

From Chapter 6: Ted's Variety Shop

Author's note: I really enjoyed remembering the sights, sounds, and smells of Ted's Variety Shop and then trying to capture them in writing. Although it was fun to remember and write, this large hunk of writing did little to advance the book's central mystery or to cause Matt to grow as a character. In the end, I cut the entire section about Ted's.

...After we sat for a while, Kerry reached into his pocket and pulled out a dollar bill. “Hey, my dad gave me some money. Wanna go to Ted's?”

“Are they still open?” I asked.

“I think they close at eight.”

“OK then, sure. Let's go. Last one there's a rotten egg!”

Not bothering to look for cars, we took off across Barron Avenue and chased each other down the alleyway. I was in the lead, but Kerry was right behind. He caught me at Fairfield Avenue, where we both had to stop to cross the street. Fairfield is busy and Ted's Variety Shop is on the opposite side, across from Esposito's TV repair and almost catty corner from Kerry's house.

The cars and trucks streamed steadily by, one after the other. When a break finally appeared, we gunned it, shooting across both lanes and bolting for Ted's front door. Before going in, I peeked through the shop's window glass, grimy with street dirt and car exhaust and smudged with greasy handprints. I could see Ted standing in the main room near the comics. Birdman was sitting on a stool behind the counter, just like he always does. Kerry threw open the door and we raced inside.

“Hey,” yelled Ted in his scratchy, wheezy voice. “Don’t run in the shop. How many times do I half to tell younz?”

“Hi Ted,” said Kerry, heading for the candy counter. “Hi, Birdman.”

Birdman, who looked as rumpled and gruff as ever, grunted.

Kerry and I loved going to Ted’s. But my mom doesn’t like the place at all. She thinks Ted and his partner Birdman are really odd. This is true, but as far as I’m concerned that’s one of things that makes Ted’s Variety Shop cool.

Ted, who is the owner of the store and the brains in the outfit, always sports a crumpled porkpie hat and a creepy, toothy grin. He grins whether he’s telling you a lame joke, selling you a bag of pretzels, or complaining about the weather. I don’t know about you, but I think it’s creepy when someone grins constantly. Like, what’s so funny? And if things aren’t funny, then why are you grinning? Ted has other weird habits, too. Like, he’s always wringing his hands and muttering under his breath. Whenever I’m in his shop, watching him grinning and muttering and wringing his hands, my opinion about him bounces back and forth like a tennis ball. Sometimes I think, “Ted is like a mixed up old grandpa.” At other times I think, “Ted is like a psycho axe murderer.”

Right now I wasn’t sure which side of the Ted-fence I was on. I looked at him and he looked back, grinning his creepy grin and wringing his hands. He pointed to the comics stand. “Got a new shipment in,” he wheezed. “Also got some new baseball cards.”

“No thank you,” I said. “I’m a football guy.”

“Actually, we’re here to get candy,” said Kerry, pulling out his dollar bill

and then looking at me. “Or maybe we should get some ice cream.”

I shrugged my shoulders. Either was all right with me, especially since Kerry was buying. Beggars can't be choosers, right? Close to the store's front door, next to shelves of chips and pretzels and Cracker Jacks, is Ted's floor freezer. He has it stocked with all kinds of ice cream treats, like Dreamsicles, ice cream sandwiches, Nutty Buddies, and all flavors of popsicles, including root beer and banana, which are my favorites. Ted's also sells Eskimo Pies and Cap'n Crunch Ice Cream Bars.

We crowded round the freezer and looked in. Kerry even pulled back the sliding glass panel and lifted out two ice cream sandwiches. But then he put them back. “I'm not psyched for ice cream, are you?”

“Nope,” I said. “It's not hot enough. Let's get some candy.”

As we headed to the display case, Birdman slid from his perch and padded toward us, swaying slightly as he walked and scratching behind his ear like a dog trying to rid itself of fleas. He met us at the case, leaned on the thick glass counter top, and grimaced. I knew the grimace was how he smiled, so I smiled back and said, “Hey, Birdman.”

Birdman is even odder than Ted. He's squat and squinty-eyed and his shoulders are all hunched up and he wobbles when he walks, like he has a bum foot or like one leg is shorter than the other. He rarely talks, even when you ask him a question. He just kinda grunts and hums. In the store, Birdman sweeps the floors, straightens the loaves of bread that otherwise sit undisturbed on the dusty metal shelves, or just sits on his stool behind the counter, looking out of the corners of his eyes at the kids leafing through the

comic books or loitering in the doorway. Sometimes, when Ted is busy in the back room, a guy might come into the shop and ask for a pack of cigarettes or a can of Skoal or Copenhagen. Birdman will pick it off the shelves and give it to the guy. But I've noticed that Ted is always the one who rings up the purchase.

My dad says Robert (that's Birdman's real name) has mental retardation, and I bet my dad is right. Whatever he has, Birdman is different, and kids make fun of him for that reason. When he turns his back, kids will squawk like a chicken or caw like a crow. Some of the older kids call him *retard* right to his face.

Every now and again Birdman will lose it and start chasing kids around the shelves, through the shop and out the door. He'll even follow them down the sidewalk, yelling and cursing and flapping his arms like, well, a bird. You would think that all the commotion would make for a big dramatic scene, but it never does. I guess that's because the scene is such a regular occurrence. When Birdman starts bellowing and flapping, and the kids start screaming and running, people walking down the street watch like they're watching a fire engine go by. It's loud and exciting for a minute and then it's over, and everybody goes back to whatever it was they were doing and acts as if nothing had ever happened.

