



GRANT MORRISON JOHN VAN FLEET

BATMAN

663
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There's something about clowns at a funeral and it's hard to say if it's sad or if it's funny.

The CLOWN at MIDNIGHT



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Chapter 1 – PUTTING BOZZO TO BED

Rain goes clickety-clack-tack through the sticks and branches of bare, bony graveyard elms, the kind that stand as if ashamed, like strippers past their best – danced out to a standstill in the naked lights, all down to nothing but fretwork and scaffolding, jutting hips, nicotine-stained fingers, and summer gone south for the winter.

"Deeply beloved blah blah blah..." the priest intones with all the ecumenical fire and conviction of an "I Speak Your Weight" machine. "Stop me if you've heard this one before..."

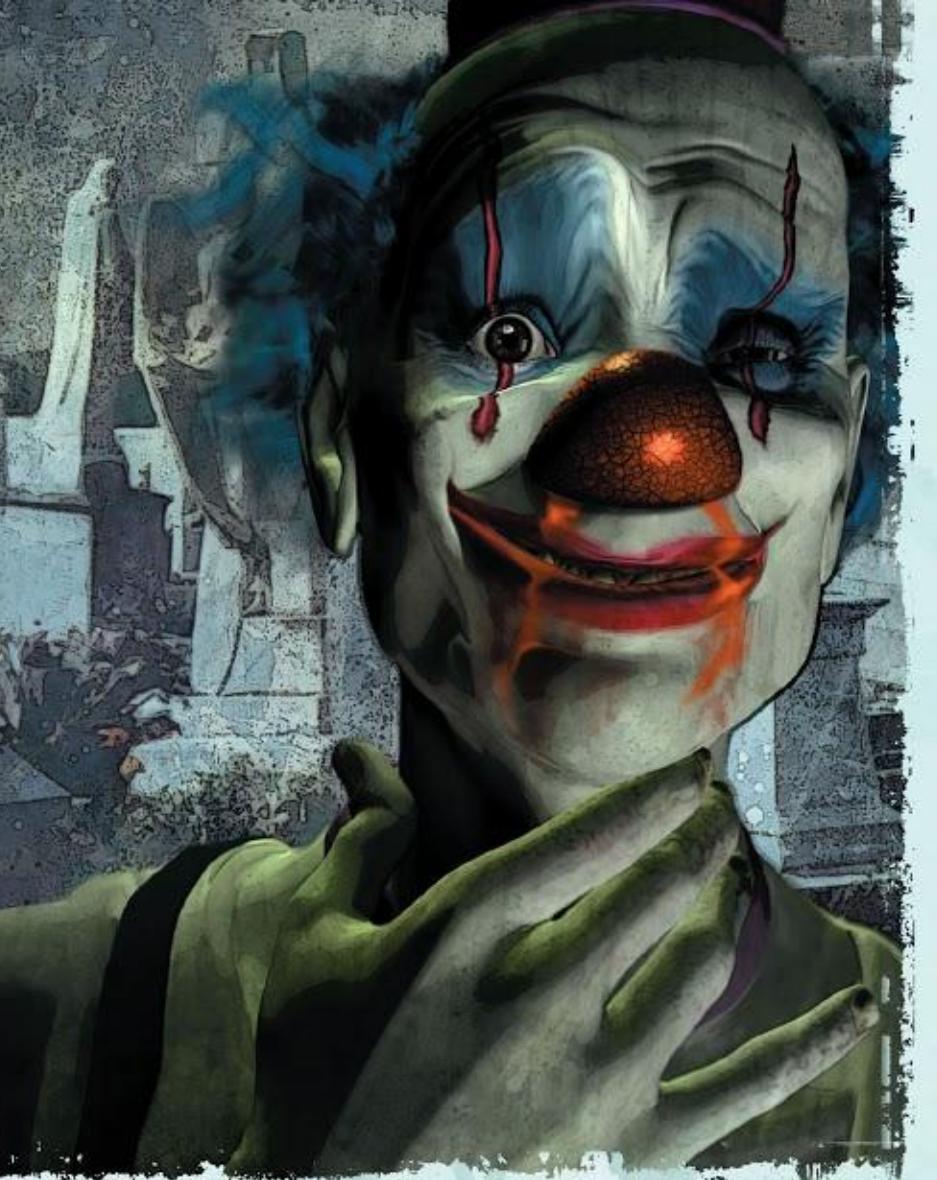
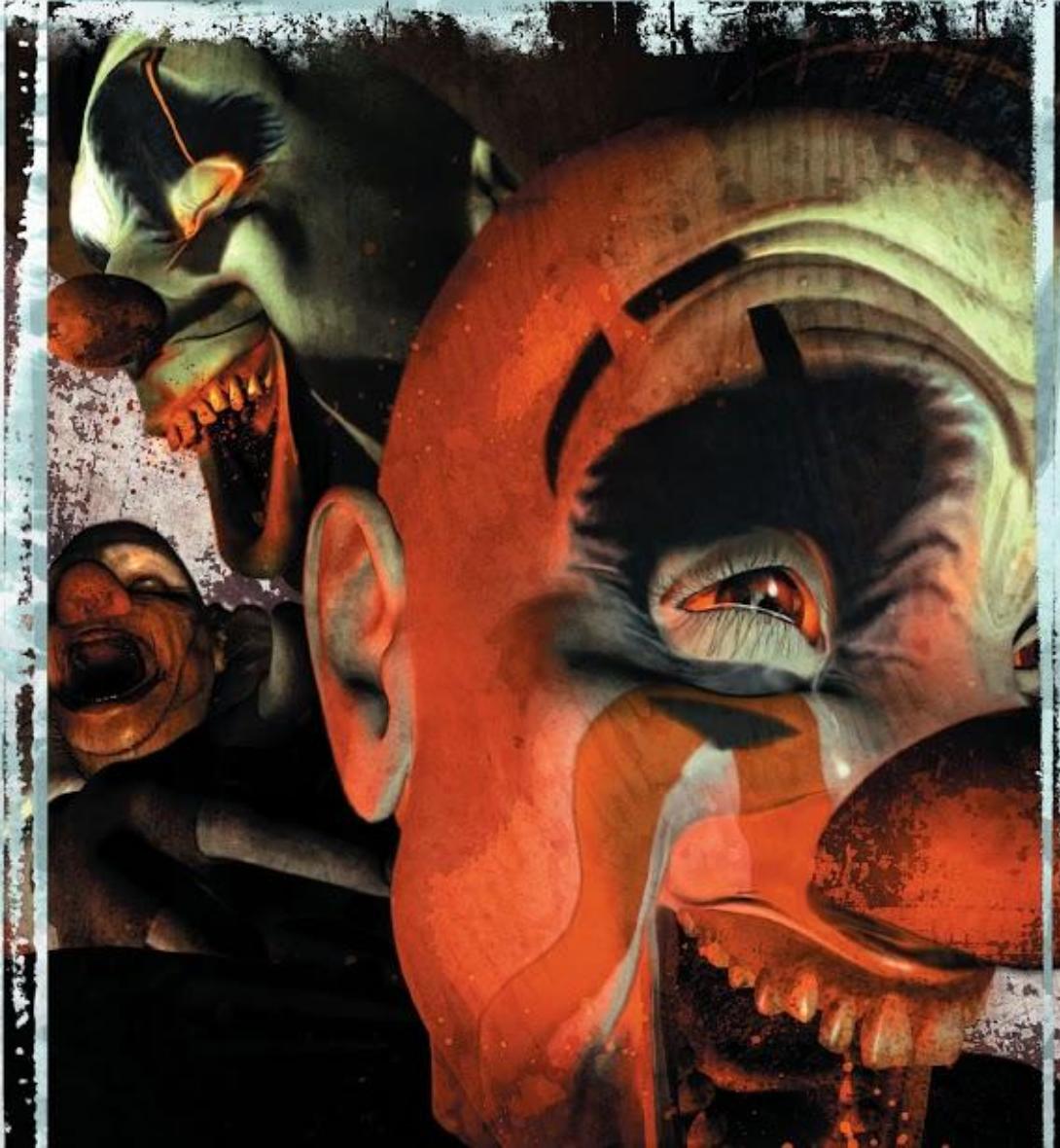
What could be sadder and funnier than clowns at the cemetery, in the sniveling Gotham rain by the Red Hook dockyards, laying to rest their finest, their best, their golden boy?

