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Warnings We Do Not Heed

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Reality at Betty's Diner

Only two were left after Armageddon destroyed modern civilization. A boy and a girl, a cheerleader and a so called "nerd." Only he wasn't. He wasn't a nerd. He was a resilient hero who didn't want to be told what he could and could not do. Who he could or could not love. Because he was in love with the plucky cheerleader. And she would love him too if there were no school clicks or peer bias or parental judgment interfering. No more bullshit! No more modern society! In Armageddon, he would be the hero -- not that idiotic jock neanderthal sitting in a booth at Betty's Diner while she spoon feed ice cream across the table just because he'd thrown the winning touchdown in last night's game. She was only dating him, he was sure, because society deemed it so. But it wouldn't always be that way. Not after Armageddon. After Armageddon, she'd realize who the real hero was and recognize the boy's true feelings for her as a blessing. She'd see him for who he really was. Real and sensitive and intelligent! Not just some geeky, awkward boy working weekends as a bus boy trying to help his Mom pay bills -- and, hopefully, save enough to start college next fall. No! Armageddon would be a veritable garden-of-Eden for him and his plucky cheerleader. A place where they'd be free to follow their true desires and fall in love. No radiation, no diseases turning them into zombies, none of that science fiction crap. Just two young, healthy teenagers living together forever. With eyes only for each other.

“Of course you’d think that,” Tom Joiner instinctively thought, telepathically linking to the teenage busboy’s daydreams across the diner. “You’re what...sixteen? Seventeen? Of course you’d romanticize the end of the world. Cause you’re still too young to understand how things really work. How hard and demanding life is. You need to wake up and stop casting yourself and your little cheerleader maiden there as Adam and Eve, carrying on like rabbits in your post Armageddon fantasy as though life were some pubescent Twilight Zone episode. Virginal and naive stuff, my young friend. Mr. After-High-School-I’m-Gonna-Be-A-Writer-Someday-And-Show-Them-All. Well, my friend, I think I can give you a little demonstration to help you grow up, if you hold still for a moment.”

Tom pushed away the breakfast he’d ordered – a French omelet which the menu identified as today’s special, but didn’t taste all that special -- and looked intently at the boy. “There’s nothing more disappointing,” Tom projected, “than an insecure boy’s fantasies. That kind of naivete is no more special than his three egg omelet. But I have a way to fix that.”

Tom quietly focused his thought-drive on the boy till he felt his own pulse beating in rhythm – matching heart beat for heart beat. Then he bunched his intentions, like a wad of gum, and let it slip down the back of his throat onto his tongue. Where he leaned forward and spat the wad of reality, hard and fast, across the room. You could almost hear the *phew!* as the telepathic shot landed right behind the boy’s ear, sinking deep into his cerebral cortex.

The telepathic shot altered the boy’s daydreams, shifting everything into a different reality inside his head. Making the next few seconds elongate into years as the boy lived out a true post-apocalypse-end-of-the-world scenario, coupled with a strong dose of Tom’s imaginative reality mixed in.

It was a hard experience to describe, but when the boy returned to the present, he realized he was still a seventeen year old boy working the weekend shift at Betty's Diner and not the man who'd lived post-apocalyptically. Still, he remembered every detail -- how food, spoiled, rotten and molded, tasted. How modern comforts quickly became non-existent once the power, water and sewer grid failed. How day dreams didn't keep the bugs and rats and carnivorous beasts at bay -- those that preyed upon the hero and his cheerleader -- the last two living humans. Not to mention how being the last two teenagers left alive didn't necessarily translate into love...not in a real survival sense of the word. Sure there was sex. Eventually. And some semblance of partnership. But it wasn't easy, and it certainly didn't feel like those generous pubescent fantasies of lovely nocturnal emissions dreamed under soft blankets in the middle of the night. Post apocalyptic sex was dark and dirty and fast. Leaving the boy feeling guilty over the lust he'd pressed upon the not so willing girl. But who else was she going to turn to for help? Or with the difficult pains of hard scrabble living. Especially in childbirth which, without benefit of modern medicine, led to the death of several children simply because the boy didn't know how to keep a newborn child alive. Or handle the contempt and loathing his cheerleader felt once she realized the boy was no hero, no Robinson Crusoe, and not adept at all in the tenets of actual survival. There was more. Much more, but the boy wanted to forget. His fantasies had become bitter and spoiled under a dose of Tom's reality check.

