

## BENNY

88

The heating oil conked out at midnight on a Sunday, with no temperature registering on the thermometer outside the kitchen window. "It must be thirty or thirty-five below," I said to the groggy man who answered the emergency hotline. "Yeah," he said. "I'll see you in the morning." He hung up. "He'll be out in the morning, sometime," I said to Pattiann. We could see our breath in the bedroom air. We both looked at our border collie, Benny, curled up, with his tail covering his nose, on his tartan bed. He'd been angling, for months, to sleep in the human bed, hang-doggedly walking back to his square in the corner after we'd kept saying no, but now, with Pattiann calling him and slapping the mattress beside her, he didn't even lift his head. I tugged on him, but he made himself into a limp weight. I dragged him half-way across the room, grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, when he said "Awroo?" as I finally lifted him, all squirming contortions, into the arms of his mama. Once under the covers, he pawed us and licked our faces. I cut the cheese and blamed it on him, and such an ancient look crossed his face that Pattiann believed me. He slept between us, the two of us hugging him, his humid fish-breaths on my nose. In the morning, I let him out and returned to bed, but something wasn't proper. I went back to the stoop, where he'd been sitting all along, frost in his whiskers, a look like "I can wait" on his face. The heating oil truck groaned into the icy driveway. "Were you the guy I spoke to on the emergency line?" I called out, and the guy replied, as he jumped down from the cab, "I'm here because I heard you ran outta heating oil." Across the street, the horses at the horse farm stood still in the field, the fog of their breath, every so often, before them. I dressed in long johns, jeans, and many shirts. I dressed in a scarf, gloves, and hat. I found my watch, outside, in the passenger seat of my car, half an hour slow. The delivery man was stowing the hose just as Hack, the horse farmer, showed up. We waved goodbye to the truck as it bounced out, a loud pulse in reverse, onto the crown of the dirt road. "This watch was outside overnight," I said. "It's half an hour slow. Do you know what that means? A link between weather and time. When it's really cold, time slows down." Hack stood there, shivering. "It ain't that cold," he said. "Hack, if you, Mr. Lower Peninsula, are shivering, it's cold. Look at those horses. It's so cold, they don't know what to do." It

looked like the wind had frozen his face half an inch from a smile. I could see his teeth. "All righty," I said. "The wife says that Benny's getting after them horses again," Hack said. "Says he's been running them around. Me, I don't care, it's just exercise, but they ain't none of our horses, we're just boarding them. So she sent me over here to straighten that out." He kicked some ice and spat. "I'm sorry, Hack. We'll walk him on a leash from now forward." A week earlier, Pattiann and I had been petting one of the horses when he bit me on the shirt and started dragging me, again and again, into the planks of the fence. I had to punch him as hard as I could, between the eyes, to get loose, and he staggered backward, to clear his clock. "According to the wife, it's because of Mt. St. Helens, the winter. All the crap in the air after it erupted. Me, I've seen it colder'n this. This ain't so bad." Pattiann came out the door with Benny, who trotted over to Hack. "Hey there," said Hack, patting him on the head. "Yeah," I said, "we threw him in bed with us last night, on account of the heating oil being out. It was a one dog night." Hack started off to the horse farm, waving without looking back. "Have you been running the horses around?" I said to Benny. He looked at Pattiann. He looked at me. He said, "Awroo?" as if his newfound spot in the human bed were jeopardized. He repeated himself, "Awroo?" before eyeing the horses, who eyed him, the old fears and fat gallop of their symbiosis dashed.