A Hundred Hours

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by Deborah Black
English, Jr.

I was out in the henhouse when he told me. We were late getting back from the hospital that day, so by the time I got around to doing my chores, the sun had just about disappeared over the west ridge. When Dad came in, it wasn’t the same as usual. He didn’t pat me on the back or ask me how it was going or even yell at me like he sometimes did when I gave the chickens too much feed. Instead, he sort of snuck up behind me, and I suddenly had this bad feeling in my stomach. His voice was quiet, almost like he was in church, but I knew it wasn’t anything like that. My back was toward him and when he spoke those words, I did not turn around. I couldn’t. My legs just wouldn’t move.

When Dad left, I sank down on an old orange crate near the door. The hens strutted around me, flutttering their wings as they leapt onto the rafters. Their noises, the clucks and cackles, seemed somehow out of place to me. I couldn’t explain it, that feeling of jumbled sounds in the still evening air, only that it gave me a haunting chill.

My brother was dead. I didn’t know what that meant, exactly. I didn’t know what to feel. Zeke was ten years older than me and lived in another town. That was where he worked. He took people’s worn-out cars and fixed them up. When he was still at home, I used to watch him work on his own car. Sometimes he’d let me sit in the front seat while he was fixing the motor. I’d pretend I was driving and I’d push all the silver buttons near the ash tray. The windshield wiper one was my favorite. But then, I’d accidentally blow the horn and Zeke would yell at me and
get mad and tell me to go play somewhere else. But he never stayed mad for long. Once he told me never to be angry after the sun went down because then I’d remember that day with a bad feeling. He said I should try to remember something happy about each day.

Since Zeke moved away, we never saw each other much, except once in a while on Sundays. I remember one time I had a bunch of my friends over to play. Zeke had come out to the farm that day and we told him we had nothing to do. So he then began to tell us about this game he used to play when he was our age. It was called “Dead Man, Rise.” One person would play the “dead man” and would lie down in the middle of a circle. On the edge of the circle would be a group of “mourners” who would walk around the “dead man.” When they had done this for a little while, the “dead man” would suddenly jump up and try to tag the “mourners” before they reached the “home free” base. We played that game all afternoon and everyone thought Zeke was really fun. He made us laugh so much that we didn’t even mind being tagged.

All I could think of was that day and that game and how my brother would never be able to get up again. I watched the last rays of the sun slide through the cracks in the henhouse, and I tried to capture the small pieces of dust in the light. What should I do? Should I bring the eggs in for dinner? Would she talk to me, would she be crying? All this settled around me as I sat watching the hens, wondering. My hands were cold and I was scared.

The next morning, Dad told me we were going to a funeral parlor to see Zeke. He said I had to get dressed up in a suit and that there would be a lot of people. I had seen funeral parlors before and most of them were big, white buildings, like houses. They all seemed so quiet and still, hidden behind tall, dark trees. I didn’t want to go.

When I saw Zeke, I got this terrible, really terrible feeling. My heart started to beat harder and harder until I could hardly stand it. My legs were shaking something awful. I wanted to run away, to shut my eyes, but I couldn’t. Instead, I just stood there, staring at him. He was like one of those dolls in the department stores, the
ones in the windows. He didn’t look like my brother at all. Why did he have all that pink stuff on his cheeks, and why was he wearing lipstick? His eyes were closed, but his eyelids were very thin, like two round pieces of glass. He wasn’t like my brother at all.

I kept remembering that game we had played together when Zeke pretended to be the “dead man.” He had layed just like that, stiff and still, trying hard not to move. Somehow, I wished he would get up and chase me, just like in the game. I would have even let him tag me, and I wouldn’t even be mad about it. I wished he would make me laugh, just like he used to.

The box he was in was a shiny brown, and when I saw the huge cover, I got a chill down my back like the day I got caught in my grandmother’s cedar chest. That happened when I was five years old and I screamed and screamed, thinking I would be caught in there forever. I was never so scared in my life. Now, as I stood there staring at that awful box, I couldn’t help remembering that time. I wondered if Zeke could feel it, being in the box.

I went to sit down in a chair, next to a desk where grownups were writing something in a big book. It looked like our photograph album at home. As I sat there, a lot of people began coming in. Old Mrs. Whitaker, our nearest neighbor, bent over to kiss me on the cheek. I hated that. She wore a black net over her eyes and smelled like those green walnuts out in our cow pasture. She kept patting me on the shoulder saying, “Oh, you poor child.” I wanted to get up and leave. I had to go to the bathroom, bad. But I was afraid of that man in the doorway in the black suit who was there when we came and talked a lot to Mother and Dad, along with the others. Besides, I didn’t think places like those had bathrooms.

It seemed like a hundred hours had gone by when I saw Jackie Simpson come in with his mom and dad. He was one year older than me and I never really played with him that much, but I was so happy when he came over and sat beside me.

