

The Tweedlebug

by

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The tweedlebugs started falling from Mars only a couple of weeks ago. They were obviously a sensation around the world. The merchandise was showing up online and would soon be in stores: T-shirts, plushies, everything really. Exactly how they got from Mars down to Earth was unclear to most people--maybe all people. It was explained on the News by some scientific expert that there was something like an explosion on the Red Planet which launched some asteroids, debris really, and the tweedlebugs had hitched a ride on those.

Some people dismissed such an explanation as foolery, so they came up with their own fool ideas as to what the tweedlebugs really were and where they had come from. Some of the explanations were not so foolish, but John DeWithers wasn't even aware of these fringe rumors floating around on the Internet and elsewhere. If the News said the tweedlebugs had hitched a ride on an asteroid, why shouldn't he believe it?

So what of Internet rumors? DeWithers was already an old man and one of the few who could remember a time before there was even such a thing as the Internet.

The News also said that the tweedlebugs were perfectly harmless, each one as harmless as a caterpillar. This also must be true.

DeWithers, dressed in his best spring suit and derby hat, walked home from the race track, where he had lost all his money for the day, but whistled a happy tune in spite of it, knowing playing the races was all just in fun and he'd have more money to bet tomorrow. He spotted a tweedlebug crawling in front of him on the sidewalk.

"I could have stepped on you, little guy," DeWithers said.

DeWithers bent down as best he could. He thought himself to be young in heart and mind, but his body sometimes creaked like an old man's body would. The tweedlebug was orange, just as it was on TV, but in real life, it was even more orange. It looked like a big, fat segmented caterpillar but also resembled a slug (or shell-less snail if you will) with two long antenna-like things protruding from its head. And like a snail, at the end of each antenna was what looked to be an eye. To tell the truth, its head was quite ugly, but DeWithers didn't care about that.

He picked up the neon orange creature and held it softly between his forefinger and his thumb. As he studied its black and bright yellow stripes between the orange segments, the tweedlebug wriggled slowly, like a caterpillar would. DeWithers looked around and saw the sidewalk and his surroundings to be nearly empty. He put the tweedlebug in his breast pocket and wiped his hand on his trousers. The tweedlebug had a little slime to it.

To think, these creatures existed for thousands of years and until only a few weeks ago, no one had known that these tweedlebugs existed, and now he had one in his pocket. He had a

pet, and he smiled even more than before. He whistled his happy tune with gusto. What a lovely spring day!

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At home, he searched the cabinets. He searched the old bedroom that had evolved into a storage room. He finally had enough and went to the place he should've gone first: the garage. Still, he had trouble finding exactly what he was looking for. Old man DeWithers dug into the piles of stuff: a dusty lamp, an ancient toaster, the old yearbooks of his dead wife, and even more than that. And there it was. He tapped on the glass, held it up as best he could, and examined it for cracks. It was his old aquarium. When the fish had died so long ago, his wife refused to let him get any replacements. "They're just gonna die anyway," she had said. And she was right, and John DeWithers went decades without another fish.

He looked down at his suit, now full of dust and dirt. He looked at the piles and piles of old, forgotten crap. He sighed. "I need to get rid of all this stuff," he said to himself. "And clean this suit." But first things first.

He carried the aquarium into his long-outdated kitchen and placed it on the green-tiled counter. He checked his pocket. The tweedlebug was still there. It protracted its eyes, like a snail does when the coast is clear, and looked deep into John DeWithers.

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There was a man in front of him. DeWithers recognized the man to be his father. John DeWithers was now small--a child. And as a child, John DeWithers was wearing a suit. At that age it could only mean that it was a Sunday or a special occasion. Little Johnny DeWithers was grabbed by the scruff of his collar.

“Why were you playing in the dirt?” the father demanded to know. “You know how much I paid for your suit? You know how hard I work to buy you your clothes?” The man’s breath was hot, and there was sweat on his upper lip and saliva in his mouth.

