

FOUR

Crossfade to a bit of garden, a bench, brick walls. Sister Aloysius, in full habit and a black shawl, is wrapping a pruned rosebush in burlap. Sister James enters.

SISTER JAMES. Good afternoon, Sister.
SISTER ALOYSIUS. Good afternoon, Sister James. Mr. McGinn pruned this bush, which was the right thing to do, but he neglected to protect it from the frost.
SISTER JAMES. Have we had a frost?
SISTER ALOYSIUS. When it comes, it's too late.
SISTER JAMES. You know about gardening?
SISTER ALOYSIUS. A little. Where is your class?
SISTER JAMES. The girls are having Music.
SISTER ALOYSIUS. And the boys?
SISTER JAMES. They're in the rectory. *(Sister James indicates the rectory, which is out of view, just on the other side of the garden.)*
SISTER ALOYSIUS. With Father Flynn.
SISTER JAMES. Yes. He's giving them a talk.
SISTER ALOYSIUS. On what subject?
SISTER JAMES. How to be a man.
SISTER ALOYSIUS. Well, if Sisters were permitted in the rectory, I would be interested to hear that talk. I don't know how to be a man. I would like to know what's involved. Have you ever given the girls a talk on how to be a woman?
SISTER JAMES. No. I wouldn't be competent.
SISTER ALOYSIUS. Why not?
SISTER JAMES. I just don't think I would. I took my vows at the beginning ... Before ... At the beginning.
SISTER ALOYSIUS. The founder of our order, the Blessed Mother Seton, was married and had five children before embarking on her vows.
SISTER JAMES. I've often wondered how she managed so much in one life.
SISTER ALOYSIUS. Life perhaps is longer than you think and the dictates of the soul more numerous. I was married.

SISTER JAMES. You were! *(Sister Aloysius smiles for the first time.)*
SISTER ALOYSIUS. You could at least hide your astonishment.
SISTER JAMES. I ... didn't know.
SISTER ALOYSIUS. When one takes on the habit, one must close the door on secular things. My husband died in the war against Adolph Hitler.
SISTER JAMES. Really! Excuse me, Sister.
SISTER ALOYSIUS. But I'm like you. I'm not sure I would feel competent to lecture tittering girls on the subject of womanhood. I don't come into this garden often. What is it, forty feet across? The convent here, the rectory there. We might as well be separated by the Atlantic Ocean. I used to potter around out here, but Monsignor Benedict does his reverie at quixotic times, and we are rightly discouraged from crossing paths with priests unattended. He is seventy-nine, but nevertheless.
SISTER JAMES. The monsignor is very good, isn't he?
SISTER ALOYSIUS. Yes. But he is oblivious.
SISTER JAMES. To what?
SISTER ALOYSIUS. I don't believe he knows who's President of the United States. I mean him no disrespect of course. It's just that he's otherworldly in the extreme.
SISTER JAMES. Is it that he's innocent, Sister Aloysius?
SISTER ALOYSIUS. You have a slyness at work, Sister James. Be careful of it. How is your class? How is Donald Muller?
SISTER JAMES. He is thirteenth in class.
SISTER ALOYSIUS. I know. That's sufficient. Is he being accepted?
SISTER JAMES. He has no friends.
SISTER ALOYSIUS. That would be a lot to expect after only two months. Has anyone hit him?
SISTER JAMES. No.
SISTER ALOYSIUS. Someone will. And when it happens, send them right down to me.
SISTER JAMES. I'm not so sure anyone will.
SISTER ALOYSIUS. There is a statue of St. Patrick on one side of the church altar and a statue of St. Anthony on the other. This parish serves Irish and Italian families. Someone will hit Donald Muller.
SISTER JAMES. He has a protector.
SISTER ALOYSIUS. Who?
SISTER JAMES. Father Flynn. *(Sister Aloysius, who has been fussing with mulch, is suddenly rigid. She rises.)*

SISTER ALOYSIUS. What?

SISTER JAMES. He's taken an interest. Since Donald went on the altar boys. *(Pause.)* I thought I should tell you.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. I told you to come to me, but I hoped you never would.

SISTER JAMES. Maybe I shouldn't have.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. I knew once you did, something would be set in motion. So it's happened.

SISTER JAMES. What?! I'm not telling you that! I'm not even certain what you mean.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Yes, you are.

SISTER JAMES. I've been trying to become more cold in my thinking as you suggested ... I feel as if I've lost my way a little, Sister Aloysius. I had the most terrible dream last night. I want to be guided by you and responsible to the children, but I want my peace of mind. I must tell you I have been longing for the return of my peace of mind.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. You may not have it. It is not your place to be complacent. That's for the children. That's what we give them.

SISTER JAMES. I think I'm starting to understand you a little. But it's so unsettling to look at things and people with suspicion. It feels as if I'm less close to God.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. When you take a step to address wrongdoing, you are taking a step away from God, but in His service. Dealing with such matters is hard and thankless work.

SISTER JAMES. I've become more reserved in class. I feel separated from the children.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. That's as it should be.

SISTER JAMES. But I feel. Wrong. And about this other matter, I don't have any evidence. I'm not at all certain that anything's happened.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. We can't wait for that.

SISTER JAMES. But what if it's nothing?

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Then it's nothing. I wouldn't mind being wrong. But I doubt I am.

SISTER JAMES. Then what's to be done?

SISTER ALOYSIUS. I don't know.

SISTER JAMES. You'll know what to do.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. I don't know what to do. There are parameters which protect him and hinder me.

