

The Legend of Tweedles

Bergsten, Ohio is an ugly place in both sky and people, but the people were not always so dour. In 1925 a wave of prosperity had swept through the town, and it crested when they built a Carnegie Library and lined the downtown streets with thirty-five cast iron streetlights topped with glowing orbs. In the Midwest's larger towns, everything is laid out on a grid. Streets with numbers ascend from west to east, and the ones with letters, trees, or states follow the alphabet from north to south. Bergsten could hardly make a dent in the alphabet, so the town founders opted for presidents from the great state of Ohio. They didn't have a street wide enough to be called Taft, and Garfield barely got started before being assassinated, so they opted for the other five: Grant, Hayes, Harrison, McKinley, and Harding. The other three streets were named after the founders themselves. Sadly, Johnson, Smalls, and Baxter's vision didn't last very long. It was the crash of '29 that marked the beginning of the protracted decline of the town, just like countless other small towns across the state.

This was the type of world that Tweedles' parents were born into, the sad aftermath of an impossible dream built on sand. They grew up together in a dying small town near the Indiana border, and then married and worked their way eastward doing odd jobs when they happened upon Bergsten, a town that wasn't located between any two places that anyone wanted to go. The couple lived there for less than two months before they achieved escape velocity by robbing the local bank, shooting someone, and taking off to the southern border with \$342, leaving their three-year old boy with their neighbor, a 72-year old man of no relation.

Phelps, the old neighbor, liked the liveliness of the young couple. The sounds of passion, the arguments, and the sound of laughter crept through their shared wall. When they asked him to look after little whatshisname, he couldn't say no. The toddler came to him with gleaming emerald eyes and dressed in a grey tweed sweater and maroon corduroy shorts. His legs were so short and unsteady he teetered from side to side when he walked. Phelps, who couldn't remember the boy's real name, settled on Tweedles for the day. *What could it hurt?* But it stuck, even after Phelps died of a massive stroke at the Lion's Club the following Halloween. He'd been a lifelong bachelor, so the only people at the funeral were his fellow Lions and Tweedles, who looked on with confusion as the wooden box was lowered into the ground. "Pa-pa," he pointed.

The people of the town argued about who should care for Tweedles. Those stable enough didn't want the disruption of a young child, and those searching to tap into the energy of youth they saw invigorate Phelps in his final months were deemed "too old" by the unwilling. An underlying and unspoken fear that Tweedles' parents would return one day to retrieve their son gave other residents pause. So entered the church, a neutral and trusted third party that could impart moral lessons to this sad offspring of criminal parents. Of course, this was a blessing and a curse. Everyone in town liked Tweedles as he grew into a young boy, but his uniqueness weighed on him like guilt. All the other children had parents and homes. He had the Bishop and his bedroom, a converted broom closet that only allowed for the narrowest of cots and smelled of bleach and pine.

By the time Tweedles turned ten, his newness had worn off and many of the townsfolk who had once competed against one another for the boy's affections with purchases from the Sears' catalogue had all retreated back into the comfortable monotony of Bergsten. Tweedles

also suffered from boredom. He grew weary of the rote memorization insisted upon in the small school house and even more bored with the Bishop's constant quotations from the Holy Bible. He finally found comfort in books in the Carnegie library; they offered an escape that he was unable to muster. The Bishop inspected each borrowed book as he was very concerned with the boy's upbringing—especially as he transitioned from boy to man. The Bishop told the boy of how he'd wrestled with the demons of lust and had succumb more than once. "In solitude, of course," the Bishop said. "But a sin is a sin."

Tweedles knew this personal sermon all too well.

At twelve years-old, Tweedles stopped going to school—by mutual agreement—and developed his own curriculum at the library. He read widely, from Twain and Cooper to Roman and Greek mythology. He lingered over Hardy's *Bathsheba*, and discovered himself in the lush loneliness of D.H. Lawrence. He'd heard that his parents fled to Mexico after the bank robbery. Part of him wished Lawrence could've lived longer, at least long enough for a connection to be made between the author and his renegade parents. He fantasized about his parents in the recesses of the library where he could read books the Bishop would censor. In his mind, his parents lived. They were hazy figures in a saloon, dancing to a mariachi band, the vigor of youth and the vitality of bank robbers dripping off of them as they twirled across dusty floorboards.