“I-I-I was o-o-only playing. I thought I saw a mouse in the grass.”

“You thought you saw a mouse,” the father asked.

Johnny DeWithers kind of floated there, being held up by the father of his past, but how was he holding him? He could see the father’s hands.

“I-I wanted to—”

“Take a bath like your mother said,” the father said, “and the money to clean your suit is coming out of your savings jar.”

Johnny felt the vise around his neck get tighter.

“You understand me?”

“Yes, sir.”

And Johnny was released. He came hurtling down to the earth and--!

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DeWithers shook his head and heard the grandfather clock in the hallway strike six. “Already?” he said. “Didn’t I just get home?”

The aquarium was cleaned, the glass as transparent as ever. A water-filled ramekin placed at one end and some greenery from DeWithers garden lined the bottom. DeWithers wondered.

Shouldn’t I put in some sand and stones instead? Isn’t that more akin to a Mars landscape? But the tweedlebug was already in the cage and chewing on a mint leaf no less. Its

eyes moved mischievously, one surveying the aquarium and one looking up at DeWithers in a friendly, I-know-who-you-are kind of way.

DeWithers put the cover on--one meant for fish--and took it to his bedroom. He placed it on the dresser, which was against the wall to the side of his bed. If he slept on his right side, the tweedlebug would be the first thing he saw when he woke up.

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That evening, as per his usual custom, DeWithers watched the News. Disaster was coming still. It had been coming all his life, but never really arrived. It was sure to get here someday, but then again maybe that was the one thing that the News got wrong.

DeWithers was dressed in old fashioned pajamas. He made a note to call the hauling company in the morning to haul away all of the burdensome artifacts that littered his house. It had been five years since the death of his wife, and he was finally going to get rid of the stuff, maybe even move to a new place without any burdensome memories.

After the News, he was going to turn to the Sports Channel to check on the race results and other scores of the day, but then he saw an ad for a special program. "All about tweedlebugs, directly after the News!"

Well, he had to watch it.

DeWithers prepared his favorite snack, a roast beef sandwich, during the commercials and sat down to watch. The best roast beef sandwiches were at the race track, but DeWithers could make a mean one himself.

The program started, and DeWithers watched with wonderment and amusement. It was amazing to him how much they knew about the tweedlebug since they had only become aware of its existence a mere two weeks ago. They didn't talk much about the creatures' eyes. They

didn't know much about that, but they did talk about its glowing skin, its locomotion, and even its eating habits.

“We are currently looking into these creatures in their natural habit and researching what they ate and how they lived on their home planet, but here on Earth, they are happy to move about and eat. That is all they need for happiness, and yes, with the latest in brainwave reading technology, our emotion detectors can determine a creature's happiness.”

To eat and to move about was all the tweedlebugs needed. DeWithers thought about buying a larger aquarium for his tweedlebug. After all, happiness was the most important thing.

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John DeWithers went to his bedroom and couldn't believe that the tweedlebug had eaten most of the greenery. The aquarium was almost bare. The water seemed untouched. DeWithers quickly went to his garden, pulled leaves and weeds at random, and put them in the cage. “That little guy'll eat anything,” he said.

DeWithers fell asleep thinking about what to name his new pet, its soft orange glow acting as a nightlight.

*

DeWithers had gone long periods of his life without dreaming. In fact, he hadn't had a dream since his wife died, so when he dreamed again that night, he was unsure whether he was dreaming or actually seeing something.

The tweedlebug's eyes detached themselves and slithered up the sides of the aquarium. They slithered up and down, up and down as if they were testing out every minute groove and crevasse in the glass.

They left the cage as things tend to happen in dreams--all of a sudden. They crawled on DeWithers as he lay there on his back frozen and helpless. They wanted to bore into his nostrils, into his ears, and into his eyes. DeWithers wouldn't let them. Mentally, telekinetically, he wouldn't let them.

Why are you doing this, tweedlebugs?

The eye worms wouldn't answer.

