

Created Paradise by Jonas E. Nwuke

*“... (We) would rather bear those ills we had, than fly to others,
that we knew not of.”* (Frederick Douglass)

The Chase (Shane)

“It’s a damn hot day sir...”

“Yes, it is... Don’t swear.”

-...father forgive me...-

“You know why we’re out here?”

It’s a casually asked question, and not really expecting much for an answer, Shane Jaffords gives the weight of his attention to the terrain through which he and his son are currently traveling. There is not much in the way of scenery, a few dried creek beds, some scrub brush, a lot of empty earth, and, in the distance, the western edge of the desert. But the trail, to Shane’s trained eyes, stands in vivid contrast to its more natural surroundings. The sun-baked desert floor doesn’t hold sign as well as more pliant landscapes, but even so, it is not hard to follow a man that does not expect pursuit, though it helps that Shane is adept at both the chase and the capture. (The latter of which is generally carried out in the early morning, when most men are still groggy from sleep, or the late afternoon, after a days rigors have blunted the sharp edge of awareness.) Here in the desert, where the sun roasts and the moon freezes, men are more careless than they would otherwise be. The naked earth gives the unwise the illusion of isolation, for surely no one could find disguise in such flat emptiness.

But for those intimate with the arid expanse there are infinite folds, crests, and cracks eager to offer sanctuary. The flatness itself is an ally, making distance difficult to measure for the uninitiated. These thoughts, and others, hover just on the edge of

Shane's consciousness, in that place between instinct and calculation, though he is not caught unawares when the boy replies to the question...

"No sir, can't say I do"

...well... that's a good boy...-

Most young men, (Shane had been a young man... once) will often go to great lengths to avoid appearing uncertain, but not Shane's oldest boy. He answered truthfully, and the boy, who will soon be a man, has just demonstrated those very qualities that his father values above all others; honesty and integrity. But he is a boy still, years yet from his first shave, his first whiskey, his first woman. There is another first that is not so far off though, and this one Shane would shelter his son from for eternity if but God, in his infinite mercy and wisdom, would grant him the long life to do so. But God works in ways that are not meant to be understood by man, and some things will be what they will...

...15 is too young for this type of thing. Christ ("don't swear' be damned) 35 is too young for this type of thing, never mind the appropriate age...-

20 Years ago...

"Son... Son do you have any other kin? An aunt, an uncle, maybe a cousin,... Son? Are you hearing me boy?..."

Here is the natural order of things, according the laws of Nature and God; the Parent bears the Child and provides for it, as the Child grows, the Parent ages, until at some point the Parent is no longer needed by the Child. When this happens, the Parent moves *from* this world and the Child moves on *with-in* this world, and in so doing, will

follow along the trails the Parent has blazed. For the sake of both the Child and the Parent, the cycle must remain unbroken.

-...she promised! Mother Promised to bake a sweet cake!!...-

But, of course, at times the cycle is broken, when either the Child or the Parent takes a step out of turn.

It is a pleasant evening in what the natives call the City. The last vestiges of winter have passed and the evening is warm, though the heat has not yet reached the sweltering heights of full summer. There are children playing in the streets, dreading that call to supper that will end their fun (although they would never admit it, most wait eagerly for that call. There is only so much a young body can do before it needs to be refueled.) Most of the men have been home for awhile, enjoying a pipe and the evening post, but there are still a few stragglers who, in order to keep food on the table, push out an extra few hours each day.

On this pleasant evening, Nature's cycle has been broken in the tenement building that will soon exist only in memory, having become intimate with an arsonists spark. Fire is especially dangerous in the City due to the close proximity of the buildings to one another. If one building begins to burn, it won't be long before the entire block follows suit, and once that block burns, the entire city could be well on her way to ruin. So, due to the constant danger fire presents, the bucket brigades are well trained, and tonight they were able to localize the damage to the single building.

Yet they were unable to save Gloria O'Meara, the young woman who lived with her husband and two children on the fourth floor. She had been pregnant with the

couples third child, and so had been unable to travel with her husband when he took the two older children to visit his parents for the weekend...

They were unable to save Frank Delaney, who worked from sunrise to sunset as a riveter on some of the new buildings (they were being called skyscrapers because of their height) going up in the business district. He was also an alcoholic and well on his way to becoming a drunk. Most nights after work he would make his way to Jimmie's Bar and have a few beers and maybe a scotch or two. It had been a particularly rough day and so he had had a few extra rounds. When the fire began he was fast asleep in his armchair. Alcohol, exhaustion, and the evening post were all contributing factors to his passing...

They were unable to save Jonathan and Agatha Jaffords. They had been on the top floor of the building. Agatha was found in the living room where she had died of suffocation. Jonathon was found in the stairwell... no one was ever quite sure why he had been there. Their son was found half submerged in the bathtub. He was alive but unconscious, and his back had been badly burned by falling debris...

