

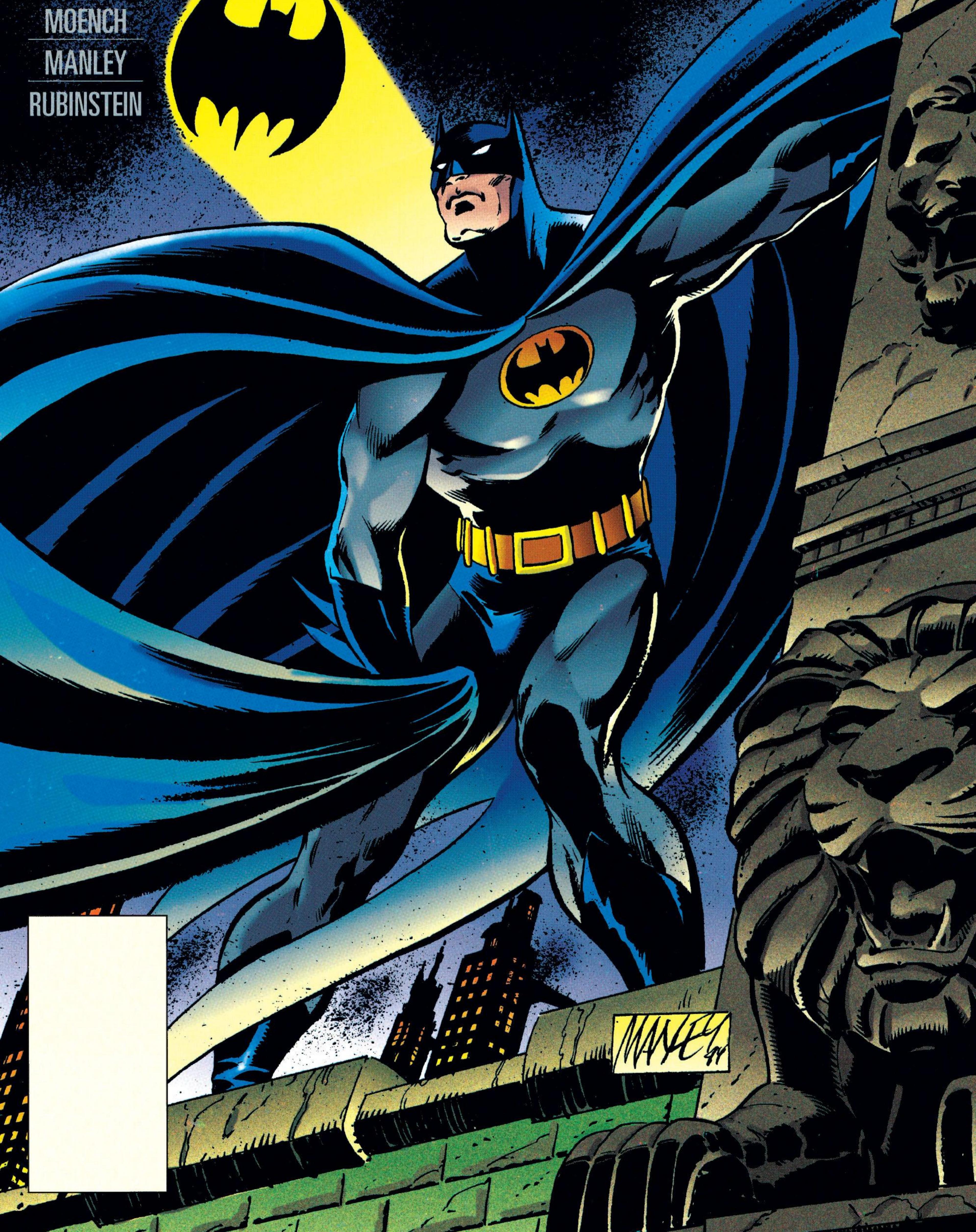


THE BEGINNING OF TOMORROW!

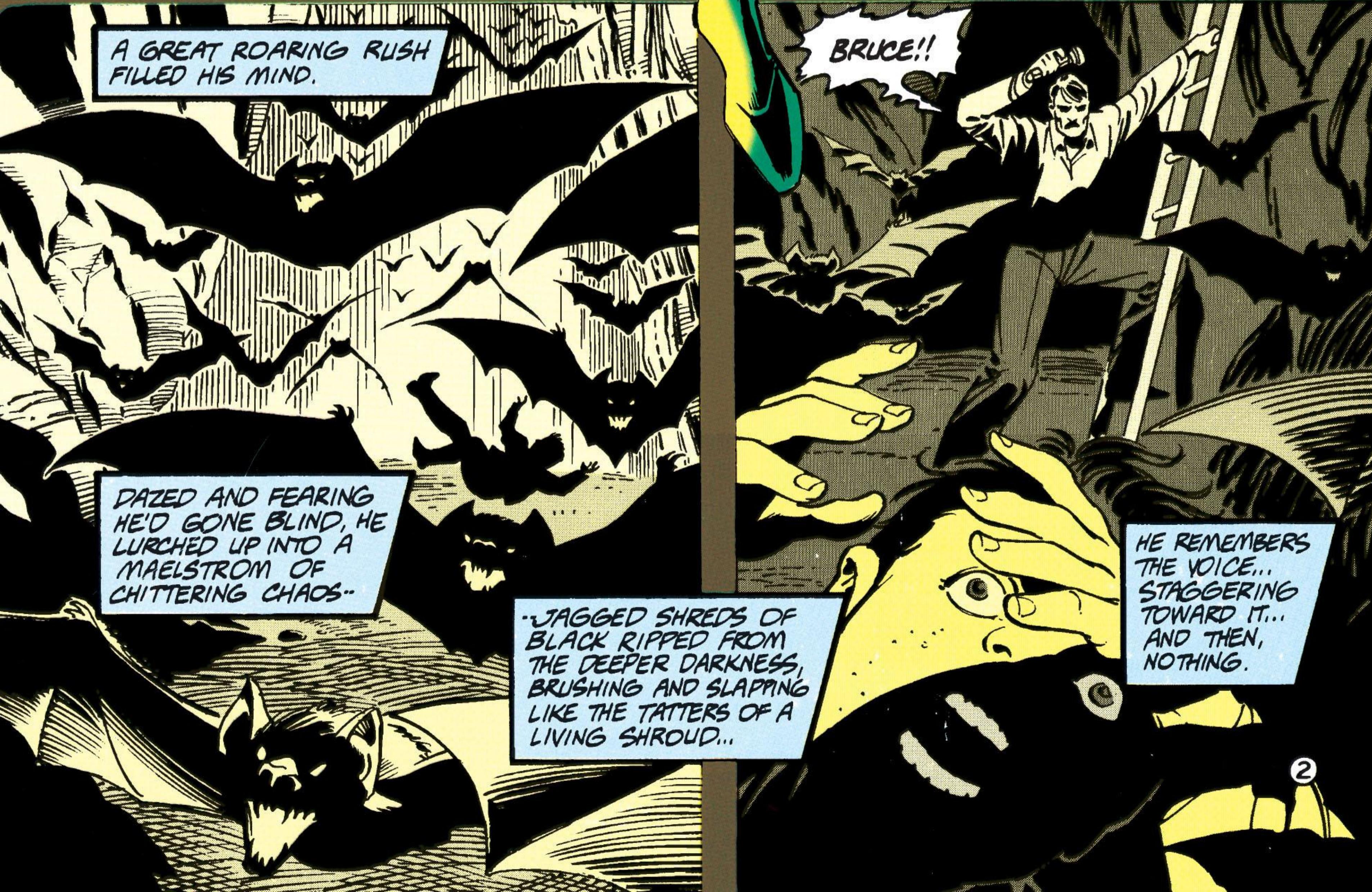
BATMAN

MOENCH
MANLEY
RUBINSTEIN

APPROVED
BY THE
COMICS
CODE
COP
AUTHORITY







MINUTES, OR HOURS, LATER—
HE NEVER ASKED—HE AWOKE
TO STARS ECLIPSED BY HIS
HOVERING MOTHER AND
FATHER.

BRUCE,
ARE YOU
ALL RIGHT?

I TOLD
YOU NOT
TO WANDER
OUT
HERE...

WAS
I...IN
HELL?

I...

ORDINARILY
I WOULDN'T
CALL YOU AWAY
FROM THE LARGER
DEMONS, BUT MY
MANPOWER'S
SPREAD THIN AT
THE MOMENT
AND...

...VICTIMS
OF
MUGGINGS
GONE
BAD.

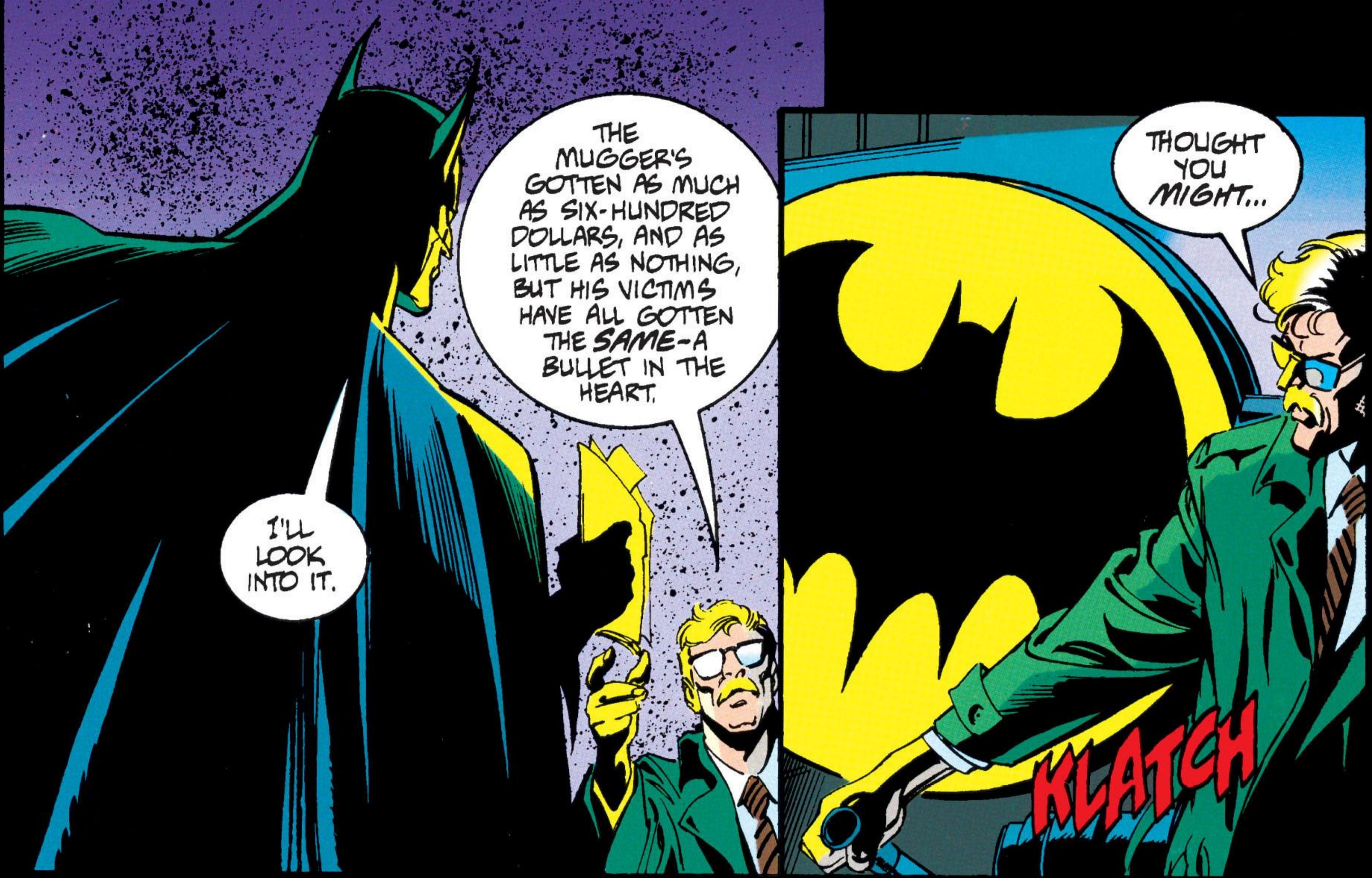
HE IS RETURNED, RESTORED
AND RENEWED, YET MADE
DIFFERENT BY HIS ABSENCE...