SISTER JAMES. But he can't be safe if it's established. I doubt he

could recover from the shame.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. What have you seen?

SISTER JAMES. I don't know.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. What have you seen?

SISTER JAMES. He took Donald to the rectory.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. What for?

SISTER JAMES. A talk.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Alone?

SISTER JAMES. Yes.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. When?

SISTER JAMES. A week ago.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Why didn't you tell me?

SISTER JAMES. I didn't think there was anything wrong with it. It never came into my mind that he ... that there could be anything wrong.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Of all the children. Donald Muller. I suppose it makes sense.

SISTER JAMES. How does it make sense?

SISTER ALOYSIUS. He's isolated. The little sheep lagging behind is the one the wolf goes for.

SISTER JAMES. I don't know that anything's wrong!

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Our first Negro student. I thought there'd be fighting, a parent or two to deal with ... I should've foreseen this possibility.

SISTER JAMES. How could you imagine it?

SISTER ALOYSIUS. It is my job to outshine the fox in cleverness! That's my job!

SISTER JAMES. But maybe it's nothing!

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Then why do you look like you've seen the Devil?

SISTER JAMES. It's just the way the boy acted when he came back to class.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. He said something?

SISTER JAMES. No. It was his expression. He looked frightened and ... he put his head on the desk in the most peculiar way. *(Struggles.)* And one other thing. I think there was alcohol on his breath. There was alcohol on his breath. *(Sister Aloysius looks toward the rectory.)*

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Eight years ago at St. Boniface we had a priest who had to be stopped. But I had Monsignor Scully then ... whom I could rely on. Here, there's no man I can go to, and men

run everything. We are going to have to stop him ourselves.
SISTER JAMES. Can't you just ... report your suspicions?
SISTER ALOYSIUS. To Monsignor Benedict? The man's guileless! He would just ask Father Flynn!
SISTER JAMES. Well, would that be such a bad idea?
SISTER ALOYSIUS. And he would believe whatever Father Flynn told him. He would think the matter settled.
SISTER JAMES. But maybe that is all that needs to be done. If it's true. If I had done something awful, and I was confronted with it, I'd be so repentant.
SISTER ALOYSIUS. Sister James, my dear, you must try to imagine a very different kind of person than yourself. A man who would do this has already denied a great deal. If I tell the monsignor and he is satisfied with Father Flynn's rebuttal, the matter is suppressed.
SISTER JAMES. Well then, tell the bishop.
SISTER ALOYSIUS. The hierarchy of the Church does not permit my going to the bishop. No. Once I tell the monsignor, it's out of my hands, I'm helpless. I'm going to have to come up with a pretext, get Father Flynn into my office. Try to force it. You'll have to be there.
SISTER JAMES. Me? No! Why? Oh no, Sister! I couldn't!
SISTER ALOYSIUS. I can't be closeted alone with a priest. Another Sister must be in attendance, and it has to be you. The circle of confidence mustn't be made any wider. Think of the boy if this gets out.
SISTER JAMES. I can't do it!
SISTER ALOYSIUS. Why not? You're squeamish?
SISTER JAMES. I'm not equipped! It's ... I would be embarrassed. I couldn't possibly be present if the topic were spoken of!
SISTER ALOYSIUS. Please, Sister, do not indulge yourself in witless adolescent scruples. I assure you I would prefer a more seasoned confederate. But you are the one who came to me.
SISTER JAMES. You told me to!
SISTER ALOYSIUS. Would you rather leave the boy to be exploited? And don't think this will be the only story. If you close your eyes, you will be a party to all that comes after.
SISTER JAMES. You're supposed to tell the monsignor!
SISTER ALOYSIUS. That you saw a look in a boy's eye? That perhaps you smelled something on his breath? Monsignor Benedict thinks the sun rises and sets on Father Flynn. You'd be branded an hysteric and transferred.
SISTER JAMES. We can ask him.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Who?
SISTER JAMES. The boy. Donald Muller.
SISTER ALOYSIUS. He'll deny it.
SISTER JAMES. Why?
SISTER ALOYSIUS. Shame.
SISTER JAMES. You can't know that.
SISTER ALOYSIUS. And if he does point the finger, how do you think that will be received in this community? A black child. (*No answer.*) I am going to think this through. Then I'm going to invite Father Flynn to my office on an unrelated matter. You will be there.
SISTER JAMES. But what good can I do?
SISTER ALOYSIUS. Aside from the unacceptability of a priest and nun being alone, I need a witness.
SISTER JAMES. To what?
SISTER ALOYSIUS. He may tell the truth and lie afterwards. (*Sister James looks toward the rectory.*)
SISTER JAMES. The boys are coming out of the rectory. They look happy enough.
SISTER ALOYSIUS. They look smug. Like they have a secret.
SISTER JAMES. There he is.
SISTER ALOYSIUS. If I could, Sister James, I would certainly choose to live in innocence. But innocence can only be wisdom in a world without evil. Situations arise, and we are confronted with wrongdoing and the need to act.
SISTER JAMES. I have to take the boys up to class.
SISTER ALOYSIUS. Go on, then. Take them. I will be talking to you. (*The sound of wind. Sister Aloysius pulls her shawl tightly about her and goes. After a moment, Sister James goes as well.*)

FIVE

The principal's office. A phone rings. Sister Aloysius enters with a pot of tea, walking quickly to answer the phone.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Hello, St. Nicholas School? Oh yes, Mr. McGinn. Thank you for calling back. That was quite a windstorm we had last night. No, I didn't know there was a Great Wind in