

# Eulogy

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Men, women and children stared at me, but I sought out the anguished eyes of six males, my father and uncles, in the somber faces of the audience. Each of them, in turn, Dad included, looked away, glancing into their laps.

My grandfather lay in the casket behind me, small and withered in a powder-blue suit he never would've worn in life, surrounded by garish bouquets he would've dismissed as effeminate, ostentatious, a waste of hard-earned cash.

As the eldest grandson, I was expected to speak. I'd planned on using the podium for subtle spite. I'd planned on telling how Grandpa's farm work ethics had reformed me, how he'd taken me in, the only one to really believe in me after my fall, my parents included.

"Back when I was eighteen, I did something supremely stupid and got sent to the state penitentiary for three years," I began.

But I couldn't go through with it. My malice and venom were the last things these grieving men needed. They looked soft, weak, broken.

I had to keep talking though; I noticed shuffling and more downcast eyes in the audience as I hesitated.

I remember the Labor Day weekend after I got out," I continued, unsure where I was headed, the scene falling out of nowhere into my head and out of my mouth. "All of Grandpa's boys, all six sons and their families, came to the farm for a big cook-out. I lingered in the background, but all that green grass, those open fields, that brilliant sun everywhere and my whole family together—man, that was freedom and none of you even knew it.

"Grandpa called the men out to the dirt yard behind his shop to look at the big new John Deere he'd bought. As they stood around, appraising the engine, Grandpa picked up this sledgehammer and sort of leaned on it.

"Now I've never understood engines, and all the guys, even

Grandpa, had always ribbed me about it. But I'd been working out in jail and, thinking I'd show these macho men, I said, 'Hey Grandpa, hand me that sledgehammer.'"

I could see a few of my uncles' faces brighten slightly out in the audience as they too remembered the incident.

"Grandpa stopped mid-sentence and furrowed his brow. 'Okay,' he said. 'Here.'"

"Everyone wondered what this black sheep was up to."

"'Who's got a watch?' I asked. 'Time me.'"

"I lifted the head of the sledgehammer skyward, then held my arm straight from my body so it and the heavy hammer formed a right angle. I maintained that position for well over two minutes, until my forearm burned and the sledgehammer shook. Growing up, we'd always had impromptu contests like this. When I finally dropped it, the hammer toppled and klunked down hard, puffing up clouds of dust, my arm numb.

"They all took turns then, these tough guys who'd wrestled me to the ground as a kid, giving me wedgies, sucker punches and Indian burns."

The less restrained audience members chuckled politely.

"My dad and Uncle Roger came sort of close, sweating to come within maybe twenty seconds, but no one beat my time.

"Then came Grandpa's turn. 'Go easy, Gramps,' I said. He paused and gave me a look warmer than that gorgeous summer day, yet somehow also colder than any felon's stare I'd seen in prison. Then he swung that sledgehammer straight up into position, quick and easy as you'd raise a baseball bat to your shoulder.

"And he held it there.

"And held it there.

"And just kept right on holding it there."

Now smiles cropped up in the audience, more chuckles.

"My record came and went and Grandpa, twenty years older than anyone else in that little circle of leathery, sun-weathered faces, hadn't broken a sweat. After four silent minutes he just hinted at a smile and said, 'Well, guess that's enough.' Then he gave the sledgehammer a modest toss so it sort of arced and—smack!—dropped solid to the ground head first."

Some just nodded; others actually laughed.

I looked again for my uncles and Dad. Their eyes were cheerier, less mournful, but still soft. They were missing a certain glint, and I knew before I even continued with the closing words of my little remembrance that we'd never again stand together in a circle like we had that Labor Day afternoon.