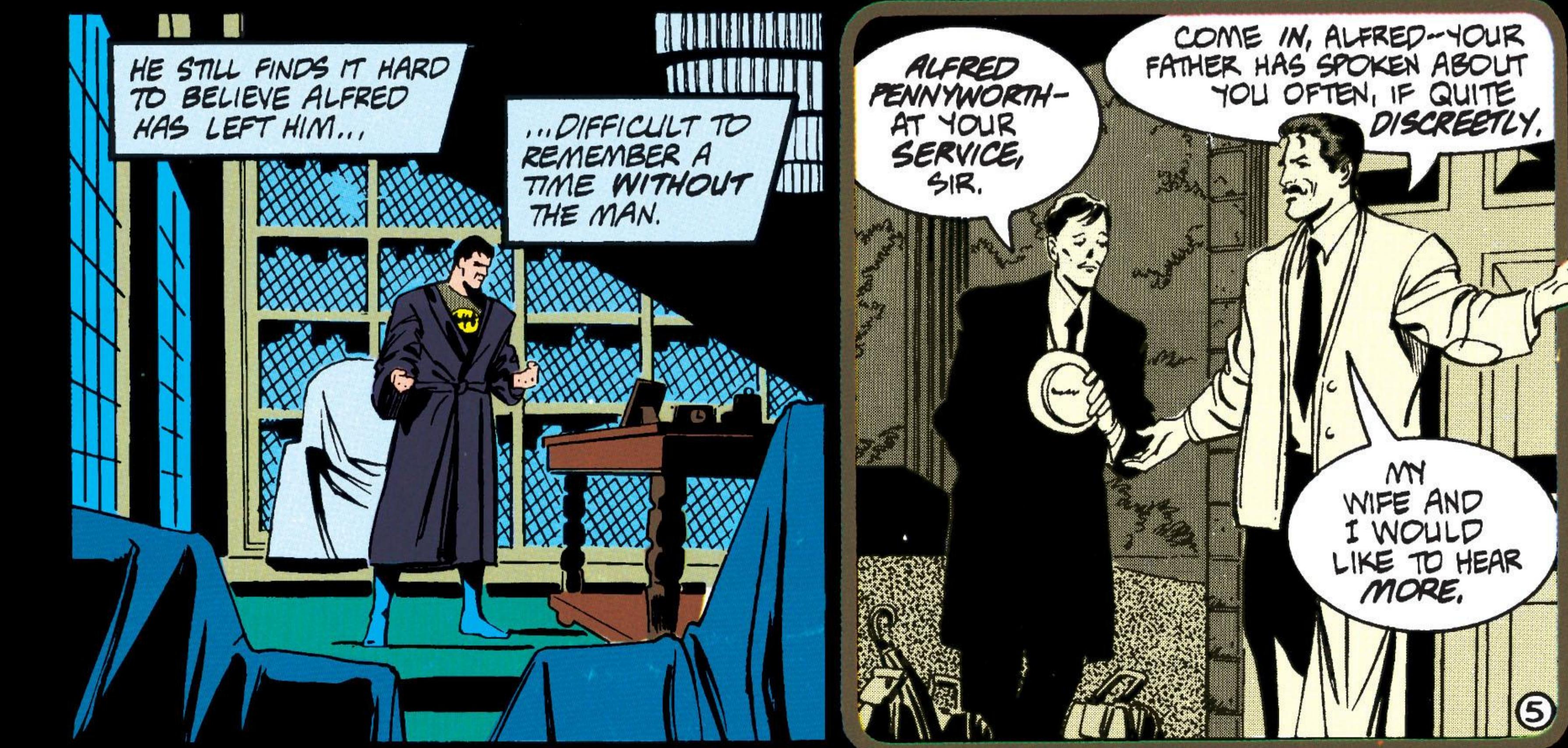
MURDERS...
THREE SO
FAR.
IF
BALLISTICS
DIDN'T PIN
EVERY SLUG TO
THE SAME GUN,
THEY'D BE
ISOLATED AND
RANDOM...

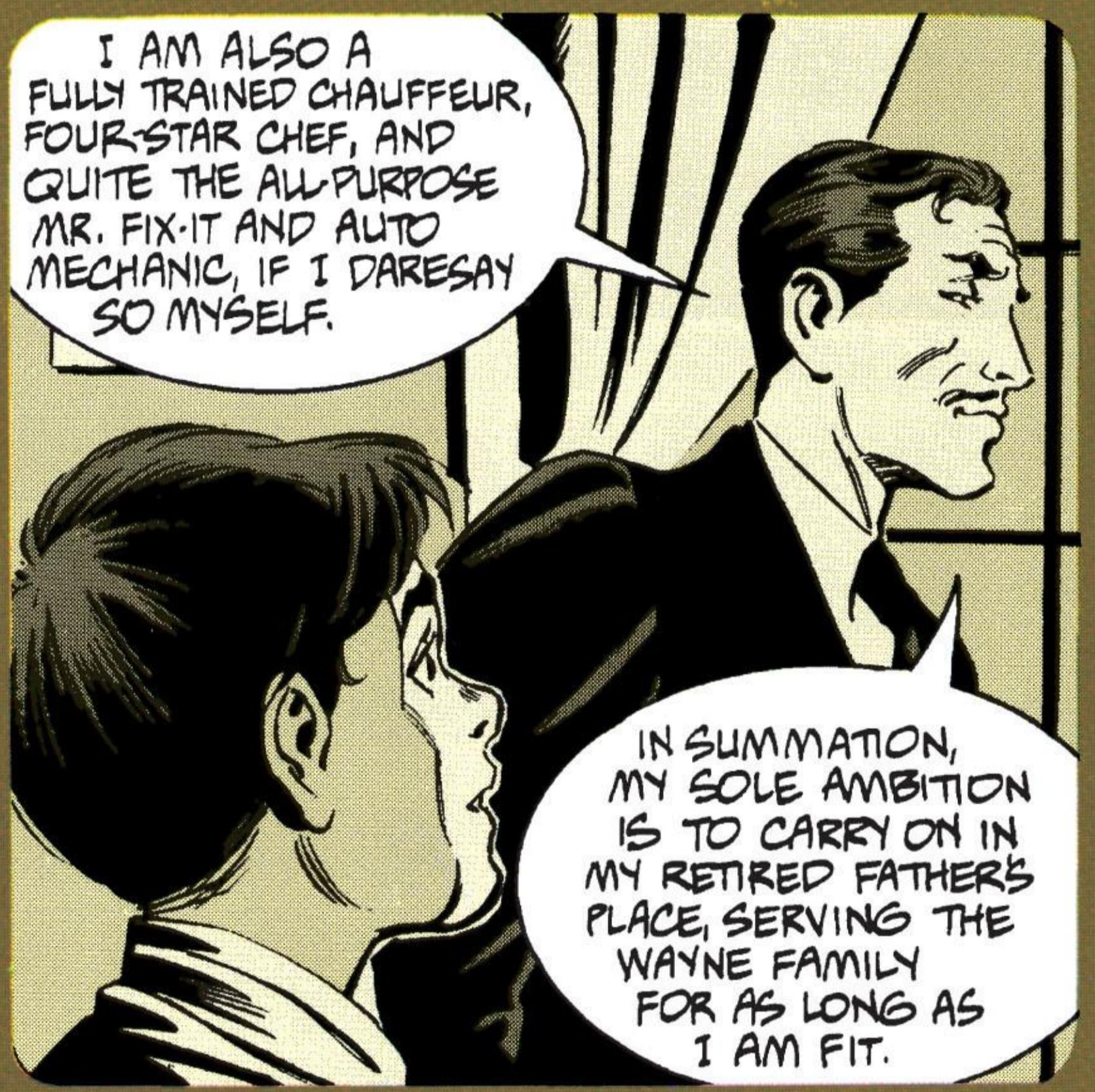
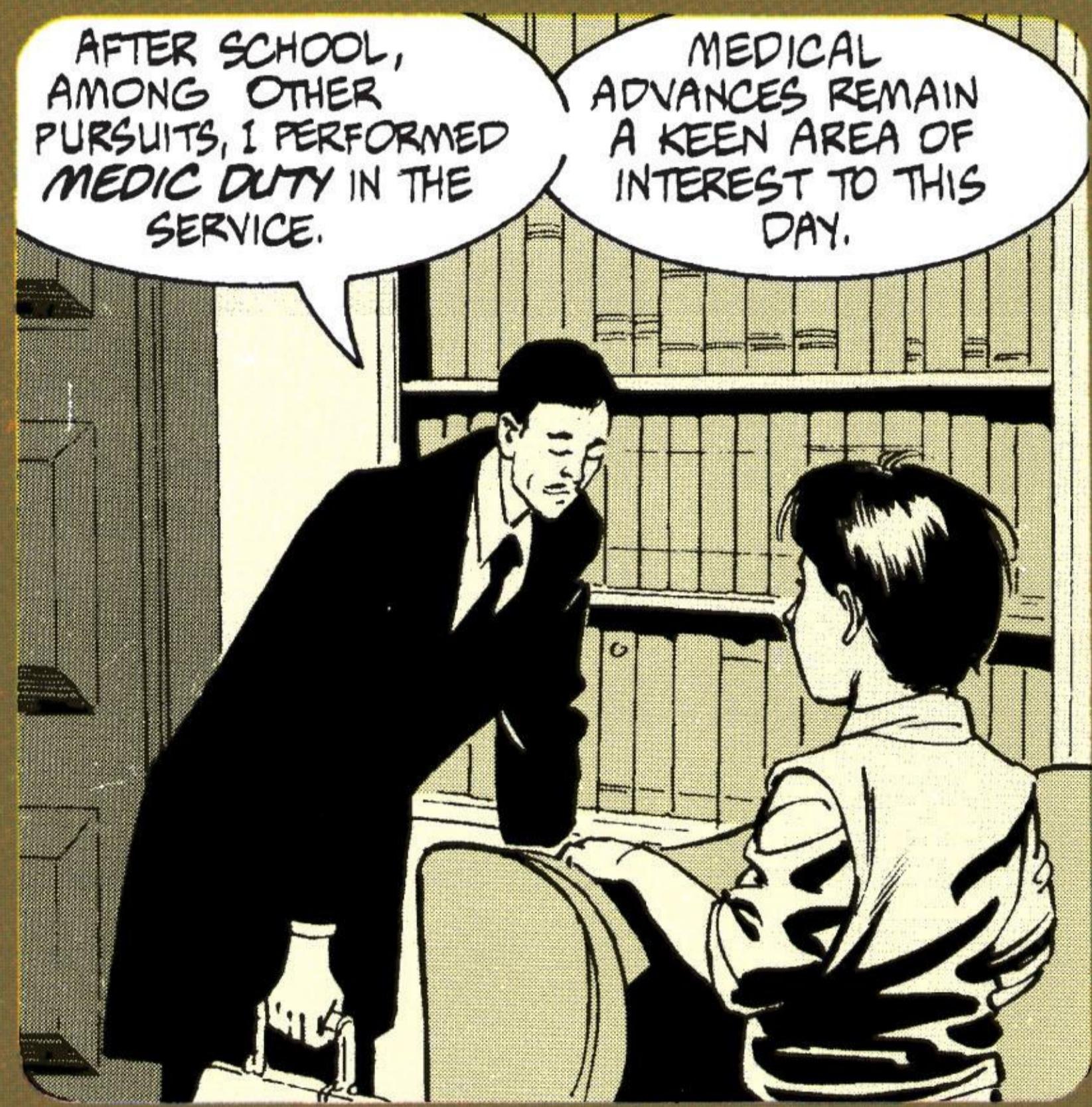
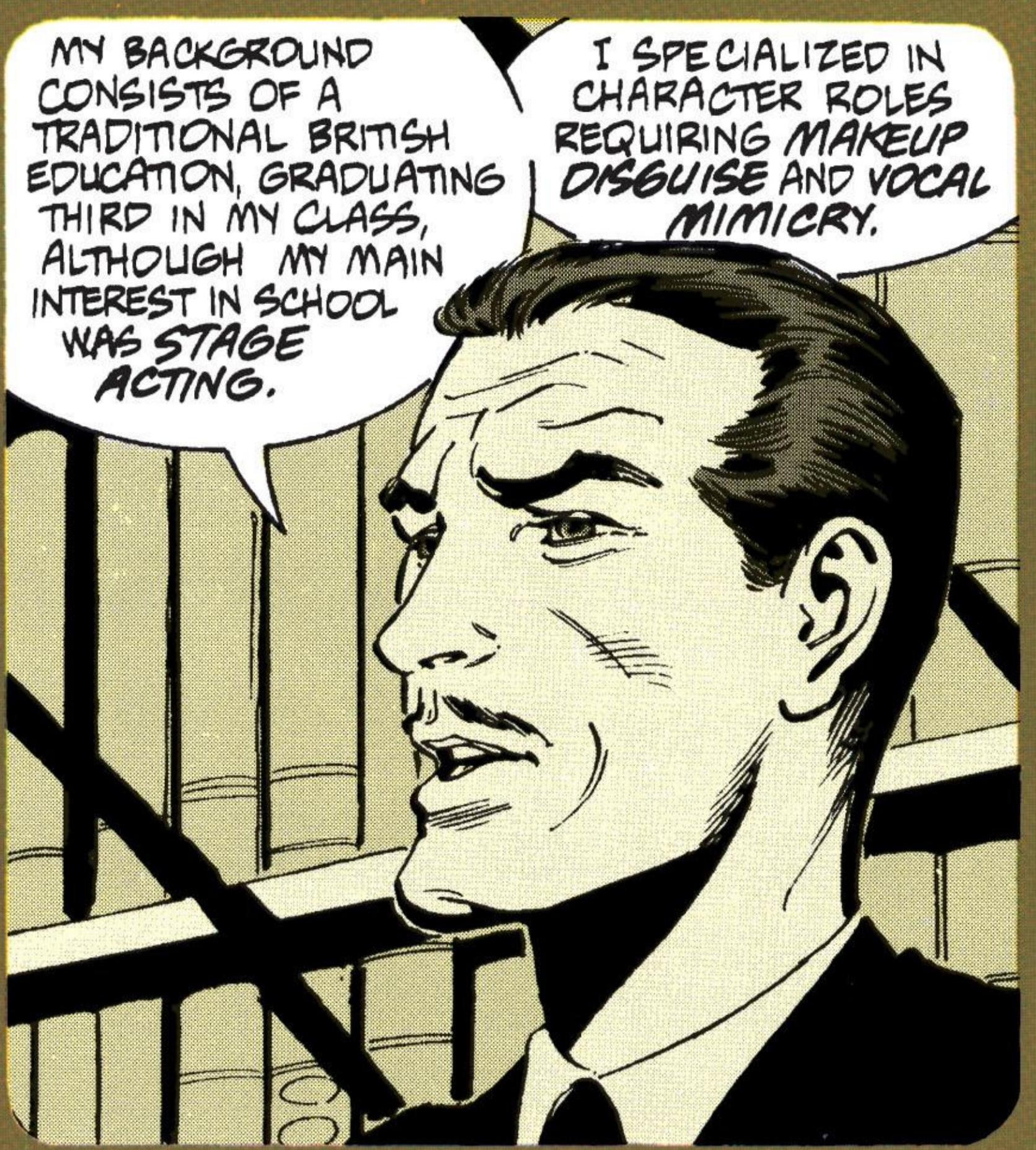
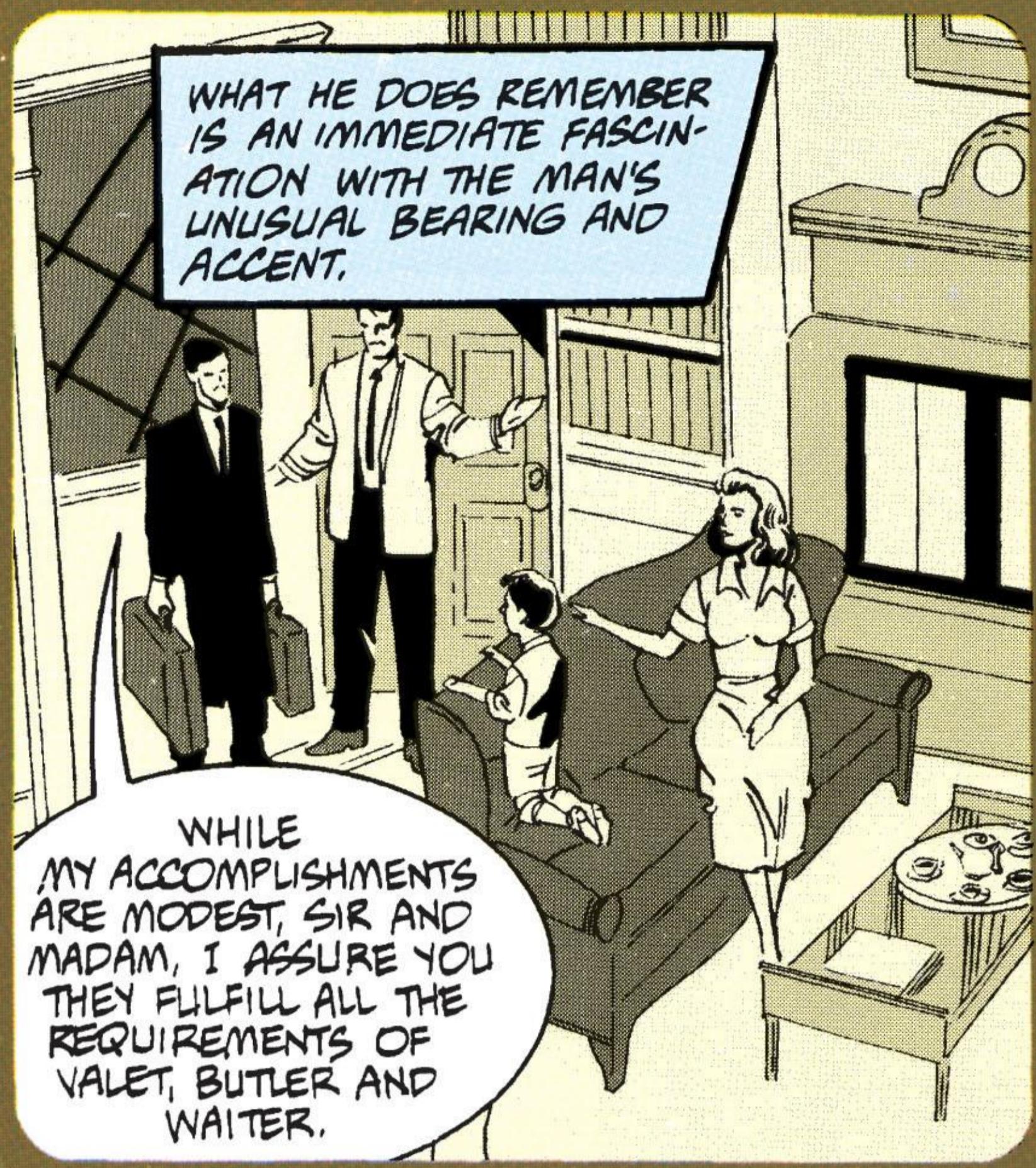
WHAT IS IT
COMMISSIONER?

