

Portland Blood
by M. J. Zellnik

Prologue

April 1861: Portland, Oregon

The blood on the steps was purple in the moonlight, fading to black as it spread out from the small body into the shadows. The boy lay face down, his head turned away from the arched doorway, as if in recognition that he was beyond the church's help now. Dark patches, which the light of day would reveal to be greenish maroon bruises, ringed with waxy yellow, marred the alabaster skin, but the pale head of curls still shone in the silver light of 2 a.m., looking untouched by whatever series of monstrous acts had left the boy here.

The first rays of the sun brought Father Jerome, as was his daily duty, to light the furnace which warmed Our Lady of Sorrows. So it was the young priest who discovered the body. He did not raise a hue and cry, however – he was a country lad, and the sight of blood did not cause him to flinch or to forget his duty to the dead. Kneeling, he whispered a prayer as he gently turned turn the body over and made the sign of the cross in the air above it. He recognized the child at once, despite the bruising: Kieran Billings, six years old, and a member of the parish. One of their own, then. He could not leave him lying out in the open like this. Gingerly, he tried to raise the boy off the cold stones. A gash had nearly severed the boy's head from his neck, which made it difficult to lift him,

but when Father Jerome curled Keiran into his chest, heedless of the blood that smeared his cassock, the boy proved no harder nor heavier to carry than a newborn.

In the rectory he deposited the child on the kitchen table, and went to wake the other priests before sending for the police. And then slowly the news spread across a disbelieving parish, and out into a shocked city.

It was Holy Week, but the parishioners who crowded into mass that Good Friday had more than the resurrection of Jesus on their minds. Despite the best efforts of all four of the priests to scrub the church stairs, a shadow still remained to show where Kieran Billings life had flowed out of him. To a man, the crowd declined to walk on those tainted stones, instead forming two queues that snaked their way up the outer edges of the church steps, silent with baffled rage. Inside, as Father Anthony rose to deliver his homily, the air crackled with suppressed expectation. Surely Father Anthony, the eldest and most revered of Our Lady's priests, would help them make sense of this senseless crime. Father Anthony was stern and unyielding, but he was wise in the ways of this wicked world.

The old priest did not disappoint. "Two days ago, in the dark hours before dawn, on the steps of this house of God," he began, his cadences measured and weighty, "a crime of untold horror, an abomination against the most innocent of all souls, was committed. We may never know by whose hand the act itself was committed. But if we seek the malign presence behind the deed, we need not look far. For we have allowed in our city a species of viper to flourish unchecked, have allowed men who deny the very divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ to put down roots here." It was clear to what he alluded. Three years earlier, Portland's small number of Jewish families had built the town's first

synagogue. At the time, many (Father Anthony among them) had spoken out against this, arguing that a few Jewish families was one thing... a fledgling Jewish community with a permanent house of worship at its center was quite another. "Two days ago we were forced to pay an awful price for having accepted these Christ killers in our midst. We, in this young country of ours, prefer to look for the good in every man. But perhaps we have been too quick to forget lessons learned over centuries. Hundreds of years ago it was common knowledge that the Hebrews have a taste for the blood of innocents. In the hamlets of the Eastern Europe the blood of Christian babies is an essential ingredient in the unleavened bread they use to mark their Passover feast... a feast to celebrate, let us not forget, the slaying of the Egyptian first born!"

Father Anthony spoke for quite a while. He drew a direct line from the Jews of Roman Jerusalem who let Jesus die on the cross to the modern Jews of Portland, stopping just short of accusing them of having actually killed little Kieran as part of some sort of ritual slaughter. The crowd that left the church did so with a renewed sense of purpose, their confusion and distress replaced with understanding and determination. Now that they knew who was to blame, they were no longer helpless.

A few hours later, as the sun was setting, Isadore Sherrin swept the floor of his tiny tailor's shop on Commercial Road. His three year old daughter sat playing with a silver thimble, while his son gazed out at the traffic, as their father went about closing up shop for the day. He rarely brought the children to work, but had today at the express request of his wife who was in the late stages of pregnancy and needed to get some sleep.

