

BLOSSOMS AND BLOOD

**a novel by
Mark SaFranko**

A muggy, late summer afternoon. This is Sister Mary Joselma's seventh-grade classroom on the third floor of Saint Faustyna's School in a worn-out northeastern city whose best days are long behind her. It's the beginning of a new year, and I've been assigned the sixth desk, second row from the window. When I look through the smudged glass there's nothing but tar paper and factory smokestacks, some belching blizzards of soot into the gray sky. Nothing new. I'm used to it. I've lived here all my life.

The French and Indian Wars is the topic of discussion. History is one of the better subjects, but after a few minutes today, it bores me. Sister Joselma is a lively teacher, always berating and scolding us, but this afternoon her zest is tiresome.

As always, my attention drifts; I'm somewhere else altogether. I daydream about smashing a long home run over the green monster in Fenway Park for the Boston Red Sox, still my favorite team even though Ted Williams is finished playing forever. With "The Splendid Splinter" gone, the names left on the roster are Ike Delock, Frank Malzone, Jim Pagliaroni -- nobodies. But I don't forfeit my loyalty easily, even if I'm the only Red Sox freak in a sea of Phillies and Yankees fanatics. As usual, I'm the outsider, the contrarian, the lover of the underdog and the loser. And the Red Sox always lose.

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Then, for a split second, my mind goes blank, and the crevice is enough to allow a demon in. I just don't realize it at the time.

1.

Recently I'd made a major decision: to not pledge myself to the Lord Jesus. Becoming a priest had been on my mind for years. Besides serving as an altar boy for masses, weddings, funerals, baptisms and Stations of the Cross, I would perform a fake mass of my own at the kitchen table in order to prepare myself for the vocation. Becoming a man of the cloth was the greatest thing a young Catholic boy could ever do; that's what the nuns and priests and my father and mother always told me.

On that late summer afternoon I still believed in God. I believed that He was up in the sky observing everything that happened down here on earth, pulling strings, determining the fate of all beings. I believed that He rewarded the good in Heaven and punished the evil in Hell. I was convinced that He heard every one of our prayers, because I believed everything I'd been taught by the priests and nuns. Every day I prayed to the Heavenly Father and the Virgin Mary and the Lord Jesus and as many of the saints as possible.

But now I was in terrible conflict. The problem? My cock. The damned thing was always standing up and demanding attention. I couldn't control it. I didn't understand why. At Saint Faustyna's School they never told us a thing about our bodies, and certainly not our penises. I thought there had to be something wrong with me.

Sometimes my cock stayed hard for so long that it ached. I began to massage it, which felt very, very good. I could even

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manipulate it to a sort of climax, but nothing came out. I didn't even realize that something was *supposed* to come out.

What I did understand was that what I was doing was wrong -- A MORTAL SIN. During the Sunday sermons the priests had warned us repeatedly about our privates, even so much as thinking about them. In class the nuns hinted at the same thing. What we learned from the Baltimore Catechism was that "self-gratification," whatever that meant, exactly, was a sin against the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," and the tenth commandment, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife." It was in fact, one of the deadly, cardinal sins: LUST. I tried with all my strength to not give in to temptation, but failed again and again. This went to prove that I was weak. The other boys in class must have not have been afflicted with this problem, because none of them ever talked about it.

When I entered the confessional on Saturday afternoon in order to cleanse my soul of my heinous transgressions, the confessor, whoever it was that day, would get upset and hand down a heavy penance, sometimes a full rosary, which would take an hour or so to complete. In order for repentance to be effective, you had to concentrate on the words -- you had to truly *mean* them. Afterwards I'd feel restored to a state of grace, free to enter the gates of Heaven and abide in Paradise forever if I happened to get struck by lightning on the way home or contract a lethal disease and die.

Thank you, sweet Jesus, for saving my miserable soul! I prayed. I promise never to play with myself again!

I counted the minutes and hours that I was "clean." But my resolve would last only a day, maybe two at most, before the Devil

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tempted me again. When he did, I'd slip my hand into my underwear and manipulate myself to ecstasy, and just like that I was back in a dismal, dangerous state of unpardonable depravity.