...ONLY TO FIND
THAT NOTHING
HAS CHANGED.

NO!



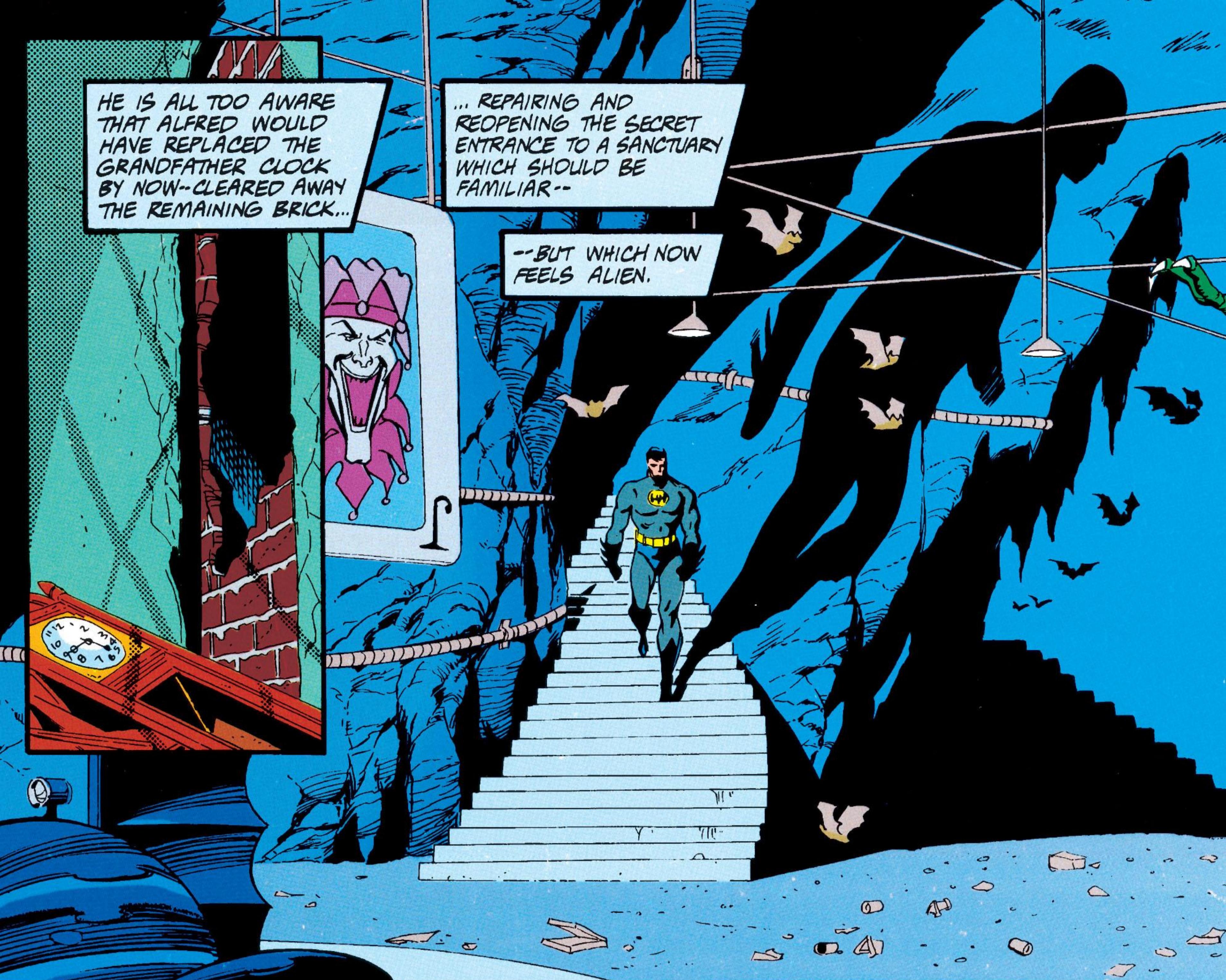




HE IS ALL TOO AWARE THAT ALFRED WOULD HAVE REPLACED THE GRANDFATHER CLOCK BY NOW--CLEARED AWAY THE REMAINING BRICK...

... REPAIRING AND REOPENING THE SECRET ENTRANCE TO A SANCTUARY WHICH SHOULD BE FAMILIAR--

--BUT WHICH NOW FEELS ALIEN.



SOME THINGS, HERE IN THE CAVE AT LEAST, HAVE CHANGED.

HIS FORENSIC EQUIPMENT LIES SMASHED AND SWEPT ASIDE, REPLACED BY A SHOOTING GALLERY.

AND WHETHER THE TARGETS WERE DESIGNED FOR BAT-BLADES OR BULLETS, THE VERY NOTION OF SUCH A GALLERY STRIKES HIM AS A PERVERSION OF EVERY IDEAL HE HAS SOUGHT TO HONOR AND HONE...

HE IS REMINDED, IN A RED HAZE, OF THE GUN.

THE HATED, SHATTERING GUN...



THE MOVIE HAD BEEN FILLED WITH STIRRING HEROICS.

SEEING IT IN THE COMPANY OF HIS PARENTS WAS A SPECIAL TREAT.

...UNTIL THE REAL-LIFE VILLAIN--THE MONSTER FROM A NIGHTMARE WITHOUT SLEEP--LUNGED FROM THE SHADOWS...

YOUR MONEY--NOW!

LEAVING THE THEATER, HIS SPIRITS WERE INFLATED, ALMOST EUPHORIC...

NO!

...AND DESTROYED EVERYTHING.

THE CRIME WOULD GO UNSOLVED, THE KILLER'S IDENTITY NEVER KNOWN BUT AT THE TIME IT HARDLY MATTERED.

THERE WAS THE NOTHING BUT THE SHOCK OF TWO SWIFT DEATHS, THE LOSS OF TWO LIVES AND HIS WHOLE WORLD...

...AND THE DETERMINATION TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT.

...THE REASONLESS GUILT OF BEING SPARED.

HE HAD FAILED TO PREVENT THE BRUTAL MURDER OF HIS PARENTS, AND HE KNEW THE FAILURE WAS FINAL.

TWO WORDS BOILED FROM THE BLACKNESS OF HIS MIND: NEVER AGAIN.

THE KILLER WOULD BECOME A SYMBOL OF THE FACELESS CRIME LURKING IN EVERY SHADOW, STRIKING WITHOUT WARNING, SNUFFING LIVES PRECIOUS ONLY TO THOSE WHOSE FUTURES ARE SHATTERED BY THE LOSS.

THUS RIVEN HIMSELF, HE COULD LET THE PIECES FALL AWAY FOREVER--OR HE COULD REASSEMBLE THEM INTO SOMETHING TERRIFYINGLY NEW, SOMETHING THAT COULD BE FORGED ONLY IN THE HEAT OF HORROR.

HIS LOSS WAS, AND WOULD ALWAYS BE, FINAL, BUT ONCE REFORGED, PERHAPS HE COULD... HELP OTHERS.

I SHOULD HAVE TOLD YOU ABOUT JEAN PAUL SOONER...

IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT, TIM.

I CHOSE MY SUCCESSOR...AND IN DOING SO, I PROFANED MY OWN IDEALS.

I...I'M SORRY, BRUCE...

BUT WHAT, EXACTLY WERE THOSE IDEALS...?

THEY WERE SIMPLE: STOP CRIME AND PREVENT HORROR--BUT BECAUSE THE LIVES LOST WERE SO PRECIOUS, HE DECIDED ALL LIFE WAS SO.

BRUCE...?

