

## A Kind of Holiness

Helen Mayers rode north using the established riding trail that led past King Avenue. She had to dismount and lead her horse across at the light, the traffic throbbing while she walked him. Remounted, she continued north along the old county road, gravel for all the years she'd lived in Billings, but recently paved. She rode in the ditch on the west side of the road. The trail climbed steadily toward the timbered hills west of the sandstone ridge that enclosed metropolitan Billings to the east.

Bromegrass and Montana bluejoint, pale brown in the late-winter cold, waved in the westerly wind. Dirt and small gravel with an occasional larger rock outlined the trail, along with a few snowbanks decaying in the lee of the ditch. She'd ridden this stretch several times a week all fall and winter. The horse knew the route and moved out smoothly. She lifted the reins, squeezed her calves and pushed him into a jog to ease her ride. She had to hold him back -- just a light touch, easy, easy, just a little -- to keep him from swinging into a trot. He responded beautifully and she smiled her pleasure. The pace was twice as fast as a walk, eating up the miles. She also knew that the jog showed off the animal, his muscles working, head bobbing from side to side in his slow, easy prance. People in their cars looked, slowing. She waved, a little proud, glad she had spent the extra money on her saddle and bridle, the contrasting scarlet of the saddle blanket.

Helen Mayers loved this, this riding on a beautiful, powerful animal. Her father, a lifetime horseman, would be so proud of her. They always had saddle-horses around on the homestead up north. She rode in front of her father as an infant, then behind the saddle when she got older, then was given her own horse, Whitey, when she was eight. She rode him constantly until he died of colic when she was twelve. Horses became iconic for her, and as she got older

she rode her father's lively mounts on roundups and trailing cattle, competed in barrel racing.

Why did she stop? She moved to Billings, took business classes, wore town clothes and began her work in the bank where she met Larry. Somehow, with marriage, then having the dairy farm dropped on them so early with Larry's parents' deaths, then her two children, she lost her younger self. A horse desert of over 40 years. It took the shock of selling out the dairy cattle and then selling the land to get her horse-loving self back.

This was her thinking time. And her thinking was that Larry worried her. He seemed to be adrift this winter with nothing to keep him occupied. What good was the 12 million in Stockman's Bank? That's what they'd been paid for the 160 acres, now scattered with new housing. A man had to be occupied. He no longer had 180 cows to milk. And he didn't look right. He'd lost weight, and not in a good way. His clothes hung on him, and he had a general look of untidiness.

The only pleasure he seemed to take was in their grandson, Patrick. The two of them, grandfather and three-year-old grandson, drove to town together for a small toy or bag of chips. Patrick took to walking like Larry, imitating Larry's posture at the table, which made the adults smile.

But now Patrick was in a preschool each afternoon, so Larry didn't even have that. One of the new move-ins in the housing project had started a school for the kids, and Patrick's mother, Barbara, enrolled him, walking him over every afternoon. He loved the school, but it worried Helen that it took one more source of joy away from Larry.

She was glad they had made the decision to build a new house. She hoped it would give Larry a focus. Let him make all the decisions, work with the contractor Sandy Vogel had recommended. She could see him walking the site, bossing the electrician or the plumber. It

would be good for him. Let him drive them crazy. Helen smiled. The blueprints were rolled up on the kitchen table. They were supposed to break ground in a week. The surveyor had finished and the stakes with ribbons flying already pounded into the cold ground.

And she had been spending money. She bought two small houses over on the east side of town, older places, respectable but in the way the market was, not too expensive. They were for her sisters who were both living in sub-standard housing. Nice houses, in good shape, with small yards and off-street parking. Helen retained title, and her sisters had only to pay the taxes and upkeep. The lawyer had set it up so the title would revert to each of them upon her death. Something to do with postponing taxes she didn't understand. It was fun just writing out a check for something so out of reach for the two people she loved. The three of them went out to lunch to celebrate. Helen was thrilled to be able to help them in such a substantial way.

She usually rode up to the first set of hills and turned back, giving her a ride of ten miles altogether. It took about an hour, gradually uphill heading north, then the easy downhill ride going back to the farm.

This afternoon she made lasagna. She had it all put together in the fridge, left a note for Barbara to make a tossed salad when she and Patrick returned from the school, and to pop the baking dish in the oven at 4:30. They worked well together now. Barbara was so willing to pitch in. She seemed so changed, no sign of the drug thing. Barbara seemed healthy and thriving after all the years of chaos. It was wonderful to have her daughter back, her real daughter. It made it easier for Helen to take this time to indulge herself.

