

THE MAN BEHIND THE BAT, THE WOMAN WITHIN THE CAT
THE LIFE BETWEEN THE PANELS, THE TRUTH BEHIND THE MASKS

#7

Cat = Sales

Fun and Games



by Chris Dee

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FUN AND GAMES

Bruce Wayne took a deep whiff of cognac and closed his eyes as the lonely tones of Schubert's Impromptu #90 wafted through the air. Relaxing in the sitting room adjacent to his bedroom, with a roaring fire, handmade silk kimono, Waterford snifter, and classical music playing on the costly ultra-sleek stereo, he was the picture of the billionaire bachelor at home alone.

He didn't hear the first distant click, nor the second. The third he attributed to Alfred, though it was more than an hour since the old man said he'd be retiring for the night. The meow he couldn't dismiss so easily and he rose to investigate...

His eyes went square as he stood in the doorway to his bedroom, observing a dark silhouette flicker before the open safe. Catwoman?

"Meow," began the intruder, as an appraising eye scanned him up and down. "You're a lot younger than the average fossil one finds home alone in these big houses."

He was beginning to regret that second cognac; he needed a clear head... Bruce Wayne shouldn't be too confident or confrontational with this woman. He had to find another way. As the figure swayed enticingly into the light, he remembered he was a known womanizer. He allowed a fascinated leer to overtake his features.

"Can I, ah, help you with anything?" he managed as she touched a single claw to the center of his chest and stepped forward, backing him slowly but firmly into the sitting room and the chair he'd occupied before. She stood over him now, twirling his great grandmother's ruby necklace.

"Not any more. I have what I came for... more or less."

She leaned over the chair, hovering tantalizingly above him, more deliberately voluptuous than she ever was with Batman... Bruce felt his hand reaching round her waist and moving gently up her back as she continued, "What's a handsome, rich, athletic guy like you doing all alone at midnight anyway?"

As Catwoman lowered her mouth onto his, he returned the kiss instinctively; never stopping to think of the times he'd kissed her as Batman...

He didn't see her hand move silently to the pouch in her belt and finger the bulb of knockout gas... then pause and change course, coming to rest instead on the belt of his kimono and slashing it with a swift stroke of her claws.

He didn't hear the necklace hit the floor as she freed the other hand to explore his abs, chest, shoulder and back.

He did feel when her body tensed suddenly, but she allowed him to twist her round and underneath him, as he groped for the clasp that undid her costume.

As the purple leather fell away, Bruce broke the kiss finally to work down her neck and those luscious, extraordinary...

Their eyes met then, and he saw it.

She knew....

... Or did she?

Impossible to tell and, at the moment, impossible to care. After all these years, after all the teasing, after all the games, he would finally have her.

“Well, that was fun,” Selina purred. “You got any other fantasies you want to take out for a spin?”

Bruce Wayne, the character of the night before, might have blushed or stammered. The Bruce of this morning stroked her leg as he whispered ominously, “You don’t think Batman’s going to simply ignore your breaking into Wayne Manor, do you?”

She considered this, then said, “But I didn’t leave with anything. And I don’t think Bruce Wayne is going to be pressing charges for breaking and entering.”

“You can’t exactly tell Batman that part, can you?”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Bet me.”

Bruce couldn’t quite believe how slow he’d been to take advantage of the situation—of exactly who his girlfriend was now. Protocols! He’d asked her about protocols, but never so much as hinted—okay, the idea had tanked when he’d floated it past previous lovers; truth be told, that’s what really broke up him and Silver St. Cloud—but Selina was not Silver. She was Catwoman. She was really Catwoman. She didn’t think having fantasies about costumed night dwellers was remotely odd; she undoubtedly had a few of her own. She was downright pleased to learn he thought about her that way, and she was excited (she was quite SPECTACULARLY excited) to try out his Catwoman-breaking-into-the-manor scenario.

And he owed it all to Giovanni D’Annunzio being a snob, the Velkstad Ballet being a bore, and the Joker being insane.