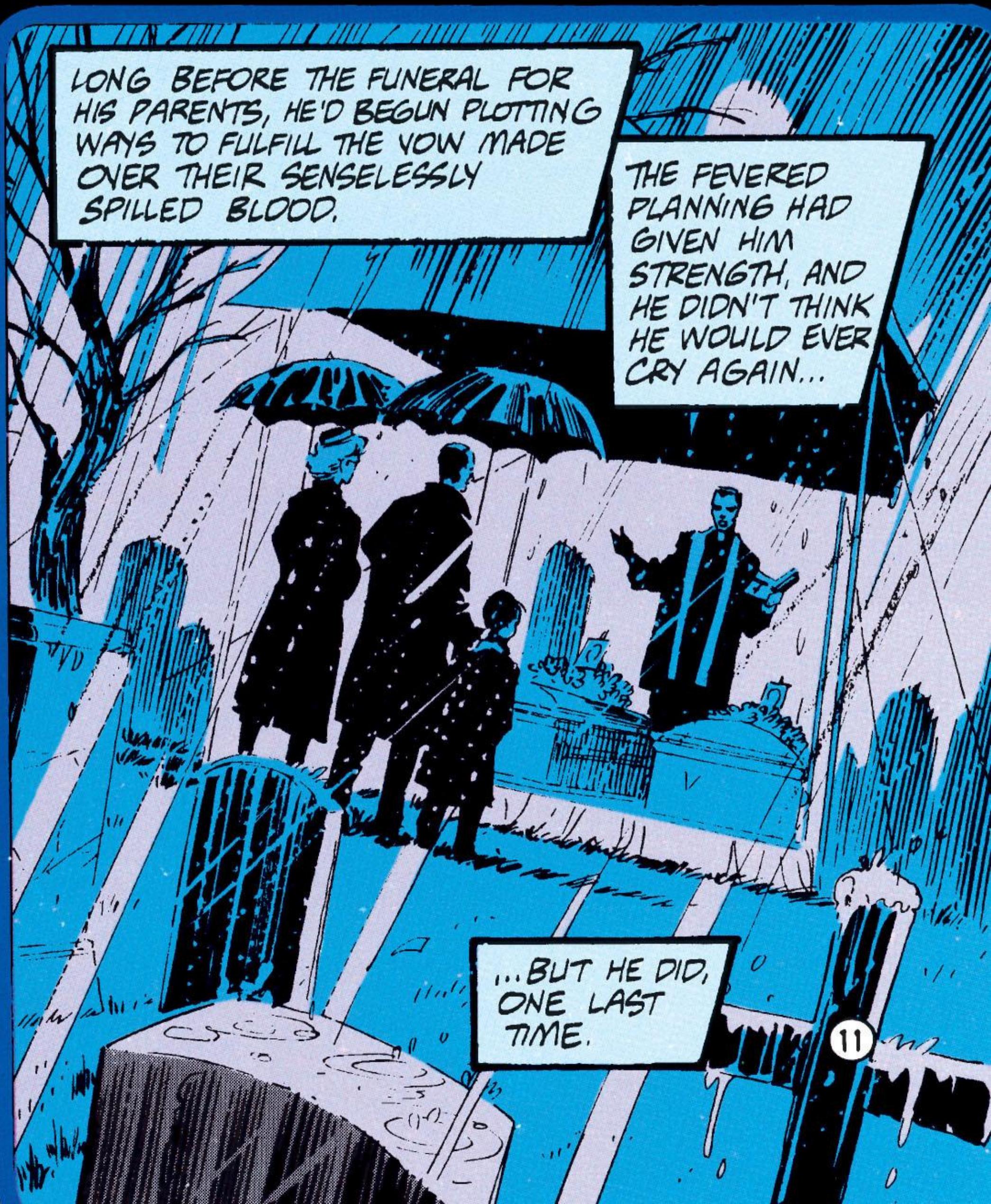
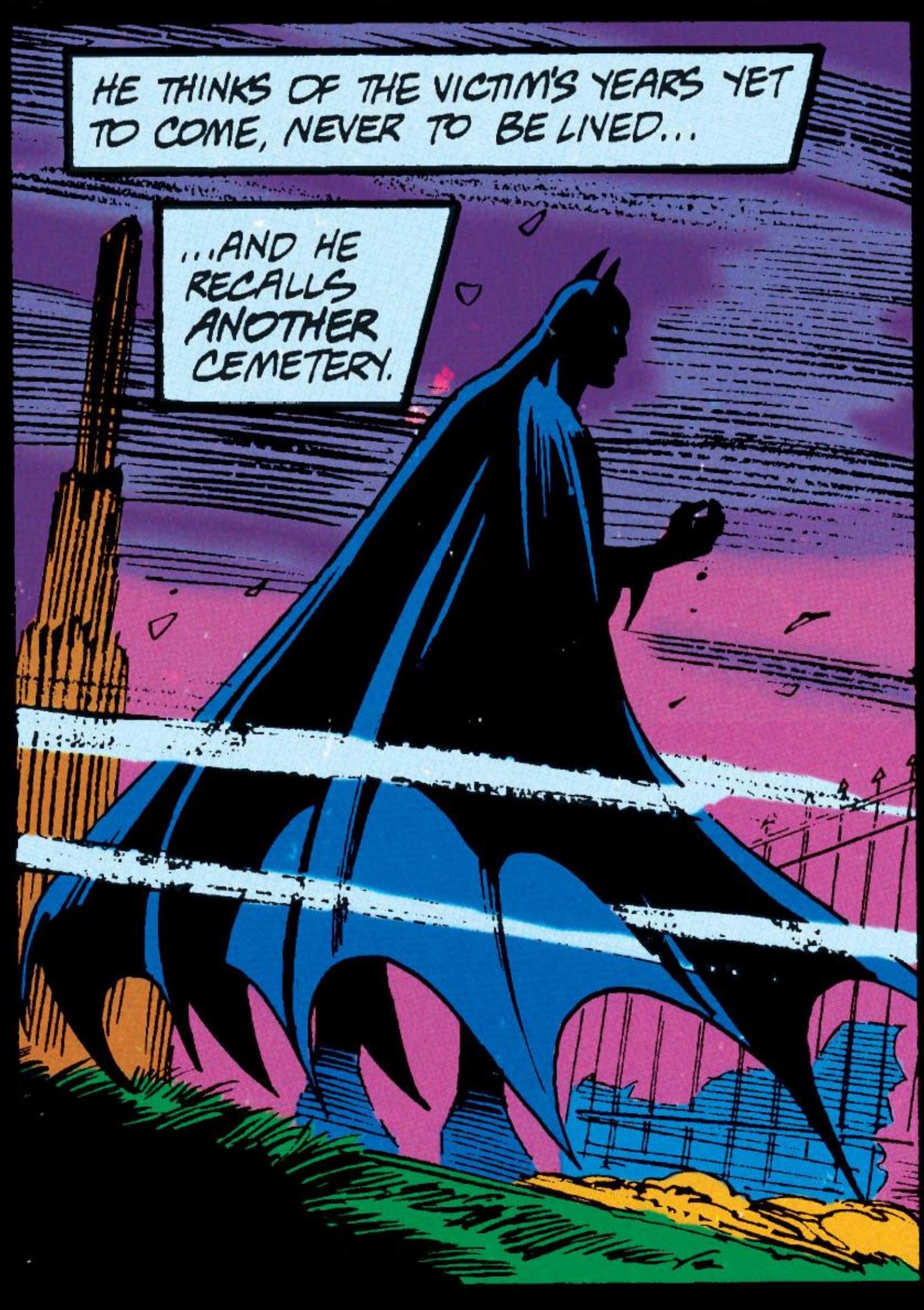
EH...?

ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?

YES... SEE WHAT YOU CAN SALVAGE HERE...

...THE MICROSCOPE LOOKS RELATIVELY UNDAMAGED...

...I'M GOING OUT AGAIN.



IT WAS WHEN HIS TEARS FLOWED MOST FREELY THAT SHE DESCENDED UPON HIM, GENTLY, LIKE AN ANGEL FROM THE RAIN.

MY NAME IS LESLIE THOMPKINS, BRUCE... I'M A DOCTOR. WE MET... THAT NIGHT IN PARK ROW.

PERHAPS I CAN... HELP YOU.

AND SHE DID, NURTURING AND COUNSELING HIM.

HE LEARNED MUCH FROM HER--INCLUDING THE FACT THAT THE STATE INTENDED TO ASSUME HIS CUSTODY AND CARE.

HE QUICKLY PREPARED AND FILED VARIOUS FORMS AND DOCUMENTS--A BLIZZARD OF PAPERWORK.

HOMEWORK, MASTER BRUCE?

NOT REALLY, ALFRED... JUST A PRIVATE PROJECT.

THE BUREAUCRACY SOMEHOW LOST TRACK OF HIM.

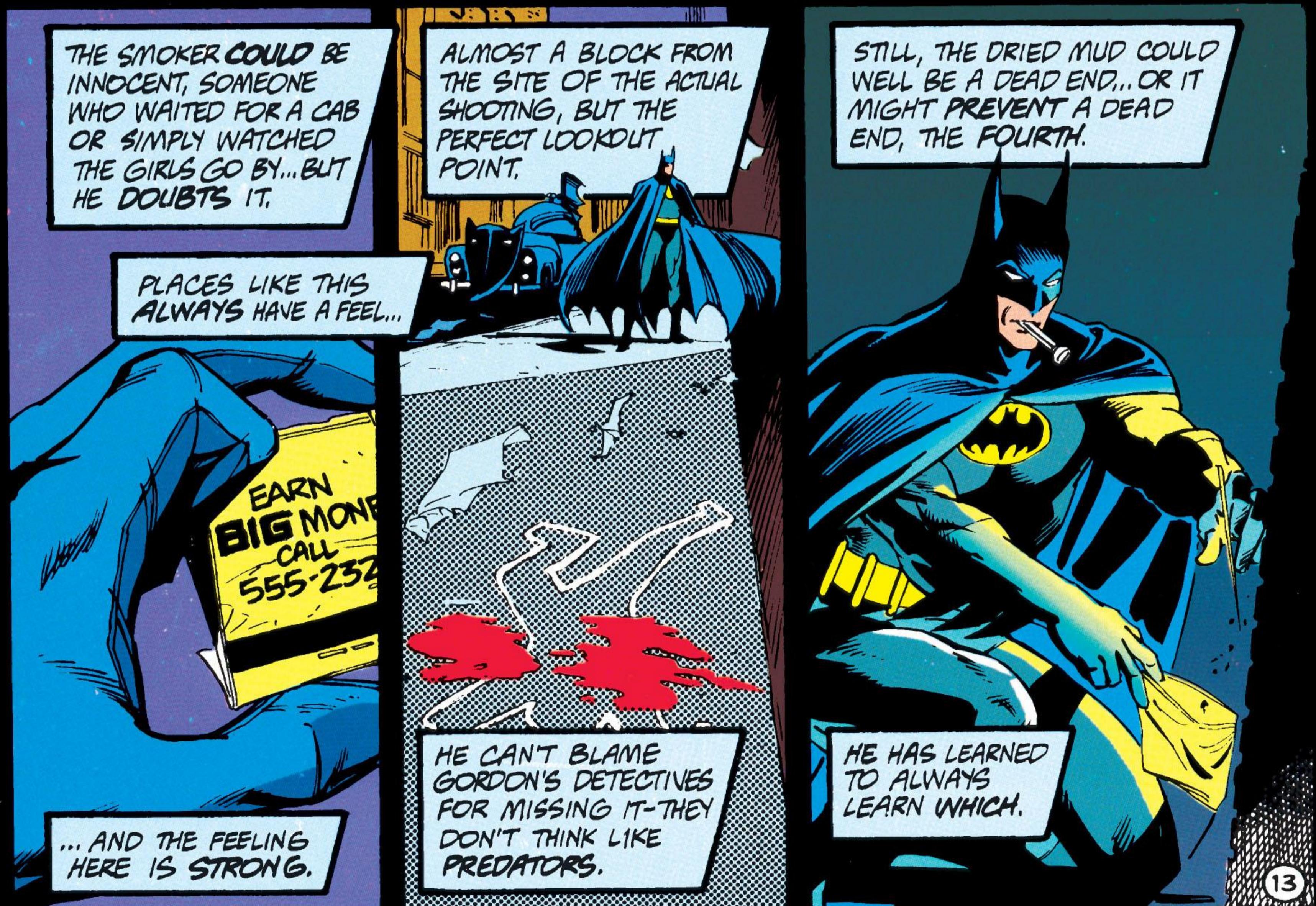
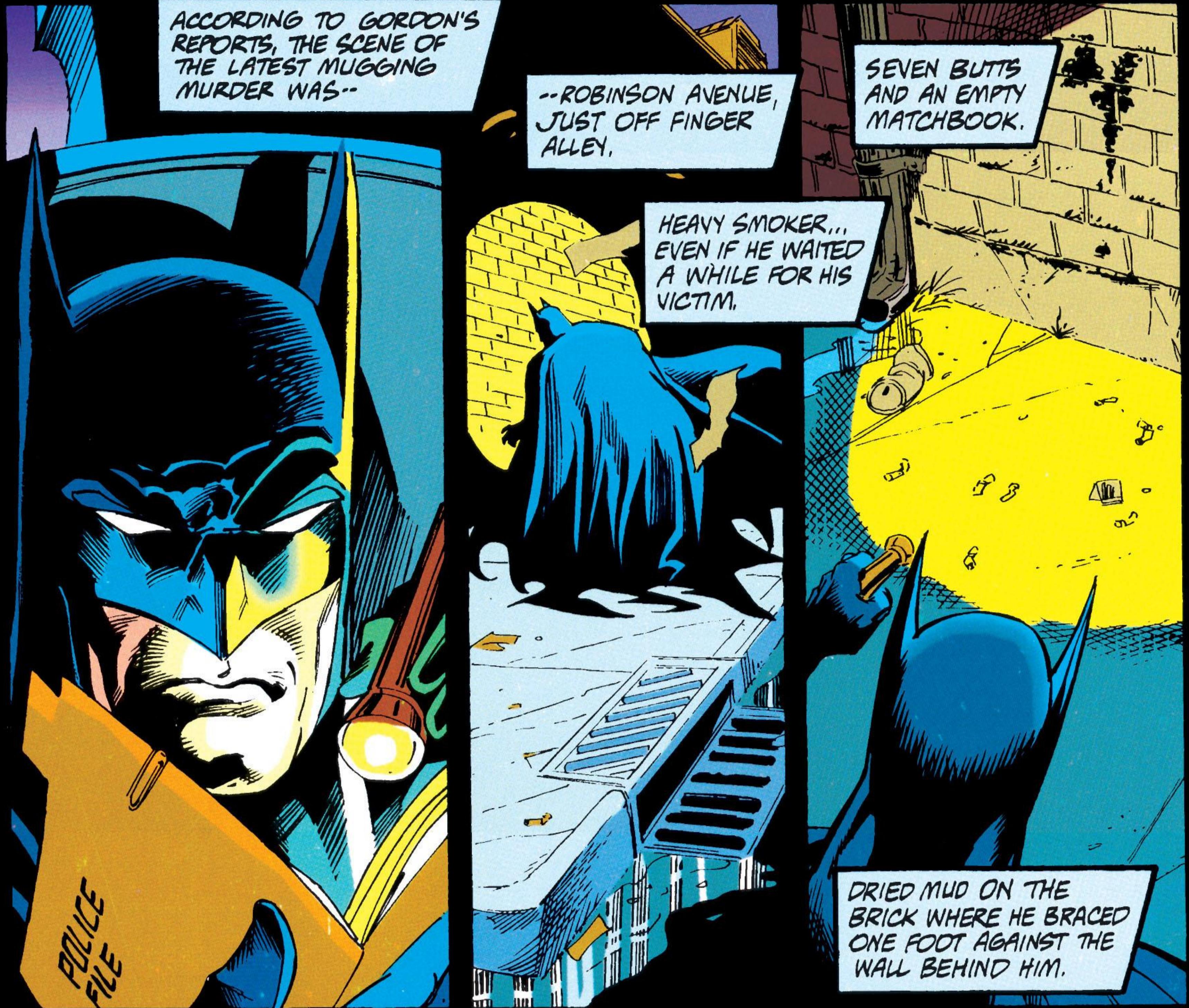
...AND YOUNG BRUCE REMAINED IN WAYNE MANOR.