Off to the west a half mile, a white grocery bag from Safeway that had been stuck to a weed came loose in a burst of wind. It tumbled over, scooting high and becoming airborne for a

time. It skipped and tumbled over Russian thistle and fireweed as it neared the barbed wire fence by the road. Another burst of wind carried it through the wire and bounced it under the horse's front legs as Helen happened to be looking right, waving at a car full of children, Helen inattentive just at that moment.

The explosion of the horse, the instinctive reaction of a panicked, athletic animal in his full prime launched Helen Mayers clear of the saddle and suddenly there was no horse under her. She tumbled backwards, sprawling, legs and hands windmilling for purchase. A white rock about the size of a basketball was in the exact position to intercept her head. No one heard the crack as her head hit the rock, or the sickening thud when her body hit the bottom of the ditch. No one saw the flush of blood from her skull flow over the rock.

The horse ran a few steps and, realizing there was no rider, and that the fearsome plastic thing had disappeared, he stopped and began grazing placidly on the wisps of brown grass thirty feet up the ditch, the reins dragging to the side so he didn't step on them.

In that moment Helen Mayers' two sisters became homeowners.

The SUV with the kids in it stopped. A man opened the driver's door and stood, looking back at the horse and the figure on the ground. He turned and said something to the woman in the passenger seat, then closed the door and walked carefully back toward the form on the ground. He stared for a moment, looked from the woman to the horse and pulled out a cell phone. "Yeah there's been an accident, looks like a fatality on County Road North, just up from King." There was a moment of listening. "Yeah, saw the whole thing. Yeah, I'll wait." He closed his phone and walked back to his car. "It's bad. Poor woman. You go on home and take the kids. They don't need to see this. Come and get me when I call, okay?" He thought for a moment looking back at the placid horse grazing. "We got an apple or anything in the grocery bag?" He came back

slowly with an apple in his hand, a Braeburn, his favorite. He approached the horse, the apple extended. The horse looked at him a moment, then sniffing the apple, extended his neck for a bite. The man gave him the whole thing and slipped his hand on the cheek-strap, then picked up the reins. He led the chomping, drooling horse to the fence and tied the reins around a fence post. He heaved a sigh of relief, and just then heard the siren.

He called 911 back. “You’re going to need someone with horse experience here.” A moment of listening. “Yes, I said horse. You got that? Yeah, I’m waiting, don’t worry.” He sat down on the side of the road near Helen Mayers, looking from the woman to the horse.

Barbara Mayers walked Patrick toward home down the main curved road of the new development. Four in the afternoon and all the construction was in full swing on her family’s former alfalfa field, crews swarming over every house, noise and dust from several places. She wended her way among the trucks and sandpiles, protecting Patrick from stepping on something dangerous. That’s what she was doing when she heard a siren out on King, the flashing lights turned north up the county road. *Somebody’s having a bad day.*

Back at the house Barbara found her mother’s note, got the Lasagna out of the fridge, laid it on the table and started the oven. She turned on the TV in the living room for Patrick, the afternoon kid’s shows on PBS, then pulled the vegetables out of the crisper and started sorting and chopping them.

Sandy Vogel had just come out of the construction office. He needed to drive into the County Office for a six o’clock approval meeting on the next 24 houses. As usual, he couldn’t help but gaze with a little pride across the development, new streets, houses in all states of

construction, gangs of workers.

He was just getting in his truck when he saw Helen Mayers' horse being led along the street south toward the old farmstead by a deputy sheriff. He made a detour to intercept the horse. He shouted. "Hey." The man stopped and Sandy caught up with him. "This is Helen Mayers' horse, right?"

The man didn't answer. "You know the Mayers?"

"Yeah, Working with them on a house plan. I see her riding this horse about every day."

"What's your name?"

Sandy told him.

"You're the supervisor running this thing?" He gestured to the houses.

"Yes."

"Could you say you're a friend to the Mayers?"

"Sure. What's going on here, officer. There been an accident?"

The man just looked at him. "You might be of help to me. I have to notify the family of Mrs. Mayers' demise. Would you come with me? It might help to have a friend there."

Sandy stared. "What, Helen?"

"Yes."

"How? Good God!"

"Don't have the full story yet. Seems the horse dumped her off. We're still investigating."

"Well, I have a meeting. But, yeah, if you think I can help."

Five minutes later the oven made its ready sound and Barbara popped in the Lasagna. She was cleaning up the vegetable peelings at the sink when she saw out the kitchen window her

mother's horse being led by two men out on the lane. One was Sandy Vogel, the other was a cop of some kind. They stopped and tied the horse to the yard fence and continued to the house.

