

## Madonna

One night in November there was a fire in the basement of the classroom building. The sisters gathered in the field to watch it, the taste of supper and vespers still on their tongues. Nobody knew where to fetch the groundskeeper, not even his wife, and the custodian's shack only had a small pail. Sister Clarence asked aloud if they should ring the fire department in Fort Wayne, fifteen miles south. She received the silence she expected; they all knew the town would not help. Fortunately the building was a brick structure with little for the fire to claim.

As the vapors dwindled to threads, somebody remembered that Sister Mary Edward was supposed to have been teaching an evening class. Suddenly an urgent fear plucked at their necks and the women lifted their hems to race inside. The first two stories were strangely clear of smoke, but they found the air on the third floor hot and cindery. Habits pressed over their noses, coughing, they opened windows to let

out the smoke. Sister Xavier reached the last classroom and found Sister Mary Edward lying prone. She had slid down the chalkboard and gotten a streak of lime dust on her cheek. Four young laywomen, in varying poses of attention at their desks, were scrutinizing the lesson on the board. They were corpses.

Father Kleier returned the next afternoon from seeing the bishop in Fort Wayne. An undertaker had arrived before him to prepare the deceased, and Kleier was left with only the nuns, among them the speechless Xavier, to account for the catastrophe. Not content to listen, he postponed mass and hurried to the building. The basement smelled of soot, water condensed on its walls like black tears. The furnace stood obscenely alone among the ashes of unknown things. Kleier made a harsh clearing sound in his throat.

“Someone overfilled it with coal.”

Sister Clarence had followed him. She stamped her foot on a scrap.

“Newspaper. Only took a spark.”

Kleier peered at the ceiling. “You said there was no smoke on the first two levels.”

“All the vents were shut.”

“The fellow would know you can’t do that.”

“It could’ve been his mistake.”

“Bother,” Kleier said.

“Maybe he thought it would keep the ladies warmer upstairs. We don’t even

know he was the one put in the coal.”

“You believe this was an accident?”

“I don’t want to think it of anyone,” she said. “Who were those girls to anybody? Only teachers.”

“So we’ve nobody but God to blame.”

He heard her sniffing, and counseled himself against anger. She was in her thirties but had probably never stepped outside Indiana, a country girl disposed to trusting. “I just have a suspicion,” he said, softer. “I would want the police to look into it.”

“You would, except...?”

“Except it could’ve been the Klan. The sheriff is friendly with them.”

“They would do this at a teachers college?”

“They fear us. They don’t want our girls taking jobs in the public schools.” He moved past Clarence, away from the scent of burning iron. “Suppress any gossip among the sisters,” he told her. “I have to find Coy. Don’t tell anyone what we spoke about.”

Coy was chopping at the brittle grass beside the chapel. He wore the grimy snap-brim hat he usually saved for summer. “What do you have to say?” Kleier asked.

Coy set down his scythe. His eyes were yellow and flat. “I don’t know, Father. You’re the one come to see me.”

“According to the sisters, you couldn’t be found last night. You could’ve been

useful to us. Where were you, drinking?”

“I didn’t have a drop till this morning, when I heard,” Coy said. “Those poor ladies.”

Coy’s smell testified to the whiskey, but Kleier felt less certainty about his grief.

“Can you tell me why you shoved all that coal in the furnace?”

“I didn’t do nothing to the furnace.”

“You’re the only one ever tending it.” Kleier’s attention strayed toward the scythe. “Why’d you shut all the vents? Tell me that.”

Coy fingered a loose button over his ribs. “I didn’t do that. I ain’t got a thing against anybody here.”

“Was it because of Jeannette? Did you think we deserved it?”

“If you really thought I done anything with that gal, you would’ve got rid of me by now. But here I am.”

Kleier’s fist hardened. He wore a silver signet ring with the crest of his order, and he could see his knuckle printing it on Coy’s lip. “I let you stay because there’s not another soul in this state who’d be caught working these grounds.” He pivoted from Coy, still aware of the scythe in the grass, seeing his martyrdom smeared on the blade. Yet a tendril of doubt curled around his stomach. Some bleakness about the crime was unmatched with Coy—his clumsiness, his impulses. The devil seemed to have done it and left them to seek a culprit among themselves. “The sheriff will call it an accident,” he said. “But someone will have to answer for it. All we can do is pray

for those girls.”

Coy rolled a hank of phlegm in his cheek and spat, discreetly, away from the chapel. “Don’t see no help in it now.”