

Joining Eden  
By  
Jonathan Brothers

"Ok, I figure we got, ah, ten days till we reach Dodge City. Right Nate," questioned Tom who was driving the horse drawn cargo laden cart. Briefly he jiggled the reins to the right horse to get her back in sync. The back of their cart held wooden boxes full of sundries to be sold at the city.

"Sounds 'bout right," drawled Nate. Surrounding the pair was the wide open Kansas prairie. It's undulating endless sea of tall grass seemed to go on forever. While the trail they rode was rather established by the numerous settlers moving west.

Nate sat to Tom's right and had a Winchester rifle laying across his lap just in case they were attacked. Though neither were worried as the more hostile people had been pushed into the territories.

"Oh, been meaning to ask, but how's your brother doing," inquired Nate.

"Better than before. He's starting to get used to his wooden leg."

"I forgot where'd he get it blown off?"

"The battle of Atlanta. Took a bullet to the leg and the doc's had to amputate it just below the knee."

"At least he survived."

"Sure did."

Tom took a couple moments to settle the horses a bit. While Nate peered about at their surroundings. The wide open land made it easy to spot trouble.

"Where'd he settle," continued Nate.

"Wadaunsee County."

"Doing what again?"

"Started a general store."

"Good work there."

"Yep, he keeps trying to get me to stop trading and settle down. Says that he could use the help with his store."

"You thinking of taking him up on his offer?"

"I am, it's mighty tempting. These long trips take it out of me each and every time. Besides, Maria has been nagging at

me to settle down and help out with the kids." Tom spoke of his wife and family.

"That she does! Though if you did settle, I'm not sure what I'd do," responded Nate while he peered ahead of them.

"Didn't your cousin offer you a deputy position?"

That caused Nate to break out laughing. "Me? Can you see me going around with some shiny tin badge enforcing the law!"

"Nah, you're right."

"I figure I'd just sign up to something different. Heck, if you did settle down and all, then I'd might try and go into the territories. I heard that there is still some gold left in Nevada or maybe even travel up to Alaska," Nate wistfully spoke.

"You'd try your hand at panning?"

"Why not, good money in it?"

"Could be," admitted Tom. Though he wasn't too sure about that.

The conversation died down for a bit. Then Nate spotted something far off in the distance to their right. At first he was not sure what he saw. But as they got closer, he saw it was a group of riders. Quickly the man pointed them out to his partner.

"Got any idea who they are," questioned Tom.

"Nope," answered Nate as he checked his rifle.

"Yah, yah," yelled Tom as he whipped the reins. Both horses surged forward causing the pair to be jostled about. The cart danced and bounced over the uneven trail.

Upon seeing the cart move faster, the four bandits rushed towards them. When the pair came into range of the bandit's guns, the group fired upon the two men. While Tom focused on steering the cart, Nate stood up and took aim with his rifle. It wasn't easy with the moving cart, yet he fired aimed shots and struck one bandit. Soon another was hit by one of Nate's bullets.

Meanwhile the bandit's were shooting up the cart. Numerous projectiles slammed into the wooden thing. Plus a few struck the stacked boxes. Tom thought he heard the tinkling of pottery being smashed by bullets.

Then Nate got another bandit as the man tried to encircle the cart. With two injured, the bandits began to retreat. However one of them, presumably the leader, turned and took steady aim. He fired once before dashing away.

At first Tom thought the man had missed. Yet he turned to see Nate slumping down onto the bench clutching his shoulder. Blood was streaming out of the wound.

"Nate," screamed Tom as he pulled the reins to stop the horses. "Hold on," Tom urgently spoke as he dropped the reins and whipped off his bandana. Using the bit of cloth, Tom tried to staunch the blood flow. He then got off the bench and hurried to the back of the cart. There he dug out a shirt and came back. Climbing up to Nate, Tom worked to stop Nate's blood loss.

"Think you can hold out till Dodge City," Tom questioned the injured man. Within moments he had bound the wound as best as he could.

"I don't know," weakly spoke Nate.

"Wait, I think we're closer to Eden?"

"Where?"

"Remember that strange town we went to a couple years ago? We stopped there once and chose not to go back?"

"Yea..."

"I think they might have a doctor. Hold on," responded Tom as he got the horses moving again. Then he sped them up to a near dash.

