



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

#10

Cat \equiv Sales

The R-Word



by Chris Dee

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THE R-WORD

"I know they're in the room now," whispered Mrs. Ashton-Larraby with a pointed nod of the head towards Bruce and Selina's table, "so I'm not naming names. I'm just saying that I'm not completely convinced the change is permanent. I don't know if ... *the person in question* has really, well, reformed."

"I don't think I'd use that word in any case, Gladys. 'Reformed' makes it sound like there's something wrong with the way they were before, and that's bound to raise hackles, whether they've turned over a new leaf or not."

"There *is* something wrong with it, Matilda, it's *immoral*."

"Just because someone doesn't live their life by your rules doesn't make it immoral."

"Oh, come now. Every week a new girl. Half the time, he didn't even know their names. I've seen him peek at the placecards during dinner, and one time when it didn't give her name, he called his own date 'Miss Guest.'"

"Well, I'm all in favor of 'the R-word.' It was dreadful trying to keep track of all the people one couldn't sit him next to: the jealous boyfriends, the angry exes, the sisters, friends, and psychiatrists of the exes."

"Will be dull, though. Clive and his friends always, I shouldn't say this, but they used to bet on the height and hair color of whatever woman Bruce brought to a party."

"And of the one he left with."

There was a round of uncharitable laughter as the trio forgot they were not to be naming names.

Selina munched a potato chip viciously as the IM window labeled IVY continued to scroll text almost too quickly to read.

I don't like the look of it

I really don't

We all know you're inclined to go both ways Catty

Grab some green then turn around and pull some nobody out of a crater

like you're a goddamn member of the justice league

But Harv says that's not such a bad thing

going both ways

if only you were more random about how you went about it

of course that's Harvey's way

But really

this is just monstrous

So you're dating a straight arrow a few months

that's no reason to go on the wagon

I swear you're worse than Harley where the men are concerned

First Batman

posterboy for testosterone poisoning

and now this Wayne character

greatest living argument for killing them all and letting Mother Nature start over

It went on like this for some time. Much as Selina was tempted to put Ivy on her ignore list, she knew that could be a costly mistake. Catwoman was proud of the way she could 'humor and handle' her fellow rogues. If she stopped listening for the sake of a few minutes' peace and quiet, she might miss important danger signals. Like this one:

Certainly no right-thinking villain would've helped Batman stop Harvey like you did

or

There are ways to prune back a wild growth to keep it in line with the others

One marked advantage of dealing with crazies, Selina thought to herself, they do tend to babble every thought in their heads. And forewarned is forearmed.

That night, Bruce came over to Selina's apartment with sesame noodles from Little Saigon. It was code for staying in to talk. As Selina transferred the noodles into bowls, set out chopsticks and glasses, and poured the wine, there was a slight, not entirely disagreeable, tension in the air. The couple had always enjoyed expecting the unexpected from the other, and since surviving their first serious quarrel, they were finding a perverse thrill in alluding to their stormy past:

"There's a problem," they said in unison.

"An image problem," Selina spoke first after the verbal collision.

"Yes, exactly."

"You know about that?"

"Overheard something that has me concerned, yes."

"Well, we've got to do something; can't just let it fester."

"Oh, I agree."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"I didn't think you would even appreciate that it's a problem."

"I didn't think you would."

They each smiled happily that the other was being so understanding. Then both spoke, again the same words, again spurted in unison:

"So what do we do—Well, there's the obvious—But you'd never approve of *that*."

Then Selina asked sarcastically: "You *wouldn't mind* if I take Bunny Wigglesworth's tiara?" just as Bruce asked, "You don't care if I start *dating the Laker Girls*?"

There was a long silence before Bruce thoughtfully set down his chopsticks, started to speak, then thought the better of it. Selina placed her tongue on her upper lip and raised an index finger in the air, then she too decided to postpone the tricky business of constructing a sentence at that particular moment.

After another false start, Bruce tried once more...

"What *exactly* are we talking about?"

"I'm talking about my standing with the other rogues since Catwoman's gone legit, what the hell are you talking about?"