She opened the door just as Sandy reached to knock. "Where's Mom?"

"May we come in?" The officer stepped forward.

"Sandy, what's going on? Where's my mother?" Barbara seemed to have trouble breathing. Something was happening. It was the way the men looked, solemn, oddly quiet, watching her.

"Let's sit down inside, ma'am." This was the cop with his leather and wool authority, but he said it gently.

She stepped back to let them in, but grabbed Sandy's hand as he went by. "What the hell is it, Sandy?"

Sandy took her hand as if she was a child and led her to the table. He pulled out a chair for her and she sat. What else could she do? She was trembling.

The policeman spoke. "I'm Deputy Daniel Baily of the Yellowstone County Sheriff's office. What's your name?"

Sandy answered. "This is Barbara Mayers. She's Helen's daughter."

The cop leaned back and looked around. "Is there anyone else in the house?"

"My boy, Patrick." She gestured to the sound of the TV in the living room.

Sandy spoke here with the gentlest of sounds, which frightened her more. "Is Larry around?"

"I don't know where he is. He left in his pickup earlier today."

The sheriff's deputy spoke. "Okay. Your mother, Helen Mayers, passed away about an hour ago. We're here to notify you and to offer any help we can."

“How?” Barbara’s voice almost didn’t work. It came out a croak. She was having trouble; her vision seemed jittery. That ambulance turning north came back to her.

“We don’t know. There was a witness. It had to do with the horse. Trouble of some kind.”

In her future life, whenever she smelled lasagna baking, it would always take her back to this time with these two men in her mother’s old kitchen and the late winter/spring scene out the window and the useless flags flying on stakes out in the cold wind where now a new house would never be built, and her mother’s voice would never sound again and all the good, small things her mother accomplished were ended. And Sandy Vogel stood and took her in his arms while she keened miserably against his shoulder. And when that was done after several minutes, she could never be sure. She hoped it was only a few minutes but time seemed not to exist and her voice just ran out of the keening at some point. It might have been an hour. She asked, “Where is she?” But her voice sounded funny, little girlish, which she hated in other women.

“They took her to Yellowstone Valley Hospital.” Where she herself, Barbara, had been born and Fred, too, and that reminded her she needed to call Fred and her aunts and Uncle Orville. Now it was her turn to bear this burden to others.

That’s what they had done to her with their notification. So now, in spite of how gentle and sweet the cop was, she could hate him fully, irrationally for this moment.

The cop asked what he should do with the horse and Barbara was tempted to tell him to take out his big, black pistol and shoot him in the head. “There’s a stall on the left in the barn. Some hay stacked in front. Give him no more than a quarter of a bale. The saddle and bridle you can hang on one of the gates where the horse can’t get to it.” She tried to smile, but it didn’t work and she thanked him. He left.

But Sandy stayed because a newly orphaned woman shouldn’t be left alone, or because



he also felt something from their embrace. She didn't know. They sat kitty-corner from each other at the table and she realized she had taken her mother's usual chair and that seemed just right. And when Deputy Daniel Baily called her for a date several months later, she turned him down a little harder than she needed to and felt a little bad later, but she couldn't imagine dating him even if her life wasn't the same.

Now she poured some coffee for Sandy and they talked about her mother, which was surprisingly comforting while the lasagna baked, the vegetables wilted and the faucet in the sink dripped like it did, slowly.

During the conversation which was otherwise commonplace, she noticed random things in the kitchen, the dishtowels embroidered by her mother, or that stupid three-sided white colander Helen had for years used to strain her homemade cottage cheese, something her mother held onto as if someone was going to someday bring a milk cow back to the place. There it was sitting on the back of the counter, useless. And whenever she became conscious of these objects, she teared up again, stunned by the enormity of her loss.

Sandy's cellphone rang several times during their conversation but he ignored it, and she admired him for that, too. Then, in spite of her need for him to stay, she realized how selfishly she was behaving. "I'm sorry. You have a thousand things to do and here I am droning on. I need to make all those calls."

He didn't reply, but took out his cell and pushed a button. "June, will you come over to the Mayers' for a while. Barbara needs your help."

And she heard for the first time, really, Sandy say her name, and the intonation with which he said it. She wanted to be held again. She could make sure of that, somehow. Inwardly she rolled her eyes and scolded herself. Her mother dead and here she was scheming for the

touch of this man, and this, too, set her tears off, a mixture of grief and shame.

Sandy stopped the call. "She'll be over in a minute, then I need to leave. Have June take over with Patrick and the meal while you make your calls. She can stay until someone in your family gets here." He put away his cell phone. "Your dad have a cell?"