- ...*She promised... Damn her! She promised!...*-

The Chase (the boy)

"No sir, can't say I do"

He doesn't know what's going on, frankly, he doesn't care. Here is an adventure. Here is a chance to ride out of town, leaving chores and studies behind him. His father is a big believer in learning and so is constantly urging his son towards his studies. His father's dream is for him to become the first Jaffords to attend university, (though he has no real desire to do so. It would mean going East, and he has no desire to go East, his whole life

is here in the West.) but he is most happy when he is out hunting prairie dogs or helping the ranchers herd their cattle.

And now there is this adventure. This is much more than hunting prairie dogs or rounding up a few stray heads of cattle. He harbors the hope that his father has enlisted his aid in order to hunt down a rogue band of Indians. Or maybe to stop a train robbery or catch an outlaw.

...if I catch an Indian I'll bring the feathers home to mother, she'll love them...-

15 Years ago (Lenore)

“Oh Shane, He is Gorgeous!... What shall we call him?”

The years since the fire have been good to Shane Jaffords. He has a beautiful young wife, a steady job, and a new son (He is Gorgeous!... What should we call him?)

But, happy as he is, there is a mark on Shane Jaffords that he is not aware of. There is something (angerreagehatredhurt) dark in him that has never quite let a smile bridge the distance between mouth and eyes. There is a thing that jerks him awake in the middle of the night, sure that he has heard someone crying for help.

And there are the scars on his back. They are like an alien landscape, one composed of craters and ravines and plains and mountains. They begin just below his collar and spread to a width nearly equaling that of his shoulder blades. They then continue down to his lower back, where his flesh finally regains normalcy.

Lenore Hunting had been fascinated by her future husband's scars when they first met. She felt they showed a man who had carried much more than the weight of the world on his shoulders, and, though it was a burden, he had managed to carry it with

grace. So she loved him all the more for them, but she had been afraid to ask him how he had been injured, for fear of offending him and for fear of bringing painful memories, that had obviously been buried very deeply, to the surface.

Her fears were unfounded. Shane loved her from the moment he saw her, and in fact was relieved to finally have someone to share himself with. So when she asked, he told her everything...

The authorities had had suspicions of arson, and after several weeks of investigation, they had a suspect in custody. The case went to trial and there was much written about it in the papers; in all, 33 people (plus one unborn child) had been consumed by the fire, but the Arsonist had connections and friends in very high places. On the day the jury delivered its verdict, Lady Justice was blinded by enticement while her hands were bound with coercion. Needless to say, the Arsonist was released.

It was heartbreaking for a soon-to-be-young man to watch; belief in the system had been one of the foundation-stones of the man who had been his father.

As her husband related the events that had taken his parents, and the later events that claimed his spirit, Lenore realized that Shane Jaffords would never really belong to her. She had no doubt he loved her, yet she also knew that another had claimed him years before. (Happiness would not be a stranger to her or her family, and so while at times she felt an overwhelming rage toward the past for her present, she would not have changed a thing had she been given the opportunity to do so.)

Yet now there is the baby, and she has hope that Shane will see the world through the eyes of his son.

...But oh how beautiful he is!...-

“No more than his mother.”

When Shane smiles the fires of the past are extinguished, and the hurts of the present are eased.

Lenore smiles back.

The Chase (Shane)

...I still can't believe it... all these years and I have been given a chance!... GOD!...-

Loss is like a stain, one which cannot be removed no matter how many times it is washed. Oh, it may fade with time, but, to the more sensitive members of the human family, it will be ever present. Those close to Shane (the Stain!!!) Jaffords can attest to that.

He has seen a lot of death in his years. He has dealt in that particular commodity for the better part of his life, first as an authority of the City, then later as an authority of the men shaping the West. Some of the men he killed deserved it, some didn't... he figures he'll take up the issue with God when he meets Him.

But this time it's different. Shane knows it and Lenore knew it (she didn't utter a single word of protest when he and her son set out on this particular expedition)... the boy doesn't know it (doesn't know anything at this point but that's to be expected) but soon he will...

...damn back still burns... the bastard took 20 years from me and God willing (God isn't here... he's taken a break from his Creation for a much needed reprieve) I will pay him proper for every minute... –

10 Years ago (Lenore)

“Lenore? Lenore? Where on earth have you gotten to? Leno... ah, here you are.”

There are now three children in the family and Lenore finds herself a subject in their kingdom.

“Yes dear, ‘here I am’ ... Can I help you?”

Lenore notes that Shane seems to be bursting with excitement and can’t help but be reminded of her five year old son when he has found a mouse or some such thing that he is sure will be just as exciting to her as it is to him.

“Can you hel...?, no, no dear... But I do have exciting news!!!”

“And what would that be Mr. Jaffords? Come, do not presume to keep your family in such suspense.”