"The fact that Bruce Wayne hasn't dated only one woman like this since never. Wait a minute, you're telling me it's a *PROBLEM* not being known as a thief and a criminal?"

"You're telling *me* it's a problem not being seen as a *Don Juan* who thinks his money entitles him to treat women like *fashion accessories!*"

And again in unison: "You so don't get it— I don't get it— But all *YOU* need to do is—"

In desperation, Bruce reached forward with Batman's speed and placed a finger over her mouth.

"All you'd need to do," he insisted while he had the floor, "is put it about that you're using me to get close to all the socialites and their million dollar jewel collections."

Selina glared pointedly at the index finger that still rested on her lip and snapped at it as Bruce finally removed it.

"And all *you'd* need to do is put it about that you're using me for cheap thrills," she countered.

Bruce's eye twinkled as he considered this: "Thrill seeking... like slumming at the Iceberg? Or for that matter, putting the moves on Batman's girl."

He looked up, expecting a laugh at this rare attempt at humor, but received only a stony deadpan.

"I offered. Batman was never interested," Selina said airily.

Bruce put a hand on her waist and nuzzled her neck.

"Man must be an idiot."

The next night, Bruce Wayne and Selina Kyle entered the Iceberg Lounge with the intention of defending their joint reputations of having "reformed." She would fence a few suitably suspicious items; he would leer at every woman in the room—every woman except Poison Ivy, as a slap for "posterboy for testosterone poisoning." Then he would spend the next day at the yacht club boasting how fast cars and the Playboy twins are nothing compared to the world Selina opened up to him, slumming with all those colorful underworld characters....

"BW from L, Paris, 1997." Selina was reading the inscription on an antique snuffbox Bruce passed her as a likely item to have belonged to Bunny Wigglesworth. "So who's L?" she asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Lucius."

Selina rolled her eyes as a waitress came over to take their order. Selina ordered a martini and asked to see Oswald; Bruce ordered a scotch and leered at the waitress.

Oswald Cobblepot, aka Penguin, proprietor of the Iceberg Lounge, waddled up to their table a few minutes later. Selina stood, telling Bruce to "soak up some atmosphere" while she and "Pengy" went into his office to speak privately. But Cobblepot sat down, eager to talk with the new arrival. Selina sat back down, eyeing the birdman suspiciously as he played the dashing host to Bruce.

"Nigma said I was to take first class care of you if you came in," he oozed with what one imagined he thought was charm.

After a few minutes of bewildering smalltalk, Selina rather pointedly left the table and waited for Penguin at the bar. She was more confused than ever when she saw Scarecrow approach the table as soon as she'd left. Certainly, he was avoiding her ever since that time she set him on fire. But why would he want to talk to Bruce?

Penguin finally joined her at the bar and Selina showed him the goods. He named a price—which she flatly refused. She made a few insulting comments about his not having the right kind of buyers for quality stuff like the Wigglesworth knickknacks... and it was done. Pengy would certainly assume she was taking this and future hauls to another fence. His wounded pride would lash out, making it common knowledge that she was robbing Bruce's society friends blind. Catwoman's reputation as a practicing thief would be restored, Meow.

She turned back to the table happily, her mission accomplished—only to see that Killer Croc had taken Scarecrow's place at Bruce's side.

"Oswald," she began in a strained voice, "Do you have any idea why Bruce is so popular with..." She trailed off as Roxy Rocket joined Croc. "...with *everybody* who's here tonight?"

Before he could answer, there were sounds of a skirmish at the front door. In strode a figure known variously among the rogues as "The Imposter," "The Choirboy," and "Barney Fife."

Oh good, Selina thought, dinner theatre.

She returned to the table, shooing Croc and Roxy away as Azrael strode self-importantly up to Penguin, grabbed the birdman by the throat, and lifted him several inches into the air.

"You'll give me answers, scum, and you'll do it now," Azrael growled.

Still getting his dialogue from Mickey Spillane, Selina thought. Aloud she called out, "You do realize that he can't talk when you're putting the full weight of his body on his larynx?"