D’Annunzio’s was everything a trendy Gotham restaurant should be: the menu was creative, the food superb, the décor was chic and colorful, the prices were more colorful still, and reservations were at the whim of the proprietor. Descended from an aristocratic Italian poet, Giovanni D’Annunzio employed a strict hierarchy that made the Hollywood star system look Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood. Bruce Wayne ranked high on this complicated assessment of wealth, fame and social position, and Giovanni was always glad to seat him and his eye-candy companions at the most prominent table.

Giovanni was, in fact, the only Gotham City snob to notice Bruce Wayne dating Selina Kyle. Though the romance had been going on for months, they hadn’t been out much in public and even less “in society.” On the few occasions they had, well, Bruce and some new brunette hardly rated as news. But Giovanni had an Italian’s eye for the female form, and Selina had very memorable curves. He recognized her from her one-woman show, CAT-TALES. Normally some flash in the pan actress from off-Broadway would not receive a coveted position in his dining room, but a stunner like Selina who only might be an actress or might be the notorious Catwoman herself, that was another matter entirely. So it was that, after the first visit, whenever Alfred called in a reservation for Wayne, Giovanni would ask “And will Signorina Kyle be his

companion this evening?" If the answer was yes, the very best table would be held for them and Giovanni would spend the day hoping it would be tonight—at his establishment—that Gotham Society finally noticed Bruce Wayne's latest flame.

And so he was heartily disappointed when Alfred made tonight's reservation for six o'clock. Six o'clock! At so early an hour, there would be no one of importance to see them! What kind of plebeians dined at six?

At 6:10, Bruce Wayne walked into the reception area, a man at one with his world, who breathed the rarified air of Gotham's high life as ordinary men breathe oxygen. Despite his disappointment, Giovanni greeted the billionaire playboy with all his accustomed charm. But instead of leading him to the usual table, he smilingly informed Mr. Wayne that Miss Kyle was waiting in the lounge.

"I think we're being punished," Selina whispered as Bruce joined her at a low, cramped bistro table in the darkest corner of the lounge. "Giovanni said a table wouldn't be ready for an hour and a half, and when I said we needed to make an eight o'clock curtain, he sat me in here."

Bruce wasn't one whose self-image could be threatened by little slights from people like Giovanni. He shrugged off the incident and ordered an expensive single-malt scotch (which he wouldn't actually drink) and Scottish spring water to back it (which he would drink).

They talked briefly about his day at Wayne Enterprises, then about Dick's quasi-reconciliation with Barbara, which was apparently short-lived. The serious rift about Helena and Jean Paul was forgotten but had been replaced by a series of small, more playful quarrels about decorating or some such nonsense.

"It's been going on like that since they were kids," Bruce concluded, unaware of the irony, "'though how it's possible for two people so perfect for one another to go on like that for years and never notice they're in love...."

"Oh shit," Selina interrupted, suddenly shrinking behind her handbag, a cocktail napkin and a bowl of mixed nuts. "Don't look now," she hissed, dipping her head strangely as though trying to shield it behind the bulk of his frame, "but Harl—I said don't look now. Is that your idea of not looking? Oh god, she's with...."

Bruce had turned nonchalantly and sucked in his breath as he saw Harley Quinzelle seating herself at a nearby table, followed by a tall, thin man whose well-applied makeup concealed from casual observers—but not from Bruce who knew his features well—that the skin underneath was a pasty white.

Joker, he thought grimly.

Batman-mentality was always quick to kick in, and Bruce's very first thought was that this was his first opportunity to see Joker's makeup work in person. The madman occasionally assumed this look to make televised threats to the populace, but never on a crime when he might encounter Batman.

Bruce turned back to Selina, who now held an upside-down cocktail menu before her face. He took it from her, turned it right-side up and spoke softly.

"You have a better view. Does that look like a wig, or do you think he dyes it?"

Selina's eyes bulged, positively bulged, as she realized he was trying to determine why the Joker's hair did not appear its usual green.

"Who the hell cares?" she whispered back. "Don't you realize if they SEE me, they'll COME OVER."

It wasn't a pleasant thought. The idea of Joker and Harley Quinn coming over to say hi, of Selina introducing him as her date... of (horror of horrors!) the harlequins from hell sitting down to join them... of Bruce having to pick up the check! The nightmare series of thoughts jolted him right out of Bat-mode.