Of all the henchmen, all the hoods, the fat man in the supersize-me coffin had led the pack. It's thanks to Bozzo the Bandit most of these comedians are still alive to bury him, when so many underlings of The Boss have met with abrupt and untimely terminations of contract down the years at the pale, cold hands of their infamous ringleader.

It's always been the same, Bozzo used to say: the smirking gift of a fat and smoldering Cuban cigar, followed by a hasty exit, a loud, flat bang, and what sounded like a drum of slurry hitting a ceiling fan. Or electricity would be used in some amusing and ultimately fatal way. Or there'd be champagne mixed with hydrochloric acid. Or rats. The Boss could transform anyone or anything into an agent of Death when he tired of you, or when you stopped making him laugh, or sometimes it was for no real reason except that he felt like doing something random and you just happened to be there, in the right place at the wrong time.

The traditional payback for loyalty was death and madness. That was the rule around The Boss.

But somehow these eight men survived and made their jump from the joyride just before it derailed, all thanks to Bozzo the Bandit's dictum – "Y'all gotta keep him laughin', boys, 'cause when the laughin' stops the genocide starts, and the genocide starts with you..."



So it's maybe something like that on Peanuts Parker's mind that makes him want to snigger a little. Maybe it's the solemnity of this big hungry hole in the ground, and this stumbling train of has-beens with painted-on smiles to hide their "secret identities" from the authorities. Maybe it's the cloying stench of black and red flowers coiled in a dirty wreath for a dead king. Or maybe it's just the bitter wine of dumb luck dying on the vine that tastes so scary and so ridiculous.

His fingers, oozing sweat and cold, slide on the polished pine (only the best for Bozzo!) and the thought that he could easily lose control of the hefty cabinet is laugh-out-loud funny and disturbing at the same time.

