond-shaped holes. The entrance to his driveway is closed with a heavy iron gate. His house is completely hidden from the road.

No one knew much about his family—or him, for that matter. Even my parents mentioned how he kept to himself. The only time anyone ever saw the old man was when he was working on his precious apple trees. In the spring and

summer, he was always pruning or spraying or something. There must be fifty of those trees on his land. They're all sizes and types. He must have sold the apples in the fall because lots of trucks pulled into and out of his driveway at that time of year.

He sure was protective of those apples. Whenever any of us kids tried to climb over the fence to get a few apples, his dog would come running out after us. And that mangy, scraggly dog would tear you to pieces if you weren't fast enough. Several times the old man even came out with his rusty old shotgun and ran us off.

I often wondered how the old man knew we were in his orchard. Some of the guys thought he must be a warlock or something.

I must admit that those apples of his were the best in the world. We never got tired of trying to get some, even though our parents always warned us to stay away from the old man's place.

We also never got tired of trying to figure out ways to bug the old hermit. We weren't exactly kind to the old man, but on the other hand, we never figured he deserved kindness. We even formed a club. We called our club "Get Old Hanson," or G.O.H. (pronounced "Go") for short.

CHAPTER TWO

meet the good guys

There are five guys in the neighborhood who are members of G.O.H. Jack lives clear at the far end of the allotment. He's a real athlete. During the school year he's involved in every sport possible. Jack's parents divorced when he was real little. His father lives on a horse farm, and Jack goes to visit him a couple of times a month. Jack has an older sister who lives with their father.

Jim lives next door to Jack, and he loves sports too. He isn't as good an all-round athlete as Jack, but Jim can run faster than anyone I know. His father was killed in some kind of accident. His mother married again last year. He has a brother who is seven years old and a little baby half-brother.

My name is Sam. I live with my father and mother. I have a little eight-year-old sister, Shirley. The guys call me "professor" because I make good grades and my parents, who are both schoolteachers, make me use correct grammar.

The fourth member of our club is Bill. He's the newcomer to the neighborhood. He moved here from Georgia two years ago. His mother ran off and left his dad and him when Bill was little. Just the two of them live together now. When Bill first moved into the neighborhood, all of us used to make fun of his Southern accent. I called him a "hick" one time, and we got into a huge fistfight. We've been best friends

ever since. He has lived such a different life than I have. He's the most interesting person I know. Lots of people still consider him an ignorant hillbilly, but he knows about things that nobody else around here knows about.

The last member of the "Get Old Hanson" club is Carl. He's sort of our mascot. He's really too young to hang around us, but he was so persistent that we finally agreed to allow him to join. He's the youngest in his family. His brother and sister are grown and married. He's a pretty cool guy, even if he is only nine years old.

My dad built a large pole barn behind our garage to store our lawn mower and other equipment. He lets us use part of the barn as our clubhouse. He doesn't know what our club is about, though. That's top secret.

CHAPTER THREE

OUR FIRST MISSION

Our illustrious organization started two summers ago. Bill and I had just become best friends. (We each still had a black eye.) The two of us were on the way to Jack's house when we met Jim and Carl. It was evident that Carl had been crying. "What happened?" Bill asked as we approached.

Jim looked angry as he answered. "I saw Carl looking through the fence at Hanson's apple orchard. I asked him if he'd ever had one of those apples. He said no, so I told him we'd get us one. We climbed over the fence, and as soon as we put out feet on the other side, the old man appeared from around a tree and sicked his old dog on us. I helped Carl back over the fence and just made it over in time myself. Carl tore his pants on the fence, and he's gonna catch it when he gets home." He scowled. "We've got to do something about that stingy old man."

"I agree," I said. "You two come on down to Jack's with us, and we'll talk it over."

By the time we had arrived at Jack's house, we had developed the plan for a club to deal with the "Hanson problem." Jack was out at the end of the driveway taking out the trash. His top half was inside the large trash barrel. He always checked to make sure his mom wasn't throwing away any "good stuff." When we yelled at him, he raised up. He had a jar in his hand.