He joined Selina behind a menu, as he strained to pick out Harley's voice from the low buzz in the room.

"If you want to get back together, Puddin', there are a few things I'm gonna insist on. And remembering our anniversary is one of them."

"This is not our anniversary," her companion insisted. "Our anniversary is in June; this is September. I'm going to kill that waiter."

"You can't kill anybody tonight, Puddin', you didn't recite Lord Alfred Tennyson's epic poem Ulysses before we left home."

Selina's menu bobbed up and down feverishly. She was laughing.

Joker could be heard grumbling. "June 4th. We broke into the fishery on June 4th."

Mercifully, Joker and Harley were soon shown to a table. It was too dangerous for Bruce Wayne to not be seen leaving the restaurant and going to the ballet as announced, but he ducked out of the theatre as soon as the lights dimmed. Within minutes, Batman was staked out across from D'Annunzio's canopy, and when the couple emerged, he followed them. He heard Harley cooing about a hansom cab through the park and Joker muttering "\$14 for a shrimp cocktail, \$45 for a dish of pasta..."

They did get into a hansom cab and, for the briefest moment, Batman almost felt sorry for the lunatic: Harley was singing snippets of My Heart Will Go On in his ear, while Joker repeated yet again that their anniversary was in June.

After the park, they went on to a nightclub. The Iceberg Lounge... Of course, Penguin's place.

Before he could decide on a course of action, the air was cut with a familiar cracking sound—Catwoman's whip. She wasn't attacking, just thrashing the air the way a cat thumps its tail to express annoyance.

"You ditched me at the ballet," she hissed.

"It's the Joker. I had to follow up."

"Well YEAH, but what am I, some bimbo you have to disappear on? Didn't it occur to you that I would prefer this to the mind-numbing bore that is the Velkstad Ballet?"

"Force of habit," Batman mumbled weakly. It hadn't occurred to him, but then he had never quite figured out her unique idea of fun.

"So, what've I missed?" she asked, blithely accepting this as a natural continuation of their date, as if it was a planned entertainment, like going dancing.

"Not much. They haven't hurt anybody or committed any crime."

"Of course not, weren't you listening? It's their anniversary."

"Well, first, Joker swears it isn't their anniversary, and second, it's Joker, he doesn't care."

“But Harley does. She wants a big night out. And she’s got him firmly under her thumb. Don’t you remember, he didn’t recite Lord Alfred Tennyson’s *Ulysses*,” she ended with a chuckle.

“I didn’t quite get what that was about.”

Catwoman smiled broadly. “Know what your problem is? You’re too big and strong for your own good. If you’d ever had to fight somebody twice your size (he had), you’d know something about using an opponent’s strength against them.”

Batman looked totally confused. He was an accomplished martial artist and had mastered the techniques of redirecting an attacker’s momentum as well as any man alive. What ANY OF THIS had to do with Lord Alfred Tennyson...

“What’s the Joker’s definitive characteristic?” Catwoman was asking.

“He’s insane.”

She nodded. “And being insane, I would imagine much of the time he doesn’t see things the way the rest of the world does. I would guess from tonight’s performance that he’s pretty well aware of that. So if Harley throws him a wild enough assertion—like that he can’t kill people tonight because he hasn’t whistled the score to HMS *Pinafore*—he’ll accept it as logical precisely because it makes no sense to him.”

“That’s insane.”

“What’s your point?”

The first time she saw him smile, Catwoman described it as “the creepiest thing I’ve ever seen.” The demented grin she saw now would have terrified the Scarecrow himself.

At 11:10, Batman walked into the Iceberg Lounge, a man at one with his world, who fed on the fearful malevolence of the criminal clientele as Bruce Wayne fed on the rarified atmosphere at D’Annunzio’s.

Catwoman was on his arm, and in the other he carried a small bouquet of flowers. They made a beeline for the Joker’s table, and before anybody could react, Catwoman had kissed Harley’s cheek while Batman handed her the flowers and clapped Joker on the back, calling him a lucky dog.

