

## 1

She's what, in her late fifties, and that's the kind estimate. Truth is, she feels older and she knows she looks older. This afternoon, with the long June sunlight steaming through the streaky schoolhouse windows, she feels the lines burrowing into her face, the flesh sliding down her neck. She's been facing the weather too long, she's got a temper like a bad windstorm, and she's too old to be starting over. She knows what the neighbors are wondering, and she wonders, herself. What the hell is Corey Henry going to do with herself, now that the Mill Creek school has finally closed, and how much hell is her old dad liable to raise with her for it?

Still doesn't seem possible to her. She has to say it to believe it. The school's not just closed for the summer, but closed. Closed. Down.

Hardly seems worthwhile to sweep the schoolroom floor before she leaves for good. None of the usual June chores seem worth doing. She's erased the chalkboard, that was automatic, and she's put dust covers over the three computers, she's done that much. Hailey

Doggett's been talking about holding a schoolyard sale in a week or two, get rid of the small stuff that way, he said. Probably he'll buy up some of it himself, seeing as he's going to be home-schooling his girls, Ariel and Rose, from now on.

Until Hailey started talking about the sale, it hadn't occurred to Corey to wonder what became of schoolhouse gear when a school closed down. Had to have happened often enough, beginning after World War II, fifty years ago, when the highways started getting paved and the schools started to consolidate. It's a new world now, the beginning of a new century, and all the country schools are long gone, sold for salvage lumber or hauled off and turned into granaries with a clutter of folders and abandoned textbooks and construction-paper cutouts bleaching in sun and dust or buried under tons of bushels of wheat. In all of Murray County, only the Mill Creek school has withstood the years of consolidation by being incorporated into a private school by a community resisting change, then trapped in some kind of goddamn time warp, and Corey Henry with it. But now it's done for, and so is its teacher.

She thinks this clutter will likely stay where it lies.

The handbell. She guesses she could take it home with her, to remind herself how many recesses she's rung in. Hailey probably won't care if she takes it. And what if he does.

And so she walks out the schoolhouse door for the last time with the handbell clanging in pure air until she puts a finger on the clapper to silence it. Turns the key in the door, on account of the computers. Hides the key under the steps for Hailey. The world has changed, after all, even up here at the head of Mill Creek, and who knows which new neighbor or carload of kids from town might come snooping around.

The schoolhouse sits on what some would call view property, but was nothing but a useless knob of pine pasture in 1912, when the neighbors pitched in to build their children a school overlooking foothills that would have receded then as they recede today, from green to blue in serrated ranks of pines rising to the long white crest of the Snowy Mountains. It's the familiar that's giving Corey pause, the way the hills roll as they always have. Her next step will be into the unfamiliar, and she's afraid to take it, afraid she's losing her balance.

But from the patch of fresh grass, the young mare raises her head at the end of her picket rope, sharpens her ears against the blue and whinnies. Corey comes alive again, tells herself to quit her lollygagging. She's got to get home, face her old dad, get it over with. So she goes to get the feed bucket from what once was a coal shed, is now a crazily leaning structure of boards, probably soon will be a bonfire. Holds the bucket for the mare and watches her dip her muzzle into the oats and lift, munching, with faraway eyes.

"You going to miss your ride every day, Babe?" Corey asks her, and winces at the sound of her own voice interrupting the summer sounds of grasshoppers, the swish of wind through pine needles. "We'll have to think of something," she mutters.

Babe ripples her hide at a deerfly. Corey pulls up the stake of the picket and leads her to the shed, throws the blanket across her back and then the saddle. Bridles her, bit first through wet flakes of grain, then the headstall over soft black ears, the buckling of the throat latch.

You going to give me another wild ride, Corey starts to ask, but thinks it instead, so as not to disturb the silence. She leads Babe a few paces in a semicircle, until the hump in the mare's back flattens and the cantle of the saddle settles. Then she flips her braid over her shoulder, pulls down her hat, bunches the reins and a hank of mane in her left hand, saddle horn in the right hand, and toe in the stirrup

for the quick swing up and astride. Corey's face may show her age, but her body is limber from years of riding. Babe snorts and takes several quick stiff steps, but she doesn't try to bog her head and buck.

Good girl, you're getting better, Corey says silently.

