



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

#11

Cat \equiv Fables

Watering Hole



by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES

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WATERING HOLE

Kittlemeier's shop was in a poverty-stricken area of town. To say that it was unimpressive would be an understatement. Its windows were patched with plywood, and its door handle was so rusty it almost posed a physical threat. The shop was not listed in any telephone book. Its door bore no street number. No sign proclaimed what it sold. Those who peered into it from the doorway saw only a dimly lit room with an ancient counter, an old-fashioned cash register, an out-of-date calendar from the local service station, and a curtained doorway leading to another room that opened onto the alley.

One would think to look at it, that Kittlemeier's shop could not possibly attract customers, and in truth it did not attract many. But those who needed Kittlemeier's particular services always seemed to know where to find him.

—from Neutral Ground by Mike Resnick, The Further Adventures of Batman

Harley Quinn tripped up the five steps to Kittlemeier's shop, then checked her watch before entering, for Mr. Kittlemeier was very strict about appointments. "10 am" meant 10:00 precisely, not 9:58 nor 10:05. She carried a metal briefcase full of cash, and a shopping bag to discreetly carry away the new costume, the chattering-teeth gas-grenades and the razor-edged playing cards she was picking up.

"3-2-1," she counted down as the secondhand of her Looney Toons watch clicked on the hour. The tiny bell over the door tinkled and she entered with a perky "Hiya Mistah K!" But no Mr. Kittlemeier appeared from behind the curtain. Harley waited a minute, then another before... it was strictly against the rules, and violating the rules even once could get her barred from the store for life. But what could she do? This was a pick-up appointment, which meant fifteen minutes only and not a split-second more. If Mr. K didn't appear soon, she wouldn't have time to look at the new costume, let alone try it on... Taking a deep breath, Harley ventured behind the counter and touched the curtain.

"Mistah K?" she called into the empty workroom.

She opened the door to the alley.

"Mistah K?"

Then returned to the shop.

"Mistah K?"

This was unheard of, impossible. Where could he be?

Harley waited a little longer, uncertain what to do, until the impossible happened again: the bell above the door tinkled and, for the first time in the shop's history, two Kittlemeier clients saw each other face to face.

Even in the days before Catwoman, Selina Kyle was never a particularly domestic person. There were errands and household chores that had to be done sooner or later, but she always postponed them to later. Grocery shopping was never a popular activity. Vacuuming scared the cats into hiding for hours. And her apartment—as well as every lair, hideout, and safehouse she'd ever occupied—had one storage closet that was a terror to even contemplate opening.

The night of the 'slumming' visit to the Iceberg, Selina was given a door prize: a tabletop plastic glacier shaped like a penguin. Even by the standards of a waddling birdman whose main criminal motif was an umbrella, it was a hideous piece of objet d'tacky. On arriving home, Selina didn't hesitate to open the closet door, toss the glacier onto the mass of junk, and slam the door without a glance. There was a soft kerplunk after the door closed, to which she didn't give a second thought. Later that night, there were a few more thumps and bumps, which she didn't hear at all. What she did hear, at 6:18 the next morning, was a distant and plaintive aieooowww.

Selina's left eye opened a sliver at the noise, which repeated: aieooowww.

"Whiskers?" she croaked.

aieooowww.

Stumbling through her apartment, she followed the sound until reaching—oh hell—the door to the storage closet. She placed a hand on the knob, turned...

aieooowww

...and a small landslide deposited old magazines, a tattered cat-o-nine-tails, a windbreaker, a tennis racket, the blueprints for the Whitney Gallery, and a box of Christmas ornaments onto the floor at her feet. Whiskers stood on a rolled-up tumbling mat balanced precariously on a document box labeled 'Cancelled Checks 1990s.' There were 8 feet of heaped up clutter between the cat and the door. It would take hours to clear a path for a person to walk over and pick her up.

"Aieooowww," Whiskers cried.

"You got yourself in there, you'll get yourself out," Selina told the cat flatly as she tossed bits of the landslide back into the closet.

"AieooOWWW!" Whiskers insisted, and there was another soft kerplunk from the clutter beneath.