At fifteen, Tweedles was tall enough to see beyond the boundaries of Bergsten. He stood a gangly six foot two, and the corn in the surrounding fields couldn't contain him any longer. He made his way to Hammersmith via Greyhound after the Bishop couldn't respect the boundaries a young man needed in order to feel comfortable in his skin. When he arrived in the new town, he was pleased to see a help-wanted sign across the street from the bus station in the window of a Pullman train car that had been converted into a diner. With his knapsack on his back he entered

the diner and didn't leave until he'd completed an eight-hour shift busing tables and washing dishes.

Cyrus, the owner and cook, wore an eyepatch. Tweedles' mind tumbled back to *Treasure Island* and he wondered how such an injury might shape a man.

"Lost it in Korea," Cyrus said when he noticed Tweedles.

"Didn't mean to stare."

At the end of the night, Cyrus directed Tweedles to the Hayes Hotel two blocks away. It wasn't much, but it was the first time he'd had a room with a door that locked. The bed was lumpy, squeaked whenever he moved, and his feet stuck through the wrought iron footboard, but he felt at peace behind a locked door.

He felt no resentment towards the people of Bergsten. He knew that they had done more than anyone had asked, but in the end it became clear that he was no one's responsibility other than his own. To stay was simply going to add to the burden that no one had wanted in the first place. He knew he had to leave if he was ever going to become a man. Of course, that's the kind of thinking that will get a body into trouble. He imagined that's what happened to his folks.

Sabrina started at the diner during Tweedles' third week. She was shorter than he by at least a head and a half, had brunette hair, and green eyes that moved Tweedles' very essence. Sometimes Sabrina would start talking to him about a customer or some other mundane topic and he'd simply focus on those eyes, the particular green of the iris, and the flecks of gold and ridges of brown that lined her pupils. Those were eyes he fell into whenever he could, and they haunted his thoughts as he washed plates and scrubbed pots.

He'd read about love in countless novels, but never truly understood the power of the strange beast that captured hearts with a glance, a brief holding of the eyes, or the deep passionate stare from across a ballroom floor. Now, he understood. Sabrina was unlike any woman he'd ever met in Bergsten. She wasn't close to his age. He knew that much by the soft lines at the edge of her eyes. She also had the scent of a woman, not a girl. She had an air that made Tweedles feel as though she knew things that he didn't, and that made him want to learn. Gladly moving beyond the Bishop's tutorials, he was aching to be an obedient student of this creature who had transfixed his soul.

"Tweedle-dee," Sabrina called him, which was better than the alternative that his grade school years had made him all too familiar. "How'd you grow so tall?" she'd ask, standing on her tip-toes and ruffling his hair.

The feeling of her fingers made his cheeks glow, and their blush brought a brighter smile to the face that lived in his imagination during his lonely nights in the Hayes Hotel.

"Tweedles," Sabrina said one day. He turned to her and instead of looking up into his face, her gaze was cast towards his dirty sneakers.

"What's wrong, Sabrina?" he asked. His hands reached out and held her by the elbows. As her head rose and her eyes met his, Tweedles' body buzzed with a hum that he was certain was real, but he knew too that only he could feel.

"A man followed me back to my rooming house last night," she said.

"Really?"

"It was a customer. Tall, dark hair. He sat in the booth yesterday. Remember?"

Tweedles did recall. He was lanky, smoked Lucky's, wore a denim jacket with threadbare elbows, and had the kind of hands one develops working in the fields of farms. Tweedles watched people, and he recognized this man as a brethren while he bussed the tables.

“Would you—”

“Yes,” Tweedles said. “I have a plan.”

Sabrina's face filled with apprehension, as though she felt partially to blame for dragging him into something that she was sure she'd instigated, but she nodded anyway. And then she did something that Tweedles had only read about. She leaned into his body and rested her head on his chest. He was certain that she could hear his heart beat with the ferocity of a prizefighter, but her face gave nothing away.

At the end of the night Cyrus counted the till as Tweedles cleaned the kitchen and Sabrina wiped down the tables and swept the floors.

