

Jeff Richards

Ne'er-Do-Well

ON A FRIGID NIGHT in October when the leaves are turning bright reds and yellows and the mist hangs heavy on the ground, Sam Nash throws a halter over Stud Poker's neck and leads him into the tile factory. He fashions a stall in the corner of the cavernous room near the ovens so Stud can stay warm. Pitches the hay in the stall. Fills the water trough. Brushes down Stud, who whinnies with pleasure.

Sam Nash used to work at Henderson's Funeral Parlor on Scioto Street until he rigged up a wire system on Miss Noble. The old geezer Henderson wandered in after lunch licking the mayonnaise off his fingers. Sam yanked the cord. Miss N. popped up by the waist. Lifted her arms. The sheet fell off. Henderson gaped at the corpse, who'd been clobbered by an automobile, and ran out of the room screaming. Sam was fired from Bidley's Restaurant on the square for spiking the coffee with hot sauce and Joe Johnson's auto repair for piling dog crap on the radiator of several cars. He has been fired from seven jobs in as many years, but for the past three, no one's fired him because, thanks to his dad, he's his own boss.

Sam saunters across the street to his house. Whistling. Opens the front door to the smell of chicken boiling in the pot. The boys are fighting as usual. Fred takes a swing at his brother. Frank ducks. Sees his father. Scampers up.

"When you gonna let us work at the factory?" he whines, tugging at his dad's sleeve. "I want to make money."

Fred hides behind his bigger brother. "Yeah, Daddy," he says. "When?"

"The way things are going," says Sam, "after you graduate from college."

For the first time ever, Sam feels that things are going right. No gambling. That's how he won Stud Poker and lost much more. No bowing and scraping to his dad, who, out of frustration, gave him the factory and the land he

owned around it, payment for medical services rendered to Mason Blake over the years. The factory had been idle for a decade ever since Blake bought it in a bankruptcy sale. “You’ll never make it work,” insisted Doctor Albert Nash, and that was enough to motivate Sam. The only thing bothering him now is his employees.

Jessie hustles in from the kitchen, hefting the platter of chicken surrounded by carrots and potatoes and drowned in brown gravy.

“You boys clean up,” she says, smiling at her husband. “Then we’ll dig in.”

After dinner and roughhousing, he takes the boys to bed. He saunters downstairs, whistling, sits by his wife, and leafs through the Sears catalog at the kit houses. They’re thinking of building one across the street.

Sam points to the Rosita. “Only 772.”

“But it doesn’t have a bathroom?”

“We can build an outhouse.”

“I don’t want an outhouse when we can have indoor plumbing,” she says. “Here’s one for 965. The Fairy. Two bedrooms and a bathroom.”

Later, Jessie combs her hair in front of the vanity mirror. It falls halfway down her back. As red as sunset. She is a small woman with delicate features. Fierce blue eyes. A fiery temper she keeps in check. Lost it a few times when he lost a job. But she always forgives him. Tells him that he’ll find another job that will pay better.

He saunters up to her, runs his hand through her hair. They kiss. Climb in bed under the covers.

“All right, Jessie. We’ll buy the Fairy, only I don’t want you to call it that in front of our friends. I don’t want them to get the wrong impression,” he says, lifting the nightgown up to her waist clumsily.

“I don’t want to get pregnant,” she says as she draws closer to him. “Not yet. Maybe one day I want a baby girl.”

He laughs. “Some things you can plan for. Some things you can’t.”

After they make love, Sam's thoughts drift back to the employees. He hired two brothers, Mack and Junior Morris, the only colored men in town, who lived in the flats with their families. He paid them pittance. Later he hired Ned Jones, who lived with his parents on Millionaire's Row, a block of well-heeled Victorians next to the country club. Paid him more, though he worked half as hard as the brothers. Sam felt bad about that but knew better than to rock the boat.

Sam notices a bright light behind the lace curtains. He jumps out of bed. Stares out the window. "God almighty."

"What is it?" asks Jessie in a sleepy voice, leaning up on her elbow.

"Some fools lit a bonfire on top of the hill above the factory. They'll scare Stud Poker to death."

He jumps into his clothes and rushes out of the room. Jessie yells after him, "Now don't you do anything rash!"

Sam Nash sprints across the road. Looks up the hill at the moon setting framing the bonfire and the people dressed in white robes and pointy hats. *A secret order of monks?* he wonders. There's no monastery within fifty miles. Crusaders. Witches. He notices a burning cross. The KKK. He has read in the newspapers how the Klan is spreading like wildfire through the Midwest by returning veterans who can't find jobs because the colored and immigrants have taken over or some such thing. And now they've come to his town.

