

2. Let the punishment fit the crime

The plan Dad came up with was simple. Into the immediate future we would spend Saturday mornings fixing up the Zeidel house. Our first assignment was to replace the broken cellar door. Our first stop was the lumberyard.

Dad was not handy by nature, but he was stubborn, and he could work things out methodically. First, he walked us through examining the original door until we understood the mechanics, and then we took the door off its hinges, cleared off the remaining wood fragments, attached our new hinges, and hung the new door we had just bought. All three of us were surprised when the new door closed properly and we were able to lock it! We were all feeling pretty smug—two hours before we had known nothing about storm doors, and now we had built one. Dad snapped a few pictures with his phone, and we were all set to call it a successful day.

Well, two of us anyway. Instead of heading home, Dad piled us into the car and drove us to the nursing home about a mile or so away. Dad said we were off to talk to Mr. Zeidel. I looked over at Dylan. Dylan looked over at me. The Godfather was alive? What about the gangland slayings? We were both on high alert.

Dad parked the car and we walked up the stairs of the nursing home and signed in at the foyer. Uncharted territory for Dylan and me. What hits you first is the odor, subtle but undeniable. There were five or six old people just dozing in wheelchairs in the hallway. It wasn't Zeidel-house scary, but it was close. We made our way through to the stairs and walked up to the third floor.

Mr. Zeidel's room was dark when we entered. He had the bed by the window, so we made our way past his dozing roommate. There, propped up in bed, was a very old man wearing very old pajamas. He had a gray stubble, and his hair was damped down. It looked as if he hadn't been out of bed in months.

"Joe, it's Jeff. Jeff Mulligan. I'm here with the boys to show you our progress."

The old man replied without opening his eyes. "So, these are the criminals."

Dad laughed and showed him the pictures, causing him to open his eyes ever so slightly. Dad also showed him the receipt from the lumberyard.

It quickly became apparent he had little interest in our project. Instead, he was more interested in talking. "You know, boys, I was living in that house twenty years before your parents even moved in. And it was part of my garbage route. If your mom threw away any of your nappies, I'd have been the one to take them away." He chuckled at the thought. In the

meantime, thoughts of gangland slayings, hidden tunnels, and the Godfather evaporated from our heads.

That being said, the old man had some great stories. Turns out he had broken his hip jumping off his truck and arthritis had settled in, and that's what landed him in the nursing home. That very first day, he told us how the garbagemen were responsible for disposing of the ashes from the old coal-burning houses, and how they converted the trucks to snowplows in the winter—sometimes working sixteen-hour days. All the time with his eyes mostly closed, like he was back there on the truck.

The next Saturday, we cleaned up the rest of the basement. Dylan and I were pretty sure most of what we swept up was older than us. There was an old stereo system there with both an attached record player and tape deck, and some kind of filing system of nuts and bolts contained in shelf after shelf of empty peanut butter jars. Crazy. Dad popped for lunch at McDonald's on our way to the nursing home.

This time Mr. Zeidel was shaved and dressed and sitting in his easy chair. Dad told him of our accomplishments. He smiled when we mentioned the nuts and bolts jars. They were his pride and joy. He went into great detail on the filing system—the jars were positioned by usage not size — and that he didn't much use for metric sizes, which were relegated to the top unpopular row. Dad didn't mention that we had just thrown it all out.

Then out of the blue, as if he had been prepping all week, he started telling us more garbageman tales. "Proud member of Local Sixty-One, retired." He then launched into rat stories. Rats fearlessly challenging him in the alley; rats jumping out of trash cans as he bent down to open a trash can; poisoned rats going round and round in circles in the alley. Catnip to two twelve-year-olds. When Mr. Zeidel finally ran out of energy, Dad made our apologies and escorted us out. "You'll be back next Saturday?" Mr. Zeidel said. Last out as usual, I gave him a quick thumbs up.

After the basement, we tackled the kitchen. It was fine structurally but really was in need of a good cleaning. We spent a whole Saturday just scrubbing the floor. It went from dingy yellow, to kind of a bored gray, to a go-ahead-and-eat-off-of-it slate color. There's something satisfying about cleaning when the progress is so measurable. Dad took yet another picture, and we headed to the nursing home.

This time Mr. Zeidel greeted us in the foyer. He had been waiting for us. We showed him the picture, but he was more intent on some garbageman stories he had remembered during the week. He told us of his coworkers and how they would race through their routes to see who could finish the earliest. And since they only had those specific responsibilities, it also meant they were through for the day. They would just have to kill time at one of the parks until the end of the day.