I knew who Astrid Perry was. Each grade was divided into two classes, and Astrid and I had been in the same half since kindergarten. She was tall and blonde, like an ice queen, and she had cornflower blue eyes. She'd been endowed with the face of angel. I was vaguely aware of a few other facts about her: that she lived around the corner, down on Mulberry Street near the Salvation Army, where all the bums hung out.

That afternoon, an ordinary, sleepy afternoon in 1962, she was in her assigned seat, third in the row next to the windows. I happened to be looking in her direction. Her head slowly turned, leaving her face in profile.

It was at that moment that the devil slipped in.

Ever since that day I've been over it a million times, trying to pinpoint what really happened to make me lose my balance, but I never did figure it out. I've never even come close. There are many theories to explain the phenomenon, from the chemical to the psychological to the philosophical, but none are adequate.

What happened that afternoon was mysterious... irreversible...fatal. It was like a trapdoor opening beneath my feet. At that moment -- one-thirty-seven in the afternoon on September nineteenth -- I dropped through it into a void, and I was swallowed up by a great black space that had no bottom.

2.

I was in love.

What was it about Astrid Perry? What hadn't I noticed about her before?

Everything. Suddenly every single thing about her cut me like a wild razor. Her blonde hair...her divine face...her bare white legs. I couldn't stop looking at her. Even her pink fingernails were painfully beautiful. Her school jumper was the luckiest thing in the world -- it got to cling to her body.

How had I missed it all before? How had I not seen her for what she was every day when she walked in and out of that miserable third-floor classroom?

What had happened to me was as devastating as an earthquake, or a detonating hydrogen bomb, but none of the others around me noticed. It was like I'd tumbled over the edge of a cliff, but soundlessly, without screaming.

I was in a delirium of euphoria. But when I looked around, nothing was different, nothing had changed. The other kids scribbled with their pencils, or flipped the pages of their books, or fidgeted in their seats. They were the same, all of them -- it was only me who was different. But none of them even glanced in my direction.

I kept looking at Astrid, to see if she'd figured out what was going on a few seats behind her, but she was oblivious, or she didn't care.

It didn't matter. All I knew was that I had to have her. No

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matter what, *I had to have her*. What I'd do when I got her I didn't know -- but she had to be mine.

It was a matter of life and death now.

At the front of the classroom, Sister Joselma was going on about some bygone battle in which thousands of men had died.

“Got it, you nincompoops? The French forces in the Ohio Valley made alliances with the Indians in order to...”

She was the one who didn't get it. She didn't get at all that this stale conflict had nothing whatsoever to do with what had happened to me.

But she refused to shut her trap. When she scanned the room, our eyes locked.

“So tell me, Zajack: what did the British do to counter this alliance of the French and the Indians?”

Fuck if I knew. And I didn't give a damn. I didn't even care enough at that moment to make something up.

“I don't know, Sister.”

“Well, you'd better wake up, don't you think? Every time I look at you, you're daydreaming! I don't want any slugs in my classroom, Zajack! I've got enough idiots as it is!”

There was no arguing that. I flushed with embarrassment and humiliation.

She tried someone else for the answer. My eyes traveled back to Astrid. Would it matter to her that I was a dope? That was all that mattered.

But my Astrid wasn't looking back. If she was thinking anything at all, she didn't let on.

Did she even realize I was alive?

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I had turned into a yo-yo, snapping back and forth between elation and despair. But what did I have to fear? If I was in love with Astrid, then *she had to be in love with me*. It stood to reason. It was logical. It made sense.

Beyond that thought, I didn't have the slightest idea what to do. All I could do was wait for something.

Well, then, I would wait.

3.

At 810 Iowa Avenue nobody said anything. Supper was liver and onions, mashed potatoes and canned beets. Bash and Jake split a bottle of Pabst Blue Ribbon. Each of us also got a slice of buttered Jewish rye.