He can hear snorting, hysterical bull grunts from the other pall-bearers too, moving in a ring, the way you'd pass a yawn or a precious secret around. Peanuts swallows hard to ease the clench of nausea's greasy glove in his gut, but he knows something's wrong and he knows what it is. He can smell it.

There's a huge and twisted ugliness inside him that has to get out or he'll go mad holding it in. He wants to tell the other clowns how cruddy and broken and uncomfortable he feels inside, but their garish faces are stretching, leering, and opening up like colorful envelopes all around him, in a way that's so awful and funny to look at he decides to face the dirt and deal with that instead.

Peanuts wonders if he too looks like a tattooed death's head, knowing that he does, as the juddering, jangling needle buzz in his spine screws his nerve cables tighter and tighter, until he's sure the rotten ladder of vertebrae must snap. He's swallowed battery acid, is how it feels, with every part of him clutching into a rictus. A premature rigor mortis is stiffening his numb fingers, spreading like an itch only the Reaper can scratch. No one can deny he's the worst sort of clown, all teeth and bleeding gums, as he cracks his head back on its

aching stalk of bone and gristle to cackle out a black and red voltage, as if by roaring and spitting the shocking pain loose into the sky in the form of thick wet streamers he'll be free of it.

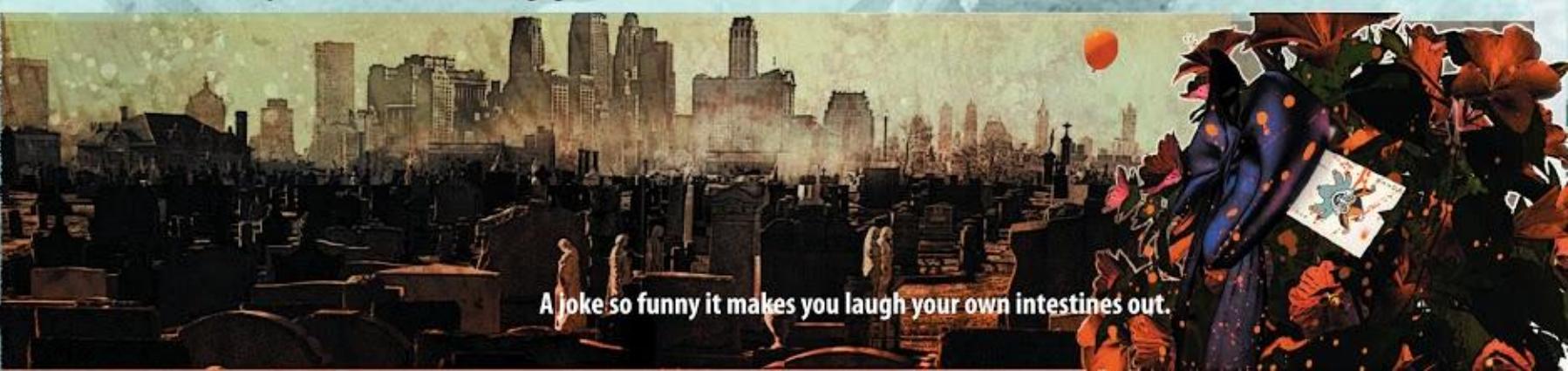
Everyone he's ever known, he's let down, and now he's about to spoil Bozzo's big day too. If there's a special Hell for losers he's on the guest list, VIP, plus none. It's so funny, it hurts. It hurts so much, it's funny.

The coffin slips from Peanuts' grasp like he knows it has to, a massive dead weight shearing off its axis into the brute fist of gravity. Everything is going wrong all at once. Casually, the coffin crushes Charlie Cheesemold's sternum to splinters and splits the man's head open the way you'd smack an egg on the rim of an iron pan. Like an overstuffed suitcase, the box pops its locks and tips Bozzo's immense mortal remains into the arms of his grieving friends and colleagues. Four hundred pounds of flesh and bone and pine comes rolling in like an avalanche across a vivid tangle of screaming rags and smeared greasepaint, unstoppable.

Everybody's laughing now, in the bloody chaos and mortuary stink of the aftermath. It's like a day at the circus in Hell. Racked with spasms, and all writhing together in the grip of the same atrocity, the funeral party sprays stomach lining through laced fingers and makeup in its mad scramble to join the deceased in comedy Valhalla. The retching, chuckling screeches pitch higher and higher, tuning themselves to a glassy, operatic crescendo only bats can hear. Maniacal and shrill with terror until the very last gasp, one by one the funnymen stop laughing and die.

A damp shroud of edgy quiet settles discreetly. The rain falls clickety-clack-tack, counting time, while the crows arrange themselves along branches, evil notes on a skeleton scale, scoring the sheet music for a funeral march in baggy pants and banana shoes.

What can be funnier or more sad than eight murderous clowns mining the mother lode itself? The ultimate punchline, the terminal gag, the killer finish...



A joke so funny it makes you laugh your own intestines out.



Chapter 2 – THE KNIGHT AND THE CITY

Welcome to Gotham City, a party ten miles long and six miles wide. From The Hill to Cathedral Square, from Amusement Mile to Blackgate Penitentiary, a 21st-century American Babylon has shouldered its way up from the mudflats and sauntered into the spotlights, eager to dazzle and seduce the world.