"No. He always says he doesn't need to lug around any of those damned gadgets. He's probably over at the feed store. I'll call there first. But he knows when supper is on. He'll be here by then for sure."

For the first time, waiting for Sandy's 17 year-old daughter, June, they were silent for a moment. Outside she noticed the sun had set and the shadows growing. It just started coming out of her. "I was a horrible daughter, Sandy. I was secretive and manipulative. I took terrible advantage of her for all my teenage years. And then for a decade I ran from her, thought she was stupid and silly and ugly, an embarrassment."

Sandy shook his head. "Barbara, I'm sure it wasn't that bad."

But she was off in her own memories, hurrying along. "It was only these last few months that we became close." The tears were coming again, but Barbara held it back. "If it wasn't for her I wouldn't have Patrick. She saw to everything, the lawyers, all that custody crap." The flood came again. He stood and lifted her from the chair and held her while she struggled for control.

They were in that embrace when a tap on the door jarred them apart. Sandy went to open it. Barbara heard him murmuring a moment, then he and June came back to the table. June looked shocked, wide-eyed and pale.

Sandy gave June instructions. "There's Patrick to take care of, and supper to get on. Barbara needs to make a number of calls and she'll need all her..." And here he stumbled a bit for the word. "*Resources* to concentrate on that." His voice went a little blubbery at the end and

he was looking at Barbara as he spoke. Then he shifted to June. "Can you stay for the time being? Everything at the office okay?"

June nodded, but looked frightened, pale. Barbara realized at that moment how young and untried this girl was, how inexperienced. Barbara felt both deeply grateful and ancient. Sandy strode toward the door. "I just have time to make my meeting. I'll try to get back later." And he was gone.

June stood by the stove, Barbara sitting in the chair by the old timey table, with the tacky checkered oilcloth. June had just been at her desk in the office waiting for quitting time after a busy day, classes in the morning at West High, then the whole afternoon chasing down a shipment of toilets lost near St. Louis for the next section of houses. Well, she admitted to herself, she was also mooning over Steve Jensen, who'd been flirting with her for weeks, but hadn't called for a date.

Then her dad called her to the old farmhouse next door and this Barbara person who she'd never really met, only seen from a distance walking that boy through the construction every day. Now June felt odd, shaken. The horse woman, Helen, dead? It didn't seem real. But here was poor Barbara's face streaked, her eyes swollen from tears.

The oven made that tinny, crackling sound, heating or cooling, and brought her back to her mission here. "I'm sorry about your mom." June hesitated. *What do you say about this death thing?* "It's such a shock."

June looked around the room, a museum. A framed cross-stitch declaring the house blessed; a print of an old-fashioned teenage couple courting over a garden-gate among flowers and trees, so kitschy; a shelf of cookbooks held up by statuary Holstein cow bookends. She

recognized both the *Better Homes and Gardens* and the *Betty Crocker* cookbooks her own mother used. The one on the end sported a circular burn mark on the front from an inattentive cook. A badly finished board on the wall leading to the entryway with hooks for keys. A small, gray purse hung from one of them, and stirred a tremor. June realized it was probably Helen's.

"Thank you for coming over, June." Barbara stood, but she wobbled a little and grabbed onto the table edge. "Let me introduce you to Patrick." June followed the woman into their living room. Barbara wore jeans and a loose blue tee-shirt, but seemed somehow transformed even in her ordinary clothes by the status of grief.

The living room was more of the same, a 1940s nightmare. June couldn't help but cringe a little. *Old people and their stuff*. The little blond boy sat on the floor watching a Sesame Street spinoff of some kind, much too close to the TV, a set that was itself a generation behind, clunky with its slightly fuzzy picture and oval screen.

Barbara went back to the kitchen to start her calls. Patrick was occupied. June consulted the bookshelf, looking for something to read to the boy -- a full set of old Encyclopedia Britannica. On the other shelf was a copy of *Trails Plowed Under* about the artist Charley Russell, a religion of its own in Montana, several other Montana history books, some Zane Gray novels. There was also a crosswise stack of old *Farm Journals* and a matching stack of Burpees seed catalogs. It was just like the bookshelf of her grandparents up in Peerless, the same stuff from the primitive Fifties. June found what she was looking for, a tattered, yellowed copy of *The Boy Who Fooled the Giant*, thick with dust on the bottom shelf.