The helmet turned towards Selina at the angle of a dog hearing an unfamiliar noise, but he let Penguin drop. While the newcomer continued his interrogation of Penguin, Selina turned to Bruce and mused:

"In 1995, Hugh Grant appeared on the Tonight Show shortly after getting caught *in flagrante delicto* with a prostitute. Jay Leno was in a position to lean in and ask a question that everybody in America was dying to have answered." She paused as Azrael threw Penguin into the dessert cart, then moved on to harass a trio of Latvian smugglers. Selina leaned over to Bruce and whispered "*What the hell* were you *thinking?*"

He looked at her blankly, so she continued, "You want everybody to think you're a dimwitted idiot? Pity you can't tell 'em you picked *that* to replace you."

Before Bruce could say anything, Croc and Roxy returned, standing near the table, watching the vigilante question the Latvians without realizing they didn't speak enough English to understand him.

"That man, I swear," Roxy began, "Intellect of a lint trap."

"I don't care how many times he changes his costume," Selina agreed in Catwoman's voice, "I can never look at him without thinking 'Pheromones.'"

"WHAT?" Bruce mouthed in shocked confusion.

Croc chuckled at this. "Fear of moans. What a maroon."

Roxy filled Bruce in on the details of that inauspicious first meeting between Cat and Bat-wannabe. "Catty was the first to discover you can't use big words with this guy," she said, succinctly.

Bruce had been under the impression that, before cracking up, Jean Paul had made an adequate stand-in as Batman. But listening to the universal derision of the rogues, a very different picture was emerging.

"And this guy thought he could be Batman?" Roxy was saying, "Batman's a detective."

"Batman's a scientist," Croc added.

"Batman is hot," Selina finished with a wink.

Bruce moved to the bar to get a fresh scotch. There, Penguin was picking himself off the floor muttering, "Ah, Azrael, valiantly striking fear into the likes of Killer Moth for over a fifth of a decade."

Bruce swallowed his scotch in a gulp. Not only did the Rogues have no respect for Azrael, it was apparently common knowledge that he was the substitute Batman during that unfortunate period when... He turned back to the table at the sound of Selina's audible aside to Roxy: "It's Ra's face I would've liked to see, when he found out his great adversary was replaced by a Ken doll!"

Playing up the angle that he was an outsider who knew nothing of these matters, Bruce put on his best clueless demeanor and asked, "You mean this guy pretended to be Batman?"

Selina turned with the slow burn that meant he was overdoing the idiot shtick.

"Just look at the costume," Roxy answered.

"Just like what he wore as AzBat," Selina added.

"Cept red," Croc completed the thought.

"Like I said," Roxy concluded, "all the imagination of wallpaper paste."

The ride home was silent as Bruce Wayne and Batman debated an appropriate strategy: The Azrael question could be dispensed with as far as Selina was concerned under the umbrella of forgetting past mistakes, but it meant bargaining away the only real affectionately-teasing boyfriend hold he had on her. The corner of his mouth twitched at the memory and Selina noticed.

"What are you smirking at?" she asked, pointing to the corner of his lip.

"Labor Day."

"Are you ever going to let me live that down?"

"No."

The Labor Day barbecue for employees of Wayne Enterprises and the Wayne Foundation was the least-stressful event hosted at the manor. It was held outdoors, so the usual week's worth of pre-party precautions were unnecessary. There was no

double-securing the Batcave access points and triple-reminding the junior partners that there would be caterers and decorators around the house.

Alfred supervised as the grills, tents, and games were set up. Tim lurked near the DJ, visibly drooling over the impressive outdoor speaker system. Dick and Barbara arrived early, chatted for all of five minutes, then headed off towards the rose garden and weren't seen again for the rest of the afternoon. Restless, Bruce paced the party grounds, and then the manor. He would normally have made a quick monitoring run on the Batcomputer, but that was out of the question with outsiders on the grounds and Bruce Wayne hosting a party in two hours. Selina's phone call provided a welcome, if confusing, distraction.

...: *Can you pick me up at the train station? ...*

"Um, sure. Why?"

...: *Don't ask. ...*

No details were forthcoming throughout the afternoon, or indeed after the party when she hung around chatting with Dick and Tim until the last of the cleanup detail had left. Then she asked casually:

"One of you guys are going on patrol tonight, aren't you?"