The pair raced along the empty trail. Off in the distance far to the southwest Tom could see the small settlement of Eden. The white steeple of their church was the highest landmark and could be seen from miles away.

Then abruptly the cart hit a bump and jumped upwards. Slamming back down hard caused one of the wooden wheels to start wobbling. Before long it's spokes cracked causing the cart to dangle precariously where the broken wheel was. Hurriedly Tom slowed the cart to a stop.

"Damn, just what we don't need!"

Nate groaned in pain. His face was ashen and he looked to be in bad shape. Tom quickly checked the injured man then hopped down to inspect the damage. He realized he was not going to be able to fix it quickly enough to help Nate.

"Don't worry I got a plan," Tom assured Nate. He spied the horses and an idea came to him. While they were not set up to be ridden, Tom realized they were the best bet to get Nate to a doctor.

Carefully Tom edged the cart off the trail. After that he got off and began unhooking the horses. Next he slowly helped Nate off the cart and onto a horse while Tom climbed atop the other.

Leading Nate's horse, Tom began riding away from the cart. He figured he would drop Nate off at the doctor and then come back to repair the cart. Once Nate was safe to travel, they would continue on to Dodge City.

A couple years ago the pair came across Eden, which was far off the beaten path, and decided to see if there were any potential buyers there. Yet what they found was that Eden had been started by a fundamentalist preacher. Those that lived there strictly followed the bible and did not buy many of the things the two offered. After that, Tom and Nate simply skipped the settlement.

Like other towns he had been too, Tom saw that Eden was laid out along one simple main road that contained most of the settlement's services and homes. Similar to most places started by people of the faith, the church was the most prominent structure and at the center of town. Also, it was the structure that was the most maintained with a fresh coat of paint, clean windows, and a nice yard.

While Tom and Nate had dealt with religious people before, what unnerved the two about Eden, was the way the town acted. Every stranger that entered was silently stared at. On top of that, no one, including the children, would say or do anything when they were around. To the two travelers, the place felt unnatural.

However with little choice, Tom reentered the center of town and encountered the same thing. It looked like Eden was in the middle of a regular weekday. People appeared to be going about their business and children, freshly out of school for the day, were playing. Yet like last time, as soon as one person saw them enter, the entire town came silent. Tom even swore he thought he saw everyone turn their heads to peer at them almost at once. Even the kids stopped playing and stared at the two.

"My friend here was shot. Is there a doctor who can help," Tom asked out loud.

Yet no one said or did anything.

"Please Nate's dying. He needs help!" Tom climbed down from atop his horse. He crossed over to a gentlemen who

appeared to have been sweeping the front of his store. "Do you know where the doctor is?"

The store owner just wearily watched him silently.

Then something seemed to change in everyone and a woman called out, "yes we have a doctor."

"He's over there," a child came closer and pointed down the street.

"Doc should be there right now," guardedly spoke the store owner.

A little uneasy at the responses, Tom earnestly thanked them and led the horses down the street. Within moments he came to a two story home that looked like a simple farmer's house. At first it appeared like all the other houses in the settlement. However there was a sign hanging next to the door that announced, "Dr Gravling MD."

Before Tom could even unload Nate who was barely hanging on to his horse, the doctor raced out of the house towards them. Plus a few people who had been staring earlier quickly hurried over to help. With that assistance, Tom was able to carry Nate up into the house. They gently placed Nate atop of Dr Gravling's table.

The man's skilled hands worked to free Nate's bloody shirt bindings away from the wound. Briefly the doctor probed the wound with a finger. Then he went over to a cabinet and pulled out a bottle and a needle. After sucking some clear liquid into the syringe he went back to Nate and injected it into him.

"Your friend is lucky you got him here," finally spoke Dr Gravling breaking the uncomfortable silence. "I don't think he would've lasted too much longer out there. But the bullet seems to have missed his major organs."

"Will he survive," Tom cautiously asked.

"He should. I've got to dig out the bullet and dress the wound. Then in a few days we'll know," answered the physician as he leaned in to work on the wound.

"Come, you can't stay here. There's a room you can use over in the inn," spoke one of the strangers who had helped Tom.

"Alright," agreed Tom. "Also, do you have someone who can repair wagon wheels?"