And then DeWithers' dream shifted. He was floating, first in his house above all the garbage and then at the racetrack, going around and around and never getting anywhere. He couldn't stop from floating. And the grandstand was full of people. He *felt* he knew these people, each and every one, although he couldn't count them or even see their faces. He was sure his father was there. Probably his deceased mother and wife. Old classmates. Ex-coworkers. They booed and hissed and threw stones at him. And they struck him, and he was bleeding from his nose and ears.

*

DeWithers woke up with a headache and nausea that reminded him of his drinking days. Maybe there was something in that roast beef sandwich. But it was his head that was making him feel sick, not his stomach. He rubbed his head to relieve the pressure and felt the few wispy white hairs that resided there. His nose felt drippy and his ears plugged. He wiped away some of the slimy snot. Sinuses, he told himself, there was a big storm coming. His head would feel better after a steamy shower.

He looked over to the aquarium, most of the greenery was still there this time. Perhaps, the tweedlebugs didn't eat at night.

“Why’d you give me such weird dreams?” DeWithers asked the creature. “Is it because you’re from another world?”

The tweedlebug moved about; its eyes moving in independent directions. DeWithers could have sworn it was slightly fatter and bigger than it was the previous day. But then again, maybe it wasn’t.

*

“You can take everything from the garage and everything from this room.” DeWithers showed the piled-up mess in the former spare bedroom to the man in the gray jumpsuit from the hauling company. DeWithers paid the hauling company with his daily racetrack money. It was the first day that he had skipped going to the track since he could remember. He had started going everyday sometime after his wife died, he remembered that much. Sure, he missed her, he must have, but there was something great about a life where you were allowed to and could afford to go to the racetrack every day and watch those beautiful horses run, maybe win a buck or two, and spend all the money that you had been saving for decades--had been saving for a rainy day.

*

When John DeWithers walked into the pet shop, he couldn’t believe how beautiful the clerk was. Even at his age, a gorgeous young lady could surprise and take his breath away. She was dressed plainly in some slacks and a polo shirt with the pet store’s logo on it, but that didn’t fool DeWithers. He considered himself an expert on spotting beauty.

He told the girl that he wanted to buy a new aquarium, she asked what kind of fish did he have. He didn’t come right out and say that he had a tweedlebug; he wanted to keep it a secret of sorts. He told her that he was keeping a tarantula--a filthy creature, but it made for a good lie.

She quickly informed him that he should buy a terrarium rather than an aquarium.

DeWithers shrugged his shoulders when she showed him the selection. They all looked pretty much the same. He asked about getting some sand to put at the bottom of the cage.

“Oh, no,” she said, “that’s bad for tarantulas.”

“What about little rocks, like at the bottom of a fish tank?”

“Those might be okay,” she said. She had a crooked smile. DeWithers wondered if it was natural or if something had happened in her life, say a tragic car accident or being beaten by an abusive father, to cause her smile to be uneven. DeWithers liked that smile. He held onto it with his eyes. The girl had an ethereal beauty, but the crooked smile made her real, earthly.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?” DeWithers asked.

“They might be okay,” she said again.

“They might be okay?”

“Yeah,” said the girl. “I’m afraid I’m not an expert on keeping tarantulas. I just know that sand is a no-no for them.”

The girl was young and vital. Had DeWithers known anyone like this in *his* young and vital days? He tried to picture what his wife had looked like, but could only come up with a vague shape and a misty image. DeWither’s own youth had slowly escaped him, but he was going through a renewal, he felt. He wished he could renew his look to go along with his energy and spirit.

He couldn’t picture his wife, but he could picture this girl. He pictured what her uneven smile would look like on her angelic face if she saw the tweedlebug that he kept in his house.

After loading it with rocks, a larger water dish, and some greenery, DeWithers transferred the tweedlebug from the old aquarium to the new terrarium. This time he wiped the slime off with a handkerchief.

From the old aquarium almost all of the greenery had disappeared, but this time the tweedlebug didn't look any bigger than it had in the morning.