Gotham City, where the greasy electromagnetics of human need, hope, and fear radiate into a new January night so rank you can taste it like tinfoil on your fillings. Where crime swaps spit with high society and everything's for sale. Where grimy clouds snag and burst on the vicious needle points of world-famous Deco-Industrial superscrapers on Wall Street and Levi and spill out more, and more, and more of the burning, glamorous downpour Gothamites call rain and know so well. It's the kind of town that whispers "baby" while it's picking your pockets, that promises the world and delivers the gutter, or vice versa, and puts out your lights with a kiss, or a bullet, then forgets your name before dawn.

Deep in the dense architectural reefs of midtown, primary reds and yellows and the hot purples of gigantic moving advertising hoardings are turning the rain to something that might as well be liquid stained glass, braiding it through the wound-tight sinews of the Aparo Bridge, scything across the docks and railway sidings, then crowding into the narrow floodlit canyons of 8th Avenue, Finger and Crescent, to rinse the lowlifes and the high rollers off the bustling streets and back into the bars, the theaters, the crack houses, restaurants and clip joints, as if the sky itself, in some spontaneous creative frenzy, has chosen to empty an ocean of raw printer's ink on the gaudy, just and unjust citizens of Gotham alike.

Gotham City. 10:23 p.m. One more night in the self-proclaimed most incredible city in the world.

Where people go who love the floodlit intensity of its teeming, restless avenues. Where human lives are bought and sold and innocence is up for trade. Where dreams turn solid and bleed. Where ghosts are real and monsters leave their footprints in the dust.

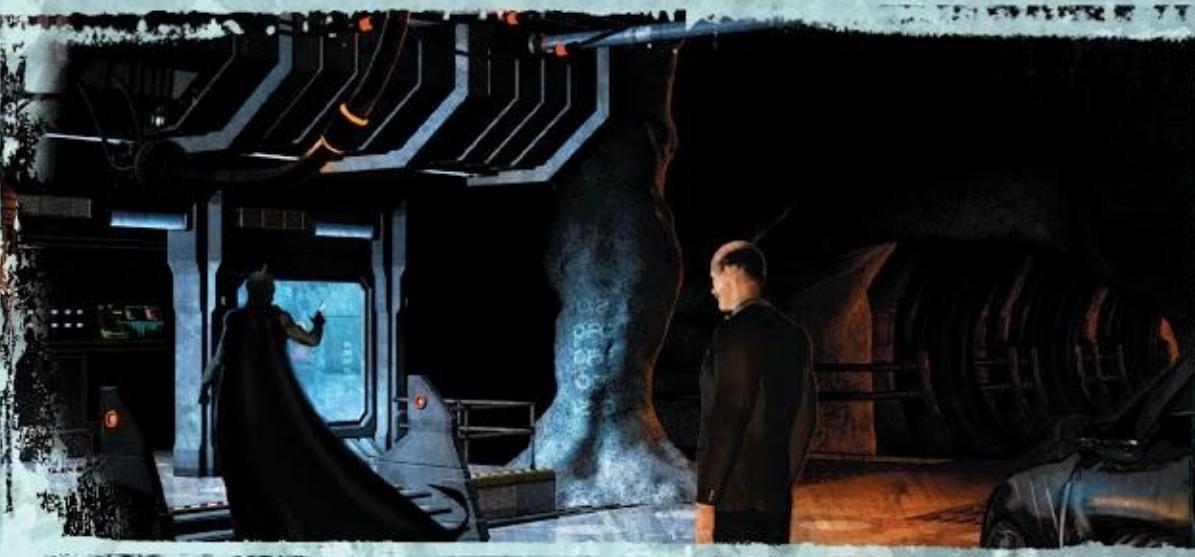
Where lives the man who has no price, the man who cannot be bought or sold or swayed from his singular path.

Black against the foundry glare of corporate signatures written large as houses, a jet figurehead, mounted on a marble and iron plinth 250 feet high at the top of Gotham Center, he wraps himself in crackling shadows and reads the fumes and divines the luminous car-headlight entrails that spill from the belly of the Beast. He smells the night and its nine million lives, soaks in its pheromones, its chemistry, its individual emotions carried as scent molecules on the breath of the city. He immerses himself in its perspiration, its animal dynamics, tastes its moods, its metals.

The Batman smells fear above all. Fear is rising from the streets the way carnival balloons rise on the hot thermals. Overwhelming fear. Like antelope on the veldt, the citizens of Gotham can sense a predator waking up hungry, prowling on the perimeter where the wild things are...



"I got there too late, Alfred," he explains. "They called themselves the Boys of St. Genesius. The usual small-time crime clowns with one thing in common; all of them, at one time or another, worked with the same man." He pauses, lets the echo underline his words. "I found a card with the wreath. The flowers are genetically engineered to release a short-acting toxic venom in aerosol form. One drop of the stuff is enough to kill an elephant."



"There's only one conclusion I can draw..."

He turns it over in his hand once again, as if in a magic trick, but the face on the Card With No Number refuses to disappear.