The patrons of the Iceberg Lounge thought it odd, to say the least, when Bat and Cat sat themselves at Joker’s table amid cries of Congratulations and How many years has it been. But it didn’t do to interfere in the Joker’s private business, let alone Batman’s. Not if you wanted to see tomorrow.

Harley thought it was odd too, but odd wasn’t an unusual state of affairs around her Puddin’. Besides, the newcomers confirmed today was, in fact, their anniversary.

Joker thought it was a good deal more than odd. Batman seemed to think they were old pals. He and Catwoman were acting like they were invited, like it was perfectly natural that they be here to help celebrate his anniversary (WHICH IS IN JUNE!). This wasn’t the way things were supposed to be. He hated the Bat; the Bat hated him. He wanted to kill the Bat but he couldn’t kill anybody tonight because he hadn’t recited Lord Alfred Tennyson’s epic poem *Ulysses* before he left the house. And now Catwoman and Harley were going to the ladies’ room together, giggling like schoolgirls, and that left him alone at the table with Bats and THIS WAS NOT RIGHT!

"Heh heh," Joker laughed tentatively.

Batman smiled agreeably, and Joker nearly choked on his tongue.

After a few moments, he asked, "You're, ah, not going to beat me up?"

"No, I whistled the score to HMS Pinafore before I left the house."

Joker said nothing for a few seconds.

Then tried again.

"Not going to arrest me?"

"Ich würde dich sofort verhaften, wenn du ein Verbrechen begangen hättest. Aber das hast du nicht, weil du Lord Alfred Tennysons Ulysses nicht rezitiert hast, bevor du das Haus verlassen hast," replied Batman in flawless German.

Again, Joker said nothing.

One last try:

"Catwoman's quite a babe."

"Oh yeah."

The women returned and after a few more minutes of mind bending socializing, Batman paid the check, Catwoman said we must do this again sometime, Harley said she was organizing another karaoke night, and Joker hailed a cab and checked himself into Arkham.

Back on a rooftop across from the Iceberg, Bat and Cat were splitting a bottle of champagne Catwoman had appropriated from the nightclub.

Selina had drunk most of it and was still giggling at the account of what happened when she and Harley were in the powder room. Giggling. This was a very different side of her from the Catwoman who hissed and scratched—and, for that matter, the Catwoman who spun his crimefighting bluster into innuendo. Maybe it was all the talk of anniversaries, but he couldn't help contrasting this Catwoman with the one that very first night, who actually answered the trademark question about "the easy way or the hard way" with a shameless "Why, Batman, how hard do you want it to get?"

How many times did he lie in bed replaying that moment, scripting himself a better response than the wide-eyed tongue-tied gulp he'd produced in the original encounter?

And here she was now... giggling over the scheme to gaslight the Joker.

"So was it their anniversary or not?" she asked finally.

"I hate to say it. Joker's right. Their first job together was at the Dini Fishery, June 4th."

"He's going by their first CRIME? Well that's the mix-up, 'cause she's going by something that happened when she was on staff at Arkham. He brought her flowers at therapy session, kissed her or something." Catwoman gave a slight shudder at the thought. "She considers it their first date."

Batman allowed himself a twitch-smile as he drained his glass. So that's what they talked about in the powder room. He'd given Catwoman a full account of the scene at the table with Joker, but she hadn't mentioned what transpired between her and Harley.

"That would make our anniversary..." Batman began.

"December 18th," Catwoman answered just as he said, "October 10th."

“Cartier’s,” she insisted, just as Batman countered, “Top of the train station—still got the scar.”

“All bluster and batarangs, that doesn’t count! I could’ve been anybody, I could’ve been Hugo Strange, I could’ve been Killer Croc!”

“How hard do you want it to get?” Batman quoted, “Can you begin to fathom how NOT SUCCESSFUL Hugo Strange would be asking ‘how hard do you want it to get?’”

She laughed delightedly.

“Are you telling me, you’ve been thinking of me as ‘not just another rogue’ from the very first night?”

“Well I don’t fantasize about Killer Croc breaking into the manor in the middle of the night,” came the thought.

Then he glanced up—a look of lusty amusement greeted him...

He looked down at the empty champagne bottle then back at Catwoman.

“Did I say that out loud?”