She remembers the handbell, left on the schoolhouse steps. Hesitates, thinks about riding young green Babe and ringing the bell at the same time, tells herself what the hell, and spurs Babe clattering across the gravel road to the verge, where her shod hooves are muted on grass and white clover.

Mill Creek starts at a spring high in the foothills above the schoolhouse and, freshened by other small springs, some mere bubbles of water, winds down its steep bed below the county road, glints through the aspens and chokecherries that glut the ravines, sparkles briefly over gravel, and froths through the last rotting timbers of the sawmill that give it its name. Along this road the past is creeping back, overgrowing the old Ballard hay meadows with scrub pine and aspen saplings, choking the roads and trails with grass and hawthorn brush, calling bears and cougars down from the mountains like advance scouts into last-ditch human settlement.

Riding this road, it's possible to believe that sky is still sky and air is still to breathe, that satellites aren't winding their invisible skeins through the blue, and fate in the form of Hailey Doggett can't suddenly snip a thread and change everything. Ahead is the Tendening gulch, deepening and widening to accommodate log sheds and corals and a sidehill cabin. Ranching in the foothills is too marginal to make a living, although the Tendennings still try. The gravel road cuts below their cabin, then crosses Mill Creek over a culvert and follows the natural curve of the gulch until, after five hairpin miles, it levels and turns to asphalt.

Here's where change becomes too obvious to overlook. Mill Creek widens and flows under the bridge at the bottom of the Reisenaur Hill, where Reisenaur's no longer live, and spreads itself behind the beaver dams, deep enough for trout to hover and dart under the shadows of grasses. The Reisenaur barn still stands back of the meadows where the pines have thickened and cast their cones in a widening circle of seedlings, but the house, and a poor shack it was, no bathroom, two cramped bedrooms, and a kitchen so shaded that it stayed dark even during summer afternoons, has been bulldozed away, and a new roof rises above the aspens, a redwood-and-glass A-frame with a deck and a satellite dish, belonging to the retired veterinarian who bought the place from Annie Reisenaur five years ago.

Just beyond the veterinarian's fancy gate, the road divides at the county cattle guard. Its main fork, the asphalt fork to the right, runs west past the subdivided Reisenaur meadows where Hailey Doggett has built his huge house behind his barricades of rail fences and transplanted cedars. The left fork, gravel again, turns east up the Henry Gulch.

It makes about an hour's ride for Corey, five miles from the school down to the cattle guard and another two miles back up the gulch to her old dad's place. She could shorten her ride by three miles if she'd turn past the school and open the wire gate, then cut across the old Ballard meadows and follow the trail along the ridge, but she seldom takes the shortcut. Talk is that the consortium of doctors who now own the Ballard ranch for its hunting rights are planning to padlock the gates, but while that hasn't happened yet, Corey hates feeling like she's trespassing on land she's known all her life.

So she rides the long way, past the high serene of Hailey Doggett's twenty-first-century luxury. At least the longer ride, the hour every weekday morning and the hour every afternoon, is good for Babe.

Keeping her saddle blanket wet, as her old dad says. Her old cowboy dad, Loren Henry.

This afternoon Corey remembers how many saddle blankets she's kept wet for Loren on so many colts over the years, colts sold and forgotten or grown old and died. Pepper. Tango. Pet. Polly. Remembering their names, struck by sadness at so many good and faithful horses dead and gone to bones, she wells over with tears, then shakes her head angrily and yanks what's-her-name's, Babe's, head back from snatching a mouthful of timothy that has escaped the meadow and grown over the embankment.

God damn it to hell. She guesses she needs something to bawl about. Hears herself explaining to her old dad. It wasn't my fault, Loren. Wasn't my fault we lost the school. It was that sniveling little weasel Hailey Doggett, who isn't worth the powder and shot it would take to blow him to hell. I'd wring Hailey's neck myself if I could get my hands on him. I'd walk away from his cooling corpse and never look back.

And yet, at this time of year the ride ought to be a pleasure. The sun warm on her shirt, then the cool shade of pines where the road bends to the south. The sharp tang of pine needles and just the faintest reek of mud and rotting roots at the lowest dip where Mill Creek is likely to flood over the road and freeze during spring snowmelt, if only those fools moving out from town onto their twenty-acre lots knew it. Wild geraniums bloom along the old Reisenaur barbed wire fence, paintbrush reddens the sunny hillsides. Corey thinks she'd like to resurrect her old paints and easel and try to capture these June hillsides, but the goddamn tears well up again at the thought of coloring those deep pinks and valiant scarlets, and she lashes her leg with the ends of the bridle reins until she feels the sting through her Levi's and Babe shies at the sound of the slap.