Chapter 3 – DOWN ON JOLLITY FARM

"We shouldn't even be letting you do this... He's still kinda groggy after the electro-shock treatments..." the guard at Arkham Asylum mumbles like a geisha, fumbling a fan of electronic keys from his pocket for the third time since the descent into the maximum security vaults began.

"And after the last time, the social work people wanted to ban you outright. You threw him in a dumpster..."

The other man represses a snort of laughter.

Batman glares. "Must have mistaken him for trash."

The big guard senses the sarcasm in Batman's brittle consonants and feels a pang of personal insult. "Doctor Arkham says he wants you to see for yourself, the Joker's pretty much finished as a threat. Spends most of his time with his speech therapist."

"Speech therapist?"

"Taxpayers' dollars. He was pretty badly messed up last time. It's a miracle he survived. Here..."

Opening a cell door at the heart of this soundproofed maze, the man releases a gust of stale cologne, antiseptic, and human waste.

"He may not be able to talk after the anesthetic. He's pretty frail, you know. All this surgery and trauma."

"My bleeding heart," says the Batman, and his voice is like the doctor's, telling you it's terminal, so the security guards pocket the small talk and leave the dark man to his business, snapping and seething in his blacks.

He goes in, and they slam the door behind him, as quickly as they can, the way you would if you thought something might escape in the form of a cloud of evil gas if you didn't act fast to trap it. The Batman feels the kind of chill that comes from stepping into deep, freezing, black water that rises rapidly around the ribs and stops the breath with a hammer blow.

Some like it hot.

ARKHAM
CRIMINAL
INSANE



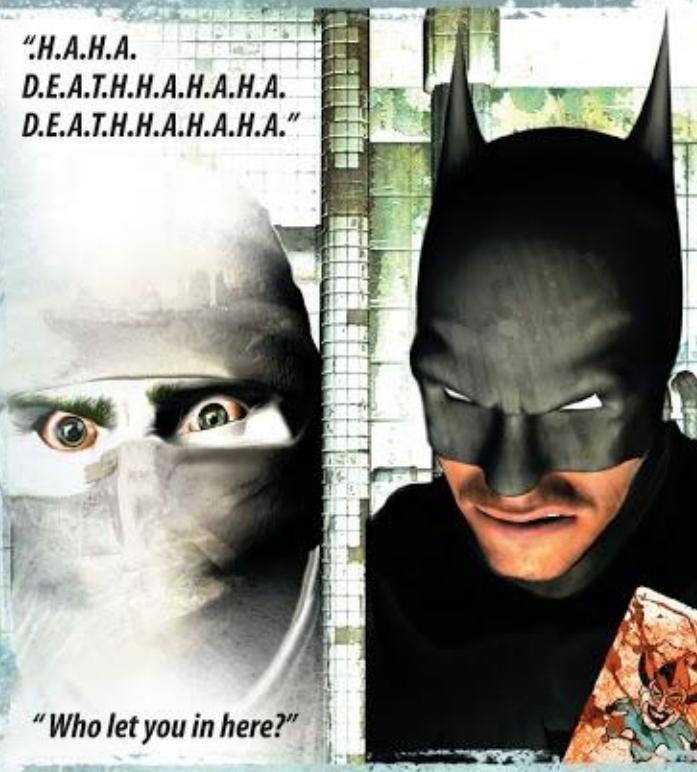
The Joker's different.

"I got your calling card," the Batman says.

Eyes flit like birds on fire beneath the stained bandages, flickering with the tiny lightning strikes of his derangement, his chemical sickness. The bony chest rises and waits to fall, as if he's onstage, catching his breath in the hush before the applause.

"Who's working with you?" the Batman says again.

The archnemesis sticks to the Fifth but the jaws work, champing gently, insistently, behind grubby gauze wrap, and the bird-eyes glitter with a sickness that never sleeps. Still, no sound emerges from the blunt, erased head. Instead, he blinks repeatedly, the same pattern over and over again, winking a chant in Morse that Batman first detects then spells out beneath his breath.



".H.A.H.A.
D.E.A.T.H.H.A.H.A.H.A.
D.E.A.T.H.H.A.H.A.H.A."

"Who let you in here?"

Batman turns to face Jeremiah Arkham, framed in the doorway with a spiky halo of uncombed hair.

"See how he's blinking?" Batman says. "He's swearing at you, Doctor."

"What?"

"Morse code."

"Blinking? In Morse code?" Arkham's haunted features rearrange themselves into a mask of derision. "May I ask you to leave, Batman? It's a hard enough job here among the criminally insane without you wandering through the halls whenever you feel like a social call."

"Your star patient has already been responsible for the deaths of eight men today."

"That could have been anybody, Batman! I need more evidence than a twitching eyelid."

"You'll get it. This is only the start."

Arkham suppresses a smirk. He expects Batman to wind up here.

"He's recovering from a near fatal trauma. We don't know how severe the brain damage could be, and he's certainly in no condition to organize gangland hits."

"Don't let him fool you. He knows exactly what he's doing."

They pause at the doors. "This speech therapist..." Batman says.

"Miss Wisakedjak. She graduated from The Rose Bruford School."

Batman's lip curls.