Selina's face fell as she realized Nutmeg was unaccounted for and had apparently gone exploring in the lower depths of the clutter. Her head rolled back with a self-pitying "What did I do to deserve this" appeal to the heavens. And another avalanche dropped a set of lock picks and a tube of outdated security schematics onto her foot.

Four hours later, there was a knock on the door. While Selina was surprised to see Edward Nigma (released from Arkham already?), he was even more surprised to see her looking like the deranged scullery maid in an Edgar Allen Poe story.

After a few colorful words about spending her morning cleaning out a closet full of nutmeg or something equally baffling, he got down to business: Could she -this was strictly against The Rules and he was risking life and limb even suggesting it- but could she get a message to Bat...

He stopped when he noticed, in the piles of assorted clutter, a bull-whip, a cat-o-nine-tails, and a set of clawed Catwoman gloves. He noticed too that Selina was giving him the look of death. Recalling that the deranged scullery maid in Edgar Allen

Poe had done unspeakable damage without anything like this assortment of weaponry, he stopped and went back to the very beginning:

He'd had a fitting at Kittlemeier's—a new costume and some exploding question marks. But when he opened the door, Harley Quinn was still there from the previous appointment.

"That's impossible," Selina interrupted. "Kittlemeier's never once double booked or run overtime."

"That's the point. He wasn't there. We looked all over. Mr. Kittlemeier's gone."

Selina looked thoughtful but didn't speak, so Nigma continued:

"The pixie and I aren't exactly in the detection business, so we thought maybe the police should look into it. Anything happens to Kittlemeier, I shudder to think."

"Okay, so you called the police."

"What's that, a joke? We call the police—and say what? The nice old man on 12th street who makes all our gadgetry is missing? So, I sent them a riddle."

"You sent them...?"

"Hi! wrote angel.

Learn with ego.

The war legion.

Glow in the era.

Grow in the ale.

Wine hot glare.

What iron glee."

"Eddie, when they let you out of Arkham, did they give you any special medication?"

"They're anagrams. For 'watering hole.' Don't you see? Kittlemeier's is our watering hole. Neutral territory. We go there; Bats goes there. Like in the desert where predators and prey can all go and drink."

"Okay, okay, let's just move on," Selina cut him off with some impatience. "You sent this surrealist haiku about watering holes to the police?"

"Yeah, but then I thought: Now, it's going to look like I did it!"

Selina agreed that it would look like Riddler 'did it,' but didn't think there was the slightest chance anyone would figure out what he was supposed to have done.

"So you want me to tell Batman that you didn't intend the riddle to mean you'd done anything to Kittlemeier..."

"Right. We just want Bats to find him."

"And why, exactly," Selina began in a dangerous tone, reaching for the cat-o-nine-tails, "do you think I'm in a position to be delivering messages to—"

"Oh, come off it, 'Lina! I know we're not supposed to say so, we even warned Bruce Wayne not to mention it, but everybody knows you and Batman have some kind of a thing, certainly enough that you could ask him to look into this and not kick the crap out of me for no reason like last tiiiiime—"

The last word was delivered as he was hurled unceremoniously into the back of the storage closet. There was a loud squeal and a blur of fur dashed out from above him, followed by another shooting out from below.

"You... warned Bruce. Not to mention—Wait, let's go back. First, who is 'we?'"

The blurs came to rest at the closet door behind their mistress's legs and all three glared at a cornered Edward Nigma, demanding a full and complete explanation.

Barbara hated getting up before noon when Oracle hadn't logged off until four. But she couldn't help it. She was awake at six, couldn't get back to sleep, couldn't stop thinking through how to classify the previous night's anomaly in the database.

The call had come in shortly after midnight. Robin and Spoiler foiled a break-in at the Botanical Gardens where two men clearly in Poison Ivy's thrall used umbrella weapons that hadn't been seen since Penguin abandoned the hands-on approach to pursue safer racketeering activities through his nightclub. The umbrellas were gussied up with clumsily tacked-on vine leaves, but they were recognizable as Penguin umbrellas just the same.

What did I do to deserve this? Bloodied up my last set of claws settling the score with Mad Hatter for that stunt at the mythology museum, ruined a perfectly good whip handle beating the truth out of Eddie, and I couldn't get any of it repaired or replaced 'til I find out what happened to Kittlemeier.