“Hiya, Billy,” he greeted loudly, chewing a stick of
gum. "Gee, they sure did a good job on your brother."

I looked at him. "What do you mean?"

Jackie sank back on the cushioned chair. "Well, I've been to lots of these things and your brother looks better than most I've seen. His cheeks are puffed up nice, good make-up—"

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

Jackie shook his head like he was bored. "Listen, Billy, don't you know anything? Your brother there sure wouldn't look like that if they didn't fix him up—sort of like an overhaul, get it?"

"Why do they fix him up?"

Jackie's arms flew into the air as he sighed, "Oh, brother." He leaned over and spoke in a whisper. "Do you think all these people would want to come here and see your brother all white and pale, rotting away?"

"Rotting away?" I was so amazed, I could hardly get the words out.

"Sure, Billy. Have you ever smelled a dead animal?"

I remembered one time I came across a dead coon in the woods behind our pasture. The thought of it made me sick at my stomach. "You mean, Zeke would get like that?"

Jackie nodded. "If they didn't powder him up and put cotton in his cheeks and take his blood out—"

"Take his blood out!"

"Sure. They punch a few holes in the body and let the blood drain out. I guess that's so it won't draw worms."

I was shaking now, and I fixed my eyes on my chair so I wouldn't look at Zeke. I really had to go to the bathroom now. My hands were sweaty and my socks were falling down. I didn't think I was going to make it.

"Well, Billy, looks like we're leaving now." Jackie got up and I wished I was going with him. "Oh," he turned back to me. "At the funeral, remember not to step on any of the plots."

"Why not?" I asked weakly, not exactly knowing what a plot was. But whatever Jackie's advice was, I was sure going to pay attention.
'Well, you don't want to be haunted the rest of your life, do you?'

The next morning I had to get up real early to go to the cemetery. The sun was shining and it was really warm, but everyone was in black clothes and no one smiled or even talked. Besides that, I had to wear a tie and it hurt my neck. I stood next to Dad and watched the six men take out Zeke's box from the black car with the curtains. The cover of the box was closed, and I couldn't really think of Zeke still being inside it. It must have been all dark in there. The men each took a handle on the sides of the box, and they had to take it up the hill to where we were standing. I wondered what would happen if they dropped it. It looked so heavy.

When the men came to the top of the hill, Dad pushed me over to one side 'cause I guess I was in the way. Anyhow, when I looked to the ground, I saw that my foot was on one of those plots Jackie had told me about. There were lots of them around so you really had to watch yourself. I couldn't get off of it right away because Aunt Nellie and Uncle John were standing in front of me. So, I had to step along the edge of it until I could get back next to Dad. That was close, especially when I almost stepped into one of those pots filled with flowers. But I made it, and I felt so much better that I didn't even mind my tie anymore.

The following evening, after the funeral, Dad had gone out to milk the cows and Mother was doing the dishes. I sat at the kitchen table in silence, listening to the rattling of the plates and trying to eat my supper. Those two white fried eggs were now cold, and the large, round yellow centers stared up at me, just like a pair of eyes. I was almost afraid to touch them.

Just then, I heard heavy steps on the back porch and in came Dad.

"Hey, Billy," he called to me. "We've got nine new chicks."

I put down my fork and left the table. "Can I go see them, Mother?"
She looked at me for a long moment, and I couldn’t tell whether she was happy or sad. Then, she sort of put her hand on my head and nodded. I felt a soapy drop of water run down my nose, and I didn’t bother to wipe it off. It felt kind of good.

Dad and I walked out back, and the sky was really clear. The moon was the only thing we could see yet, but already it was bright. We went into the henhouse, and Dad knelt down in one corner. I looked over his shoulder.

The mother hen, Gertrude, was strutting around, examining the new family. The nine yellow chicks followed her around, their high voices sounding like two hundred crickets.

“They were late this year,” Dad spoke up. “Your mother should be pleased.”

I then saw him smile for the first time in days. To see that felt almost as good as riding in the hay wagon on a sunny morning. I picked up one of the chicks and ran my fingers over its fluffy body. “Dad?” I ventured quietly.

He raised his brows.

“Is Zeke happy?”

He didn’t answer for a minute. “I don’t think we have to worry about Zeke anymore, son. I’ll bet he’s as happy as anyone can possibly be.”

I put down the chick and left the henhouse. The stars were beginning to come out now, and I knew that by the time I went to bed the sky would be covered with them. I felt very tired, almost weak like I had just swum two lengths of our pond. I’ve only been able to do that once, but somehow I wanted to try it again. Tomorrow couldn’t come soon enough.

I then felt Dad’s hand on my shoulder, and together we walked back to the house. I couldn’t wait to tell Mother all about those chicks.