"Not me," Dick chirped. "Did my weekly night in Gotham on Saturday."

"I'm taking the night off," Tim answered. "School starts tomorrow. But Bruce'll be going out. Why?"

"Shit," Selina muttered under her breath, then added, "I need a ride into town."

"I'll give you one," Bruce materialized from nowhere at the sound of his name.

"You know what," she began, the too casual making-this-up-as-I-go-along lilt in her voice fooling no one. "I can just sleep over tonight and catch the commuter train in the morning."

"Dick, Tim, let us have this room," Bruce spat out in Batman's gravelly baritone.

They did.

Bruce glared, demanding an explanation.

Selina glanced at the ceiling, then down at her nails, then back at Bruce—and then, at last, she complied:

"I... can't ride in with you in the Batmobile because I don't have my costume with me."

"You always have your costume. Where's that big handbag you use?"

Selina blinked, summoning patience for the trial to be endured.

"It's locked in the trunk of my car," she announced flatly.

Ah, revisiting the original question from before: "Why didn't you drive out here anyway, instead of taking the train?"

"Ilkdmkysnmycr," she mumbled behind clenched teeth.

"Ex-cuse me?"

"I LOCKED MY KEYS IN MY CAR, OKAY? HAPPY?! I LOCKED MYSELF OUT OF MY CAR. AND I CAN'T GET BACK IN, BECAUSE I'D NEED A COAT HANGER TO DO WHATEVER IT IS YOU DO WITH THE COAT HANGER AND THE CAR WINDOW AND... THIS ISN'T FUNNY... I DON'T BREAK INTO CARS. AND ANYWAY, I DIDN'T HAVE A COAT HANGER, BECAUSE THAT WOULD MEAN GETTING INTO MY CLOSET, WHICH IS IN MY APARTMENT, THE KEYS FOR WHICH ARE ON THE SAME KEY RING THAT'S LOCKED IN MY—THIS ISN'T

FUNNY—AND I HAD TO GET HERE BY FOUR FOR THE BARBECUE—BRUCE, THIS ISN'T FUNNY!"

But it was funny. Bruce made a feeble effort to hide his smile by scratching his nose, until Dick and Tim's cackling behind the closed door made the gesture pointless.

"Now, wait a minute, okay, you don't do cars, I'll give you that much," Bruce began, mentally adding *Thank god for small favors. Only reason I still have the Batmobile.* "But you can break into condos, so why can't you get into your apartment?"

Selina looked daggers at him, then hissed.

"Lockpicks are in my costume which is..."

The voices outside the door said the last words with her.

"...locked in the trunk of the car."

The deal was struck the next afternoon at D'Annunzio's. Selina would forego all future jibes about the great Dark Knight Detective putting his mantle and reputation in the hands of a rookie that didn't have the brains, the character, the sophistication, or even the *vocabulary* to go a full round with Catwoman. Bruce would relinquish all future references to the best thief in the Western Hemisphere locking herself out of her car, her apartment and, effectively, her life.

As they raised their glasses to seal the bargain with a toast, the words "look at them," "backsliding," and "such a pity" drifted over from surrounding tables.

Mrs. Ashton-Larraby clicked her tongue unpleasantly.

"I said so from the start, backsliding into his shallow old ways."

"Slumming at that horrible downtown club with all that riffraff," added Matilda.

"Using that nice girl for cheap thrills."

Bruce and Selina's eyes met in a silent, invisible highfive.

"By the way," Selina asked curiously, "Why were you so popular at the 'Berg last night? I swear, I've endured Harley's karaoke with those people and they never buzz around me that way."

"Oh that," Bruce answered bitterly. "Apparently I'm the only one that hasn't heard all those 'Almost Got'im' stories you all evidently tell *ad nauseum* in your spare time—which incidentally are *TOTAL EXAGGERATIONS*. I couldn't believe the shameless whoppers—what? It isn't funny—Selina!"

Selina scratched her nose vigorously as she sputtered, "the treacherous, thieving, blackmailing, murdering lunatics also LIE? How shocking."