"Yes," simply spoke another man escorting Tom.

"Good because our cart has a broken spoke that needs to get repaired."

"It's almost dark out, you should get your rest first," someone advised Tom.

"Thanks but I don't feel that tired," mumbled Tom. With that he led his horses over to the local stable. Then he was escorted to a two story building that looked like a regular house. Going inside, he found a simple sitting room. Over to one end was a studious looking woman silently watching Tom.

Tom crossed over and requested a room for the night. After paying her five cents, he was led upstairs to a room that overlooked the main street. It was a simple space that had a small bed, mirror, wash basin with a jug of water, a small dresser, and a plain chair.

Gratefully sitting down on the bed, Tom's thoughts ran back to Nate. He hoped that the doctor would be able to save him. Then he began to ponder Eden and its strange people. To him, the settlement had not changed much since he last was there. The people were still just as strange as before. However, he contented himself that at least they were god fearing folk and were willing to help.

Before long Tom felt the need for a drink. He headed back downstairs and asked where the nearest saloon was. Yet she informed him that the town did not allow alcohol. Tom shrugged and did not want to offend the people who were helping Nate. He knew he had a small flask of whiskey just for emergencies and went back upstairs for a few swigs of the fiery liquid. Within moments he felt a bit more relaxed.

Tom pondered why was this town so strange? Throughout his adventures across the territories, Tom had met many god fearing folk. Many of which followed some small church ran by an authoritative preacher. Yet none of those settlements ever acted like what Tom saw in Eden.

He was tempted to go about asking some questions. Yet Tom reminded himself that was not proper. So in the end he chose to put aside his suspicions and went downstairs for something to eat.

Later after a hearty stew cooked by the inn's owner, Tom was back in his room trying to get some sleep. He wanted to go back to his cart bright and early. However before he could fall asleep, he heard the church bell ring out.

Checking his pocket watch told him it was eight pm. At first he ignored the bell thinking it was just telling the time.

Yet once the bell stopped, Tom thought he heard the sound of people silently walking outside along the street.

Intrigued, Tom went over to the room's single window. He saw what looked like the entire town, young and old, walking along the street heading towards the church. Before long the holy building was full of people causing the settlement to look rather empty.

Yet seeing the hour and day caused Tom to think what he saw was rather odd? He knew of no other church that required it's parishioners to attend a mass in the middle of the night. Especially when it was not a holy day.

Tom wanted to find out more about that church. While he was not a religious person, he wondered what type of church could cause such strange reactions he saw. Plus why they were having a mass that late.

Tom decided to tip toe out of his room. However once he got downstairs, he realized he was the only person in the entire structure. Then after checking to see that the coast was clear, Tom hurried across the street towards the church. At first he thought about going inside and joining the mass. Yet something nagged at him that suggested he not do that. Instead he worked his way around the side of the church until he came to a window that allowed him to see inside.

Carefully peering through the window allowed Tom to see that the place was packed. Not only that, but everyone there was sitting nice and quiet. While he could not see their faces, they all looked like they were focused on the preacher. Each studiously listened to the man calling out his sermon. Tom thought he saw the doctor near the window. His posture showed he was just as rapt as everyone else.

Then Tom focused on the preacher at the front of the room up in his raised pulpit. At first the man appeared to be the typical preacher with his black jacket, white shirt, and black ribbon bow-tie. His hair was neatly trimmed and his face was clean shaven. Yet what struck Tom was that the preacher was blind. He had a thick white cloth wrapped around his head covering his eyes.

Though as odd as the man's lack of sight was, his sermon seemed rather typical. It was about sin, god, and Jesus. Then before long the congregation stood up and began to sing with the preacher. Finally despite the odd hour, the church seemed

relatively normal to Tom. With his curiosity satisfied, he went back to his room and to bed.

The following morning found Tom first going over to the physician's house. He found Nate resting comfortably. The doctor informed him that within a day or so it should be safe to transport Nate.

Pleased that Nate was healing, Tom got both of his horses and rode back to where his broken cart was. Thank fully no one had tried to ransack it. Though the goods the two were transporting to Dodge City were not all that valuable. Mainly dishes, cloth, and other house wares. All the money the pair had was in his pockets.