When Tweedles let Sabrina out the front door, he noticed a figure leaning against a streetlight by the Greyhound bus station smoking a cigarette. She looked at Tweedles, and he nodded. “It'll be okay.” He locked the front door and then walked through the kitchen and met Cyrus by the back door. Cyrus got into his Rambler and drove off, and the boy began walking in the direction of his hotel. Once Cyrus accelerated out of the parking lot, Tweedles went back to the rear entrance and bent down and picked up a small bundle. He unrolled the white cloth of the apron he'd stashed and steel glinted in the moonlight.

There was a side to life he'd never experienced that resided in him. Phelps was gone before he knew it, and only a vague notion of the man who named him remained, but his goodness lingered in the boy. The people of Bergsten were like the faces one sees in the crowd while riding a merry-go-round, just passing images with a hint of familiarity. Although the town was all he'd ever known, he realized that he'd didn't know those people at all. He just knew the public faces they presented to their neighbors, their church faces. And the Bishop, as much as he talked about the perils of the darker side of man, had little hesitation about darkness when no one watched. Tweedles' parents had robbed a bank, shot a man, fled across the border, and abandoned their son. That was their darkness, and part of that was part of him, so he decided to see for himself where his balance fell.

Tweedles hung the apron on a nail by the door and then ran around the far side of the diner. He sprinted across the street to the bus station. The 11:15 to Springfield was already there, and no one would give two thoughts to a figure running towards an idling Greyhound as it loaded passengers. Tweedles kept running beyond the bus station to the next street and took a right. His sneakers pounded the sidewalk in front of Harvey's Hat Shop and Bernstein's Grocery. Before she'd left, he'd told Sabrina to walk slowly, like her feet were sore from her shift. She'd nodded and didn't ask questions. "Trust me," Tweedles said.

He rounded the corner just after Sabrina reached the corner a block down. He stopped and flattened himself up against the wall of the First National Bank of Hammersmith. He caught his breath and scanned the road and sidewalk. Sabrina's silhouette ambled towards her boarding house, and Tweedles waited for something to move in the dark. To his left he saw a puff of smoke billow out from some shrubs, and the Bishop's image of a burning bush popped into his mind. And then an ember arced towards the road and a cigarette butt smoldered in the middle of

12th Street. A moment later, a gangly figure emerged from the shadows, crossed the street, and began walking in the same direction as Sabrina. That's when Tweedles began to move as well. He stayed as close to the shops as he could, walking in the shadows and keeping his head down as he approached the streetlight at the end of the block.

Sabrina continued to walk slowly, and the man's normal pace advanced on her effortlessly. Tweedles' sneakers allowed him to move quickly and quietly. He knew his speed, and waited until it was needed. Then something unexpected happened. Sabrina's rooming house was on Pennsylvania Ave to the east, but at the corner she turned west.

As Tweedles turned the corner and headed west, he saw Sabrina sit down on a bench in a small park at the corner of 11th and Pennsylvania. The man had disappeared. Tweedles pressed himself against the wall of the local Apothecary and stood still. He was young, but he'd watched people all his life, so he stayed in the shadows of a storefront and waited. Sabrina looked in his direction, but didn't appear to see him. He scanned the darkness for the man in the denim jacket with worn out elbows. He sniffed the air, searching for the scent of a Lucky Strike. Then his eyes drifted back to the bench Sabrina sat on. She sat with her purse in her lap and pulled out a cigarette. She didn't seem concerned at all, and this puzzled Tweedles. She'd been so nervous at the diner. The longer he stood there, the more he knew something was amiss.

Earlier, while Cyrus was busy counting the night's receipts and Sabrina was sweeping the floor, Tweedles had taken a cleaver from the kitchen and wrapped it in an apron. In the parking lot he'd slid it into his waistband in the hollow of his back and pulled his shirttail over it. He reached back and grabbed ahold of the wooden handle and removed the blade from its hiding place. He glanced up and down the street, searching for a glowing ember or a shadow that didn't belong. Sabrina sat on the bench with her purse in her lap, smoking, staring into the darkness.

