

MADONNA

Anthony Otten

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 dinner and vespers still on their tongues. It was a brick structure with little for the fire to claim. Nobody knew where to fetch the groundskeeper, not even his wife, and the custodian's shack only had a small pail for mopping. Feeling an obligation, Sister Clarence asked aloud if they should go ring the fire department in Fort Wayne, fifteen miles south. She received the silence she expected; the women knew the town would not help. Decorum might force an excuse: a punctured tire, the drought emptying everybody's wells. And the sister on the telephone would say, "Bless you anyway," and her heart would pucker and she would struggle to put down the receiver gently.

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.

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 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," Kleier said.

"It could've been his mistake."

"Bother."

"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?" he asked her.

"I don't want to think it of anyone," she said. "And who were they 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."

"But a teachers college?" she asked.

“They fear us,” Kleier said. “They don’t want our girls 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. I’ll put him on the rack if I have to. Don’t tell them I said that, either.”

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 dropped 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?”

Coy fingered a loose button over his ribs. “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 sprang back from him, unsteady. “You think I want them to put me in the chair? I ain’t got a thing against nobody here.”

“Was it because of Jeannette?” Kleier asked bitterly. “Did you think we deserved it?”

“What, you folks believe in working on Sundays now?” Coy said.

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 alighted in the cornfield next to campus and left them to seek a culprit among themselves, when there was no one. “The sheriff will call it an accident,” he said. “Someone will have to answer for it, though. All we can do is pray for those women.”

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

During mass that Sunday he stumbled through his Latin, and the organist pounded into the communion hymn to spare him. He might have mastered his tongue, even in his grief, if not for his vision of the worshippers as students lifting their faces toward him, their Sister Mary Edward, all authority and knowledge held in his hand as the chapel's windows flamed bright around them.

The bell was sounded, the Host rose. The people came toward him to be filled, and he fed them. He prayed aloud for the dead to enter glory, privately unable to imagine those girls nursing any sin worth a sojourn in fire. He saw their graves on farms all over the county, not yet dug from the frozen earth. He saw the rain that would fall on their stones.

Sister Casimira broke from the departing crowd of sisters to wait for him in the narthex. She didn't seem to have enough of a body to hold up her clothes. Kleier cautioned himself about anything she would say. Rather than growing less excitable in her age, she wielded her seniority to exaggerate anything she heard or saw as the worst she had ever heard, the best she had ever seen.

"Sister Cass," he said.

“I need a moment, Father,” she said. “It’s about that caretaker and his wife.”

“Then let’s step over to the rectory,” he said, his heart already toughening like leather.

They said nothing as they wound up the path to his cottage. The older he became, and the longer he lived apart from the world, the less that pleasantries felt instinctual to him. Casimira stopped beneath the trellis that bore his raspberry vine, and looked into his window. “You haven’t made your bed.”

“I didn’t sleep in it last night,” he said. “I have that excuse.”

“Do you sit up praying?”

“Only when it’s cold, like now. Otherwise I pace out in the dark. So what is it I should know about Coy?”

“That young woman,” Casimira said, with an unnecessary glance behind herself. “She came to me a few days ago.”

“This is Coy’s wife?”

“Yes. She led me apart from the sisters when we were going to mass. She’s just a little bird in a dress.”

“And what did she want?”

“She asked if I had a calendar for the feminine cycle,” Casimira said with rigid seriousness.

He would have laughed if not for fear of the offense. Why would any woman choose this sister for a fertility question?

“She was awfully shy,” Casimira went on. “But she wants to avoid the procreative times.”

“Well, she and Coy have enough trouble keeping the fat on their own bones. Add children to that and we’d have to take up a collection.”

“It’s worse than money. She’s *afraid* to have his baby. She said more than I think she meant to. Apparently he drinks himself wild, and...” Casimira pulled in her lips. “Father, she told me he didn’t come home after the fire. Not till morning.”

“Then where was he?”

“He wouldn’t tell her.”

Kleier was silent. Casimira looked both anxious and pleased now that he seemed to listen. “I have my own idea,” he said deliberately. “But I can’t say until I know. Thank you, Sister.” He turned away, then asked, “Did you give her the calendar from the almanac?”

“No, no,” she said. “But I gave her a method. I told her to—”

“That is enough to know,” Kleier said. “Thank you.”

Crossing back to the chapel, he locked himself in his office and squinted over the telephone directory. He preferred not to rely on anyone outside the Church, but it was simpler than involving the diocese, and faster than bumping back to Fort Wayne in his Studebaker. He rang the operator and asked for the home of a Lutheran pastor he knew, a man with sympathies for Rome. A woman answered in a hurried voice. Behind her there was laughter and the clashing of cutlery. “It’s dinnertime,” she said as a greeting.

He identified himself as the chaplain at Madonna College, calling on a matter that required discretion. Without a word the woman retrieved her husband, who was still chewing. “Tobias,” Kleier said. “Forgive me the hour.”

“Don’t worry, time’s not sacred—not to me,” Tobias said with a chuckle.

“I need to know if a certain woman is still in town. You’ll remember she was a teacher for us here. Jeannette Preston?”

“Indeed. She’s living at a women’s home down here. Working at the tailor’s, I think. Shame to see her on her feet, with her condition.”

He felt himself being teased. “Condition?”

“She’s expecting a child. No father around, that I can see.”