During the next couple hours, Tom worked to jack up the cart with rocks and wood. Then he had to disconnect the broken wheel and strap it to the second horse. Finally he rode back to Eden. There the wheelwright told him it would take a day to repair it.

Upon leaving the repair shop, Tom found himself with little to do. If Eden wasn't a dry settlement, he figured he would have gone to the local saloon for a drink and maybe some cards. Yet with the religious people in town, all that was forbidden.

"Good afternoon my son," came the voice of the preacher from behind him.

The preacher's sudden appearance nearly scared Tom. Quickly he whipped around and found the holy man standing before him. He was wearing similar clothing to most priests he had seen in the west. The only difference was the white sash across the man's eyes.

"Oh, um, afternoon Father. I didn't hear you walk up sir," Tom spoke remembering his manners.

That caused the preacher to chuckle a bit. "That's alright my son, while I may be blind, I still know how to move quietly from time to time! I just heard that your wagon wheel will be repaired soon. Plus that your friend is coming along nicely."

"Yes sir." Though something in the back of Tom's head began to nag at him. The question was how did the preacher hear about his wagon wheel when he had just dropped it off not five to ten minutes ago? Plus he had not seen the preacher there when he did it? In the end, Tom guessed that gossip must travel quickly around town.



"Where are you two heading," the preacher politely inquired.

"We're traveling to Dodge City?"

"Oh, to do what?"

"Nate and I have a little business transporting goods from Kansas City all the way to Dodge City."

"I'd thought they would use the trains to do that?"

"Normally, but we also hit a bunch of smaller settlements along the way. Saves those places time and makes a little more money for us."

"Why so concerned with money? Greed is a sin son," preached the man.

"I understand father, but I have a wife and three children to feed."

"Ah I see then, earning a living off of hard work is a very noble thing my son. God would approve."

"Thank you Father."

"What about the other man that was riding with you? Nate's his name?"

"Yes sir."

"He's your business partner?"

"Yes."

"And does he have any family?"

"No sir."

"I see. So he lives in sin?"

"I would like to think not sir. Nate's always been very honest and loyal to me."

"I see. Yet he does not have any family?"

"No sir."

"Then if he has no one to care for and he's working that hard to make money, then he's committing the sin of greed?"

"I guess if you put it that way," acquiesced Tom not wanting to debate the preacher. He never felt Nate was greedy or a sinner. Yet Tom had been around enough to know when not to get into a debate with a fundamentalist preacher. He knew he would never win the argument.

"Make sure that you're living without sin. That is the best way to serve him."

"I understand sir."

"Very good, see that you do. Good day my son, god bless you, and god bless your family," intoned the preacher.

"Thank you sir."

After that the preacher turned around and walked away. Though despite being blind, the man seemed to know his way around the settlement quite well. Tom briefly stood there watching the holy person walk away.

Shaking his head, Tom went back over to the doctor's house and checked in with Nate. When he got there he found the man groggily awake. The doctor explained that Nate was showing good signs that he was getting better. After the doctor left, Tom and Nate quietly discussed what happened out on the prairie and what Tom was doing to fix the wagon. He chose not to tell the injured man some of the strange thing's he had seen in town. Tom felt it was best not to worry Nate.

Afterward, Tom went back to the inn and ate dinner. Then he went up to his room for a quick nip from his flask before bedding down for the night. Like last night, the church bell rang out again and he saw the villagers go over to the church. Tom assumed this must be a nightly event and decided not to go out and poke around.

The following morning found Tom up and moving. His first stop was to pick up the newly fixed wheel. After strapping it to his horse, he then went over to the doctor's house to check on Nate. There he found Nate awake laying atop the doctor's spare bed.

"How you feeling," Tom tentatively asked.

"I've been better."

"Got the wheel back and it's good as new."

"I'm glad to hear that. When are you going to replace it?"

"Once I'm done here."

"Then don't let me hold you up. The sooner that wheel is replaced the sooner we can get home."

"Agreed!" With that, Tom left the doctor's house and led his horses out of town back to where the cart lay.

Yet back in town, The preacher softly walked along the street towards the doctor's house. Despite being blind, his actions suggested he could somehow see or at least was so familiar with the settlement he knew exactly where to walk. Approaching the house, the holy man easily climbed the front stoop. Instead of politely knocking, the man opened the door and let himself inside. There he silently met the doctor and

then both crossed through the house towards the room Nate lay in.