By the way, I would never call Birdman a retard. In fact, I would never call him, or anyone else, *any* kind of name. Not only is it cruel, it's just wrong. I have my faults, to be sure, but being mean to people like Birdman isn't one of them. It's upsetting to think how callous people can be. I often wonder why people do the horrible things they do. Like, when I think of all the terrible

things people have done to each other in Vietnam, it makes me sick to my stomach. Anyway, because I'm mostly polite and courteous, I get along fine with Ted and Birdman. So does Kerry. We're regulars in the shop, even though, as I said, my mom doesn't like me in there.

As we stood gazing at the candy selection, Ted drifted over and joined us. Ted and Birdman were always super vigilant whenever kids were in the store, even if the kids were well behaved. "How about some Pop Rocks?" Ted wheezed. He turned to the back wall, grabbed a few packets from a box on a shelf, and handed them to Kerry. "Got Watermelon, Blue Razz, Tropical Punch, Strawberry..."

"Tropical Punch!" exclaimed Kerry. "Whoa. Haven't tried that one yet." Kerry loved Pop Rocks. But not me. Eating them was like holding a gulp of Sprite mixed with sand in your mouth while someone ran an electric current through it. To me, the whole fizzing and crackling thing was less like an enjoyable candy eating experience and more like an attempt to eat a handful of exploding gravel. Needless to say, I wasn't interested in the Pop Rocks.

Ted must have sensed my aversion because he immediately pulled out a couple of boxes from inside the counter. "Maybe you'd like some Bottle Caps. Or an Atomic Fireball." He reached into a box decorated with flames and mushroom clouds, pulled out a Fireball, and waved it in front of my face. The bright red sphere danced before my eyes, a tiny plastic-wrapped planet floating in space. Ted brought the fireball in closer and I could see the yellow cigarette stains on his fingers and the dirt under his nails.

Speaking of dirt under the nails, here's another reason my mom isn't a

fan of Ted's: everything in it is dirty. Actually, filthy is the word my mother uses. First, there's the actual real-life dirt and crud. The floor of the shop is wooden and splintered, and it's encrusted with spots and splotches of identified gunk that never gets cleaned up. I bet that by the time we graduate from high school, the gunk will have piled up like the bat guano in Mammoth Cave. The shelves in the shop are dusty and the glass counters are smeared with oily streaks and handprints. Even Ted and Birdman are dirty, what with their food-stained clothes, unwashed hands, and body odor. My mom says that anything I buy at Ted's has to be sealed in plastic, so the Atomic Fireball was looking like a pretty good option.

Ted's is filthy dirty in another way. It has dirty magazines, as in adult magazines, like, with pictures of naked women in them. The magazines are kept in a small room towards the back of the store. There's a sign on the wall next to the doorway that says, "No one under 18 permitted," although I know for a fact that Kerry's brother Steve has gone in there, and he just turned seventeen.

If you're ever in Ted's and you're curious about the back room, here's something I've learned. Ted carries a good selection of comic books, like The Fantastic Four, The Incredible Hulk, and Tales from the Crypt, plus there's always the latest Mad Magazine. They're all displayed on a big metal carousel off to one side of the main room and kids are always standing around the rack, reading the comics and fanning through the magazines. What I discovered is that if you stand at the backside of the carousel and look between the second and third tiers, you can see right into the dirty magazine room. Most of the

magazines in there, however, are wrapped in paper so that the only things peeking out are the titles, and even those are hard to make out.

While the back room makes kids curious, Ted's candy display case makes kids happy, very happy. There's the usual kind of stuff in it, like Bazooka bubble gum, Dum-Dums, jawbreakers, Swedish fish, licorice strings, caramels, lemon drops, and Tootsie rolls. But then there's some stuff in it that you can't find anywhere else, like these edible styrofoamy things shaped like tiny UFOs and filled with little sugar beads. Nobody knows what they are called. If you want some, you just point and say, "Give me some of those." There are bubble gum cigars (pink for a girl and blue for a boy), wax lips and wax mustaches that you can wear or chew or both, bracelets and necklaces made from candy beads strung on elastic bands, wax cylinders filled with a sweet goopy liquid that's colored with Red Dye #2, and packs of candy cigarettes, both the brittle, sugary matchstick kind and the paper-wrapped bubble gum kind that actually puff like real cigarettes. I'm sure I'm leaving a bunch of stuff out, but you get the idea.

For a buck, you can fill up a small brown paper bag full of candy. That's what Kerry and I did. With Kerry's dollar, we bought a packet of Pop Rocks for Kerry, two Atomic Fireballs for me, and then to share we bought four Tootsie Rolls, four Bazooka's, a pack of candy cigarettes, a bunch of Pixie Sticks, and a pack of Bottle Caps.

Ted crammed it all into a bag and handed it to Kerry. "Thanks, Ted," we yelled as we ran out of the shop. "See yah, Birdman."

I heard Ted yell, "Don't run in the shop" as the door banged behind us.

We raced back to the cement wall and dug into the bag of candy. I started with an Atomic Fire Ball. Kerry chose a packet of Pop Rocks. When my mouth had filled with spit, I spat a stream thick red stream onto the sidewalk, which was totally gross but also kinda cool. Kerry sat with his head pointing up and his mouth half open. I could hear the Pop Rocks sizzling and snapping. It sounded like he was cooking bacon in his mouth...