



The Story of Little Brother

Once upon a time, a little family lived in a grey house with blue shutters. Dad, Mom, Big Sister, Big Brother, and Little Sister were happy already, but when Little Brother was born on a chilly day in March, they were overjoyed! “2 boys and two girls, we are so blessed,” Dad and Mom exalted, and the whole family poured their love and attention on Little Brother. But after only a week, Little Brother began to fuss. His tired little eyes looked haggard and distressed. Mom did her best to keep him comforted and fed, but it seemed Little Brother didn’t enjoy eating. Dad walked the floors at night with Little Brother over his arm so that Mom could get some rest. During the day, Big Sister spent hours carrying Little Brother around until he fell asleep. Months slipped by, and Little Brother grew. He rolled over and crawled right on time. The family cheered when Little Brother took his first unsteady steps, but still, Little Brother was seldom happy. His troubled little face made Mom and Dad concerned. They took him to the doctor, but the doctor didn’t seem concerned. The time came that Little Brother should start talking, but he remained silent. A distressed little soul in a prison of silence. He couldn’t say when he was scared. He couldn’t say when something hurt. He couldn’t say when he felt lonely. He clung tightly to his daddy and was terrified to be separated from him.

In his prison of silence, Little Brother’s distress grew. At night he could not sleep. He seemed to be in some pain. Dad laid down beside him and sang to him and patted his back, but Little Brother

couldn't drop off. He got out of bed and laid down in the hallway, and Dad laid down beside him. Soon he got up and laid down on the couch, and Dad laid down beside him there. Next, they moved back to Little Brother's bed. Round and round the house they went. Dad's heart cried for Little Brother's misery. He pled with God to let Little Brother have peace and rest. Sometimes Dad clenched his teeth when frustration over Little Brother's distress swept over him. Finally, towards morning, Little Brother would fall asleep. Those nights were very long and very dark, and they went on for many months.

Although Little Brother could not talk, he was very nimble and active in the daytime. He got into everything and spilled and dumped and poured and turned the kitchen into a disaster zone. He fried Mom's cell phone in the microwave. He almost microwaved a rifle clip full of bullets, too, but Mom caught him in the nick of time. Mom did her best to train him, help him develop and care for the family, and keep her house neat and clean, but it was overwhelming. Kind Christian girls offered to help. 1, 2, 3, 5, 10, 15, over 20! different girls came to the house over the years and helped Mom with the work. They helped with the many therapies that Dad and Mom tried to help Little Brother learn to talk. They helped entertain the other children. Sometimes they just cried with Mom as they felt her pain.

When Little Brother was three years old, Dad and Mom took him to Children's Hospital. "Your son is autistic," the experts told them. "How does that make you feel?"

"It is what we were afraid of," Dad and Mom replied. They loved little Brother all the more. They determined to leave no stone unturned in their quest to give Little Brother the best life possible. They tried vitamins and chiropractor treatments. They tried speech therapy, music therapy, occupational therapy, verbal behavior therapy, and many, many other things. But Little Brother remained mostly silent, and in his prison of silence, his frustration grew. Sometimes he screamed in distress, and the family felt helpless to comfort him. The family often gathered around him, and all put a hand on his little head and cried out to God to help Little Brother. Most times, Little Brother calmed down when the family prayed for him.

When Little Brother was six years old, he went to the Mennonite School with a one-on-one teacher. His teacher tried hard, but Little Brother learned very slowly. The teacher soon felt burned out and told Mom that she was having trouble relating to Little Brother. This made Mom feel very stressed, and it took a toll on her emotional health. Dad was at a loss on how to keep his family together. Sometimes he cried all the way to work.

Big Sister and Big Brother and Little Sister pitched in valiantly. Big Brother bravely took Little Brother in church when it was Dad's turn to preach. Sometimes Little Brother cried and screamed during the service, and Big Brother had to take him out. Big Sister and Little Sister spend hours trying to keep Little Brother entertained and happy. They played toys with him, took him for long rides on the side by side, and spent hours bouncing him on the trampoline.