The preacher entered with the doctor standing behind him. Despite the binding's around his head, the man's posture suggested he was contemplating the injured Nate. The doctor behind him softly smiled a knowing grin.

"Good morning son," finally spoke the preacher.

"Morning," Nate casually responded.

"Are you ready?"

"Ready for what?"

"The blessing of god?"

"Huh?"

"You're living a life of sin my son. You must come back into god's fold and be forgiven if you want to go to heaven."

"Um, but..."

"I insist, it's best for your salvation. You want to go to heaven right?"

"Yea sure, but..."

"Then accept this blessing, confess your love of god, and be willing to be baptized."

"Ah, I was already baptized by my local church."

The preacher was not going to be detoured. "I understand my son, but you have not been baptized by my church, the one true house of god."

"I guess if it'll make you feel better and allow me to get to heaven," relented Nate.

"Very good, I'm glad you see the error of your ways." Responded the preacher as he reached into his pocket for a small bottle of clear oil. "Then you shall now receive his blessing and join the flock."

With that the preacher stood beside Nate's bed while the doctor assumed the other side. For the first couple minutes the preacher recited various prayers while signing the cross both over himself and Nate. When it came time to anoint the injured man, the doctor silently leaned in to pin Nate's arms down. At the same time, the preacher held a finger to the bottle of oil and dropped some of the clear liquid on the digit. Then the holy man reached the finger out and created a cross in the center of Nate's forehead with the oil. As soon as the cross was completed the spot began to burn causing the injured man to

cry out in agony. Both the doctor and preacher smiled at what was happening.

While Nate was being attended to by the preacher, Tom was approaching his broken cart. After removing the wheel from the back of the horse he set things up so the two animals could graze. Then he went about the arduous task of replacing the cart's wheel.

"This would be far easier if I had Nate here," grunted Tom. However an hour later he was able to get the hub greased and the new wheel on. He had been so focused on the task that he barely noticed an empty cart with a single horse had come to a halt near him.

"Howdy stranger, need a hand," called out the cart's driver. That was more than enough to get Tom's attention who stood up from the wheel and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Thanks, but the hard part is already done," replied Tom walking over to the stranger who dismounted his cart.

"What happened?"

"Busted a spoke after outrunning a group of bandits?"

"Ah, must be the Bowen boys," knowingly responded the man.

"Who?"

"They're the sons and ranch hands for Edward Bowen. When they get bored they sometimes go out and terrorize travelers. The local law doesn't have the gumption to do anything about them."

"Oh where's my manors, my name's Tom."

"Jake," responded the man as they shook hands.

"I wish they would do something about those boys. That would've saved me having to repair my cart and kept my business partner from getting shot?"

"Your friend was shot," asked Jake alarmed. He hurriedly looked around for the injured man.

"Yea, but I was able to get him to the doctor in Eden."

"What! You brought him to Eden?"

"Yea why not?"

"Everyone around here knows to steer clear of that place."

"Why's that? I mean I know they're a bit strange, but my friend was dying."

"Strange ain't the half of it! The people there just ain't right. Plus, many times people go there and never leave."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, one time my friend went there to deliver something. Yet he never came back. I decided to see what had happened. When I arrived, well, I saw he had gone all cattywompus, crazy like you know. During that time he somehow became a member of their church and didn't want to leave."

"What happened after that?"

"As soon as I saw he was a lost cause I skedaddled out. Good thing too because they were working to get me to join." Jake paused to remember something. "The strangest thing during that moment was how it seemed as if they were of one mind or were somehow being coordinated? That unnerved me enough for me to get the heck out of there." The man quickly crossed himself for protection.

"I don't know. I mean they sure are truly devout, but..."

"Look, you don't have a lot of time. Did your friend seem strange?"

"No, but..."

"Than you need to get back there now. Do it before they induct him into their cult. After that, he won't leave and may even try to get you to join!"

"Alright, I'm done repairing the cart. I'll harness up the horses and go back and get him," sighed Tom.

"Good, see that you do. Otherwise your friend will be a lost cause. I'd help you, but I dare not step back into that place again," Jake spoke getting back on his cart.

"Thanks for the tale."

"Just heed my advice," called out Jake before spurning his horse forward.

