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Short Story

Sieloff: A Gift To Grow On

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A Gift To Grow On

by Valerie J. Sieloff

It was still early, the sun was just peaking above the cornfield, washing the farm in its red glow, as she padded her way downstairs into the cold, dark kitchen. Believe it or not, this was her favorite time of the day, everything was so fresh and new, like a chance to start all over again. To her, Ann, that was the only reason to get up so early, to see the world in this light. Everything seemed so hopeful. Today was a special day for both her and her daughter, Jenny. Jenny would be celebrating her 16th year as Jennifer Ann Wilson.

It didn't seem that long ago Hal was running and stumbling in the dark, half dressed, trying to find his shoes to take her to the hospital. She wasn't nervous at all, in fact, it was really quite funny, but she knew she couldn't laugh because he was doing his best and was only concerned for her and the baby. Those few years they shared together before and after Jenny was born were the best years of her life. Things weren't easy for them in the beginning with the farm and all. It wasn't the easiest way to make a living, but they survived. Oh, how she wished he was here now. He would never have believed how Jenny had developed into quite an exceptional young lady. After Hal's accident, she didn't think she would be able to make it alone, but with help from dear friends and family, she did and things were going quite well. Jenny had always been so much help to her. She even wanted a part-time job after school so that she could help out with the bills and have some spending money of her own. She was quickly developing into a young woman, with a young woman's need to be well-dressed and popular. The boys were already asking her out and now that she was 16, she was allowed to date. Jenny's life was just beginning and she would probably see less of her each day.

She put on the coffee and started getting breakfast ready. She would make Jenny's favorite breakfast, blueberry pancakes with sausage. Somehow the tradition of making Jenny's favorite things on her birthday was started, and this was one of her favorites. She wasn't sure what time the horse would arrive for the birthday, but she was assured they would be there before noon. A horse was something they could not afford just now, but she had scrimped and saved just for that reason. She wanted to do something special and because Jenny lived and dreamed horses, this would be the ideal surprise birthday present. Jenny realized the expense of a horse and figured one day she would have a job of her own and then, maybe, she could have a horse.

Ann poured herself a cup of coffee and went out onto the porch to watch the sun coming up. The farm was small as farms go, including the house, but she loved it here. It was the peaceful mornings like this that made her forget the old plumbing, the cramped, out-of-date kitchen and not to mention, the drafty, coldness of winter nights. She could have moved closer to town and rented a small apartment, but somehow it couldn't compare to the feeling she had about the farm. She had mentioned moving closer to town for Jenny's sake, but Jenny felt exactly the same as Ann.

Sitting down on the porch swing, slowly rocking to and fro, she sipped her coffee, enjoying the warmth as it flowed through her. She began reflecting back into her past. It didn't seem that long ago she had celebrated her 16th birthday. The morning was just as beautiful as today. She remembered her brother Mike coming into her bedroom that morning to give her a card he had struggled over for hours.

"Well, wadda ya think!" he grinned.

"It has to be the prettiest card I've ever seen, so much color, so much detail and so much glue! Yech," she laughed.

"I just finished it a few minutes ago, what do you expect? Creation took seven days, so does my art!" as he tossed a pillow in her direction. "We're going fishing today, aren't we?"

"Yes, now get lost or you can find yourself another fishing buddy," as she threw the pillow at him as he ducked out of the room shrieking with laughter.

Mike was four years younger than Ann, but they were the best of friends. She had wanted so much to spend her 16th birthday doing whatever she felt, but she had promised to spend the morning with Mike fishing down by the creek. Well, she still had the afternoon to herself.

Ann could smell breakfast, and imagined there would be sausage frying in the pan, hash browns and eggs, ready when she got downstairs. The heavenly smell of breakfast encouraged her to dress faster than usual.

"Ann, Mike come on down here or we'll start breakfast without the two of you." Dad yelled from the bottom of the stairs.

Mike was already racing her down the hall, dodging from side to side so she couldn't pass him. By the time they sat down at the table, they were both panting heavily.