Kleier was quiet for a second. Tobias said, "But we can agree an earthly father's not always needed, can't we?"

"I'm just hoping to be wrong about something. I might be wrong."

"Well, if that's all you needed," Tobias said. "That turkey won't stay hot."

"Yes, thank you. God bless." Kleier set the phone on the hook. A suspicion crossed his brow. Then he whipped his coat over his shoulders and headed out into a piercing wind, toward the parsonage.

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The two arrived at the college the same spring, which now, to Kleier, seemed a terrible symmetry.

Coy's uncle recommended him to the job. He came up from Kentucky in a wagon with ungreased wheels whose rhythmic whine could be heard a mile before it was seen. Edith was lying on a crusty blanket in the bed, holding herself over the road to vomit. Kleier assumed it a maternal sickness, but no pregnancy ever became evident, and later he questioned himself, because of her emaciated look, if she had been ill from hunger and travel. Coy had not had work for months.

Jeannette was a parochial teacher from Tennessee, where there were even fewer Catholics, and she seemed bewildered at the presence of so many nuns

together. Kleier could not recall ever seeing Jeannette move. Instead she seemed merely to appear wherever she wanted to be, whether at mass, or dinner, or confession. She kept herself in a still posture that would have seemed imperious if not for her perennial smile and her bland green eyes; she looked to have only half the experience of her thirty years.

Kleier sensed the activity between Coy and the new teacher as he would have an intruder in his garden—not seeing anything directly, only distinguishing a footstep, a shadow. Jeannette would stop for long intervals between her classes to talk with Coy, or stand silent near him, as he cut ivy from a wall or troweled at a root left from a tree stump. He would sweep in the building whenever she taught, lingering twice as long on the floor where her classroom was. Their errands in town, their absences from house or dormitory, always seemed to correspond. With alarm, Kleier noticed cheer replacing the morose look on Coy's face. His affection for Jeannette seemed to warm his demeanor toward all the people at the college, the nuns and lay teachers, as a suitor would feel a secondhand affection for the family of a young lady he was courting. Kleier could not guess if anything had occurred, but he feared a scandal that would disillusion the students and dampen the diocese's ambition to fund the school. That was impetus enough to confer with the sisters.

Jeannette volunteered her resignation. She refused his offer of a referral to a good academy in Indianapolis, only mentioning a place she might stay in Fort Wayne. He would have preferred her farther from the college, but her willingness to leave gave him little capacity to dictate.

Coy, he found, soon became again the man who had towed a sickly wife through the country so he wouldn't be late for the midday meal. Except he was meaner, wounded in his spirit. Kleier wondered that he didn't leave the college, and Edith, altogether.

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A loose gutter clanked against the pine boards of the parsonage. Kleier stood on the porch and hugged himself in the cold. The wind persisted, but it soon brought Coy marching across the field. "Good time in town?" Kleier asked.

Coy looked up, startled. "Thought you folks didn't believe in work on Sunday."

"We don't. I was only wondering if Jeannette is well."

"I told you I never had a thing to do with her," Coy said with a scowl.

"And the child?" Kleier asked. "Were you involved with that?"

Coy took his hand from the railing. "You won't take your teeth out of me, will you? I ought to just quit this damn place."

Kleier stepped off the porch. Coy backed away from him.

"I'll save you the choice," Kleier said. "Pack everything you can into that cart, and get out. Anything that won't fit, I'll drive to Fort Wayne myself."

"What's waiting for me there, a noose?"

"No. I don't know enough to mean anything to a court. But I know enough for myself."

A defiant look of mischief. "You can't put somebody out on the Sabbath."

"You're a heathen in a heathen land," Kleier said. "Leave."

Coy glared at him and swaggered into the house. Kleier poked at the notion that he might have a gun, but he doubted any man who fed his horse better than his wife could afford bullets. Certainly not more than two.

Coy emerged without his trunk. His face had lost all its blood. "Somebody done took my wife."

Kleier tilted his head skeptically. "She might've gone to the sisters' for dinner."

Coy thumped into the rusted swing on the porch. "My horse is gone, too."

Kleier entered the house, tentative. The unstirring air was like an iced cloth on his skin. No wood in the stove. He looked out at the empty stable, turned to the kitchen. Coy must have missed the scene here. Some of his clothes lay on the table, overalls, trousers, undershirts, with a long knife stabbed through them and stuck in the table's surface. Beside this heap, a word was gouged in the wood: HER. He stared at it a long minute, then went to look in the bedroom.

Coy leapt from the swing when Kleier rejoined him. "We got to call the sheriff," he said. "He could block all the roads out of the county."

Kleier asked, "Would a kidnapper have taken all of Edith's clothes with him?"

Coy ran inside with Kleier trailing him. He yanked out the drawers in the dresser. Then he shuffled to the bed on his knees and thrust his hand under the mattress. A hoarse cry shot from his mouth. "Edie," he said. "Edie, Edie." He beat his hands on the floor. "She took it all, damn her! Three to one I'll bet she's on a train back to her daddy's! She's taken everything I have!"

And Kleier, with a sudden vision of the road to Fort Wayne, thought, No, she hasn't. Not yet.

Anthony Otten's stories have appeared in *Jabberwock Review*, *Grasslimb Journal*, *Wind, Still: The Journal*, and others. He was a finalist for the Hargrove Editors' Prize in Fiction this year. He lives in Kentucky. Find him and more of his work at anthonyotten.com.