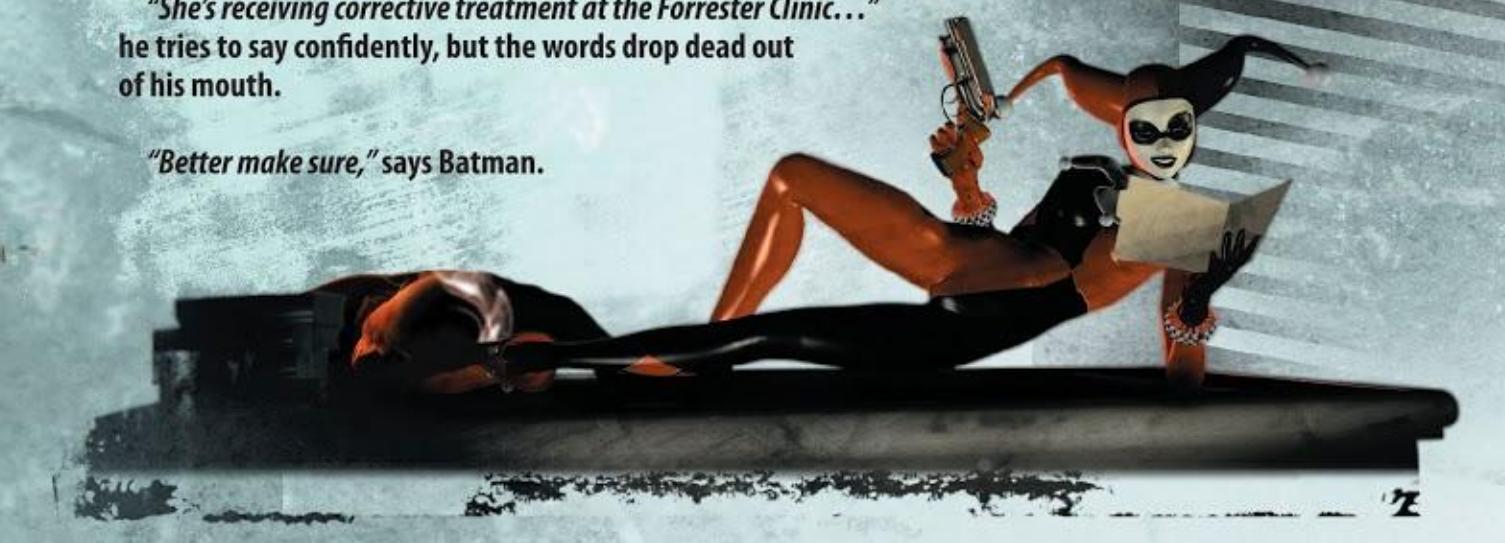
"Wisakedjak is the name of the Cree Indian trickster god," he says, as if it's something only idiots wouldn't know. "Where's Harley Quinn?"

Arkham's face bleaches to resemble an overexposed passport photo.

"She's receiving corrective treatment at the Forrester Clinic..."

he tries to say confidently, but the words drop dead out of his mouth.

"Better make sure," says Batman.



Chapter 4 – HER SPECIAL DAY

Four miles south, in the charred and broken-down shadows of Black Brothers Department Store, or at least what's left of it after the big insurance fire, it might at first glance appear that a strange child is trying on a wedding dress in front of a cracked mirror, but there's more to this scene than meets the eye. The little figure sways lightly from side to side on stained satin ballet pumps, humming a mindless, one-note melody, as though it's waiting for its cue and the inevitable moment in the movie where the kiddie turns around to reveal the face of a leering, wizened dwarf with an axe and the operating system of a shark where a mind should be.

Sheba gets that movie star double-take often. She was born with microcephaly and sees things with a plain,

high-contrast clarity that many Zen masters might envy.

During the Joker's short-lived ringmaster-from-Hell phase, the craze for creepy dwarfs and henchmen with odd congenital conditions reached fever pitch and drew to the City many otherwise unemployable characters from the margins – it was an equal opportunity era when the ambitious pinhead could fast-track to the top and score steady gigs at the swankiest clubs in town. All you had to do was look all starey-eyed in fetish diapers and break a few things while the Boss threatened his victims. So it was for Solomon and Sheba.

Scored with a soundtrack of wheezing calliopes and Wurlitzer steam organs played backwards, their little lives unfolded, while grinding, blind horses went around and around and around on their rusty poles, making the Boss laugh all the more wildly in the swamp-black Southern Gothic twilights they all loved so much. Those were days and nights of cattle prods, of fishnet and ultraviolet light, of porno candyfloss spiked with strychnine. She filed her teeth by mistake one night, then Solomon did the same to prove his love for her. The Boss treated them well and seemed genuinely amused by their cartoonish perspectives. You might be forgiven, like Sheba, for thinking that the good times would last forever although no times ever do.