Despite his heart, and his deep need to feel that someone wanted him, he felt the tension of a trap. What they hoped to take from him was beyond his imagination, but that didn't matter. He saw himself as a catfish lurking in the murky depths being taunted with a tasty morsel so ripe for the taking that he'd be a fool not to take a bite. His parents had been tempted by the cash in the bank, and they took it and ran, hoping to run out any line that may have snagged them and brought them to shore or justice.

Tweedles beat the flat side of cleaver against his leg, knowing both what he wanted to do and what he should do, and then the smell of tobacco curled into his nose.

He stepped out of the shadow of the storefront and glanced towards Sabrina before he headed back the way he came. He saw her head turn towards him, but he didn't bother making eye contact. After two or three steps he heard the thud of boots coming up from behind him. Without thinking he turned and swung blindly. It worked as intended, cleaving through flesh and bone.

The cigarette was the first thing to fall, then the man with the denim jacket with worn out elbows crumpled to his knees before falling face first onto the sidewalk.

Sabrina screamed.

Tweedles ran.

As he ran back in the direction of the diner, the sound of his sneakers hitting the sidewalk pounded like the heart in his chest. Sabrina's scream bounced around in his head. He wondered if his parents had felt the same way as tellers and customers yelled and screamed at them as they fled the bank. No one had ever told him directly, but he'd heard hushed conversations about his parents at the church. And now, despite all the sermons from the Bishop, despite all the interest

the people of Bergsten had shown him as a child, he found himself running away just as his parents had. It must've been something in the blood, his blood.

Two blocks down, he turned the corner and shot into the diner's empty parking lot and ran up to the back door. He stood there, catching his breath, and then looked down at his hand and saw the cleaver, dark and wet. He hadn't realized he was still carrying it. He lifted the lid of a garbage can and dropped it in. It landed with a hollow metallic thud.

Tweedles squatted down next to the can and his face fell into his hands. The sound of the cleaver hitting the man wouldn't leave his mind. Part of him wanted to believe in a chance the man wasn't dead, but the empty look in his eyes as he fell forward argued against such a fantasy. Tweedles stood, found the apron he'd left on a nail by the back door, and wiped his face and hands.

Cyrus had told him not to leave his money in his room at the Hayes Hotel. While he was in his room he felt secure enough behind the locked door, but he was not foolish enough to think no one had ever gone through his belongings. His copy of *Tropic of Cancer* had mysteriously moved around his room in his absence, as did his other meager possessions: a comb, the pocket knife that once belonged to Phelps, and a small brass medallion The Bishop had given him. Cyrus had paid him yesterday and the possibility occurred to him that Sabrina and the mystery man were angling for the few dollars he had. He'd seen the good people of Bergsten do worse things for less. Still, his heart leapt back to Sabrina's green eyes, and he didn't want to believe she was setting him up to get rolled. At the moment though, he didn't have a better explanation. Tweedles moved through the shadows at the back of the diner. Three cinderblocks supported a sagging corner of the old Pullman car, and he kicked the bottom one until it revealed its hollow.

He reached in and pulled out a brown paper bag with the money he'd stashed. In all, including this week's pay, he had \$47. More than enough for a bus ticket and a new town.

The sun was up by the time the Greyhound pulled into the bus station in Columbus. Tweedles decided he needed a city he could get lost in. A place where he could fade into the fabric of everyday life and not raise any suspicions, a place where he could get a job, find a room, and be anonymous. Small towns always knew who the strangers were, and regardless how long you stayed you'd always be from somewhere else, never fully accepted. Bergsten taught him that.

Along with the new city, he determined it was a time for a new name. Henry struck him as good as any, so when he checked into a boarding house on 14th Street and Oak Avenue, he signed his name as Henry Bergsten. He thought it clever to name himself after the novelist and the place he was from. The desk clerk took his \$7 dollars for the week, handed him his key, and then looked at the registration card. "Bergsten, huh?"

"Call me Henry," Tweedles said, proud of his new name.

The desk clerk nodded and pointed to his newspaper on the counter. The headline read: Bergsten Bank Robber Bludgeoned. Tweedles stepped forward and looked closer. He stood for a moment, looked at his shoes, put his key in his pocket and then he turned and walked out of the boarding house. One step followed the next as he wandered the streets of the city under the same ugly sky that had haunted him as long as he could remember.