A Story about a Boy I knew from Rogers and his Father's Hammer Mill

In the fall of 1971, I decided I needed a hammer mill.
I grew about 60 acres of corn at the time and fed it to my cattle and hogs.
You can feed corn on the cob to these animals, but it is easier and more efficient to grind cob corn into a course meal before feeding.
A hammer mill can do that.
A hammer mill is a medium size machine that hitches behind a tractor and is powered by the tractor.
Corn or any other suitable feed material is shoveled onto a short conveyer; the conveyor moves the material into the hammer chamber where it meets rapidly whirling steel hammers.
The hammers smash it through a steel screen.
The hammers spin so fast that they drive a high volume of air through the machine.
That blowing air carries the ground feed up and into a conical metal tub from which it falls into a metal tube of about six-inch diameter and several feet in length.
To the casual observer, large material is shoveled into one side and in seconds ground material comes falling down the tube on the opposite side.
In those days there were still many small farms.
The local weekly newspapers all carried, "farm classified ads".
There was an advertisement "Hammer Mill for Sale" in the paper with a phone number from the Rogers exchange.
Back then, you could tell what town a number was from by simply knowing the three-digit exchange number.
I called the number, spoke briefly to the seller and decided to drive down to Rogers for a look.
The farm was on the short road west of Rogers where my Mom was raised.
The family name of the farmer was a common name in those parts.
The owner and I walked to his machine shed to see the hammer mill.
It had not been used for some years, but it had been shedded and was in good condition.
The farmer was a nice old fellow, well, old to me anyway.
He was probably only in his fifties, but I was in my early twenties.
He had hard farmer hands.
He was lonely, or at least he wanted to talk.
He spoke softly and had a profound sadness about him.
I looked over the machine and decided quickly that it would do the job, and the price was just fine.
The farmer was proud of the simple old machine.
Even though the sale was made he wanted to tell me about all its features.
There was a wooden platform built onto the back where the ground feed came down.
He told me how he used to shovel the grain in while his son would stand on the platform to collect the ground feed into sacks.
He said his son had died in a car accident and he asked if I had known him.
I realized that I did know his son.

We played on the same softball team one summer.
I told him his son was a very nice fellow, and that it was a shame that he was gone.
Both true.
He showed me around the farm. I thought about his son while he talked.
The broken-hearted old man described every machine or building or stanchion relative to his son.
How his son had used this tool or did this job.
While the farmer talked, I thought about his son.
He was friendly, medium tall, strong, and confident like all of us farm boys.
No doubt he was a good son.
No doubt this man was a good and loving father.
I did not mention that I was at the accident site, or that I had seen his son die.
I probably spent most of two hours at the farm before driving off with the hammer mill hitched behind my pick-up.
I never saw the man again, there was no reason to.

The accident was a bad one.
It happened in the spring of 1964.
I was a senior in St Michael High School.
I had dropped my girlfriend off at her home and was cruising through town on my way home.
The accident scene was on the east edge of St. Michael.
The car with three boys, all my age or a year older had hit a car with two women, head on.
The women had been out for the evening with their husbands.
Both women had small children.
I did not know the women, but I knew all three boys.
The details of exactly what happened were never known.
It is probably safe to say that the guys were traveling 100 miles an hour.
I knew personally that their car could easily do that.
We drove that way in those days.
Some said that the women forgot to switch their headlights on as they drove out of town.
That happened, easily.
No doubt all five had been drinking.
We did that too in those days.
Cars did not have airbags then.
People seldom used seatbelts.
Ambulances took a long time to arrive.
Small towns did not have the great fire and rescue capability that they have now.
I doubt the terms EMT or Trauma Center had even been invented.
All five died at the scene or were DOA at the hospital.
I got to the accident scene a few minutes after it occurred.
A few people were already there, including a couple of sheriff cars.
We parked our cars, so the headlights illuminated the scene.
The cars were so mangled it was very difficult to get the bodies out.
More than anything I remember the blood, everywhere, glistening in the bright lights.
The amount of blood that can come out of five crushed human bodies is incredible.
The cars were in the center of the tar road and the blood ran in streams to both ditches.
The women and the driver of the boy's car were dead instantly.

All three boys were riding in the front seat.
The engine compartment of their car was compressed to nothing.
The engine was in the front seat.
The engine cut their legs off.
In those days there were no tools adequate to extract bodies from such a mess quickly.
The second boy died mercifully soon, the third took longer.
Too long, there was no possibility of saving his life.
I did not need the wooden platform on the hammer mill because I farmed alone.
The platform was built and shaped like a workbench. Good solid 2-inch lumber and it stood about waist high.

I took it off the hammer mill and kept it in a machine shed.
In 1984 I sold all my farm machines, equipment, and tools, but I kept that bench.
I kept virtually nothing else.
The bench is still here.
I have lots of better benches, but this one is in the barn I built in 2000.
I use it from time to time.
It has been 40 years since I bought the hammer mill.
It has been 50 years since the accident crushed the lives out of the boy and his father.
Last week my son-in-law and I were working in the barn.
The bench caused me to think of these things.
I told him much of this story.
He asked if he could keep the bench after I was done with it.
Maybe he knows why I keep it; I don't know why I do.
Tom.
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