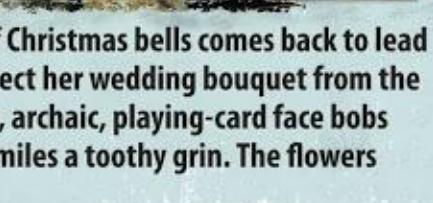
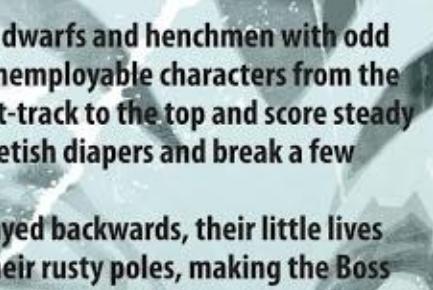
Even when He was caught and put away again, leaving his tiny, imbecilic henchmen to fend for themselves like Hansel and Gretel in Hell, luck continued to smile on Solomon and Sheba. They were discovered by policemen, hiding in the engine of the carnival ghost train, and embraced by the Bohemian demimonde of East Gotham Village. Soon the pair were everywhere, on catwalks and fashion shoots, lending color to metal videos and artpunk happenings.

So she dances in front of the mirror, the perfect bride-to-be, endlessly unable to comprehend a world where the Boss could ever be cruel. In her head it is always sunrise and everything is always on the verge of making complete sense.

Sheba knows her lovely Solomon is dead before everyone else does because, when she looks in the mirror for the first time ever it seems somehow empty.

But before she can do anything else, the nice lady with the head full of Christmas bells comes back to lead Sheba up the grand skeleton staircase to collect her wedding bouquet from the Boss. Sheba remembers the Boss – his vague, archaic, playing-card face bobs like a balloon in her low-res memory – and smiles a toothy grin. The flowers are roses.

Red and black roses piled like cake.



Chapter 5 – NIRVIKALPA SAMADHI

"We know what killed him. We're talking about a new airborne strain of the Joker poison. You all heard Batman — the flowers are carrying a death pollen. The aerosol nerve agent activates when the red and the black flowers are brought together and remains effective for ten minutes."

Police Commissioner Gordon makes his explanations brief, like text messages. His men are uneasy around the Batman. They say he brings bad luck.

The pathologist steps back to give the Dark Knight access to the tiny corpse in its tiny, stupid tuxedo. Uttering a prayer for the dead he learned from the Lamas in Nanda Parbat, Batman extracts a sample of blood into a clear ampule, then clips it back into his utility belt. The rest he hands to Gordon. Uniformed cops in gas masks and a dead dwarf; it's like a fetish club in here. Even the walls are sweating.

"We need an antidote. Fast," Gordon barks.

"It won't happen again," the Batman vows.

"So the Joker's wiping out his old henchmen. Good riddance.

Maybe when he gets done, he'll kill himself."



Gordon nods at Solomon's grinning corpse.

"You remember what this little creep did to me?" He shudders. "The Joker and his whole circus can go to hell as far as I'm concerned!"

"There's something more to this," the Batman says.

"You think? Since when did killing the hired help stop being one of his favorite pastimes?"

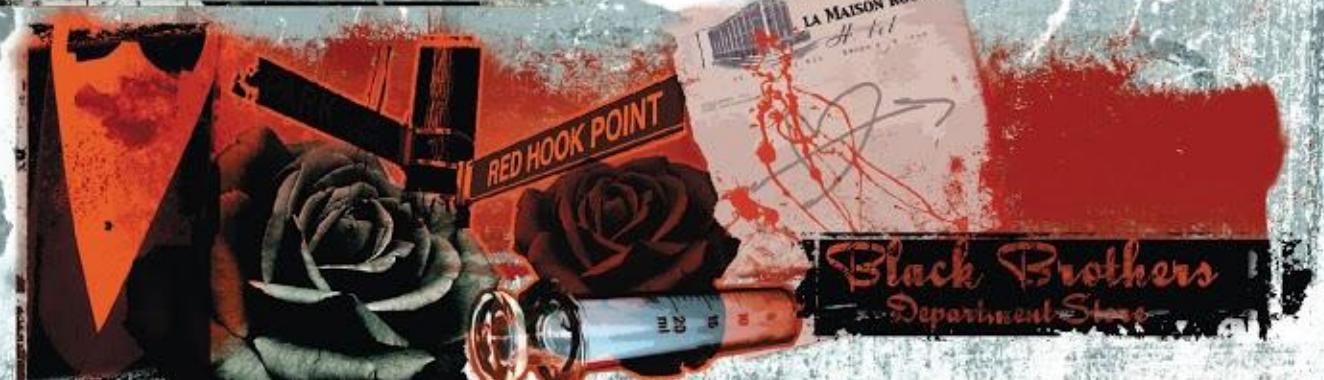
"If it's him, there has to be more. He always leaves a clue. A pattern. You know that," the Batman says, slowing his breathing to trigger Delta-wave activity before entering Nirvikalpa Samadhi, the supreme meditative state.

"Are you listening to me at all?" Gordon says. Batman nods curtly, very still and silent, scanning for the pattern he knows is there. When he finds it, the corners of his mouth twitch upwards. The Joker always plays to his theme.

Rebirth. Snake scales, red and black. Blood on the tuxedo. Red Hook and Black Brothers and the Red House. And red, and black. The big game is there in plain sight, as always. Life and death transformed into one more ugly, unfunny gag.

The Joker, as ever, can't help giving it all away.

"No one else is going to die," Batman says and is gone, leaving Gordon alone in a room with an open window.