The conversation, such as it was, consisted mostly of grunts and curses and complaints from my mother and father about their jobs.

"You wouldn't believe what we got stuck with today," snorted the old man. "Had to lug a three-hunnert-pound Frigidaire up four flights of stairs over on Clinton Avenue. Only we couldn't get the damned thing around the corners, right? Had to take all the doors off, which was no easy task. You'd think these people would measure an appliance before they buy it! It must have been a hunnert degrees in that stinkin' hell-hole, right? So when we gets up there, there's a German Shepherd tries to take my damn leg off! I'm tellin' you, that thing was nasty!"

Bash shook her head. "Don't sound like no fun to me, boy!"

"Then the stupe decides he don't want the refrigerator after all, and we gotta haul it all the way back down to the truck!" The old

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man turned to me. “That’s why I always tell you, Max, get yourself an education, because you don’t want to end up a jackass like me!”

“Hey, I didn’t have it no easier today,” my mother chipped in.

It was her turn to tell us what a rough time she had cleaning houses out in the suburbs. Every day it was pretty much the same story.

When supper was over, Jake disappeared into the cellar to fiddle with his tools. I cleared the table and dried the dishes that Bash washed.

“I’m so damn tired I can hardly stand on my feet,” she grouched. Like my father, my mother was always pissed off about something.

She went on bitching, but I wasn’t all there. I was in the arms of Astrid Perry, my beatific blonde goddess. I never even considered telling my mother about her, because she would never have gotten it. In that house you didn’t talk about things like love....

Seven o’clock....Where was my darling now? What was she doing? Did she go straight to her bedroom and apply herself to her homework? Yes, that’s where she had to be. She always knew all the answers in class, which made me feel inferior, because I didn’t.

And to think that at that very moment she was a mere matter of steps away. Why wasn’t it possible for us to be together?

But it couldn’t be done. I was only twelve years old. I couldn’t just walk out of the house and around the corner, knock on Astrid’s door and ask to come inside. She and I weren’t even friends, let alone something more.

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That night in bed I jammed the transistor radio earpiece in all the way. The Yankees were about to win another game en route to the World Series. Since I hated the Bronx Bombers, I spun the dial to WABC. The Shirelles were into “Baby, It’s You.” There were a few other good songs that fit my mood too: “Can’t Help Falling” by Elvis. “You Belong To Me,” by the Duprees. But what really got me that night was Ray Charles’ rendition of “You Don’t Know Me.” That number was perfect for the way I felt.

“You don’t know the one who dreams of you at night, who longs to kiss your lips and longs to hold you tight....”

I hadn’t been around long enough yet to understand what a fool I was.

The next morning when I looked out the window the sky was blotched with gangrene-colored clouds that hung low and seemed to choke the atmosphere and drain all of the joy out of life. I was scheduled to serve the seven o’clock Mass, but from that day on I would only be going through the motions. I no longer wanted to be in church, close to God and the sacraments and the angels. I wanted to be next to Astrid Perry.

Throughout the long, tedious school day I did nothing but gaze at my darling. Every strand of her golden hair, each simple movement of her exquisite hands, even the threads of her white blouse and navy skirt, tore at me. If she did something as

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inconsequential as push the hair back from her forehead, my heart stopped dead. I was sick with a sick desire, and the illness had struck overnight.

I spent the entire morning, from religion to arithmetic to English grammar, trying to catch her eye, but it was hopeless. The kid by the name of Max Zajack didn't seem to register whatsoever. When we filed out to the street for recess, I pretended that I was hanging with my buddies, but I never stopped looking for Astrid. Sadly for me, she was always lost in the crowd on the other side of the rope that separated the boys from the girls.

Astrid was the prettiest and most intelligent girl in class. When recess was over, it was she who got to ring the bell to summon us into line for the march back inside. She stood perfectly straight, her chin upturned, shaking the brass contraption up and down. *Bing-bong bing-bong bing-bong bing-bong*.

How had I not noticed any of this the day before?

The sight of her ringing that bell nearly drove me to tears.

--- END OF SAMPLE ---

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