"I hope you like it, little guy," DeWithers said and tapped on the glass. He had caught the attention of the eyes, which seemed to be convulsing and at the same time taking in the tweedlebug's new environment. "Are you okay in there?"

The eye antennae seemed to have calmed at his voice, seemed to look straight into his eyes.

*

The pet shop girl looked up at him with a sweet longing in her eyes and that crooked smile.

"No," DeWithers said. He shook his head vigorously. "No," he repeated. "You don't want an old man like me."

*

DeWithers looked down at the tweedlebug again. The room had dimmed. Obviously, twilight had snuck up on DeWithers once more. He went to the living room to watch the News and said to himself, "I should probably think of a name for you."

*

By the time DeWithers began to turn in for the night, he still hadn't thought of a name. He watched the creature in its cage for a while. It moved about like the previous night, up and down the glass, studying its grooves, DeWithers assumed. And it ate. DeWithers swore he saw

it suck up a stone in its mouth like a vacuum would. DeWithers imagined all the tweedlebugs in the universe going around the surface of Mars and sucking up small stones, making the surface smoother one tiny pebble at a time.

All the names that DeWithers could think of for the creature were lame vacuum puns. DeWithers was not good with words.

*

The dreams came for a second night in a row. It started out as a repeat of the first one: the eyes detached from the tweedlebug as if they were independent worms themselves. They slithered over to the bed somehow and went for DeWithers' face. He fought them off in that frozen sleep state. The term 'sleep paralysis' entered his thoughts, but for that, another voice said, you would actually have to be awake.

And the dream blacked out for a moment. And DeWithers was hurling through space, or actually the tweedlebug was. DeWithers was watching things from its perspective. Hurling through space, blackness and stars. There was no up and there was no down. In one direction, he saw the Red Planet, and in another, he saw the Earth's moon, but it wasn't gray, it was a fantastic color that neither DeWithers nor the tweedlebug could describe.

Words. The tweedlebug seemed to know words and they were entering DeWithers' head now. *Space is cold. Mars is not my home.* And the words had an electric pulse to them, one that vibrated DeWithers' brain when the words were spoken.

There was a curtain floating in space. It was almost black and almost invisible. A true camouflage in the darkness of space. DeWithers--not the tweedlebug--reached out and grabbed it. It felt like silk finer than any of his ties. He lifted it and saw not-space.

There were men in white coats in a room full of tweedlebugs, not all of them neon orange. Some were headache-inducing red. Others yellow. And some even a neon blue. But most were orange. The scientist closest to the curtain studied an orange one--it could have been the one that DeWithers was keeping in the terrarium. The scientist had a dropper with some clear liquid. It looked as if he were going to put the liquid on the tweedlebug when he seemed to notice DeWithers watching him.

He looked directly at DeWithers, there floating in space, peaking behind the curtain. And the scientist scowled at DeWithers as he yanked the curtain away from him.

DeWithers reached out for the curtain again, but felt nothing. He was tumbling in space and started moving faster and faster. And then he was no longer tumbling; he was falling down to Earth, but Earth was not there. He was falling into nothingness. Falling and falling until he felt he was going to hit something, and then--

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The headache was worse than the previous morning. DeWithers' head was throbbing and he sat up and clutched his head with both hands. He rocked back and forth from the pain. He felt something wet coming from his ears. Was he bleeding?

"Ah, make it stop!" He shut his eyes tight, trying to shut out the pain. And then he thought he would vomit. He ran nearly blind to the bathroom and evacuated a bright liquid from his mouth and into the toilet. His throat burned.

"My God," he said, "I'm going to die." The bathroom tile was cool, and so was the toilet seat. He wiped his mouth, flushed the toilet, and closed the toilet cover. He rested his head there, absorbing as much of the cold as he could.

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When he was steady again and the headache had waned, he went back to the bedroom. Where he had slept was wet. Had he sweated that much? It wasn't so hot, but his fevered dreams told him that he was not well.