Taking a moment to gather himself, Shane begins to relate the news to his wife and children, the youngest of whom responds to the happy information by promptly falling asleep.

“... and so they want to send me west to act as a security coordinator for the railroad, which means a higher salary, a new home, and authority over an unspecified number of counties and territories. The initial contract will be for three years, with an option to renew for seven more, and a raise in salary, if I prove to be proficient.” Lenore’s first reaction is:

-...Thank GOD...-

As are her second, third, and fourth.

...perhaps now we can escape the (NIGHTMARES) confines of this Light Blinded City...-

The Chase ...

Lifetimes have passed since that night in the City, when a tenement building housing families and singles, the young and the old, those with nothing to lose and those with the world ahead of them, burned.

Shane Jaffords has become a man grown, with a family, a home, and a career. He rarely allows himself to think of his old life for any amount of time; that slate was made clean when the final remnants of the City faded from sight behind the Jaffords family as they made their way West, where they have since set down new foundations and gone-on about the business of living.

The husband and the wife have become pillars to the small community in which they live. He sits on the town council and is often the first voice heard in matters of importance and debate. She has become an important member to the local church, helping raise funds for renovations and teaching Sunday School when her schedule allows for it.

The oldest son will someday be a fine man. He will be educated, handsome, charming, and eloquent. The second son will follow in his beloved older brother's footsteps, and both will always regard their father as a hero.

The youngest, the daughter, will one day be a great beauty. But her father, realizing that a woman's lot in this world is far from secure, will have pushed her to learn

the book, the horse, and the gun just as hard as he pushed either of his sons. Life is good...

Shane Jaffords had imagined his burdens lifted when he left the City. There were no more newsboys crying their headlines to remind him of evenings spent in his fathers lap, hearing of the day's goings ons and smelling the sweet smoke of the pipe he enjoyed after work. There were no more bakeries to walk past to would remind him of how his mother would sometimes send him up several blocks to the bakery to purchase a loaf of bread or some muffins, which she was sometimes too busy to make herself. Whenever he did this chore she would give him just enough extra to buy a pastry for himself.

There was nothing left to remind him of who he had once been, and that was fine by him.

But on that night much more than just a building had been ignited, a desire had been kindled in a newly made orphan. The spark would drive the boy and the fire would warm the man, and somewhere in the process he became one of those committed to the principles of the public good. The fire was clean, and overly idealistic was the worse anyone could ever accuse a young Shane Jaffords of being.

But all flames cast shadows; the brighter the light, the darker the gloom, and growing in Shane Jaffords shadows was a hunger for retribution so intense it bordered on insanity.

The Chase (the boy)

The novelty of the trip has worn thin. His father had set a hard pace and he is unused to such strain... even the most elusive of cattle would have long since been caught. He is tired from both the physical rigors of the journey and the emotional strain of being kept in the dark as to the purpose of their mission.

There is also a new thing. A tension hangs in the air that becomes more intense with each passing mile. It is not between himself and his father, but rather between his father and some distant (*...but we're catching up, I'd bet my life on it...*) point on the horizon. He is afraid...

2 weeks ago...

“Morning Shane. How are you today?”

“Fine James. Fine.”

James is Shane's second-in-command, although they don't really have any formal titles out so far from civilization. It is James' job to follow up on the leads that agents in the countryside send in, evaluate them, and then present the most tangible and imperative of the bunch to his boss.

Shane and his officers rely on the locals for information, as it is disgruntled locals, angry with losing land to the railroad, who are most likely to become security concerns. So he makes sure that his officers make every attempt to cultivate relationships with their peers and neighbors. For the most part the system has worked and everyone is happy. The locals feel that they have someone on their side (Shane does take his membership in

the community very seriously) and the authorities are able to stop most problems before they have a chance to manifest.

“I have a new report ready... It’s on your desk next to that pile of letters”

“Thanks James.”

Shane takes his coffee and heads into his office. He finds the report and starts scanning through it. There is nothing particularly dangerous (and since Shane took up his post, there hasn’t been) this morning and so when he comes to the last several pages he is even more taken aback by what he sees.

Most of his agents are a fair hand with a pencil and paper. When they have a feeling about a person, especially an outsider, they will do a quick sketch of said person and send it in to the main office. There the sketch will be compared to all the current wanted posters and sometimes, when lady luck is smiling, there is a match.

The face that Shane Jaffords is now seeing is the same as it was 20 or so years ago. There is a little more wear and tear on the features, especially around the eyes and mouth, and the Arsonist is not wearing the suit that he was when Shane had last seen him in court, but it is the same man.

The report says that he is traveling by himself, heading further west in hopes of cashing in on the rumors of gold coming out of that part of the country.

-...*GOD!!*...-

The Chase...

