

Silent Partner: Chapter 2 - Peace

I squinted my old man eyes, and tried to focus through the cobwebs that invaded my glasses during my nap. And then she appeared at the crest of the hill where the school bus had dropped her off, my precious Sara.

She skipped down the hill, pigtails keeping time with her swinging lunch pail.

The girl's eyebrows rose. *Grandpa, can I go riding?* Her eyes spoke plain as day, punctuated on either side by dimples like craters. Her soft fingers grabbed my calloused ones.

"Let's go, young lady."

Since that day four years ago, Sara sometimes uttered sounds but not often. She had been starved to express herself and had learned sign language easily and effortlessly, like a young Monet who was suddenly presented with a canvas and paint. Words became ideas and actions as her whole body got involved.

I was driven to learn and boy, that took some effort. That first year I traipsed to the library every week for books. Nowadays, just the thought tires me out. Instead, I picked up a used computer and I pecked at the damn thing for months, learning about deafness courtesy of Google.

Sara on the other hand... well, her fingers danced on the keys like a pianist. The mouse took her to imaginary places that turned out to be real. I could hear her clicking away, squealing at pictures of pretty horses, as I watched the news. It was a welcomed softness against the mayhem of CNN.

The draft horses in the back barn loved her and she them. Long retired, their liquid eyes perked when Sara entered the barn, their ears rotated like radars honing in on the clank of the rusty lid covering the feed bin when she opened it. Joe, a copper palomino, would blink from his napping, while Clem, a white-haired gentleman poked his nose out his door, stretching to nibble at her angel hair. He would run the tips of his whiskers along her cheek and with the dexterity of a surgeon, and gently extract the carrot nestled between her fingers.

The day Sara first asked me to ride was a day we circled with a red Sharpie on the refrigerator calendar from the feed store. I lifted her up on Clem and he turned his head around and looked at her like he was saying, what took you so long. Clem carried her around like she was a piece of Waterford crystal. His big movements rocked her side to side and she giggled uncontrollably like a kid on a merry-go-round. Not one speck of fear.

She and Clem would walk the neighborhood of farmhouses, Sara sitting like a queen on a throne, the kids trailing them like ants. Some of the boys would hang on to Clem's tail without much traction, until he swished it away nonchalantly. They'd shriek with glee, then roll on the ground like puppies.

Now that Sara and her friends were well into middle school, the kids didn't come around as often. They had their activities and dances and sports teams and Sara had her horses.



Photo by Taylor on Unsplash

While the other kids played their dance cards at school mixers, Sara was two-stepping with a senior horse. Clem would lumber into a trot, and as gingerly as he carried her, his stride would throw Sara's small body like a rag doll. She learned to post with the horse's movements, imitating the show riders she saw on videos on the Internet. When she wanted a lope out of Clem, her legs would start bootin' his sides. Clem, bless his heart, would oblige for a couple times around the pasture. Then his arthritic bones would start objecting and he would ask to stop and she let him right away. Sara's whole body draped over his neck and she'd stretch her arms all the way up to his furry head.

Old Clem ate it up, loved every minute, and although he looked like he took his job seriously, no doubt he was wondering how he got so lucky. Sara would climb all over that horse like a sunken in couch. One afternoon I peeked in through the barn wood slats and Sara was standing on Clem's wide butt, changing a light bulb in the barn aisle. Summer nights would find her laying on top of his back, watching the shooting stars streak the dusky sky. They were a pair, and those were peaceful times.