

JENNY

The first time I saw her she was backing out of Grandpa's horse trailer. Her broad muscled rump, her long black tail swishing.

I'd never seen a horse this close up. Deep brown, oiled, like our cedar chest. Small ears, delicate black ankles. Grandpa told me, as the oldest girl, I was going to ride her the rest of the way to the farm. Five miles. We were half way up the hill, near Shattucks' place. Grandpa explained she was a Morgan horse and would ride easy. "All you have to do is hang onto the reins and pull back if she goes too fast." I'd never been on any horse except ponies at the fair. They were held back and roped.

I could hardly breathe at first. Grandpa threw me a striped woolen blanket: "Throw it over her back." He put the saddle by my feet: "Lift it and place it gently on top of the blanket." I could barely lift it.

"I want to get to know her."

"It will be dark by then."

So it was "cinch her up" and "always mount from the left" and I was up, as high as the truck's top and scared down to my keds.

Jenny's skin rippled, telling me she was alive underneath me. I touched her bristly mane. It felt like the ends of a Navajo rug, something I could hang onto. Her skin felt warm and I wanted my hands to stay there a long time. Grandpa fed her an apple and she chewed like a lady with her mouth shut. But the sound echoed through her head like sounds in an underground cave that had no end. All the while she didn't turn to meet me or look at all, yet I knew she saw my twelve-year-old uncertainty, my curious hope and scrawny legs hoisted up over her. And I felt her body's patience, as if we both wanted me to ride her now.

Jenny seemed older than any adult I knew. Smarter than any farm animal. Smart like some people are. It seemed right I would always look up at her, that she would always be more than me. Yet she let me ride on her back as if we both wanted it that way. As if we'd made an agreement a long time ago, before I was born. Her ears were pricked up, ready for my call.

Donna L. Emerson