



"They shoot the white girl first..."

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PARADISE

They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time. No need for hurry out here five miles from Fairly which has seventeen miles between it and any other town. Hiding choices are plentiful in the Convent but there is time and the day has just begun.

They are nine, over twice the number of the women they are obliged to capture or kill and they have the paraphernalia for either requirement: rope, crosses of palm leaves, handcuffs, Mace and sunglasses along with clean, handsome guns.

They have never been this deep in the Convent. Some of them have parked Chevrolets near its porch to pick up an order of honey or have gone into the kitchen for a gallon can of barbecue sauce; but none has seen the halls, the chapel, the school room, the bedrooms. Now they will. And at last they will see the cellar and expose its filth to the light that is soon to scour the Oklahoma sky. Meantime they are startled by the clothes they are wearing--suddenly aware of being ill-dressed. For in the dawn of a July day how could they have guessed the cold that is inside this place? Their t-shirts, work shirts and dashikies soak up cold like fever. Those who have worn workshoes are unnerved by the

thunder of their steps on marble floors; those in pro-
keds by the silence. Then there is the grandeur. Only
the two who are wearing ties seem to belong here and, one
by one, each remembers that before the place was a
convent, it was a gambler's folly. Bisque and rosetone
marble floors segue into teak ones. Ising glass patterns
early morning shadow on walls stripped of fabric and
white-washed thirty years ago. The ornate bathroom
fixtures which sickened the nuns were replaced with good
plain spigots, but the princely tubs and toilets they
could not exchange bordered on corruption. The
gambler's excess that could be demolished was,
particularly in the school room (once a dining room)
where stilled Arapajo girls once sat and learned to
forget.

Now armed men search rooms where macrame' baskets
float next to Flemish candalabra; where Christ and His
mother glow in niches trimmed in grape vines. Nuns
chipped away all the nymphs, but some of their hair is
still entangled in the grape leaves. The chill
intensifies as they spread through the building, taking
their time, looking, listening, alert to the female
malice that hides here and the yeast and butter smell of
rising dough.

[tk]

He looks back, this young one, forcing himself to

see how the dream might go. The woman, lying uncomfortably on the tile, waves her fingers--or seems to. So his dream is doing okay, except for its color. He has never before dreamed in such clear color.

The leading man pauses, raising his left hand to halt the silhouettes behind him. They stand, measuring their breath, making friendly adjustments in the grip of rifles and handguns. The leading man turns and gestures the separations: you two over there toward the kitchen; two more upstairs; two others into the chapel. He saves himself, his brother and the boy for the cellar.

They part gracefully without ~~sound~~^{words} or haste. Earlier, when they blew open the Convent door, the nature of their mission made them giddy. But the venom is manageable now. Shooting the first woman (the white one) has clarified it like butter: the pure oil of hatred on top, its hardness stabilized below.

Outside the mist is waist high. It will turn silver soon, even yield a rainbow or two before the sun burns it off, exposing acres of clover and maybe witch tracks as well.