The Hatchet Man

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MIKE AND John are sure good at this kind of stuff.

Their backs hug the side of Mike’s and my house as we all three sneak along the side of it. I must watch out to keep out of trouble so I won’t be ditched. They always ditch tag-alongs. I got to try harder to keep my hands against the house. I think people won’t see us so easy then. Nobody better see us. Billy would want to come and he’s a real tag-along. Then they’d ditch us both. Mom would want to know something if she saw us. Grownups always ask questions . . . especially Mom.

I wonder what we’re going to do today. Yesterday we played baseball. Billy was there too but he was too small to play. Sometimes, though, he is backstop for the catcher, but not too often. I got to be umpire who calls balls and strikes. They didn’t tell me how to do it so I just said “Ball two” every time unless they swang at it. I didn’t want them to get mad and make me watch with Billy. Mike sometimes makes me.

I’m really lucky that Mike’s my older brother. He’s pretty much bigger than the other guys his age so nobody picks on me. He told them once that they could if they wanted to, as long as they didn’t make me cry too much. They don’t anyway because they are scared he is going to change his mind after they’ve done something.

Now we’re in the alley behind our houses. We play football here a lot. Maybe that is what we are going to do today. This is about the only game John lets Billy play. John is Billy’s big brother, but John is the leader so he
can't let things like that bug him. John is the leader because he has a big green coat of his dad's that has two lines on the arms. He says that his dad is more important than ours but Mom says he isn't. Anyway our dad is going to come back home before John's dad.

When we play football, I'm hiker for both teams. I like this game more than baseball because I get to touch the ball more. Billy marks the "line of scrimmage" as Mike calls it. Sometimes Billy forgets to move and just watches. Then they yell at him and tell him he could never be a football player if he can't even be a line of scrimmage. I laugh too because I don't think he will ever play with us if he can't remember what to do.

We've snuck all the way to the garage now. Mike and John keep talking and laughing but I can't hear what they say. But they don't have any type of balls or bats with them so we must be going to do something else.

"You want to be with us?" Johnny says to me.

Wow! They're asking me out loud so now they can't change their minds.

"Sure. And I won't let Mom or Billy see me either."

"All right, then. Go into the garage and get the hatchet. And be sneaky while you do it."

Maybe we'll be Indians or something. The other day we were cowboys. With our lassos we tied up a kid down the block. We were going to brand him too with two bars, but his mother came out and started yelling at him and us. John ordered us all to retreat. We loosened the rope on the kid real fast so we wouldn't lose it.

I wonder which one of these is the hatchet? This one's too big. You have to be able to throw a hatchet. I'll take this one. It looks like it would stick in a tree. "Here it is, you guys," I whisper as loud as I can.

John grabs it from my hand. "Okay, follow me." We both fall in behind him as we cross into the neighbor's yard. All three of us crouching behind the garage, Mike and I look out behind us. John is on the lookout ahead of us.
We jump when we hear John whisper, “Here cat, here kitty.” Boy, if I was the one playing around with cats at a time like this, you can bet they’d tell me about it. But it doesn’t bother Mike, so it’s all right with me, I guess.

It’s Mrs. Bidges’ kitten. She’s mean and old and her face is wrinkled. Cats are kind of neat though. John told me once that they always land on their feet. But Mrs. Bidges got mad at me once for playing with them. She said something about her cats being special . . . kind of pure cats, I think. I thought that was stupid and I laughed ’cause anybody could tell that they’re all cat.

“Here, hold this.” John hands me the hatchet and he picks up the cat he’d called over to him. “Let’s go behind your garage now, Mike. We’ll go over one at a time. I’ll go first.” John always knows how to do these sort of things the right way. By the time I get over to the garage, John and Mike have a small pile. I see a paper bag like for lunches. There is also some string and a couple little nail spikes.

John pets the cat and tells us to take hold of it real good. I put down the hatchet and grab the cat with two hands real hard so Mike won’t tell me I’m doing a bad job. John ties the paper bag over the cat’s head and puts the ends of the twine spiked into the ground on both sides of him. We can sort of hear the cat’s crying inside of the bag, but I don’t think Mike and John are listening anyway.

John looks up and says, “I want to be the one who uses the hatchet but the leader isn’t supposed to do everything.” He is right too, because John always knows who is supposed to do what. He looks at Mike and sort of laughs. They both look at me. “Here, you can do it.” He hands me the hatchet. I smile and kind of stick out my chest a little like Mike does when he gets ready to do something important.

I look down at the cat before I raise the hatchet over my head. “No, do it like this,” John says as he takes the hatchet. He raises it way above his head and lets it fall hard on a stick. The stick pops in two. The two of them
smile 'cause John did it so easy. I'm glad he gives me the hatchet back.

I raise the hatchet again. Sun shines on it and I see spots for a second. Then I let the hatchet fall as easy as John did. It hits right where the bag was tied. "Good job," they say. I stand up with them wondering if John is going to give any more orders. He says, "Take this hatchet back where you found it."

I don't often get to play with the hatchet. Maybe I can chop down some of the weeds in the garden. Whichever ones they are, they don't go in the vases anyway. I wonder what Mike and John are doing now? I wonder if they are going to do something else?

Here they come. They sure look kind of funny. John says, "Remember you promised not to say anything about what we did." I can't remember saying that but I must have. John always remembers little things.

"Sure."

"Well, don't forget it." They leave me all alone and they both glance at me before they disappear around the corner of the house. I keep on digging into the plants like they're whitemen's scalps. I make a pretty big pile of weeds.

A little while later Mom comes out and walks up near me and stops. She just stands there for a bit and doesn't say anything. I look up once but she is looking at me pretty hard so I return to digging scalps.

"Ernie," she says hard. I stop digging and look up again. She is quit for a minute. "Ernest, you weren't obeying this afternoon, were you?" Her voice is funny like when she reads one of Dad's letters to us.

"Sure I was obeying."

She steps one step back and says, "Well, I'm going to need some sort of explanation. Go inside the house."

I go inside with Mom right behind me. I can say John's name to her. That should explain to her what I did. No, that wouldn't help anything. She doesn't understand about John. She couldn't. Grown-ups just don't understand.