We ate up the stories. We'd take it all in and then repeat them to Mom as she was making dinner. I loved the crazy nicknames of the other garbagemen—"One-Eyed" Johnson, "Big Man" Adamczyk. Straight out of *Treasure Island*, I was expecting Billy Bones any time now.

The winter progressed. As the house started taking shape, so did Mr. Zeidel. Every week stronger: the unshaven man sleeping in his bed in the middle of the day became a distant memory.

The first Saturday in March was one of those rare Milwaukee winter days. It was in the forties, and everyone was walking around in shorts and T-shirts like summer had arrived. We even opened the windows as we worked on the upstairs rooms. This was our first trip upstairs. Dylan and I almost had simultaneous heart attacks when we opened up one of the bedroom doors and a couple of mice scurried out. Dad just laughed. Mr. Zeidel might be death to all rats, but mice seemed immune. We put out some traps and cleaned up the droppings as best we could.

When we got to the nursing home, Mr. Zeidel was waiting for us on the front porch. Dad told him of our progress, but once again Mr. Zeidel was more interested in his agenda. But instead of starting in on tales of days gone by, he surprised us. "Jeff, on Saturdays it has been a long tradition that the retired members of the Local Sixty-One meet at the George Webb's for lunch. I've missed them for quite a while, but I'm feeling up to going again. I'd love to take the boys too."

Dad paused. "Let me ask the boss and get back to you, Joe," he said diplomatically. Mr. Zeidel seemed satisfied with that answer and led us back to his room, where he continued telling us of his exploits. He got his name in the paper once by foiling a robbery. He had to admit, though, that he had mistaken the thief for the man of the family and had given him a friendly wave, which the robber misinterpreted and ran off. The story in the paper had conveniently switched the wave to an angry fist pump. Still, a hero is a hero.

Dylan stated his decision as soon as we got back to the car. "Count me out."

As we drove back home, Dad looked at us through the rearview mirror. "The decision is totally yours, but I want you to give it some thought first. Then let me know. Just make sure you're deciding between right and wrong and not between easy and hard. Now, let's go home and sweet-talk your mom into some junk food!"

I looked over at Dylan. He looked over at me. We both shrugged. You had to watch Dad like a hawk. Right when you least expected it, he'd sneak in a life lesson. And then sweeten it with something special. We were defeated.

As we drove to the nursing home that next Saturday, he asked whether we had made a decision. It was nice of him not to acknowledge that the decision had already been made. We told Dad we decided it was a good idea to go to the diner.

“Great, Joe will be happy.” Dad wasn’t a big talker, but he didn’t lose too many arguments either.

Mr. Zeidel met us in the foyer with his jacket on. We both jumped into the backseat and let him ride shotgun. When we got to the George Webb, Dad let us all out but then said he had to run some errands and would pick us up in an hour. We both gave him a look, but he just ignored us.

The three of us walked into the diner and toward a table of old men. “Unser Choe! Long time no see!” A couple of the men noticed us. “Bring your grandkids?”

“Nah, just a couple of friends.”

The first thing I noticed was inappropriate hair: it was everywhere—ears, noses, eyebrows. Not so much on heads though. We both quietly sat down and took it all in. They let us order chocolate shakes with our burgers, though, so we were quiet but placated.

Other than “One-Eyed” Johnson, it was hard to figure out who was who based on the nicknames. For instance, “Big Man” Adamczyk certainly wasn’t anymore. It took us about halfway through lunch before we started to realize that these guys were a hoot. This was a table full of people throwing shade. We did blanch a bit when they tried to pass the check to us. We must’ve passed the test—we were made honorary members of Local 61, retired. My guess is the average age went down a decade or so.

Dylan loved the Local 61 stories, but he would get antsy. The stories kind of moved at my pace. So, for once I was home and Dylan was the visiting tourist.

So that was our punishment: spend Saturday mornings putzing around the old house with Dad and Saturday afternoons getting regaled with the glamorous life of a garbageman. Sometimes we’d be so motivated we’d go back to the house and put a couple of extra hours in. We’d get home late, often after supper, but Mom would make our favorite quick meal—Denver sandwiches and chocolate malts—for dinner. Scrambled eggs, green peppers, and bacon on toast. Good stuff.

Over the course of the summer, we slowly whipped the house into shape. The house lost its magic along the way, but it gave us something back too. As we headed into the seventh grade, it just became a given that if you saw Dylan, well, then there was Lou.

Local 61, retired, gave us some useful lessons. If you want to make friends, you have to put in the time. Friends can come in unexpected packages.

Meanwhile, Dylan was onto his next big plan.