DeWithers looked from afar at the tweedlebug.

It brought back the childhood memory of his space buggy toy--the one his father bought him. His father helped him put on the decals just so, and DeWithers, as a boy, was so proud of that toy. He was so happy to have it, but it made him sick. The fumes from its plastic made him physically sick. Sometimes, merely looking at it would make him nauseous.

The tweedlebug was doing the same thing to him, making him sick somehow, but there was no odor to the tweedlebug and DeWithers couldn't figure it out.

"I might have to move you to another room," he said. He went back to the bathroom and soaked a washcloth with cold water and then stuck it on his forehead. "I wonder if I'll even make it to the track today."

*

Back in the bedroom, he took a closer look at the tweedlebug. It wasn't moving, not at all. And its eye antennae were not protruding. DeWithers didn't even see any nubs where they had been before. Was it fatter today or a little thinner, more withered? Why did every look at the creature prompt DeWithers to question the creature's plumpness?

"Maybe it's sleeping," he said. "Maybe—" And DeWithers had some kind of feeling, almost like true knowledge, that the creature was in some kind of stasis, almost like a caterpillar in a cocoon, but there was no cocoon--unless its body was a type of cocoon. The tweedlebug wasn't from this world after all, it didn't have to mimic earth creatures perfectly. It was in stasis, and DeWithers wondered how long it would be so. Would he see a tweedle-fly emerge?

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After a breakfast of buttered toast and orange juice, and then some aspirin and a steamy shower, DeWithers decided to go to the track.

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Going to the racetrack everyday was his freedom. DeWithers strolled and whistled along the way. His headache lingered in the background, almost like an echo--he could tell it was there, but it grew fainter with each perception.

Everything looked a little off today, and DeWithers wasn't sure what it was. The flowers, the grass, the people around him, all looked a little less bright, a little more gray. The experience was similar to looking at the tweedlebug each morning. Was it really fatter, or did it just have the appearance of being fatter?

Freedom. The freedom of floating through space and then to come crashing down to Earth. DeWithers stumbled with each thought.

“Are you all right, sir?” someone, whom DeWithers didn't see, said.

“Yeah, yeah, fine.” DeWithers kept moving and thinking strange thoughts. Poison, he was a poison now. Or was he meant to poison others? His whistling stopped. It had been interrupted at each thought. He was whistling a bar at a time, and then only a couple of notes, and then it stopped all together.

Keep moving, he thought. There was something definitely not right. Keep moving . . . and eating. There were roast beef sandwiches at the track for him to scarf down. Gotta watch those beautiful horses, and then in the evening I can watch my tweedlebug. And I'll keep moving from here to there and from there to here. My house is clean now. No more dusty artifacts.

Oh, my wife, how I miss her. But I'm free now, I'm free, like an astronaut floating in space. My head hurts. The pressure. There's something wrong with my spacesuit, my helmet. The pressure isn't right.

He was losing focus. There was something wrong with his eyes. "Are you okay, mister?" the man at the gate asked.

The sky, the people, the light were all gray now. It must be overcast, but it felt more like someone had switched off the color. And crooked smiles everywhere. Everyone seemed to smile at him with uneven concern, but that was okay. There was no panic. He started whistling again--a full tune this time. And then he sat down because his instincts told him to. His instincts didn't want him to fall. And there was one final jolt of pain--one so strong that DeWithers must have blacked out.

His head popped off--his human head that is--and was replaced by a tweedlebug's head. This final evolution of the tweedlebug must have been reported on the News (although DeWithers must've missed it) because no one seemed shocked at his sudden transformation. He looked around, his sight very different now. He saw other man-sized tweedlebugs standing up, moving about, and eating at the race track. What would the News say about this, about men and tweedlebugs being fused together?

"It is perfectly safe and the altering of humanity is nothing to worry about. It is, in fact, a wonderful thing."

And it must be true: DeWithers, like the tweedlebug he was, was happy. His ugly head be damned.

The End

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