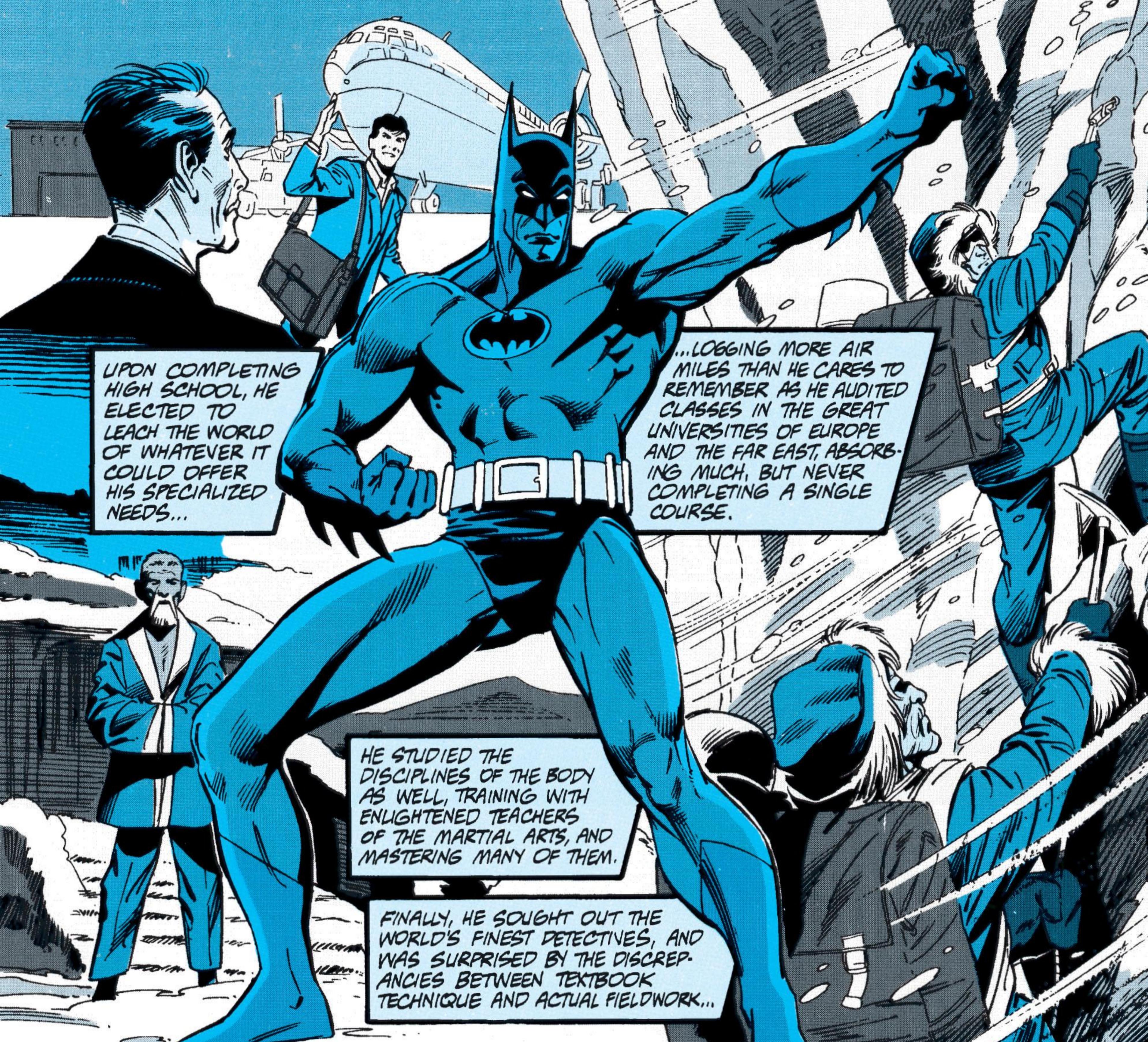
SEVENTY-SIX, SEVENTY-SEVEN... AND TIME'S UP.

HIS EDUCATION PROGRESSSED

--GENIUS LEVEL IN CERTAIN SUBJECTS, YET ALMOST NO RETENTION IN OTHERS, AS IF HE'S FOCUSED ONLY ON WHAT INTERESTS HIM--TO THE EXCLUSION OF EVERYTHING ELSE.

CHILD SERVICES ADMINISTRATION





UPON COMPLETING HIGH SCHOOL, HE ELECTED TO LEACH THE WORLD OF WHATEVER IT COULD OFFER HIS SPECIALIZED NEEDS...

...LOGGING MORE AIR MILES THAN HE CARES TO REMEMBER AS HE AUDITED CLASSES IN THE GREAT UNIVERSITIES OF EUROPE AND THE FAR EAST, ABSORBING MUCH, BUT NEVER COMPLETING A SINGLE COURSE.

HE STUDIED THE DISCIPLINES OF THE BODY AS WELL, TRAINING WITH ENLIGHTENED TEACHERS OF THE MARTIAL ARTS, AND MASTERING MANY OF THEM.

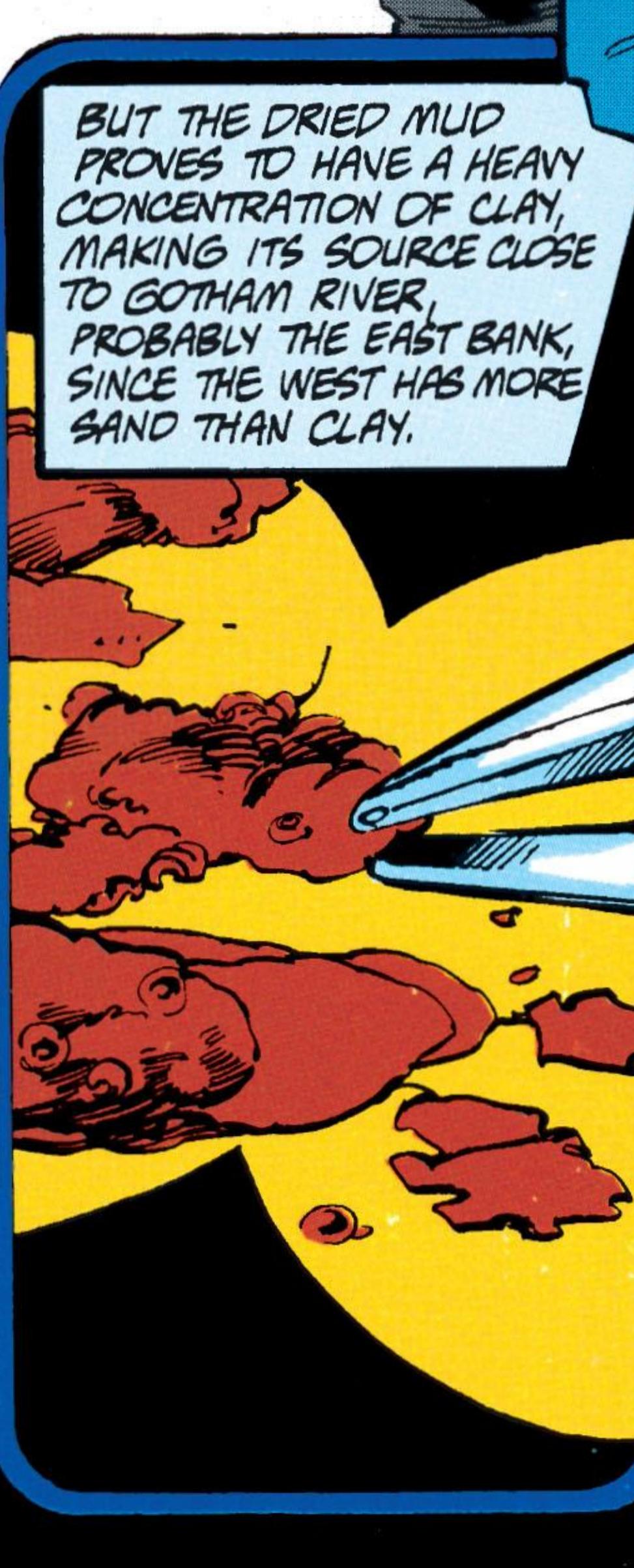
FINALLY, HE SOUGHT OUT THE WORLD'S FINEST DETECTIVES, AND WAS SURPRISED BY THE DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN TEXTBOOK TECHNIQUE AND ACTUAL FIELDWORK...



...AND NOW HE'S COME FULL CIRCLE, BACK TO THE BASICS.



ONLY A PARTIAL PRINT ON THE MATCHBOOK, AND NOT ENOUGH TO I.D. ANY KNOWN FELON.

