

Armageddon Tack and Feed

Deac Etherington

I tell the owner, Mr. Romanoff, I am new to Tucson and have no experience with either tack or feed. That I'm not even sure what those things are. He says everything will be fine as long as I believe in Jesus. I tell him Jesus is swell. He peers over his glasses with watery eyes and says I am hired. I take this to mean I'll be a fast study in the apocalyptic arts. I don't mention I only need this job a few weeks. That afternoon I rent a room in a single-story motel next to a strip club on a road called Miracle Mile. I appreciate the irony. The motel manager says each evening there is a sewage bloom when the city releases effluent water into the Santa Cruz River. So I shouldn't assume there is anything wrong with the motel. I tell him I would never assume that.

My name is Jewel.

And this is my last errand.

"You look pale, dear," says Mr. Romanoff's wife, Lily. She is fat in a cherubic way and smells like talcum powder. "Also, your outfit isn't very flattering." I am wearing jeans and a Joan Jett T-shirt. I ask what would be flattering in a tack and feed store. Lily just smiles and offers to loan me a curling iron because she thinks my stringy black hair covers my eyes like vines. Lily gets around in one of those scooter-chairs with an orange flag flopping around on a pole. You see the flag over the top of the aisles when she is on the move. When you are looking for Lily you try first for that flag. Then for the talcum powder smell.

"She means well," says Mr. Romanoff. "Certain people

trigger her maternal instincts." He wears his pants around his actual waist with the shirt tucked in which shortens his upper body and makes his legs storky. He has the kind of face you would see on an abstinence pamphlet in high school. At the moment he stands there holding a bag full of dried pig ears. I ask him what is wrong with my outfit. "Your T-shirt," he says. "It's an advertisement for the Devil's music, as we all know." I tell him I don't know but appreciate the heads-up.

Mr. Romanoff and Lily are Adventists. That means they are convinced the world will be ending any day now. Nothing could make them happier. The righteous dead will be resurrected and swooped up to Heaven along with the righteous living. For the unrighteous it is a different story. They'll be squatting in embers for all eternity while ants eat their eyeballs. So the whole point is to have someone like me around to pluck from the flames of perdition. Help everyone's odds when it comes time to float into the clouds. They tell me they have a son about my age named Stevie. I think he is watching me through a crack in the storage room door.

On my lunch break I'm parked opposite a school in the shade of huge Aleppo pines lining a little street on the northwest side of town. The campus has a lot of grass. Something like that stands out in Tucson. Grass. I'm looking out over a big quad with a central walkway connecting white cinderblock classroom buildings. Across the quad there's an auditorium. Beyond that, soccer fields. Already there are clusters of students outside. I'm looking for the older ones. The seniors. Pretty soon I realize they have a

special gathering place. The picnic tables under a sprawling mesquite tree close to where I'm parked. They saunter over and dump their book bags and straddle the benches. I watch their easy interactions with each other. The tables beneath the mesquite fill up. And I wonder if now, after seventeen years, I am at last seeing her in this group of other strangers.

Each night the neon glow from the strip club leaks across the parking lot all the way to my motel room window. Casts a scarlet hue against these walls. Against my face. Just around the corner an ice machine hums and bangs and puddles the asphalt. People kick it. I suppose that sort of thing would keep me up at night if it wasn't drowned out by the *boom-boom-boom* from the strip club. I'd never realized how similar stripper music was. This shouldn't be surprising. The mission on stage tends to be singular.

I believe I belong here.

When I was fifteen, I got pregnant. I don't want to talk about the circumstances. My mother said the baby would be adopted and everything would be fine. But when the nurse bundled her in blankets and hurried out of the room and that big hospital door slid closed, I started screaming. The doctors did things to make me stop. After that I got sent away. A place for teenagers like me. It was because of how old I was when everything happened and because of how I had been hurting myself. I remember that first doctor's face when he saw the welts. I'd been focusing on the tops of my thighs and my stomach. I remember how each line in my skin was like a little catastrophe, pretty much like any given week of my life. And each time I did it I felt a little better. But only for a minute. Which I suppose was the whole problem. Anyway, it was two years before they finally let me out. By then my father had disappeared. I always thought my mother blamed me. I remember the expression on her face when she picked me up and drove me to the group home. Like I was the mess that never got cleaned up.

At the Tack and Feed Store I'm selling things like pre-emergent and cattle tanks and granule spreaders. All behind a big counter cluttered with catalogues and receipts and plastic plants. The regulars are curious about me. They linger over the big plate of muffins Lily bakes each day. Cranberry-nut-raisin-surprise, she calls them. Though I can't see how anyone would consider a nut-muffin in any way surprising.

