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Warnings We Do Not Heed

July 22, 2025

1, 634 Words

Reality Check at Betty's Diner

There were only two people left in Redwood Falls after worldwide Armageddon – a boy and a girl, both in their teens. A cheerleader and a misunderstood “nerd.” Youthfully resilient. Agreeable in view – that the world had been too crowded with too many people telling them too many things about what they could and could not do with their own lives. Both wanted to live free post-apocalyptically. Without technology. Without cellphones and social media and money dictating their lives – all those conventions that interfere with young love. Like school clicks and peer bias and parental disappointment. Not to mention weekend jobs at the local diner just to cover the cost of braces --which also tended to eliminate any chance of dating. No, the pretty young cheerleader and the shy nerd may not have been a match on paper before the apocalypse. Nor was she particularly aware of his intentions or feelings before. But after, without society's judgment's to limit or control her, the cheerleader would certainly see the young “nerd” for who he really was. Real and sensitive and intelligent! And definitely not some idiotic, immature football jock who not only bullied nerds, but was too stupid to realize why he did. No! Armageddon would become a veritable garden-of-Eden for the young nerd and young cheerleader. The girl quickly falling in love with the boy as her true partner, leaving both free in the aftermath to follow their own desires. No radiation, no diseases turning them into zombies, none of that science fiction crap. Just two young, healthy teenagers together forever. With eyes only for each other. How exciting.

"Of course you'd think that," Tom Joiner thought, telepathically picking up the teenage busboy's daydreaming from across Betty's Diner. "You're what...seventeen? Eighteen? Of course you'd romanticize the end of the world. Cause you're still too young to understand how things really work. Not to mention the embarrassment of casting yourself and your little cheerleader maiden there as Adam and Eve, carrying on like rabbits in your post Armageddon fantasy like 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, sliding the plate across the table – a three egg omelet with ham, capers and cheese – which the menu identified as today's special. He looked intently at the boy thinking, "There's not much complexity to an insecure boy's fantasies, but your innocence will taste better than this omelet."

Tom quietly focused his thought-drive till he felt the pulse bunching together at the back of his head, then slip down his skull like a ball into the back of his throat. And as the young busboy cleared dishes from the table where the pretty young cheerleader and her large, jock boyfriend had sat, Tom leaned over for a better angle and spat the wad of reality -- hard and fast -- like expelling a wad of gum – right at the boy. You could almost hear the *phew!* as the telepathic shot flew across the room and landed dead center behind the boy's right ear, pushing hard into his cerebral cortex.

The telepathic reality shift altered the boy's daydreams to a new reality inside his head. Making the next few seconds elongate into years of torture as the boy lived out a true post-apocalypse-end-of-the-world coupling with a strong dose of Tom's reality interjection mixed in.

What the boy felt took seconds, but stole years. An experience hard to describe. But after returning to the present, where he was still a seventeen year old boy working the weekend shift at Betty's Diner, the boy remembered how spoiled food, rotten and molded, tasted in a post-apocalyptic world. And how modern comforts were non-existent once the power, water and sewer grid failed. And how fantasy didn't keep the bugs and rats and carnivorous beasts at bay – those that preyed upon the last two living humans. Not to mention how being the only two teenagers alive didn't necessarily translate into love...not in a real survival sense of the world. Sure there was sex. 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 to prepare her for the difficult pains of hard scrabble living. Especially childbirth which, without benefit of modern medicine, led to the death of several children simply because the boy didn't practically 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 in actual survival. There was more. Much more, but you get the gist. The boy's fantasies spoiled by a liberal dose of Tom's reality check.

Snapping back to the present, the busboy stood in confusion knocking over two glasses at the table. His emotional dissonance ejecting a psychic blob above his head, like a thought bubble, which Tom quickly linked to and reeled in. Practically licking his lips at the taste of such innocent naivete passing his telepathic taste buds. Letting the wonder and satisfaction carry him for a while. This boy was no longer innocent. Tom knew because he'd just ingested a large portion of it.

After the boy stumbled back to the kitchen, Tom smiled, pulling the breakfast plate back in front of himself. "No sense wasting food," he thought committing to eating the omelet as well. No one else in the diner knew an exchange had occurred. Not the telepathic kind, as far as Tom could tell. Which he found bountiful to his pride. They never did. And no one else's psyche seemed the least disturbed by his efforts. Mainly because they weren't paying attention – including several who'd even begun daydreaming themselves. Which lit up their hair like a spotlight shining from underneath. That mother over there in the back booth with the bickering kids and husband staring at his phone. She wasn't really there. She was on a sunny beach. And that farmer at the counter staring at his waitress every time she walked by. He was definitely dreaming – surprisingly about marrying her and getting the same service for free at home. There were at least a half dozen others daydreaming in the fairly crowded diner. Enough that Tom noticed the rare quality of timing in such bounty.

"Maybe," Tom thought, "I should stick around a bit and stock up. These people have a great deal of naïve fantasy going on. Normally people just dream about getting rich and owning more stuff, which isn't very imaginative. I wonder why here is so different? They're grown adults after all."

"That's because they know their place in the world," a new voice spoke loud and clear into Tom's head. A deep, baritone voice. "Small towns tend to be like that -- filled with pragmatic people used to the hard reality that life can be difficult. Not much hope there. 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. Something helpful in its innocence. Which we can help them with. You should try it some time. You might find it cathartic. Help them dream rather than feed off those who don't deserve having their dreams stolen. Or their heads messed with."

“What the....” Tom sat straight up 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 talking to you. Did you think you were the only one who could 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 in ‘02.

“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 to the back of his cerebral cortex, snapping his brain from the force. Like a solid jab. It didn’t hurt so much as spin a whirl of confusion into his thoughts before a new reality materialized. Not his physical reality, but a projected life over his thoughts. The years that took place in mere seconds. But by the end, Tom understood the pain he was causing with his psychic feeding. In a way he never had before. That the means did not justify the end. Or the selfishness of his personal agenda giving him right to do so just because he could. Sure, he had power, but using it for disturbing purposes put out more harm into the world than peace or love. He should be helping people – not feeding off their dissonance. It meant a great deal more when he did and made him part of something greater.

Tom understood. Tom finally understood. Like a rock turned over letting a new growth plant sprout from the rich soil beneath. He felt a new empathy and a desire to turn from his old ways. And a whole new perspective on people for the first time in his life. In fact, he felt...saved.

The End.