Ten minutes later Patrick was putty in her hands, sitting on her lap in a big, old armchair, listening to her read the book. The TV had been turned off. While she read about the small boy and the doomed, stupid giant, she heard Barbara's voice in the kitchen making calls, telling the

same dreadful story of death. A story, altered slightly for each party. The voice began to be practiced, but after a number of calls, began to sound tired. There were intermittent tears. Calls came in, the phone making its old-fashioned ring, a land-line obviously. The oven buzzed and June heard Barbara step over, take out the lasagna and clunk it on the stove.

The kid was mesmerized. Had nobody ever read to him? About the dozenth time through, Barbara rescued her. "I'll need to take him upstairs and change his clothes. Company coming." She saw the book and smiled. "That was my book when I was little. My mother must have saved it." June saw how beautiful Barbara could be in the right light and it made her heart hurt.

Barbara picked Patrick up from June's lap. "Would you mind dishing the lasagna? Four plates. One for yourself. Milk is in the fridge. I think the salad is a lost cause." Barbara led the boy up the stairs just as a flash of lights from the lane indicated someone coming.

June opened drawers until she found the knife and sliced the lasagna into four-inch squares. She found the spatula sticking out of an ancient, yellowed cookie jar, some kind of applique in roses almost worn off the side. Then she saw the note, one of those yellow sticky things on the counter by the range. *Barbara, put the lasagna in at 4:30. 45 minutes, 375 degrees. Fix a tossed salad. Thanks.*

It was written in a beautiful hand and she realized it had been written by Helen in the moments before she left to ride her horse, the last message in her life. It made the lasagna seem sacramental. She tried to be extra careful as she sectioned it and lifted the pieces onto the waiting plates. She had never been to church, but it felt religious. It seemed the least she could do, even if no one ever ate it. The last dish in a long life of providing. She turned teary from the thought.

She had just dished out the plates when an older man came through the back door. He stopped short when he saw her, standing surprised in his John Deere jacket, red suspenders and

worn jeans. “Who the hell are you?”

June wanted to disappear. She knew she shouldn't be in this room with Larry Mayers who was still innocent and unknowing, who still lived in the world of a living wife, a world of a still functioning marriage and children and a shared life. She called up the stairs, ignoring Larry Mayers. “Barbara your dad's here.”

Barbara came down immediately carrying Patrick, bless her. The boy was half-dressed. June took him and helped him back up the stairs, escaping the coming revelation and anguish.

She found the right bedroom and finished dressing the boy in the shirt and pants laid out on the bed. He stared at her passively. Then he smiled, and bashfully turned his head when she winked. She led him to the bathroom, killing time, closing the door to the voices downstairs. They made faces in the mirror. She got him laughing.

A few minutes later she ventured out. She moved down the hall and she noticed markings on the wall above the stairs and stopped. In pencil it said *Frederick* and *Barbara* and beneath each name lines accompanied by ages and dates. Helen Mayer had kept track of her children's heights. June caught her breath at the care and pride of such a mother. She stared at the arrangement for a moment. An idea came to her and she acted on it. She led Patrick into the bedroom. He trusted her by then and stood by while she rummaged in a desk. She found a ruler and a pencil. At the hallway wall she wrote *Patrick* beside the other names, then stood him against the wall. She whispered, “stand still.” He did, looking up at her in wonder, and she drew the line and put the date next to it. The date of his grandmother's death.

She stood back, remembering the few times she had waved to Helen Mayers from the office step, the elderly woman on that beautiful horse. A bubble of regret rose that June had never called to her, never talked to her. Never, ever, ever. A new understanding of death came to her,

that granite finality. A shiver flushed through her body. All this while emotional voices continued below. Then June hesitated, took a breath and stepped down the stairs with Patrick.

An enraged male voice saying, “I told her she shouldn’t buy that damned horse. Even the guys at the ranch up there in Roundup told her it was too much horse for her. But no, she could handle any horse, ‘I been riding since before I could walk’, she says. ‘I can handle any horse,’ she says. Got her back up about it. Wouldn’t listen to me or anybody. They had an older nag that would’a been fine. No, she had to have that fancy, skittish cayuse, and now just look.” Larry Mayers broke up into tears on the final sentence.

June reached the bottom of the stairs just as the front door opened and a mass of people came in. Suddenly the room was crowded with crying, hugging family. She sidled over to Barbara at the table and slipped Patrick into her lap.

Barbara gave a wan almost-smile. “Thanks, June. Come back in a few days. We’ll talk.”

More cars were coming down the farm lane when she left, and she moved to the side and trudged around the corner back to the construction office in the darkness. She looked up. The wind had dropped and the stars were out. The Big Dipper hung northeast over the city. June stood and gazed at the stars. She had that feeling again, something strange. She thought it might be a kind of holiness. She didn’t know. That’s the word she gave for it, anyway.