Sam reaches the factory door. Checks the interior. The light from the fire streams in the windows. Casts giant shadows against the ceiling. Stud Poker skitters around, frantically seeking an exit. Eyes flashing. Squealing like a rabbit caught in a trap. Sam fiddles with the latch. Yanks open the door. Steps aside. Stud gallops out the door and across the road to the pasture, where he spends most of his days. Kicks first his front legs, then his hind, until he settles down under a tree,

nibbling the grass. Looking up at the fire on the hill. Snorting.

Sam Nash creeps into the factory. It's in complete disarray, the gate to the stall in splinters, holes in the wall and ovens punched by Stud Poker. The worst thing is that the tiles they piled up for delivery Monday are scattered and broken all over the floor. Sam feels the fury burn inside him. Races across the road and grabs his shotgun and shells.

"What are you up to, Sammy?" Jessie yells as he slams the door behind him. He hears the fear in his wife's voice, but he doesn't care. These fellows are going to pay.

Sam heads through the apple orchard, hunkered down. Climbs the hill, hugging the shadows. Drops as he reaches the crest. He feels like a cavalry officer sneaking up on the heathens, who are listening to one of their numbers standing before the smoldering cross railing on about how the niggers, kikes, wops, dagos, and micks are stealing the country. Sam laughs at this foolishness. Someone whips around and catches a load of buckshot in the butt. Sam Nash laughs louder and stands up. Lets go another blast. Pops in two more shells. The speaker's mouth drops open. Sam sees through the holes in his mask a pair of bloodshot eyes bugging out. Fires point-blank at the fellow, who stumbles sideways, knocks over the cross, runs as fast as he can over the hill in the opposite direction toward a road lined with automobiles and is joined by two other Klan members tripping over their robes. One of them jumps in behind the steering wheel of the car. Whips off his mask. It's Harry Toombs, a teller at People's Bank.

Sam lets loose another two-barrel blast. The masked crusaders are scattering in all directions. To the woods. Down the hill, where they get hung up in the brambles. The rest scramble to their automobiles, race off, leaving only one man hand-cranking his Model T, while another is behind the wheel screaming, "Don't do

it! Don't do it!"

Sam grins. He approaches the car slowly, firing at the ground, a crazy look on his face. He deflates one of the tires. The man cranking the engine scurries off into the woods followed by the other, who falls down twice before he crawls on all fours behind a bush. The bush shakes.

Sam Nash loads his shotgun one more time. Aims at the bush.

"Don't shoot. Please don't shoot," begs the disembodied voice.

"I guess I won't. But I sure as hell want to," he says matter-of-factly. "But I tell you what. Don't you ever dare come by my factory again. You're fired, Ned Jones."

"Yes sir." He runs off into the woods.

Sam checks out the remaining automobiles ~a couple of roadsters, a sedan, and a Packard that belongs to the president of Carson Cement Company. He laughs. "I guess I'll have hell to pay."

He hears a moan behind him. In all the commotion, he's forgotten the fellow he shot in the rear.

He saunters slowly across the field to where the man lies. Leans down, yanks off his hood. "Damn, Ethan Lawrence." He shakes his head in disbelief. Ethan's an old high school bully he knew, but he's also the town sheriff.

"I think I'm bleeding to death," whimpers Ethan.

"No you're not," says Sam, checking out his rear. A few dots of blood. "That's a load of harmless buckshot I was shooting. Meant to scare the piss out of you and the rest of those fire bugs."

"You shouldn't ought to done that," says Ethan in a voice that sounds relieved that he isn't going to die.

"You shouldn't ought to scared my horse half to death."

Sam Nash helps the sheriff down the hill to the house, kicks open the front door, and yells

for Jessie. She's in the kitchen.

They lay Ethan Lawrence on his stomach on the kitchen table. Pull up the Klan robe. Pull down his pants. Jessie tweezers the buckshot out of his rear end. Dabs the wounds with alcohol.

"This is the most embarrassing moment in my life," says Ethan, wincing. He leans up on his elbow and stares straight ahead, sullenly.

"It should be," says Sam, grinning. "You been caught with your pants down twice."

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry. I didn't know your horse was skitterish."

"He's so damn skitterish, he kicked apart my factory. Ruined my orders for Monday."

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry for that, too, but I could arrest you for attempted murder," says the sheriff, defensively. "Attempted murder of a law officer carries a long prison sentence."

"Just try it," Sam retorts angrily.

Jessie yanks the last pellet out of Ethan's rear. He screams.

"You want me to call Doc Nash?" asks Jessie sweetly.

"No. No." Ethan pulls up his pants, climbs off the table gingerly. "I'm fine. Thanks, Jessie. You won't tell anyone."

"My lips are sealed."

"I appreciate it." He turns to Sam. "We were just trying to scare the niggers."

"What for?" asks Sam. "There's only two families. They're poor. They live down in the flats. What more do you want to do to them?"

"I don't know." Ethan Lawrence looks down at his feet. "Nothing, I guess."