This was not a case for Batman, that was for damn sure.

I'd be damned if I'd ask his help, that impossible, arrogant, infuriating,—

Stop.

Deep cleansing breath.

Alright, truth be told, under normal circumstances, I would probably laugh at the idea of Eddie, Harvey and Jervis going to brief Bruce about "The Rules." But still. Those bastards! I went nine rounds with Batman about that protocol business, went out of my way to avoid giving out any inside information on them as a result of our relationship—and they pull this! This... this... testosterone conspiracy! Turns out, now the only one he had inside information on as a result of the relationship was me!

And did he tell me any of this? Noooo. He told Barbara not to mention the book. He told Dick and Tim "no pussy jokes." He...

I'll bet the look on his face was priceless.

Sigh.

I guess it is kinda funny. But, damnit, no. This, right on top of the other, it was too much. I was not asking for his help on Kittlemeier, I was going to solve this one on my own.

That night, Nightwing stumbled into Barbara's apartment, holding his head, blinking deliberately, trying to focus, and unable to latch the balcony door behind him.

"Can you help me out, Babs, I've got a little bit of a problem here."

"What happened?" Barbara asked, guiding him to a chair.

"Harley. Incident with one of those big laughing gas grenade-things."

"Oh my god, did you breathe any of it?"

He shook his head, trying to calm her fears but intensifying his headache tenfold.

"It didn't go off," he said, "It hit me in the head."

Barbara felt above his ear where he gestured... and winced. There was a palpable lump.

"Damn things always explode into a cloud of laughing gas a couple feet in front of you, but this just kept coming and kerpoink. Felt like a goddamn brick."

I was already pissed, okay? Hearing about the Rogue Committee visiting Bruce would not have set me off if I wasn't already pissed. I realize it was years ago, but still—I had just found out—and it's not like there's a statute of limitations on that kind of thing.

Cleaning out that damn closet, I just happened to unearth some old newspaper clippings. And on the back of one was a full page ad from the Do It Right campaign. Microchips were becoming cheap, and Wayne Enterprises introduced a line of mid-range products for consumers and small businesses that thought they couldn't afford what were, at the time, considered high end corporate tools.

"You've waited long enough," began one ad depicting a one-man bookkeeping office packing up cartons of paperwork and installing a single desktop PC. "Now that you're doing it...DO IT RIGHT. Business Solution Suite-WE"

Like everybody else, I'd seen the ads a thousand times...

"Life is short," began another, picturing a busy mom paying the bills and sorting recipes at the touch of a button while the kids, visible through a big picture window, played soccer in the yard. "Free yourself to live it...DO IT RIGHT. Home Suite-WE"

...I thought nothing of it. Who knew?

Well, now I know. Bruce Wayne is Batman... the arrogant, self-serving, duplicitous bastard.

Raised to fight and do little else, Cassandra Cain had a very limited understanding of social relationships. She'd made some progress since she assumed the mantle of the new Batgirl. She was acquiring a limited vocabulary that sufficed to echo Spoiler's opinion on whatever was being discussed, and she attended, perfunctorily, the various meetings Bruce mandated for the "bat-family." But she wasn't so far along that, since moving out of Barbara's apartment and taking a room of her own, she would ever return to Barbara just to touch base and say Hi.

Thus, Barbara knew there was some purpose in her showing up unasked, and it was an awkward moment when the original Batgirl realized what that purpose was: her successor was out of tungsten cord. It was the material of choice for swinging around the city and, for some reason, she was unable to get a new supply. She wanted some from Barbara's old costume.

Barbara told herself it was a reasonable request. Cassie had a limited understanding of anything outside of the mission. She wouldn't realize this might be a painful subject for Barbara, and even if she did realize, it's unlikely she would put such considerations above obtaining the supplies she sought.

Barbara pointed her to a box under her bed; Cassie rummaged and eventually found a quarter-reel of cord.

“There,” Barbara made an effort not to spit the word. “Anything else you need, you’ll have to get from the Batcave. Understand?”

It was years ago; it was another lifetime.