For a moment Tom stood there scratching his head. He was never one for the supernatural, but what Jake said seemed downright like a fairytale. However, he did grasp how strange the town acted and decided there might be some credence to the man's story. In the end, Tom harnessed the horses and decided to drive into town, grab Nate, and get out of there as quickly as he could.

Once he pulled into Eden, he noticed how the place felt different. When he first entered with the injured Nate, the town seemed almost normal. While there were a few strange things, including everyone being silent, at least on the face of it Eden had seem like a normal settlement. Yet now rushing back in, Eden appeared to have changed during the time he was gone.

No longer were the people going about regular activities seen in most settlements. Instead they all just stood there watching Tom bring his cart to a halt near the doctor's house. Their faces did not show any sort of emotion and were blankly staring at him. Even the children were just standing still watching him. Their toys lay discarded on the ground.

Ignoring their stares, Tom jumped off the cart and climbed the front stoop leading up to the doctor's house. Yet before Tom could step onto the porch, the doctor walked out of his house and planted himself before the door. His stance suggested he was not going to be moved.

"You cannot have him," resolutely spoke the educated man.

"He seemed ready earlier and it's time to go."

"He's one of us now."

"I'm sorry, but Nate's already a member of another church."

"Nate is now part of our family," insisted the doctor.

"Look..."

Yet something happened to the doctor that quickly interrupted Tom. At first it seemed as if the physician's forehead was like any other person's with a few age wrinkles. Yet in the center of the man's forehead something began to move underneath his skin. Then abruptly his skin pulled apart like an eyelid unveiling a third eye. What was even more was that while the man's normal eyes were hazel colored, this third eye was an intense blue. On top of that, while the doctor's eyes were focused on him, this third eye briefly looked about before focusing directly at Tom.

"You cannot have him, he is now a member of my flock," the doctor spoke. Yet his tone and inflection changed a bit.

"Um..."

"He was a sinner, but now he's seen the light." Except this time, instead of just the doctor talking, it sounded as if the entire village had said those words at exactly the same time. Hearing everyone speak together caused Tom to quickly whip around. He saw that while some of the villagers stayed still, many had come closer. What was even more shocking, was that young and old, male and female, all sported a third eye in the center of their foreheads. Plus, Tom could see that each extra eye was an intense blue. "He's now a part of us," responded everyone in unison. Even a little girl clutching a

teddy bear standing beside her mother, sported a third eye and said the same thing.

"Greed is a sin as is envy and spite," intoned everyone in unison. As they spoke, Tom realized their words sounded just like the preacher. "You must repent and join my flock if you want your soul to go to heaven."

As Tom listened to the preacher speak through the mouths of everyone, he noticed boot steps accompanied by a familiar voice.

Tom whipped around to see that the newcomer was none other than Nate. He had on a pair of pants and boots, but not much else. His bare chest showed the bandages the doctor used to bind his shoulder wound. Yet what truly stunned Tom was that in the center of Nate's forehead was a third intense blue eye.

"Join us. That's the only way to live a pure life," the preacher spoke through Nate's mouth. His regular eyes and face showed he truly believed what he said.

"Nate!"

"It is time to join," announced the preacher. That caused the villagers to begin to slowly advance towards Tom.

The horrified man rapidly began to back away from them, including his one time friend, and whip around to face his cart. Using his shoulder to push past the preacher controlled mass, Tom hurriedly climbed atop of the cart and suddenly whipped the reins. That caused the horses to dash forward. While Tom did not want to run anyone over, he urged the two startled animals not to stop. The horses heeded the reins and raced out of the town. Briefly he looked back to see the villagers staring at him. He even spotted Nate near the front watching his long time friend leave.

As he safely rode away, Tom silently mourned Nate. What Jake mentioned was true. His old friend was lost to him. In the end, Tom was so unnerved by what had happened that he chose to keep what he saw to himself. If anyone asked, Tom simply said that Nate had gone north to Alaska to stake his claim. It sounded plausible enough that no one challenged his story.

Once he got to Dodge City, Tom went about selling everything on the cart, the cart itself, and finally the horses. With money in hand, he hopped a train back to Wadaunsee County. There he joined his brother and settled down to tend his brother's store. Tom never once told anyone what he saw in the town of Eden.