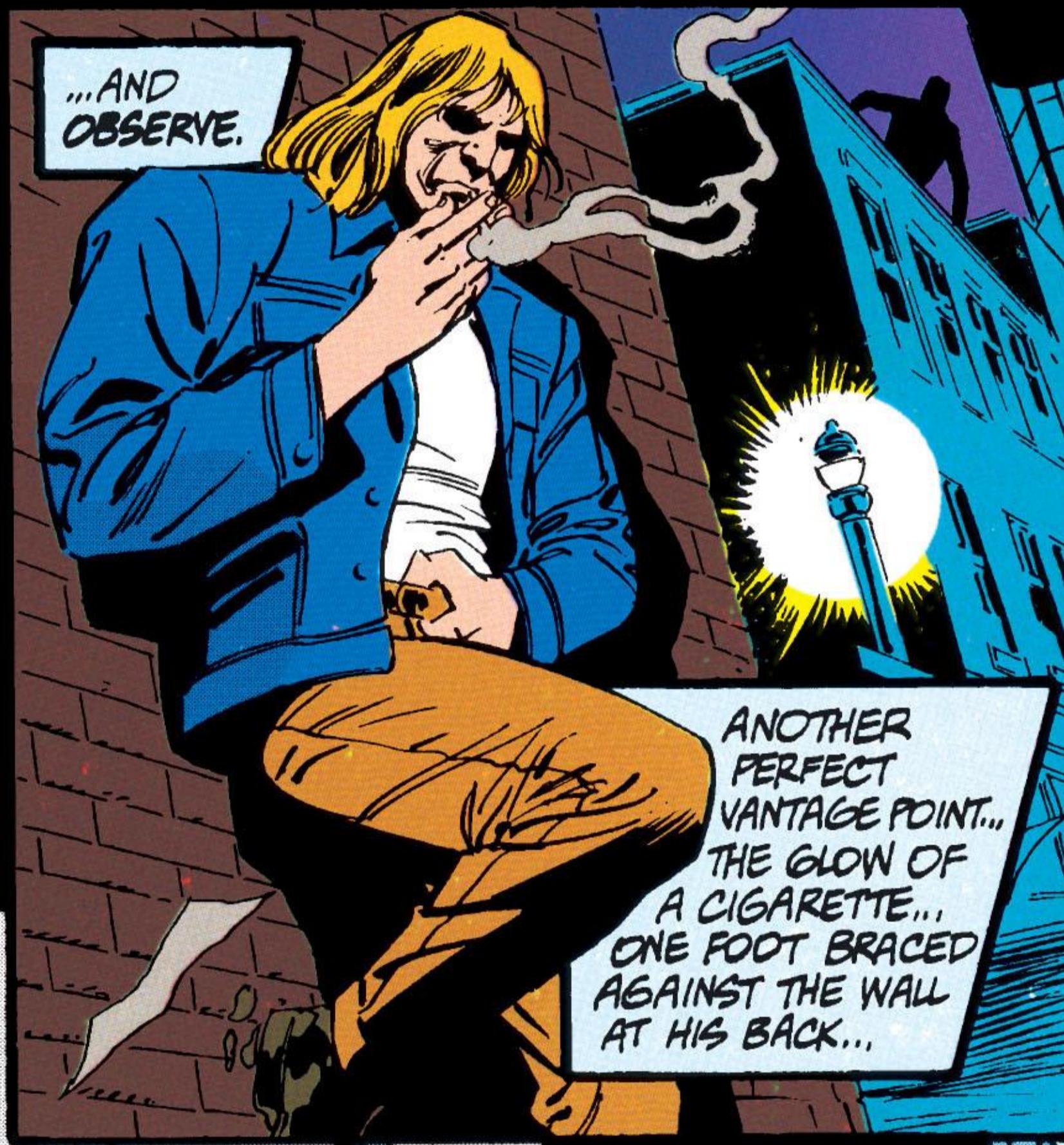
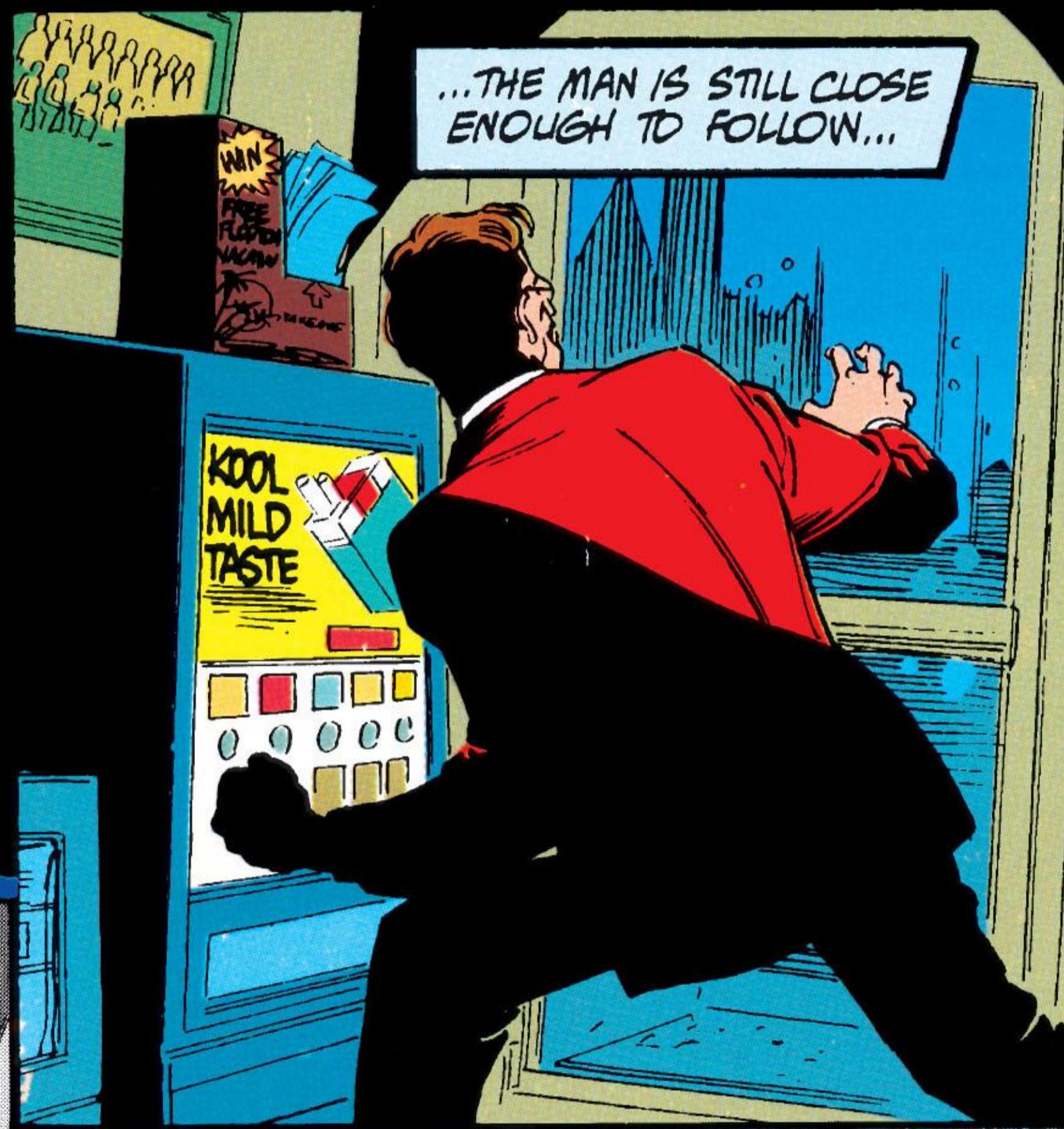


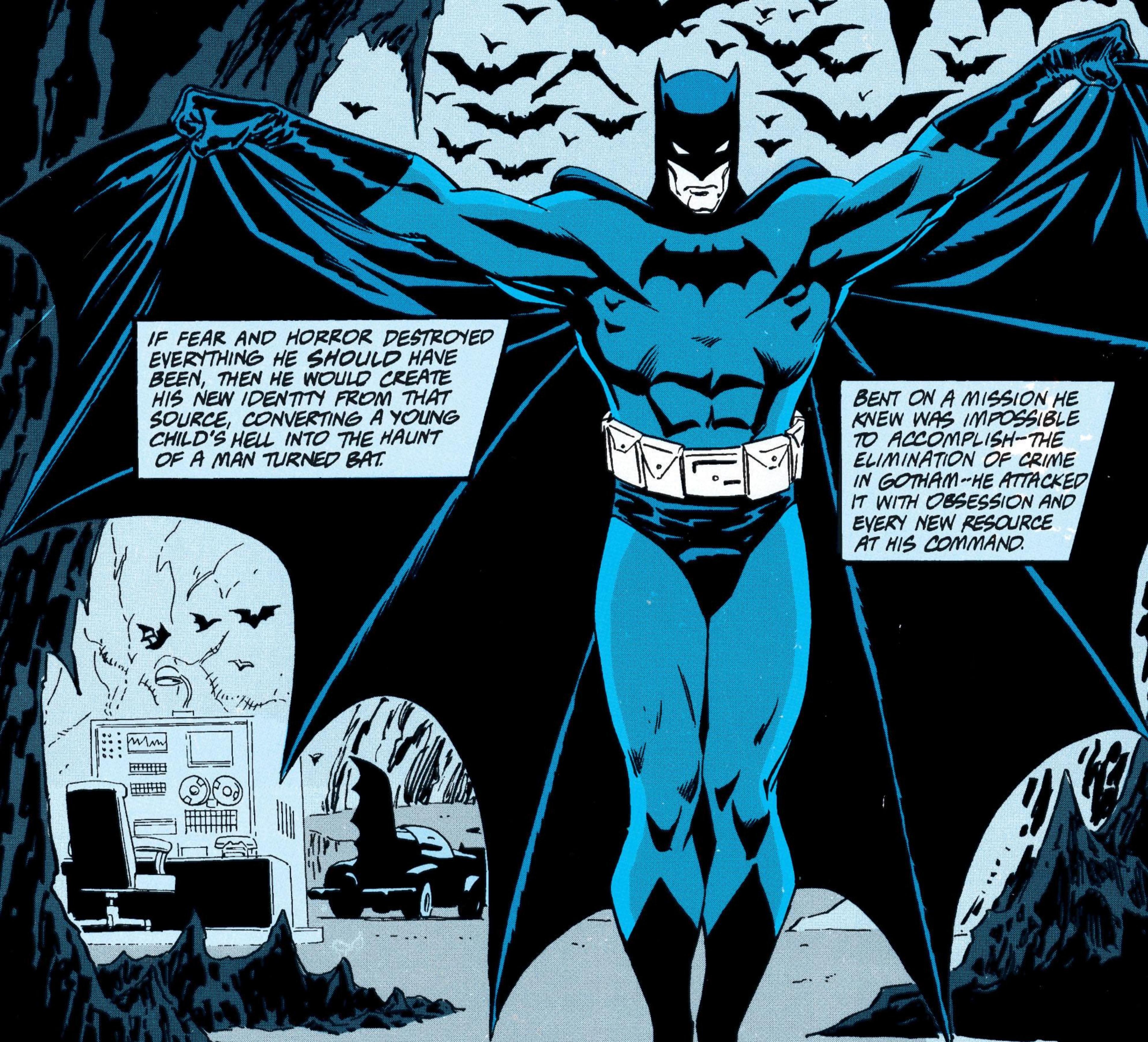
BUT THE DRIED MUD PROVES TO HAVE A HEAVY CONCENTRATION OF CLAY, MAKING ITS SOURCE CLOSE TO GOTHAM RIVER, PROBABLY THE EAST BANK, SINCE THE WEST HAS MORE SAND THAN CLAY.



THE MATCHBOOK ITSELF IS NONSPECIFIC, FAIRLY COMMON, AND COULD HAVE ORIGINATED FROM MANY PLACES...