“You want to smell something that really stinks?” he asked us before we had a chance to spring our big news on him. When we got close, he opened the top of the jar and waved it in the air in front of our faces.

“Peeeeeee uuuuuuu! That smells like an outhouse in July!” Bill said as we all grabbed our noses. “What the heck is it?”

“It’s half a jar of spoiled Limburger cheese,” Jack laughed.

“Well put the lid on the smelly thing,” Jim demanded. “We have serious business to discuss.”

We sat on the grass in Jack’s front yard and explained our idea of a club to Jack. He liked the idea as well as we all knew he would. We decided that we would take turns being president of the club (all except little Carl, of course). They voted that I be the first president, and my first official task would be to ask my dad if we could use our pole barn for a clubhouse.

All of a sudden, Bill jumped up. “I got a humdinger of an idea. That stinky cheese of Jack’s gave me the inspiration. Let’s get Old Man Hanson back for chasin’ us and sickin’ his dog on us. Let’s pull a trick on him. Tomorrow is Wednesday, and I’ve noticed that the old man always goes someplace in that old van of his every Wednesday morning. Let’s fix his van up for him to make his journey more interesting. Let’s sneak over there tonight and smear some of Jack’s superstink stuff on his muffler. When he starts driving and that muffler gets hot, you’ll be able to smell the old man coming before you hear him.”

We all started laughing. The more we pictured the prank that Bill was suggesting, the more we laughed. We spent the rest of the afternoon discussing the idea and planning our strategy. We even developed the idea for the name of our club.

It was finally time for all of us to go home for supper. We agreed to meet back at Bill's house at dark. We would get permission to camp out for the night in Bill's backyard.

By nine o'clock, all five members of G.O.H. were in Bill's backyard helping to set up the old, moldy-smelling army tent that we always used when we camped out, which was about three times a week in the summer. We usually went into the tent when it was raining because of the musty odor. We made our final plans and then snuck out of Bill's yard. We regrouped in front of the gate at the entrance to Old Man Hanson's driveway.

Jack was given the honor of smearing the Limburger cheese on the muffler. Bill was elected to go along with Jack and hold the flashlight. Carl was appointed to stay at the gate and yell if anyone was coming. Jim and I had the toughest job. It was our duty to distract the old dog in case he was loose.

We tried the gate and found that it was on a spring and opened when we pushed on it, but it wouldn't stay open. Carl had orders to be ready to open the gate for us in case we came running back.

When we were inside the gate, the four of us stayed close together as we made our way down the driveway. We made it to the van, which was parked by the side of the house under

a giant old apple tree. Jack and Bill went right to work and crawled under the van. I think everything would have gone smoothly if Bill hadn't started laughing. I found out why later.

Jack was lying flat on his back smearing the stinky goo when a big glob fell down and hit him right in the face. Bill said that Jack started gagging and tried to get out from under the van, but he raised up too fast and bumped his head. By that time Bill was laughing so hard he could hardly breathe. We kept whispering for him to shut up. Jack got so ticked at Bill for laughing at him that he took a big glob of the rotten cheese from his face and smeared it on Bill's. They started wrestling around, and we had to pull them apart just as the porch light came on and we heard the dog barking.

"Ever'budy hightail it outta here!" Bill yelled. We took his advice. The old man started shouting. As we neared the gate, we yelled for Carl to hold it open. We zoomed past him and didn't stop until we were all back at Bill's yard. Bill and Jack had to go into Bill's house to scrub the stink off their faces. They said the worst part was trying to explain to Bill's dad how they got such a stinking mess on themselves in the first place.

It was generally agreed by the club members that our first mission was something less than a complete success. We figured the old man must have checked his van over before he drove it again because no one ever smelled any rotten odor coming from it.

We decided that we would come up with a new plan—one that would be fool-proof.