But now the creek forks, and the Henry Gulch road, as warm and worn as Corey's own skin, follows a mere trickle of water. The sun is at its hottest, the shadows of pines just beginning to lengthen and point toward home. Stone barn, stone house in the deep fold of meadows and hill pastures. Babe breaks into a spontaneous trot, anticipating her own corral and manger.

At the pole gate beside the barn, Corey eases Babe alongside with a touch of spur, reaches for the chain that loops it shut, misses when Babe snorts and side steps.

"Whoa, dammit!"

On the second try, she catches the chain and spurs just a little to push the gate open ahead of her and the mare, then spurs and neck-reins Babe around in a tight circle so she can replace the chain. Babe hates the maneuver, which runs contrary to all she's learned so far. She fights the bit and slobbers but finally pivots, with a clatter of shod hooves on gravel, until Corey can drop the chain over the pole.

"Good girl, you're catching on," Corey tells her, and Babe flicks back an ear at the tone of praise. "By the time school starts this fall, you'll be perfect."

School. Won't start again. God damn it to hell, she has to start remembering. Not that Loren is going to let her forget.

Later she will remember how, unsuspecting, she unsaddled Babe in front of the stone barn. How she rolled back the wide door on its iron track, hung her saddle on its rope and the bridle on its nail, then brushed down the sweaty mare and let her lip up a scoop of oats before she led her across the road with a twine string off a hay bale around her neck and turned her into the small pasture below the corral where Baldy, Loren's old thoroughbred stallion, lived until he died last winter. How she watched as Babe ambled a few paces and shook herself until her

wet withers rippled. Babe, a dark bay, not a white hair on her. Shows her Arab blood in the slight dish of her face and the arch of her neck, and in her gentleness, but she has the long legs and stride of Baldy, and she's fast enough for racing, if Loren wasn't dead set against racing any of his horses. Wouldn't hurt Babe, though, to be worked some on the barrels this summer, as long as nothing is said in front of Loren about competition barrel racing.

Corey drags up the barbed-wire gate, sets its pole in the bottom of the two wire loops on the gatepost, then braces herself with her arm around the pole and leans into it to slide it under and then through the top wire loop. You got to hug a wire gate, Loren instructed her years ago, and Corey at age ten or eleven went around all summer with fine red blisters like stitches sewn into her right arm and shoulder from hugging hard gates closed. Now she straightens from the gate and looks down the slope of road past the log springhouse, the outcropping of sandstone boulders, and the hawthorn brush that crowds the old root cellar with its door hanging off its hinges. Doesn't matter, the root cellar hasn't been used for years, and neither have the three long log chicken sheds, collapsing in the shade of pines that overgrow the hill behind the house.

The springhouse door scrapes a half-circle on the gravel as she drags it open. The dark cool is like walking into a refrigerator with wet log walls. Sunken into the dirt floor are ancient pine two-by-twelves, rough-sawed at the mill long before Corey's time and nailed together into a square bottomless box filled with spring water that trickles over the sides and through a gap in the logs to become the creek. The box smells of saturated wood and creosote and chill, and moss grows in its cracks. Corey takes down the tin dipper from its nail, dips it full, and drinks and remembers her grandmother's wrinkled hand on the dipper. She barely believes she's seeing her own hand, scarred and spotted with her nearly sixty years.

She guesses it's an afternoon for memories. Hangs up the dipper, steps back into the late afternoon sunlight. Drags the heavy door shut and looks at the familiar scene as, she supposes, a real painter might see it. The house, heavy as a fortress with its sandstone walls and picket fence and ring of firs. Blue sky and masses of clouds floating over pale aspens in the distant draw and dark points of pines on the ridge above the hay meadow. Farther still, the outline of mountains, the blue frame of the world.