The Western Frontier is a living thing, it is ever growing, ever expanding, ever changing. Like any living and growing thing it makes waste. Abandoned farmhouses and barns

radiate West like the rings visible on the stump after the tree has been cut down. There are any number of reasons why homes are abandoned. Sometimes families are swept away by Indians, sometimes they catch word of better opportunities further west, and sometimes they realize that they are not, in fact, cut out for life in the West... Sometimes they pack up for no apparent reason at all.

Whatever the reason, these barns and farmhouses make ideal shelter for travelers. And it was at one of these castoffs of civilization that Shane Jaffords caught up with the Arsonist.

The farmhouse sits at the edge of the desert. The humble structure has its back to the empty sun baked expanse as if to deny its existence, and so the front door faces out towards the more fertile plains that are due west. The paint has long since been stripped of the walls and roof and the house resembles a skeleton, as you can see through to the interior through the many broken boards that had once been walls. There are two smaller structures flanking the central farmhouse, like children clutching their mothers skirts, that once might have served as shelter for horses or harvests (although the thought of growing anything out here was laughable, probably the reason this particular farmhouse was abandoned)

The Arsonist had selected the smallest barn, which is to south of the main farmhouse and faces back East, which is appropriate; let all be witnessed by that land what birthed these events.

Now

It is now early evening and the sun has just taken her leave, sinking down behind the distant mountains. The sunset she leaves in her passing is the most beautiful that Shane Jaffords has ever seen. It is somehow more vivid and intense, much more detailed than usual... it is a gift to the man for whom it will be his last. Shane hopes the Arsonist appreciates it.

The shadows are growing long and so Shane turns to his son in order to give some last minute instruction. He is pleased to note that, while flushed, the boys face is set in determination. He still doesn't know what is going on, but he seems to appreciate the severity of the situation.

"Son, listen to me. I am here to kill a man. No... Be silent now and ask your questions later. Just trust me when I say that this man deserves to die. Do you understand?"

The boy nods.

"Good. When we go in you must remember to stay slightly to one side of and behind me. If this man starts shooting he will look to take me down first, he won't see you as a threat. But don't worry, I promise I won't give him a chance to draw, much less shoot. Ready?"

With the boys second nod the two Jaffords begin to move quickly and quietly towards the front of the smaller building, which already has become wreathed with shadow.

With each step Shane has to fight the urge to run into the structure and end the man with his bare hands. He draws his weapon.

Even growing up in the City he had heard, as a child, the tales and legends surrounding the six-shooters of Western Heroes. In the stories they were always akin to King Arthur's great sword Excalibur, bright and shining and full of an inner radiance. Noble men used them as tools to deal both death and justice, thus bringing peace to lands in which that concept had previously been unknown.

The reality of the gun was quite different. They were ugly things, with worn sandalwood grips and long inelegant barrels. Far from bright and shining the metal was often flat and lifeless, possessing neither dignity nor nobility. The reality was that the gun looked just like what it was, an agent of destruction.

Shane's is no different, having seen many years of service. But it is reliable, which is all he needs.

Shane enters the small barn and notes that his adversary appears to already be asleep, huddled in a corner against the wall opposite the entrance, covered by blankets and his leather duster. The brim of his hat is drawn down over his eyes to shield them from the last rays of sunlight penetrating the broken slats of the wall. The remains of dinner are scattered about him and soon the mice will come to claim their prize.

As Shane edges further into the room he directs the barrel of his weapon towards the man's head. In spite of the pain he has suffered at this person's hands, he will finish his business quickly. In the real world there is no room for theatrics (look a man in his eyes when you kill him) that leave room for error.

The shot is so loud that at first Shane is unable to grasp what has happened, but understanding comes. 20 years of pain and suffering have just ended as abruptly as they began. He turns to his son.

“Take care of our family. Tell your mother I love her.”

Animals have a strong sense of survival, an instinct stronger in wild animals than in their domesticated cousins. The Arsonist is no different. He watches from under the brim of his hat as the man creeps into the room. Not knowing what is happening, but catching sight of the drawn weapon, he readies the shotgun he keeps hidden under his blankets. He learned long ago that questions are nothing more than invitations to the afterlife, so when he spots the pistol raised and aimed at his head, he fires. The shot catches the stranger full in the chest (slugs, not buck) causing him to stagger back. He attempts to turn to another man just entering the room, mumbles something, and drops to the floor.

Nicholas Jaffords reacts quickly; even as his father is turning towards him (he mumbles something unintelligible) he swings up his own rifle and fires both shots in rapid succession at the man in the corner.

Everything is still and quiet, it seems that even the moon has halted in its evening journey, as if hesitant to send its light into the small room and reveal to the world the sad scene. Nicholas (Nicky to his family, even though he hates that name) has just lost his father. He realizes that he will have to take both the body and the story back to his mother and siblings. Their hero is dead.

-...no...he promised...-