"Morning boys," Mr. Romanoff says, coming in from the back room where he keeps all the really bad poisons. "World's ending."

"True enough," says a burly man in a CAT cap. "Especially for mesquite girdlers."

"More signs every day, if you know where to look."

Stevie, their son, has begun to show himself. I like him instantly. I think that's because he's so odd. He passes back and forth across the open doorway to the storage room. Eyes fixed on me each time he glides by. He's handsome in a brooding sort of way with curly black hair and blue eyes. Lily calls him special. Stevie is a savant with numbers and a

few other things but has some challenges. Like the fact that he's terrified of shoelaces. Lily tells me it's all a part of God's plan and smiles like everything is peachy because if the plan belongs to God, then everything *has* to be peachy. That's the thing about faith. You don't worry about imponderables. I can see why people like it. Then I notice Stevie has stopped in the middle of the doorway and is facing me. I can tell from his eyes that he's lonely. Because so am I.

Lunch break beneath the Aleppo pines. I'm eating the chicken salad Lily gave me because she thinks I'm too thin. "You look like a bird, dear. Where did you say you were living again?" Right on schedule the seniors saunter out of the classroom buildings. They come across the quad in little groups. I find myself smiling. It's as if I'm parked there to actually meet someone. Which of course I am.

That's the thing about faith. You don't worry about imponderables.

A boy puts a speaker on the table. Syncs it to his phone. "Daydream Explosion" by The Dollyrots starts playing. A few of the girls jump up onto the table like go-go dancers. The music gets louder. I find myself nodding along to a song called "Naked." Then one of the girls stops dancing and looks directly at me where I'm parked beneath the pines. A wave breaks in my chest. She narrows her eyes. And I think, *What if this is the one? What if she intuited something familial because I'm here?* Then a man walks up to my car. He stands between me and the girl on the table.

"I'm Dean of Students," he says. "Can I help you?"

"Maybe get your crotch out of my face."

He leans down.

"We were wondering what you are doing here."

"Eating. It's my lunch break. This spot is pretty."

"We carefully monitor all our campus visitors."

"I'm not visiting. I'm parking. On the street. Okay?"

He lingers for a moment. Gives me the kind of smirking smile you would expect from someone whose career apex was high school administration. Then he strides off in the direction of the picnic tables. Khakis sagging tragically. The music goes silent. And that girl who looked at me is now focused on a boy with a vape pen up his sleeve.

Afternoons are usually quiet at the Tack and Feed Store. Today Lily is using the lull to take inventory. I see her scooter-cart flag inching above the rat baits. Mr. Romanoff is setting up a tough-shed demo in the parking lot with Stevie. I watch them through the window. Then

Stevie takes off his shirt, and I see that his entire back is tattooed. I'm shocked. It looks like a scene from Dante's *Inferno*. Black and grey with white highlights for lightening. Beautiful and awful at the same time. Like a lot of things. This complicates my impression of him. I try to imagine what it must be like going through life terrified of shoelaces. Then I run my fingers across the raised scars on my thighs. Stevie stands straight up to wipe his face with a bandana and glances over at me. His gaze lingers. And I find myself offering him a little wave like a high school girl signaling across a barren gymnasium dance floor at Senior Prom. He smiles and pushes the bandana back into his pocket. There's a confidence in the way he moves. This complicates my impression even more.

The next morning I find an intricate soap carving on the counter.

A jewel.

"That would be one of the things he's good at, dear," says Lily.

I'll be honest. After Social Services called I only went out to my mother's place to steal money. I remembered how she always hid cash in envelopes that she tucked into her bank ledgers. She kept these in a box in her closet. She'd probably never miss it now if she was as bad as they said. It had been so long since I'd seen her she might even think I was just another social worker. So I went. I am not entirely proud of this. But it's not like my moral life was all that impressive, anyway. My last boyfriend wanted me to pose online with another girl for bitcoin. I considered it. I had just lost my job working the register at a pharmacy where I'd shown too much interest in the alprazolam. My rent was overdue. I was scraping the bottom. And I was done hoping for anything different.

I had no intention of staying where I was to the end. My last gesture would exercise more dominion than that. I'd be standing at the literal edge of the world someplace where I would close my eyes and slowly lean out into an airy descent, and the wind would drown out all the other noises of my life ... Because that's all it was, now. Noise. Then I would hit. Obliterate on rocks. Sink into a dark sea. Step into traffic on some dark road on some anonymous night in a place where no one would stop. And I'd be over.

So while she sat silent and small in front of a TV that

wasn't plugged in, I was going through her banking ledgers. Trying to ignore the wet bathroom smell everywhere. I noticed an entry that stood out from the others. It was for a tuition payment to a private school in Tucson. I didn't move for a while. Then I took the ledger to my mother in the next room. Held it open in front of her and pointed.