Snapping back to reality, still a bit dazed and confused, the busboy knocked over a glass of water at the cheerleader's table. Which caused a temporary disturbance, till the jock boyfriend shoved the busboy away, grabbed a towel and wiped up the spill. Causing the cheerleader to coo -- chirping how the jock had, once again, had saved the day. The busboy nearly threw up.

But Tom was happy with the results – destroying the insufferable boy's day dreams, which tickled his telepathic taste buds and sense of justice.

Tom pulled his breakfast back to himself and ate again, looking around the diner. He could tell no one else knew an exchange had occurred. Not the telepathic kind. Which Tom found bountiful to his pride. He had become fairly adept. But still was hungry, psychologically speaking. And could tell there were more people shamefully daydreaming away in the diner because such displays lit up their hair like a spotlight shining down on them. That mother over there in the back booth with the bickering kids and husband scrolling on his phone. She wasn't really there. She was picturing herself on a sunny beach with the soothing sounds of waves and the tropical sun melting on her skin. Why'd she even get married and have children if she didn't want to be present? Make life better for herself and them? And what about that farmer sitting over at the counter staring at his waitress every time she walked by. He was definitely dreaming about marrying her and getting the same food service free from her for at home. Then why had he been so abusive to his first wife? There were at least four other people scattered about the crowded diner doing the same. Ignoring their reality for pie in the sky, unrealistic dreams. With nary a one willing to work to make their dreams become a reality. It was all very apathetic and quite disturbing to Tom. Who hadn't had a tenth of what they'd been given, but still overcame his difficulties to make a better life for himself.

"I see," Tom thought, "I have some work to do here. And, telepathically speaking, if crushing their naïve fantasies gave him a bit of nourishment, so much the better. They deserved it."

"Why?" a new voice sounded loud and clear inside Tom's head. A deep, baritone voice. "They already know life is hard. And that it doesn't get any better. Or easier. Small farming towns tend to be like that -- pragmatic people used to the hard reality

that life can be difficult. Not much hope there. Or comfort. They work hard and don't get much back for their troubles. So they use dreams to keep reality from grinding them down to nothing. It's a survival instinct. Helpful in its innocence. Which we can help them with, if we care to. You should try it some time. You might find it cathartic. Easing other's burdens rather than feeding off their heartache. Not to mention, its far more nourishing for the soul."

"What the...." Tom sat up fast, letting his fork drop and a bit of egg fall from his mouth. Looking around the diner, catching sight of a bearded man with piercing blue eyes sitting at the counter staring at him. "Did you just..."

"Yes, you heard me. Did you think you were the only one who had telepathy in this world?"

"Holy Mother of God!" Tom cried out in surprise. He did think he was the only one. The only one since his granddad passed.

"Sorry, Tom. You're not alone. And won't be acting with impunity in my town anymore. Here's your reality check....custom made just for you."

The force that hit Tom square in the middle of his forehead sank deep -- right between his eyes, all the way to the back of his cerebral cortex -- snapping his head back from the force. Like a solid jab. It didn't hurt so much as spin a whirl of confusion into his thoughts as a new reality materialized. Not his physical reality, but a projected life over his thoughts.

The years Tom lived in those next few seconds opened a whole other up to him. Helped him understand the pain he was causing in a way he never had before. That the means did not justify the end. Or how his personal wants didn't give him the right to exert his will over others. Sure, he had the power. Could use it for his own dark purposes. But that, he soon understand, brought more harm into the world than were

he to offer the solace of peace and love in its place. He should be helping people – not feeding off their dissonance. It meant a great deal to the world they lived in.

Tom finally understood. He saw the selfishness he'd had, living for himself, taking from others. Like a rock turning over the proverbial new leaf only to discover the richness of soil beneath, Tom felt a new reality. It was hard to describe, but he felt a new man. Reborn somehow. With a new empathy, and a desire to turn from his old ways. People would come first. He would serve others. And through his acts of faith, would, in fact, be saved.

The End.