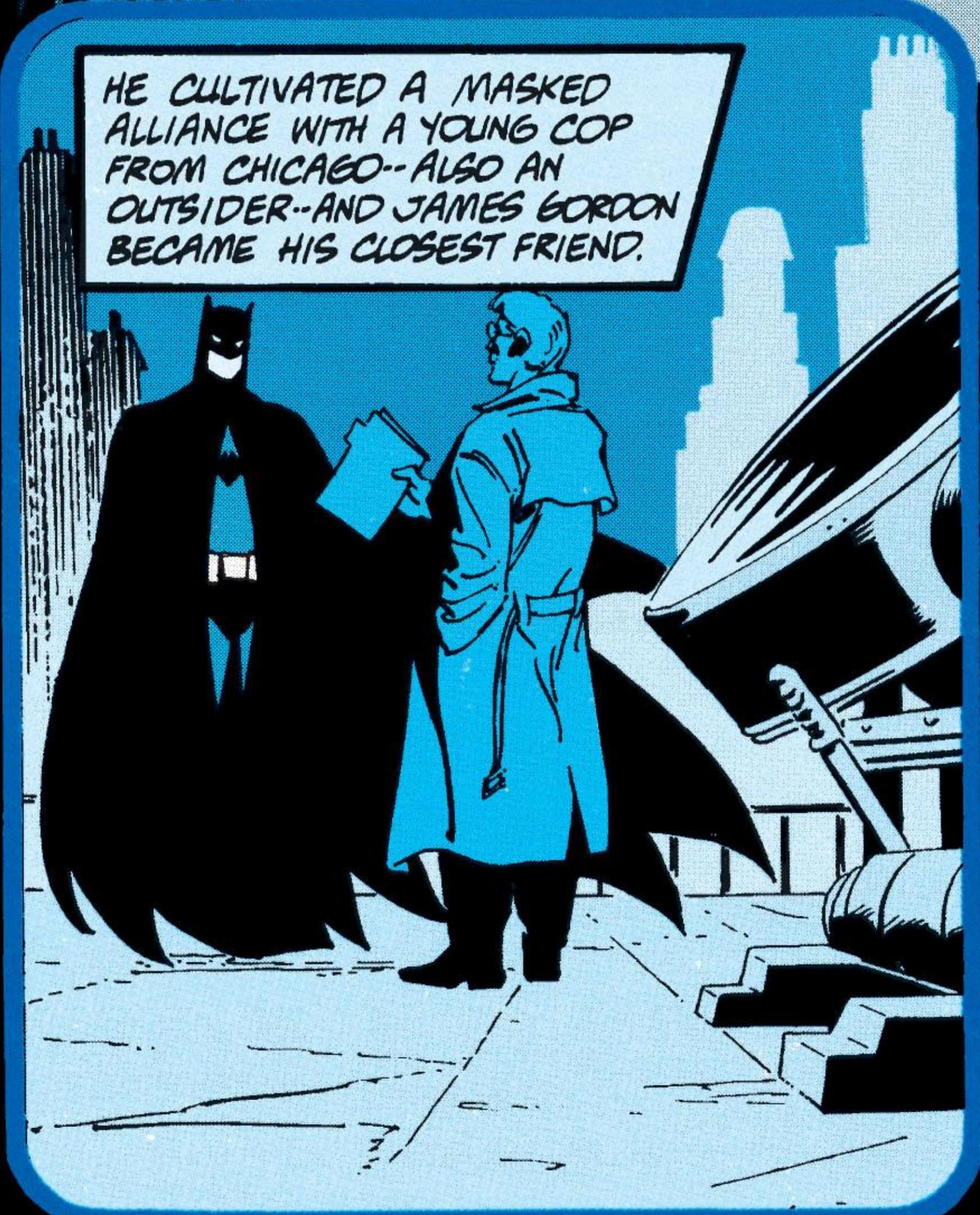




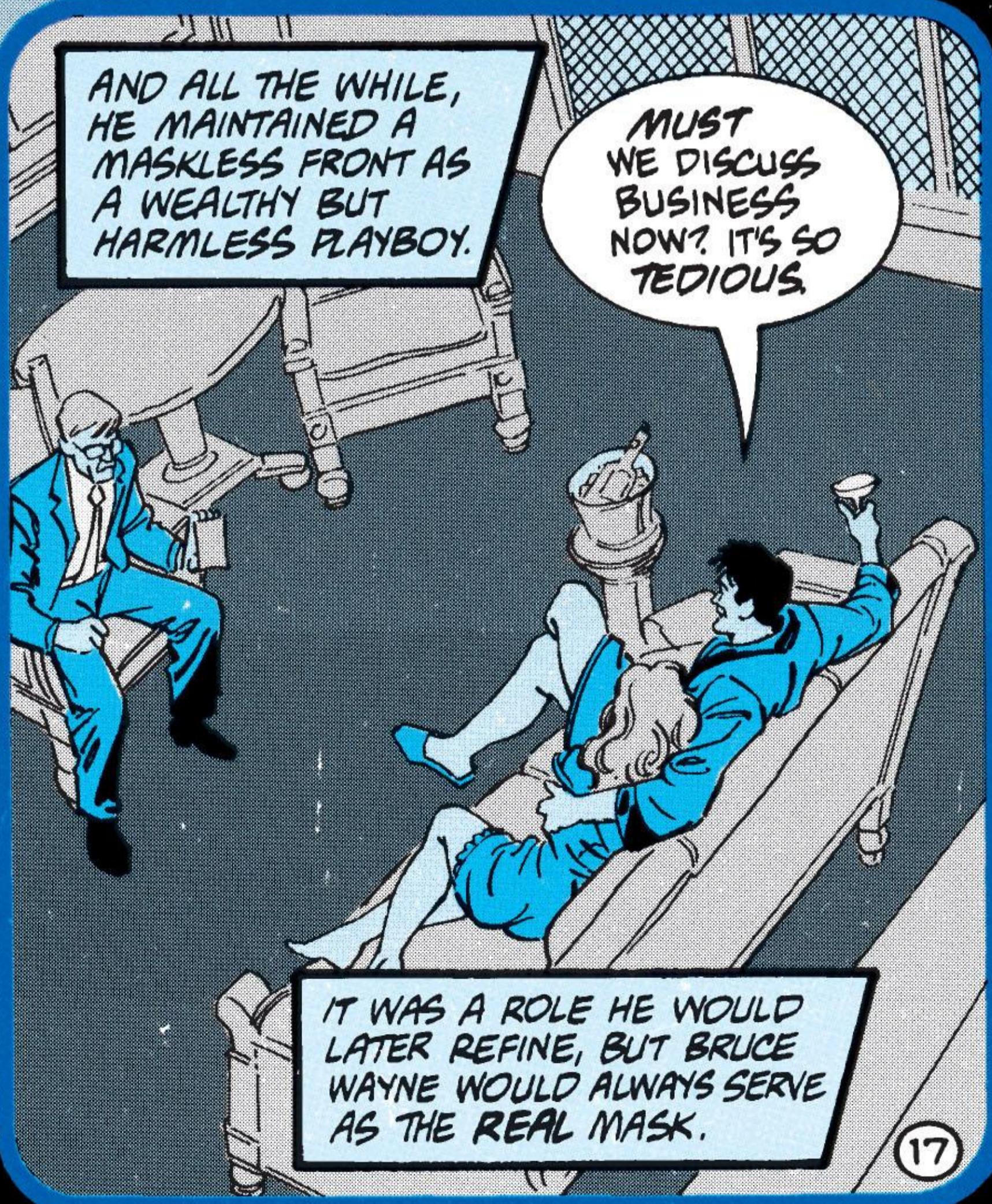


IF FEAR AND HORROR DESTROYED EVERYTHING HE SHOULD HAVE BEEN, THEN HE WOULD CREATE HIS NEW IDENTITY FROM THAT SOURCE, CONVERTING A YOUNG CHILD'S HELL INTO THE HAUNT OF A MAN TURNED BAT.

BENT ON A MISSION HE KNEW WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO ACCOMPLISH--THE ELIMINATION OF CRIME IN GOTHAM--HE ATTACKED IT WITH OBSESSION AND EVERY NEW RESOURCE AT HIS COMMAND.



HE CULTIVATED A MASKED ALLIANCE WITH A YOUNG COP FROM CHICAGO--ALSO AN OUTSIDER--AND JAMES GORDON BECAME HIS CLOSEST FRIEND.



AND ALL THE WHILE, HE MAINTAINED A MASKLESS FRONT AS A WEALTHY BUT HARMLESS PLAYBOY.

MUST WE DISCUSS BUSINESS NOW? IT'S SO TEDIOUS.

IT WAS A ROLE HE WOULD LATER REFINISH, BUT BRUCE WAYNE WOULD ALWAYS SERVE AS THE REAL MASK.

AS THE DARK ANGEL INVADING GOTHAM'S UNDERWORLD, HE FACED NO SHORTAGE OF GROTESQUE DEMONS...



SOON HE TOOK ON A PARTNER, A YOUTH WHOSE SOUL WAS ALSO SHATTERED BY THE LOSS OF HIS PARENTS.

DICK GRAYSON BECAME THE FIRST ROBIN; A LEARNING EXPERIENCE FOR BOTH OF THEM...

DICK'S GREATEST MISTAKE— HIS NEAR-FATAL ENCOUNTER WITH TWO-FACE— WAS AN EVENT FROM WHICH HE NEVER TRULY RECOVERED...

...EVEN AFTER STRIKING OUT ON HIS OWN TO BECOME NIGHTWING.

AN EVEN MORE TRAUMATIC EVENT SHATTERED HIS SOUL FOR A SECOND TIME— AND ENDED THE LIFE OF THE SECOND ROBIN.

EVEN NOW, HE CANNOT MAKE PEACE WITH THE MEMORY OF JASON TODD.

BOTH WERE LESSONS LEARNED HARD AND, HE HAS DECIDED, MUST NOT BEFALL THE THIRD ROBIN.

NEVER WILL HE KNOWLINGLY PIT TIM DRAKE UNPREPARED AGAINST DEMONS THE LIKES OF TWO-FACE, THE JOKER...



--OR
BANE.

THE RECENT RECOVERY WAS LONG, HARD, AND COMPLICATED BY WHAT WAS PERHAPS THE GREATEST MISTAKE OF HIS CAREER...

INDEED, THE DECISION TO FACE BANE ALONE AND IN EXHAUSTION MAY WELL HAVE CAUSED HIS DOWNFALL.

...APPOINTING THE FORMER ASSASSIN AZRAEL AS HIS SUCCESSOR, CREATING IN JEAN PAUL VALLET A NIGHTMARISH NEW BATMAN ONLY ONE SHADE REMOVED FROM THE DEMONS HE OPPOSED.

AND IT IS THESE TWO FACTORS--MISTAKE AND RECOVERY--THAT HAVE SPAWNED HIS CURRENT DOUBTS AND QUESTIONS.

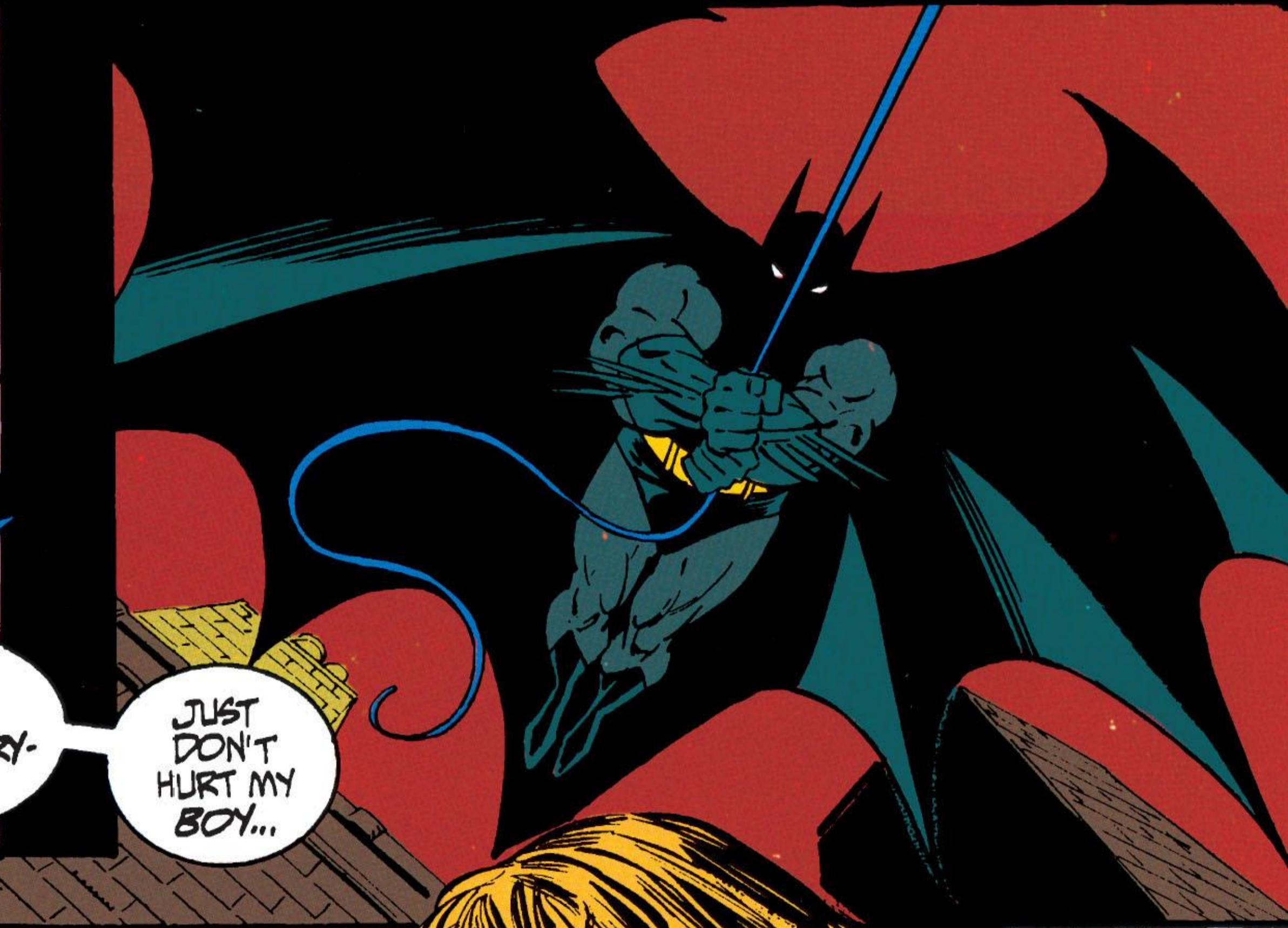
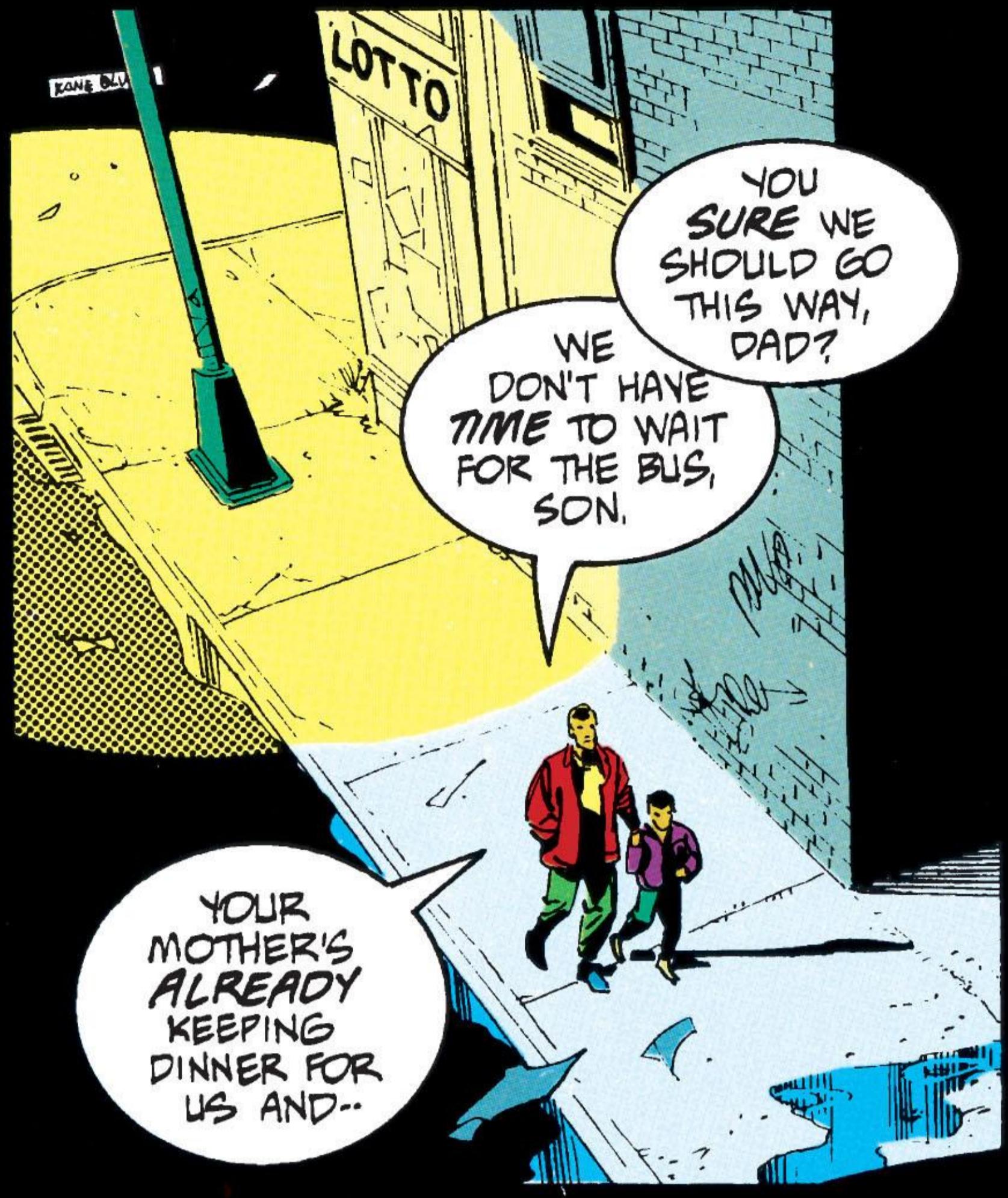
STILL HAUNTED BY THE HORROR THAT GAVE HIM BIRTH, HE IS REBORN WITH A NEW BUT UNFOCUSED PERSPECTIVE.