I wanted a change from museums and jewelry stores. I was breaking into the Expo Center. and he found me. We traded barbs. We fought. It was physical. It was very physical. Especially after I tripped and he landed on top of me.

We wrestled a little more and... it seems like nothing now, but then it was, well, we both had it ratcheted up pretty tight back then... Body to body, breathing hard, perspiring, adrenaline pumping ...neither of us made a conscious decision... it just... happened. It morphed... from a fight into... God, I hadn’t thought about this for years. He was such a mystery back then, and his touch was... electric... Somehow, the scratching became caressing, and the squirming turned into this rhythmic bucking and grinding. It was getting intense, and I honestly don’t know what might have happened if we hadn’t heard those sirens...

We were so screwed up.

It was unthinkable that we might be seen like that, so rather than relocate to somewhere more private and continue what we both so clearly wanted to continue, we shot to the far corners of the roof and never mentioned it again. DenialFest ’95.

I hadn’t thought about it for years... But now I remembered as clearly as if it were last night. His hand coming up my waist, gently, so gently, and he murmured, “Too long, we waited too long.”

And I arched my back slightly, pushing into his chest and answered, “then LET’S... DO IT RIGHT.”

Two weeks later, Wayne Enterprises launched the DO IT RIGHT campaign.

Barbara felt bad after Cassie left. The poor kid didn’t have a lot of people to go to where she could make herself understood. What was she supposed to do if she runs out of cord and can’t get more, improvise something with telephone wire?

...

Improvising.

Barbara thought back to Poison Ivy using the Penguin Umbrellas.

And Harley Quinn’s malfunctioning gas grenades.

And a half-dozen other anomalies of the past week.

And now Batgirl was unable to get new tungsten cord.

Something was wrong—upstream.

Something had happened, at the source.

She snapped open the OraCom panel and opened a channel to Batman.

At Kittermeier’s, there was a note stapled to the door. An incomprehensible riddle was scratched out, and written beneath in Harley Quinn’s flowing handwriting was:

He’s not here.

We don’t know what’s happened.

Enter at your own risk.

Below that, in the handwriting of the original riddle, the words were scrawled:

It has no panache.

And beside it in the margin, in Harley's hand again:

But it's clear.

Making a mental note that the note-writers were mental—then smacking myself for the Nigma pun, I entered Kittlemeier's shop. It wasn't any dustier than usual, but the emptiness made it seem dustier.

I searched.

As often as I've gone through other people's things when they're not at home, it was an eerie feeling. Opening a parcel under the counter, I found a Harley Quinn costume and some vicious looking playing cards. In the back room, I did a double take when I realized there was a Batman utility belt half-assembled on the worktable.

The breakthrough clue came at the cash register. At some point, the countertop must have swelled and made the register wobble, because, underneath one corner, a folded envelope was wedged in to steady it. The envelope had an address in the East Village. Walking the route from the shop to the address, I stopped in every coffee shop, grocer, and convenience store. One block from his flat, I hit the jackpot in a quaint Hungarian restaurant.

"Ya, Kittlemeier, he stops in most nights. Jaegerschnizel, potato pancake, extra sour cream, half litre of Dortmund with dinner and a lemon schnapps after."

I had to smile, remembering a fitting when I was freezing in that miserable backroom with only a tiny space heater. Somehow we got to talking about his rates, and he said he made enough money for his only vices: good German beer and a little glass of schnapps after dinner.

"Has he been in lately?" I asked.

"No," came the scandalized reply. "He's in hospital. Didn't you know? He was mugged—four nights ago. Beaten. Very bad. Gotham Presbyterian."

It was upsetting news, I won't pretend otherwise. But that's not why I changed into Catwoman. It's true I'll sometimes use the suit to better deal with... whatever it is I don't want to deal with, but not this time. This was Kittlemeier, and it seemed more appropriate somehow to go to him in costume. A tribute of a sort.

Fortunately, Gotham Presbyterian is a downtown hospital. By that, I mean that they're in the front lines and they don't have time for nonsense. You can walk up to a nurses' station wearing leather and spandex, ask about a sixtyish gentleman brought in four nights ago, and expect to get an answer without a lot of carrying on.