"Beat ya!" Mike gasped.

"I didn't have a chance, and you know it." Ann said as she gently punched Mike's arm. "You could have let me win today, my birthday comes only once a year."

"Thank God for that." Mike giggled.

She was barely into her breakfast and she was already thinking about what Mom and Dad had gotten for her birthday. Gifts were usually exchanged after dinner, and it was a long time until dinner. That was half the fun, waiting and trying to guess what she would get for her birthday. She and Mike excused themselves from the table. The two of them went out to the barn. Mike went to get the poles and she was left with the pitch fork to turn over the dirt to find a few worms.

"Why do I always have to get the worms!" she complained.

"Because you're so good at it. You always seem to find the most convincing worms to tempt the fish."

The least he could have done was stick around long enough to put the worms in the can. She really didn't mind taking Mike fishing. She enjoyed it probably just as much as Mike did. So, the two of them began their trek to the creek. Mike was always teasing her of late, especially when he noticed a few of the boys up in town talking to her. She could tell even now it was going to be hard to shake him when she eventually invited one of her admirers over to the house. She and Mike were inseparable, but today she felt was a turning point in her life. There would be dances to go to now, even college to think about in a few years. She was finally growing up.

Mike ran on ahead as he claimed he knew just when and where the fish were going to bite. he picked a shady spot a little ways up the creek, where the waters rushed over the rocks, forming a small rapid.

"This is the spot," Mike said, "because the fish will hit the rapids and get confused and swim right by our hooks! Hope you picked out some pretty sexy worms. We're going to need them."

"That's what I like about you, your logic!" she had to smile. "By the way, what do you know about being sexy?"

"Not much, 'cept it doesn't hurt when you're trying to catch something." Mike said with his most serious voice.

The grass was still wet from the morning dew, but it wouldn't be long before the sun started to warm the ground and dry everything up. It was so peaceful here, just the birds and the sound of the water running downstream. Maybe, they would spend most of the time here, as she really didn't have anything planned for the rest of the day. She lay back in the grass and let the sun warm her face. Mike had already caught two fish and said she wouldn't be doing so bad if she didn't daydream so much.

They had to be back in time for dinner and to help out with some of the chores. So they packed up their poles and headed back to the farm. Mike kept teasing her because he had overheard Mom and Dad talking about her birthday present.

"Betcha ya, you can't guess what it is." Mike teased. "Wait 'til you see, you won't believe it," as he rolled his eyes.

She had to admit she was very curious, but she really

enjoyed being surprised. Mike was ~~the first to find the~~ house before his birthday and Christmas, trying to find his presents. Even after he found them, it was amazing what a good job he did at acting surprised. He was really a character.

Mike was now running ahead of her, threatening to open her presents if he reached the house first.

"You better now!" she yelled running after him.

Mike was pretty fast, but not fast enough. She beat him to the porch just a few seconds ahead of him. Dinner smelled heavenly and she realized that she was starving.

Mom called, "Git on in here and wash up, dinner will be on the table in five minutes."

Mike was already racing to the bathroom, this time she was running a close second. There was the usual scramble at the sink, with Mike leaving more dirt on the towel than down the drain.

Sitting down at the table, she saw that Mom had made her favorite things for dinner, pork roast with homemade apple-sauce, mashed potatoes with gravy, corn, and, for dessert, dutch apple pie! There was the usual talk around the dinner table and Mike's exaggeration about all the fish that got away. She was really hungry and was eating faster than usual, hoping the sooner she finished, the sooner she would get to open her presents.

"Hey, slow down, you're splattering food all over me!" Mike teased.

After dinner they usually helped Mom clear the table and wash the dishes, but she said they could skip it today and that maybe they should start the chores a little earlier today. Dad said they could help him out in the barn, so the three of them headed outside while Mom started cleaning up the kitchen. Dad told her to take one of the bales of hay and bring it up to the loft.