"Mom. What is this for?"

She gazed at me. I noticed something change in her expression. Something drifted across the surface of her eyes like the reflection of a ghost passing along the edges of the room.

"That is for Lulee," she said, smiling. "*Your* Lulee."

And I realized she was talking about my daughter.

Soon it's the last day of classes beneath the Aleppo pines. I assume there was some clinical reason no one told me about my mother's decision to stay involved in my baby's life. Something that was probably arranged at the adoption. Maybe the doctors decided the risk was too great. Or maybe she was just being selfish.

Either way, I suppose I should be grateful.

Because I wouldn't have told me either.

I settle back in the car. The students are all out on the grass passing around yearbooks. They huddle in little groups. Writing final thoughts to each other. Shrieks of reaction. Now that the end has arrived no one can quite believe it. This is especially true for the seniors. They are more somber. Much of what they're leaving will be forever. I look at each of their faces at the picnic tables and feel my chest swell. Because I know hers is among them. I also know that this is as close as I will get. My next stop is the place you go when you have run out of time. Her next stop is everywhere else.

Someone taps on the passenger window.

"Excuse me. Are you Carissa's mom?"

It's that girl. The one who stared at me.

"Me? No."

"Sorry. You have the same car."

"Why do you ask?"

"I've got Carissa's yearbook."

"Oh."

She looks at me.

"Do you know Carissa's mom?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Okay. Well, sorry to bother you."

I had just lost my job working the register at a pharmacy
where I'd shown too much interest in the alprazolam.
My rent was overdue. I was scraping the bottom.
And I was done hoping for anything different.

And Lily, still in her scooter-chair, looking up at me
like a mother who's just evaluated a scraped knee
and is assuring me everything will be all right.
Even when it won't.

"Wait," I said. She pauses in the window. Looks at me with light grey eyes. Pulls a strand of hair from her face. Her expression is plainly trusting of everything. "I just wanted to say happy graduation."

"Oh. Thanks. You sure you're not Carissa's mom?"

"I'm sure."

"Well, bye."

She turns and starts walking.

"Bye, Lulee."

Her right hand moves in what might have been a little wave.

I tell the manager of the motel that the effluvium never reflected poorly on his establishment. He looks at me like a big lizard contemplating a fly not quite worth entwining with his tongue. I settle up with the last of my cash. Tragic late-afternoon music is pounding in the strip club. The doorway dark. Shape shifting souls just inside. The rise and fall of cigarette tips in the gloom. I'm going to thank Mr. Romanoff and Lily for their kindness and apologize for leaving without notice. I consider telling them that my moment of dominion is at hand, but realize this sounds a bit cataclysmic in the prophetic sense.

Which of course it is.

I pull into the parking lot of Armageddon Tack and Feed. It's that dusky hour when interiors glow warmly. I see Mr. Romanoff and Lily huddled at the counter. I push open the door.

"Sorry I blew off the afternoon."

"Praise God," says Mr. Romanoff.

He pulls off his glasses. The cord catches them around his neck. He hurries toward me in a bowlegged old man

shuffle-run. Lily does a k-turn in her scooter-chair between the counter and the fifty-pound sacks of dog food. Then accelerates. I just stand there until they both sort of bookend me. He coming in high and she coming in low.

"She's fine," he says. "Just fine."

"You gave us such a scare, dear."

"Me?"

"Well of course," she says. "You left for lunch and just vanished."

"And you've never done anything like that before."

I look from one to the other. Mr. Romanoff with the spidery veins on his cheeks. And Lily, still in her scooter-chair, looking up at me like a mother who's just evaluated a scraped knee and is assuring me everything will be all right. Even when it won't. My lips start to tremble in that way you can't stop and my eyes sting. I begin to cry. A little, at first. Then more. And I think maybe I'm crying for the little girl I never quite got to be. Crying for an idea of family that never came true. I feel myself leaning into Mr. Romanoff's shoulder. Or maybe it was him leaning into me. It was hard to tell. And the three of us are like that for what seems a long time. Then the door opens behind me and I feel the cool air of evening curling across the floor. Stevie stands there holding a red rose. All three of us are looking at him. He shifts his weight and turns the stem in his hands so that the flower twirls.

"Is this a bad time for me to ask Jewel a question?"

"Tomorrow might be a little better," says Lily, gently.

He looks away for a moment. Then nods.

"I'll just put this in water. Maybe it will start to bloom."

He smiles at me in the dark doorway holding my rose.

And I think ... Yes. Tomorrow, after all, might be better.