Sam Nash can't sleep the rest of the night thinking about how the people in town will react. He can't understand why the Klan is around in the first place. Mack and Junior Morris are well-liked -- as a matter of fact, Junior operates a still out in the woods. Supplies the locals with liquor. The only ones who'd complain are the Carrie Nation types, and he didn't see any of them running around in robes. He's worried that he's in

major trouble. Not only will he not be able to get the order together by Monday, but also the Klan will stop him now that he has shown his true colors. Unintentionally, of course.

He is wrong about the first thing. Mack and Junior turn up the next morning. They heard about the debacle. They spend the rest of the weekend putting the order back together and, by Monday morning, ship it over to a builder. He's pleased. Submits another order. They work nonstop for a month. Then the tile factory burns down.

Sam Nash lies in bed wondering what kind of man he is. The fire chief said there was no way of telling how the fire started. He suspected that someone must've left the oven open and that the sparks flew out and set the building on fire. That place was a tinderbox. Sam Nash didn't exactly buy that theory. But what could he do? It was the middle of winter. He could wait until spring. Repair the ovens. They weren't that badly damaged. But everything else was. He'd have to start from scratch. He went to his dad. The Doc offered to help with the cost, but he didn't think it was worthwhile. What if he was able to put everything together? The Klan might burn it down again.

"Son," said his dad, "I'm proud of you. How you worked so hard to get ahead. You proved yourself for the first time ever in your life. Now you get on to another job. And don't get involved in that political stuff."

Sam Nash lies in bed thinking that his dad is right. He feels sorry for Mack and Junior. But it is not his concern. He has his family to think of. He doesn't know what kind of man he is, but somewhere on the edge of his mind, he thinks, *Not a very good one.*

Sam Nash loses four jobs in two years. At Carson Cement Company next to the cemetery on the edge of town, he rigged up the spillway so it dropped cement on Carson when he came in

early, as he did every morning. Carson screamed that he was going to dock Sam a week's pay because he ruined his new suit. "Then I'm going to fire your butt." When he worked as a teller at the bank, he sneaked a hundred bucks in twenties out of Harry Toombs' drawer. When it came to counting at night, Harry was left red-faced, blubbing into his hands. Mr. Reed, the head teller, threatened to fire him until Sam fanned out the twenties in front of his face. He kept a job at Biddy's Restaurant for a year. Clarence Biddy was softhearted. But one Saturday morning, Ned Jones wandered in for breakfast and Sam spilled a pot of hot coffee on his crotch. Clarence Biddy had no choice but to fire Sam, the way Jones yelled about suing the restaurant.

One day Sam Nash walks along Scioto Street, hands in pockets, wondering what he is going to do about money. He had sold the land across the street, and the couple who bought it cleared away the debris from the factory and built a four-bedroom Dutch colonial. He had sold Stud Poker to a farmer for next to nothing. He had borrowed money from his dad; when that ran out, Jessie went to work at the five-and-dime; the boys put together a milk route. Now Sam doesn't know what to do next.

He looks up. Sees Sheriff Ethan Lawrence leaning up against a lamppost with one of his deputies, a big grin on his chubby face that reveals a single gold tooth. "Hey there, town ne'er-do-well," he says in a lazy drawl. "Ain't seen you in a coon's year."

He pokes the deputy in the side. They both laugh.

Sam Nash takes his hands out of his pockets. Stares at the two buffoons, who are still grinning. Something inside him snaps like it always does. He rushes across the street and attacks the sheriff. The fight doesn't last long because not only is Sam smaller than the sheriff, but the deputy is a six-five, 290-pound behemoth. Sam delivers a few good licks, one that bloodies

Ethan's nose and another that blackens his eye. They knock him to the ground, beating him with their sticks. Not too hard because some curious citizens wander up. They lift him to his feet and drag him off to jail, two cells in the back of the courthouse, next to the sheriff's office. They lock him in one of the cells.

"You going to be in here a long, long time," says the sheriff, stopping his nosebleed with a handkerchief he pulls out of his back pocket. His tan sheriff's shirt has a few trails of blood running down the front.

Sam Nash laughs, completely ignoring Ethan's comment. "Hey there, sheriff," he says. "You look exactly like half a raccoon."

Ethan looks in the mirror at a brown circle around his left eye. Sam laughs again. Even the deputy starts to snigger.

"Shut up, Ace." The sheriff locks the cell. Grabs the deputy by the collar. Drags him out of the room. Slams the door behind him.

Sam Nash sits down on the bed in his cell. Adjusts his eyes to the darkness. Then notices there is another person in the cell next to him.

"Is that you, Junior?" he asks. "What you in for?"

"Selling liquor to white folks," says Junior, shaking his head. Grinning. "You made a fine mess of the sheriff."

"Thank you. I guess we're both in big trouble."

"Ain't that the truth," says Junior, the grin widening. "We're a pair."

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