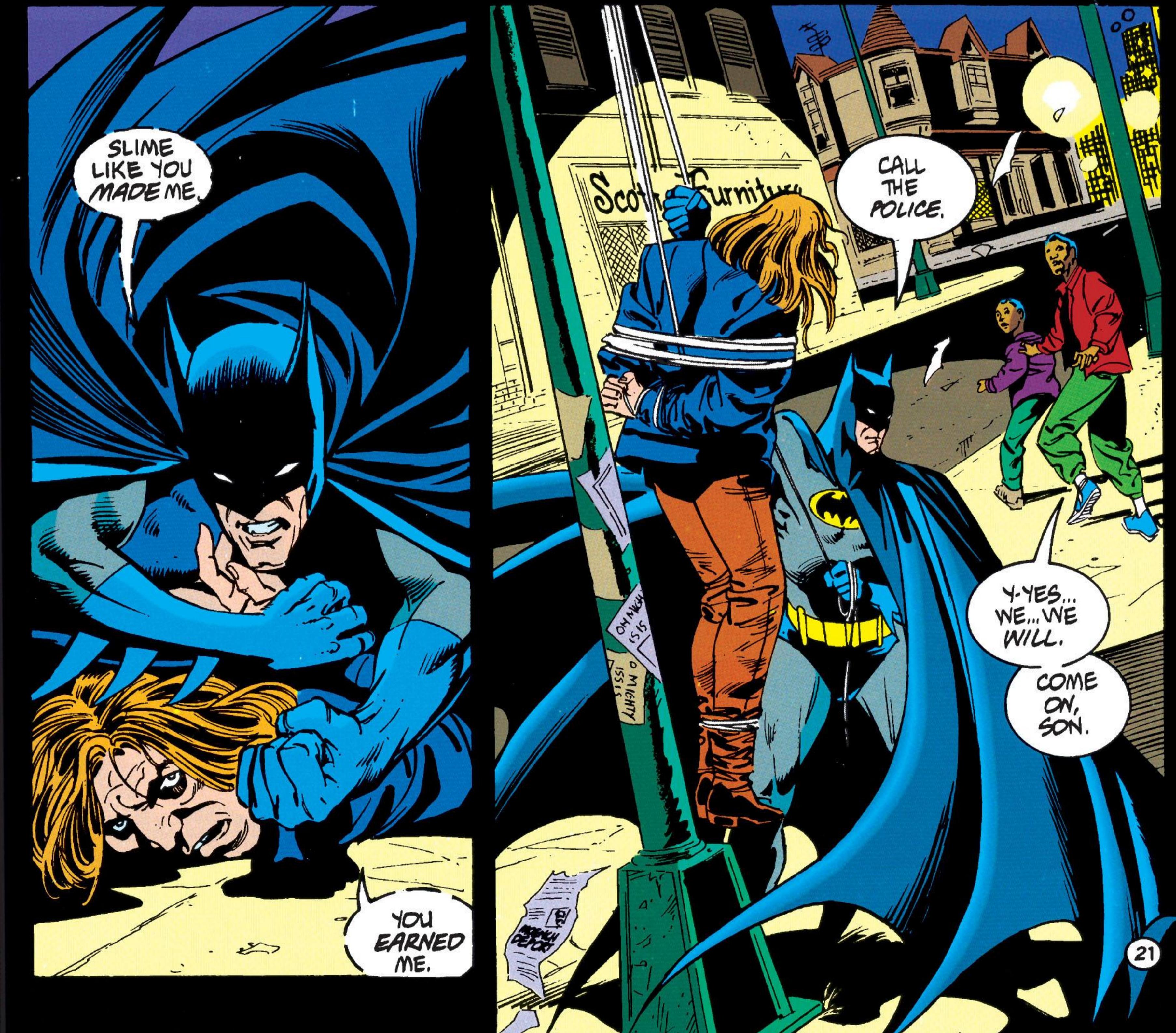
SHATTERED BEFORE HE WAS EVEN FORMED, BRUCE WAYNE BECAME NOTHING BUT A STITCHED-TOGETHER MASK...

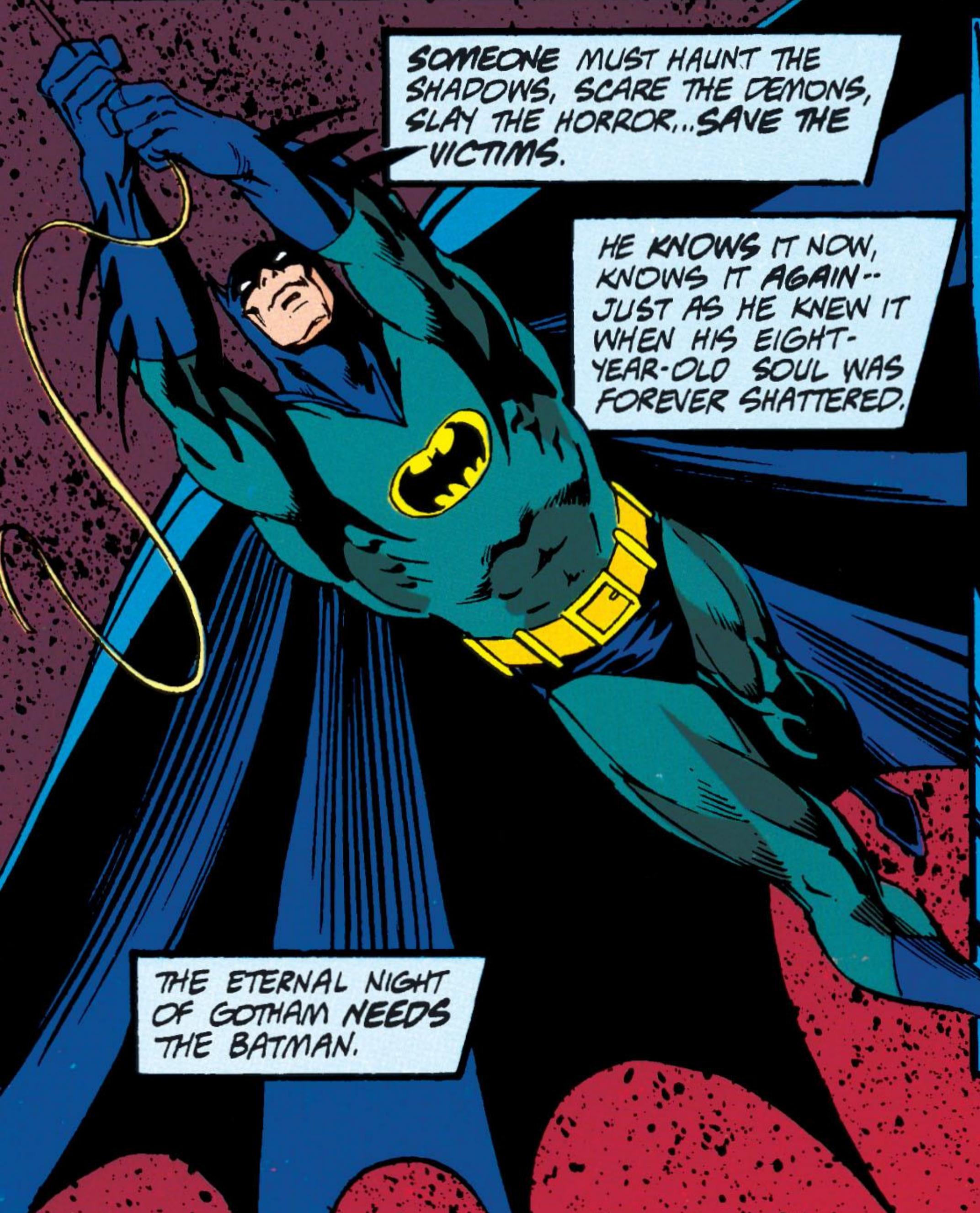
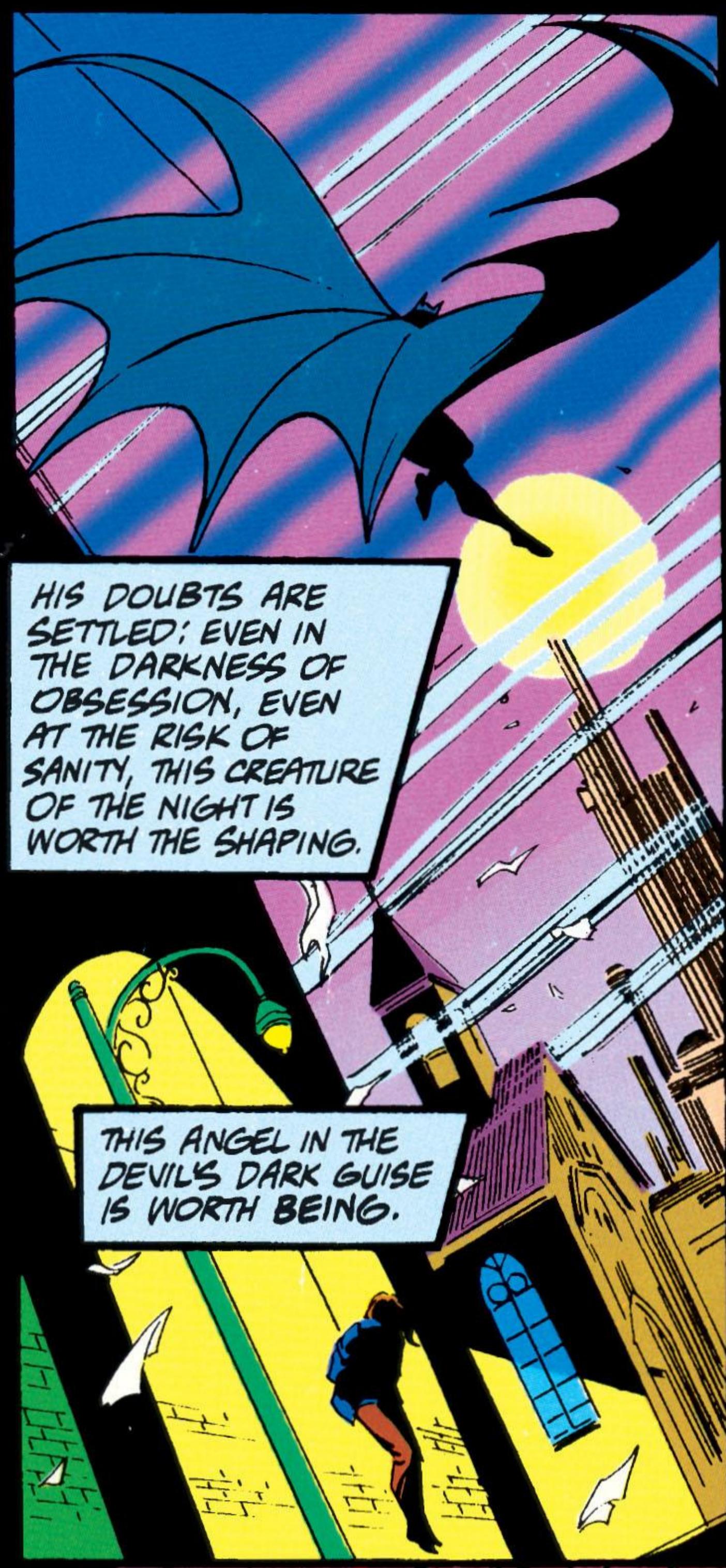
...BUT WHAT IF THE BATMAN, TOO, IS NOTHING BUT A MASK?

WHO IS HE, REALLY?
WHAT HAS HE CREATED?

AND IS IT WORTH BEING?







THE ETERNAL NIGHT
OF GOTHAM NEEDS
THE BATMAN.

Continued in
Shadow of the Bat #6.