Years went by. The family was breaking under the strain and stress of caring for Little Brother. School was going better, but it became obvious that Little Brother would soon be too big and strong to keep going to the Mennonite School with his brother and sisters. Mom and Dad visited the autistic classroom at the public school. They didn't like what they saw. Little Brother would

certainly hear foul language and learn destructive behaviors. One day, Dad picked up the phone and dialed the number for the School in the Blue Ridge Mountains with a big lump in his throat. He talked to a kind man named Galen. Dad's voice trembled as he told Galen that they wanted to put Little Brother's name on the waiting list to enroll at the School in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Galen said he would. Mom and Dad tried harder than ever to bring happiness into Little Brother's life. They tried drugs, but Little Brother just gained 15 pounds overnight and wasn't happier at all. They stopped the drugs, and Little Brother slimmed right down again.

One day Dad got an email. A kind man named Howard said there was an opening for Little Brother at the School in the Blue Ridge Mountains. The family in the grey house with the blue shutters shed rivers of tears. They admitted that they had failed in finding quality of life for Little Brother. They acknowledged that although it would break their hearts, it would be best for Little Brother and the rest of the family to try the School in the Blue Ridge Mountains. They began to prepare for Little Brother to go away.

One awful day Little Brother ran away. He sped like a deer through the woods and across the field to the neighbor's pond and waded into the water with his winter coat and boots on. He made his way out to the overflow pipe and shouted down into it to hear his echo. He was in the water for 7 minutes before Big Sister spotted him in the pond and plunged in after him. The family thanked God that Little Brother had not drowned. They realized they were unable to keep Little Brother safe.

The day drew near for Little Brother to go to the School in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Mom cried as she packed all his clothes. Dad cried as he drove around town with Little Brother in the back seat of the truck. The family wondered. How can we do it? How can we give away our precious son and brother? How can we leave Little Brother with strangers and drive away?

A few weeks before Little Brother's enrollment day, Dad got another email. A childcare worker has been selected for your son, the email said. His name is Jason Yoder, and he is from Ewing, Virginia. The family asked for pictures of Jason. They put one in the living room and one in Little Brother's bedroom. The family explained to Little Brother that Jason was going to be his new teacher.

One beautiful morning in May, the family arrived at the School's front entrance in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Dad and Big Brother and Little Brother were wearing their matching shirts. The family tried to smile, but their hearts hurt.

Jason appeared and took little Brother's hand. To the family's great relief, Little Brother willingly went with Jason. Jason and Little Brother went off to have a fun morning together while Dad and Mom filled out paperwork.

Jason and Little Brother roamed around the school grounds. They jumped on the trampoline. They ate some strawberries. They strung some beads in the craft class and ran on the track. Little Brother loved it.

When the paperwork was finished, there was nothing left for the family to do but say goodbye. The compassionate staff of the School in the Blue Ridge Mountains melted away while the family gathered around Little Brother to hug and kiss him goodbye. Little Brother kept smiling while the families' tears fell on his precious head. When Jason reappeared to take his hand, Little Brother went off with him without a trace of fear or sadness. Seeing Little Brother so happy made it easier for the family to drive away.

The family waited eagerly for news from Little Brother. When it came, they were overjoyed to hear that Little Brother was adjusting well! Supervisor Micah stated that Little Brother was doing nothing short of amazing so far.

Little Brother thrived on the predictable schedule and classes at the School in the Blue Ridge Mountains. With patient consistency, Jason taught him many things. Little Brother stopped having accidents. He learned to eat neatly at mealtimes. He learned to do little jobs. His schedule kept him busy and well-occupied. One morning during devotional time, Little Brother sang "Building Up the Temple" to the whole audience in the dining hall. Supervisor Micah emailed Little Brother's family and told them about Little Brother's accomplishment. He said Little Brother's song made chills go up his spine.

Little Brother's family misses him every day. But they rejoice that he is in a place where he is so happy. They rejoice that Little Brother has found better quality of life. They love to visit him at the School in the Blue Ridge Mountains. They look forward to Summer and Christmas vacations when Little Brother can come home for two weeks. They have a heartfelt appreciation for Jason and all the other kind young men and women who give so much and make such a difference in Little Brother's life, and they believe that many stars will be added to their crowns because of their sacrifice of love. They have a deep respect for the administration that makes the School in the Blue Ridge Mountains such a loving and orderly place. Most of all, they thank God for answering their prayers for Little Brother.

Titus and Carol Hofer and family