A painter could gloss it over. Smooth out the cracks in the sandstone, park the old Farm-All somewhere out of sight, trim the grass along the picket fence and get rid of the empty motor-oil cans that Loren drops wherever he gets done with them. Loren might not care if she got out her paints again, if she painted him a picture of the house and maybe some old-time cattle herds and cowboys.

Loren's red truck, gone from its usual place by the log shed. Gone to town, Corey supposes. Loren likes to drive to Fort Maginnis in the afternoons and park behind the old Majestic Hotel, where he'll limp through the service entrance and across the lobby to the coffee shop and find cronies from the stockyard crews or other old ranchers with nothing to do but sip coffee and worry about the weather and curse the federal government. But he also likes to be home for supper by five.

Corey digs her watch out of her pocket, thinking Loren should have passed her on the road home. She'd been later than usual leaving the school, and yes, it's almost five-thirty, although the long June afternoon still seems endless. She'd better get on up to the house and put her potatoes on, or Loren will be home and sulking about his late dinner, and she doesn't need that.

Eighteen-inch sandstone walls, high ceilings, and deeply recessed windows keep this house cool and dim even in June heat. Corey throws her hat on the washing machine and feels the hair lift on the back of her

neck. Smells the horsehair and grime on herself. At the sink she turns the faucet on, cold, soaps her hands and uses them to scrub her face, cowboy-style, then rinses and dries herself on the blue towel. Hangs up the towel, looks around the kitchen for signs of Loren.

There's Loren's coffee mug on the kitchen table. There's his book, facedown, and his ashtray, full of butts. And, through the arch into the front room, on his rug in a corner, is Loren's old dog, Sonny, half-blind and smelling like rotten meat but thumping his tail at the sound of her steps. Sonny has water in his dish, yes, he can wait.

Corey goes back into the kitchen, thinks about emptying Loren's ashtray into the garbage under the sink. But her knees feel weak, her arms heavy.

"Too goddamn long a day," she says aloud. She pulls out a chair and drops into it. Holds her head in her hands.

After a few minutes she looks to see what Loren has been reading. One of his old Louis L'Amour novels. Anybody would think he'd know them all by heart. Her feet feel hot and swollen in her boots, but she can't work up the energy to lean over and yank them off. She thinks about heating up a cup of the cold coffee left in the pot, decides it's too much trouble to move from her chair. What a day. What a day. She knows she should forget about it, but the noises buzz, a whole angry hive of neighbors' and children's voices, clamoring, quarreling, screaming good-byes, and every scream an accusation.

What has she done, what has she done.

If only the school had closed thirty years ago, when all the other country schools closed. Or if the school board had fired her twenty years ago. Or ten, even. Ten years ago she would have been forty-eight. Loren would have been seventy, and plenty able to get by without her. He would have been angry, but no angrier than he is now, and she might have escaped as far as Billings, say, where she could have taken

art classes at the state university and lived in an upstairs apartment in one of those hundred-year-old houses on a leafy street where Loren, or the likes of Hailey Doggett, would never look for her.

Knows she shouldn't, but lets herself imagine a dark hardwood floor polished and flickering with the shadows of leaves, and a single bed with clean white sheets and a white blanket, no, a white down comforter, one of the expensive ones, and a down pillow in a linen case where she can lay her head and listen to nothing but the rustle of passing time.

When her eyes snap open, daylight still shows at the window, but its edge has filtered away, leaving the sky whitish, and she knows her day-dream has spun away the time. Or has she slept. Her vague anxiety feels like the leftovers of a real dream. And oh hell the time, it's nearly seven, she must have slept for over an hour in the chair, no wonder her neck feels broken. Something dark has just run past the window, and yes she has been dreaming, but no this is real, and there runs another and another.

Yearling calves, running loose, along the picket fence.

Corey leaps up, snatching her hat from the washing machine as she runs. Yes, the yearlings, the Angus yearlings or most of them, seven or eight anyway, spilling down the road from the upper pasture. Damn them, damn them. Next they'll be in her garden. She'll take the red truck—but the red truck is gone, Loren hasn't come home at nearly seven o'clock, nearly twilight, and Loren never drives after dark.

Corey sprints for the barn, her braid batting behind her. Snatches the bridle off its nail and whistles in Babe with a few flakes of oats, bridles her and swings up, bareback, which surprises the young mare, who takes an uneasy sidestep, but Corey has no time for her nonsense and kicks her into a lope.