The nurse told me Kittlemeier had been moved out of the ICU into a private room that morning. If she even noticed I was wearing a mask, there was no indication.

I crept into his room and was relieved to see that—despite a leg cast, traction gizmo, neck brace, a black eye, and a nasty looking cut on his forehead—he looked much the same as always.

"Mr. Kittlemeier?" I whispered, not sure if he was awake. His eyes popped open instantly; clearly he had not been asleep.

"Selina!" he waved me in happily.

"I heard you had some trouble," I said.

“Bah, hoodlums. Not my kind of people.”

“Nobody we know then?” I smiled.

I figured as much, but it was good to have it confirmed. No name villain would dare touch Kittlemeier. What would be the point?

“No. Nobodies. But dats is not important now. Vat is important is my shop. It is going to be very deeficult getting started up again. My clients, they get the time for the next appointment when they come to the last one. Now that I have missed so many, I can’t have zem popping in to see if it’s a good time. But, I zink I have a zolution, if you vill help me.”

Before I could ask what he was getting at, he held up a hand and said, “But dats is for later. You must go now, my dear, for my next appointment id here and I can’t have clients running into each other.”

“What?”

I thought maybe he was confused, what with that head wound and all... when a scalloped shadow fell over the bed.

I nearly jumped out of my skin—the sneaky Bat scared the HELL out of me.

“This won’t take long,” he said to Kittlemeier. “I just have a few questions, if Catwoman wants to wait.” Then he turned to me and added with a mouth-twitch, “Or to tell me what she’s doing here?”

Damn.

Maybe it was cleaning out that closet and thinking about the past... when he was “Batman,” not the guy inside the Bat... but looking at him now, growling, waiting for an answer... I was struck with how knowing who was in there didn’t make him any less sexy.

“Well?”

I meowed instead of answering him, sauntered up—completely forgetting Kittlemeier was a captive audience—and kissed him. He seemed surprised (though why I can’t imagine, kiss follows meow nine times out of ten for as long as we’ve been doing this). I got a little carried away and sunk a claw into his shoulder, and he pushed me back.

“You zee, dis is why the appointments must be kept zeparate,” Kittlemeier intoned. “I can’t have dis kind of zing going on in my shop.”

I left Kittlemeier’s room through the window, and immediately a batarang attached to a silken cord (Kittlemeier’s finest, \$29.95/yard) dropped down in front of me. I used it to ascend to the roof where, instead of the customary brooding bat, I heard, unmistakably, the voice of the boyfriend with a grievance...

“What was THAT about?”

I tried to pout, but a smile leaked through.

“I’m mad at you,” I told him.

“So I gather.” (He was fussing with the shoulder as if it was gushing blood. It was a tiny cut at most, the big baby.) “What did I do?”

“You didn’t tell me the Three Stooges came to see you with that Rules nonsense.”

“Oh, that. I was saving that.” A mischievous smile formed beneath the cowl that was all Bruce. “I thought, now that they’ve introduced themselves, maybe next time at

the Iceberg, I'd bandy the names about..." he came closer, wrapped an arm around my waist, "...just to see the look on your face...'such a pity Eddie and Harv couldn't be here tonight.'"

I giggled a little at this. Bruce in playful mode. It was very odd seeing—really SEEING—Bruce under the cowl.

"Well, it was silly anyway not telling me," I answered, reminded of the other issue. "Those rules don't apply to you..." I nuzzled his chin, the old blind spot, suckering him in, then worked back towards the ear and delivered the blow "...only rule that applies to you is no using our pillow talk in Wayne Tech advertising campaigns."

Following my instructions from Mr. Kittlemeier, Catwoman prowled again that night—breaking into no less than thirty-five rogue hideouts, leaving cards announcing Kittlemeier's official reopening and giving them the times for their next scheduled appointment.

I did cheat where the vigilantes are concerned: I gave the list to Barbara to distribute to Dick, Tim, Steph and the others.

The next night, three nameless thugs were delivered to the door of Gotham Presbyterian. Each had a concussion, a broken leg, two broken ribs, and assorted scratches and bruises. Each was trussed in ivy and wore a top hat with a playing card, a book of riddles, and a two-headed coin wedged into the rim.