"Look, Papa," his son said in his sweet five-year old soprano, "the sun is coming back!" Isadore chuckled at the child's nonsense as he crossed to the window, but the

smile faded as he looked through the plate glass window painted with his name on it. There *was* a golden glow coming from the end of the street, but it was not the sun reappearing. A small crowd of men carrying lanterns and a few torches rounded the corner, the look on their faces immediately spelling trouble. As he watched in horror, the mob passed by the first building on the block, but when they reached the next (Greenberg's Haberdashery) a brick sailed out of their midst, shattering the glass window in front.

"Hurry, children, behind the counter!" He scooped his daughter up from the floor, and reached a hand out to his son, who remained staring fixedly out at the street.

"Why are they breaking the windows, Papa? Won't Mr. Greenberg be mad?" Isadore had been so proud that his children were born in America, where violence against the Jews was rare, but just now he wished that his son wasn't so naïve. A six-year-old back in Lithuania would have understood what was happening. From outside there were the sounds of more glass breaking. "Look Papa, the hat store is on fire!"

"Moishe, come to me now!" The boy reluctantly did as he was told. Then the children were behind the front counter and there was nowhere else to hide. The shop was only one room, with a storeroom downstairs that could only be reached by an entrance in the sidewalk outside. "Now, no matter what happens, you stay—" The front window cracked with a sound like ice breaking, followed by a incongruously delicate tinkling as shards dropped little by little onto the freshly-swept floor.

"Let's torch it!" Isadore could hear voices outside. They sounded as if they were drunk. He rose and, reminding himself that his children were depending on his courage, stepped toward the empty window frame.

“Please. I will give you anything you ask for. My children are here. Please...”

The crowd was smaller than Isadore had thought, only a dozen men or so. One who carried a torch answered back, “What about my boy? Where was your concern about children when my Kieran was being gutted on the steps of the church?”

“I don’t know anything about that,” Isadore’s voice cracked. “I am sorry for your loss...” With a grunt rough hands reached in and grabbed the Jewish tailor by the lapels. As they pulled him through the window, he could feel a jagged corner of glass that remained in the frame stabbing his gut. It felt as if it was ripping him open. A scream escaped his lips, cut short by a punch to the chest that took the air out of him. Blows rained down upon him. He fell to his knees in the street, clutching his belly, which was wet with blood. Isadore allowed his eyes to close, and his body to collapse to the street.

And then it was over. Lying on the ground he heard running feet, and cries of alarm. And police whistles. When he forced his eyes open he could see the police giving chase to his attackers, and a human chain of his neighbors throwing buckets of water on Greenberg’s emporium. And, as his gaze swiveled towards his own storefront, the last sight his eyes would ever see: his son Moishe, looking down at him in confusion.

Incredibly, Isadore Sherrin was the only person to die that night, though a few other Jewish men were beaten and a number of Jewish businesses attacked. The police braced themselves for more violence, but salvation for the troubled city came the very next day from an unlikely source. Three thousand miles away, in South Carolina, the Confederate batteries in Charleston harbor opened fire on Fort Sumter, and suddenly the nation was thrust into a Civil War. While enmity between religious factions in Portland

did not vanish overnight, displays of violence beyond a fistfight or two were subsumed in the face of the bigger conflict.

By the war's end few remained in Portland with any direct connection to the sad events of Easter 1861. The Sherrin family left the city almost immediately afterwards. Simon Billings, leader of the lynch mob, died in the war, and his widow remarried. And Father Anthony died peacefully in his sleep at eighty in the summer of '63.

No one was ever arrested or brought to trial for the killing of Keiran Billings. And eventually even the shadow on the church steps faded, leaving no outward sign of the blood which had been spilled there. But deep in the crevices, invisible to the eye, traces of the blood still remained, its elements merging with the mortar holding the stones together. Waiting, all but forgotten, for some new act of violence that might expose it once more to the light of day.