"This is boy's work!" Ann said, glaring at Mike.

Walking back into the barn she dropped the bale of hay, there was a horse in one of the stalls!

"Dad, there's a horse back here!"

That's when she noticed Mom had come out to the barn and the two of them stood there grinning.

"Is it mine!" Ann cried.

Mike was already telling her that he knew all along and wanted to know if she was going to stand there all day gawking or was she going to saddle her up and take her out.

"She's a real beauty, Mom, Dad."

"Well, saddle her up and take her for a ride." said Dad.

Ann could hardly believe it. She was mine. What was she going to name her? She was really beautiful. She was so black and her coat was so shiny. Mike helped her saddle up and Dad gave her a boost and she was off.

What a feeling to be on her own horse, trotting down the road. She started thinking of names. Maybe, Blackie. No, that sounded too childish. Then she knew, Cinders, because she was as black as cinders! What a free feeling, her hair blowing in the breeze, the smell of the horse and the whole world ahead of her. She could have forever, but it was getting late and she started heading back to the house. This was the perfect day.

Cinders and Ann were inseparable, spending every day together, in the mornings getting up early to brush her down and feed her, and then after school, out riding in the fields. At the time, Ann felt she could share her most inner thoughts with Cinders and that she would understand. Mike was even a little jealous.

Then one day Cinders came down with some sort of flu that that horses got and the Vet told her not to worry because most of the horses in the area that had this flu, had no real problems. He gave her some medication and suggested she rest for a week or two. Ann stayed with her from the time she got home from school until it was time to go to bed. She seemed to get better with each day.

One day after school, Mom insisted Ann help her with dinner and she remembered telling her that as soon as she had looked in on Cinders she would give her a hand. Just by looking at her face I knew something was wrong.

"Mom, what is it, what's wrong? Is it Cinders?" the words rushed out.

Tears started welling up in her Mom's eyes and then Ann knew. Cinders had died. She ran out of the house toward the barn. Mike was sitting there on a bale of hay with tears running down his face.

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"They took her away." he choked.

"Where!" "Why!" Ann really didn't have to ask, she knew.

Mom was right behind her. She took her into her arms and Ann cried like she hadn't for a long, long time.

It took Ann so long to get over Cinders. The most painful part was putting her things away. Just seeing another horse would cause that painful lump in her throat. No one could ever replace Cinders, and she never even tried.

"Morning, Mom, can I help with breakfast?" said Jenny, as she stepped onto the porch.

Ann didn't even hear her up and around the house. She came back from her daydream.

"No, thanks, everything is just waiting for you to roll out of bed. Well, this is your day, what would you like for breakfast?" she teased.

"Oh, Mom, you know what I want for breakfast. The same thing I've been having for the last umpteen birthdays."

The two of them walked arm in arm into the house and sat down for breakfast. They were just starting to clear off the table when there was the sound of a car coming up the road. Jenny ran out to the porch.

"Ma, someone's here," she yelled, "and they're pulling a trailer."

Following her out to the trailer, Ann gave Jenny a hug.

"Happy Birthday, Jenny."

Jenny knew what was in the trailer and ran out to meet her new friend. Words couldn't describe the joy on her face, but Ann knew that was probably just the way she looked 22 years ago on her 16th birthday. Some day the horse will no longer be in Jenny's life, but hopefully he'll bring to Jenny the freedom, love and peace Cinders had brought to Ann so long ago.



THE FIRST LAW OF NATURE IS, "SURVIVE,"
THE FIRST LAW OF SOCIETY IS, "CONFORM,"
THE FIRST PRACTICE OF POLITICS IS TO
EQUATE THESE TWO ADMONITIONS.

BUT

ALTHOUGH THE PRINCIPLES OF SURVIVAL AND
CONFORMANCE ARE NOT MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE,
THEY ARE NOT INTERCHANGEABLE EITHER.

— George A. Whittington



Listen Very Carefully

"All things considered
I will make my stand."

.. So speaks Liberty.

Edward Happel