**Black Brothers
Department Store**

Chapter 6 - JOKER MAGGOT

In the white, empty cell, the flat, pressurized silence is relieved by these three things only - the crawling ticks of fluorescent lighting, the slow crackle of breathing - if breathing sounded like paper being torn and torn again and torn again, obsessively, into tiny scraps - and the pin-thin whine of a mosquito that rode in on Batman's cape and now finds itself locked in a madhouse with something bad for company.



No movement registers either until you look very closely to see the jaws working in stealth beneath surgical gauze and pins. Don't even think about those sly mandibles chewing down on some poison mantra as the dreadful eyes track the poor mosquito's lazy flight-path, the way a spider's might, triangulating its victim.

He's scrolling through a list of things that make him laugh. *Blind babies. Landmines. AIDS. Beloved pets in bad road accidents. Statistics. Pencilcases. BRUNCH! The Periodic Table of the Elements.*

The insect selects a moon-white hand, the left, and settles there like a NASA landing module. It folds its little wings back neatly, takes air in through its tracheae, then eases its hypodermic tool face into the weave of the Joker's papery skin and begins to pulse, gorging on blood flow.

Geniuses suffering irreversible brain damage. REAL bad news. Shattered faith. Sombreros. Politics. Fish being gutted. Fish being gutted. Fish being gutted.

Like a grub growing all wrong in a tiled cocoon, like a caterpillar liquefying to filth in its own nightmares, or a fetus dissolving in sewage and sour milk, the Joker dreams, awake. His is the *mal ojo*, the evil eye. He wills Death upon the world.

Bowel cancer. Fish being gutted. Mister Ed. Guns in schools. Cripes. Racism.

Breathing slowly in his bright and boundless Hell, the Clown Prince of Cruelty dreams a new face, a new world, a Year Zero. An unforgettable golden age of blood-red comedy and crime!

Alzheimer's.

The mosquito, meanwhile, gets the message, shudders and falls from the Joker's hand. Blind and crippled, it spins in circles on the radiant floor, choking on tainted blood.

Batman.

He watches the tiny life go out, listens to the fading whine as it slowly curls up, like a hand becoming a fist, and dies.

Batman.

Eager to be born, he counts backward to midnight.

Chapter 7 - THE CHECKERBOARD DOLL

WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE?



Harley Quinn's been busy since she blew the kook farm, trailing her EEG cables like Medusa locks. It was fun to be free, fun to have a purpose again. It was something to keep the spooks away.

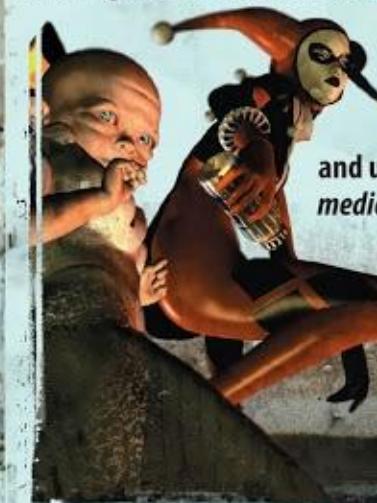
The flowers are only dangerous when they're brought together, of course. Combine the red and the black and *voilà!* The perfect Romantic murder weapon is born - a death rosary. She loves the way his corkscrew mind works. Her obsession, her puddin, her Joker. She goes gooey when she thinks of his ghastly mask of hate. She loves his shattered thoughts, imagining them in all their labyrinthine, jewelled disarray as unknown cities on a distant planet and she, the girl explorer, lost among sinister wonders.

She's all hearts and flowers since he surfaced from his coma. Every week she'd slip away from her cell and bounce all the way to Arkham. As Jane Wisakedjak she's been playing the role of the Joker's quiet Bostonian speech therapist for the last three months. As for the real Jane, who never danced naked or watched the sun rise over the peaks of Bora Bora or took a chance on the classified ads section, what remains of her lies gently rotting beneath the lonely floorboards of her ground floor apartment. Harley's heart beats happily as she dots the question mark she's sprayed on the wall, then skips a beat as a deadly voice splits the gloom.

"He's changed, Harley Quinn," it says.

Her eyes roll, fractured semi-precious stones set like charms in a frightened little Halloween-cake face. She's cute like a Chihuahua pup with rabies, or a baby swinging an open razor.

Harley's damaged enough to love the Joker with a love so pure and unconditional, it has its own severe medical disorder classification in the psychiatric journals.



"Harley, you have to stop killing for him. He's sick," the Batman ventures, well aware that reason's well debate ethics with a tiger kitten. "He's changed every few years. You wrote the book, Doctor Quinzel. He has no only a series of 'superpersonas.' That's what you called them, right?"

Her brow furrows. "What do you know?" she says, and he registers the flex of tension that snakes through her taut musculature. "You tried to kill him! You shot him," she works out.

"I didn't shoot him," the Batman is telling her. "That was someone else."

"Batman shot him!" her voice is becoming shrill, agitated, distracted.

"And you're Batman, aren't you? Dressed up like that?" Her gaze zigzags around the room as her muscles shift under her costume, making the checkerboard ripple.

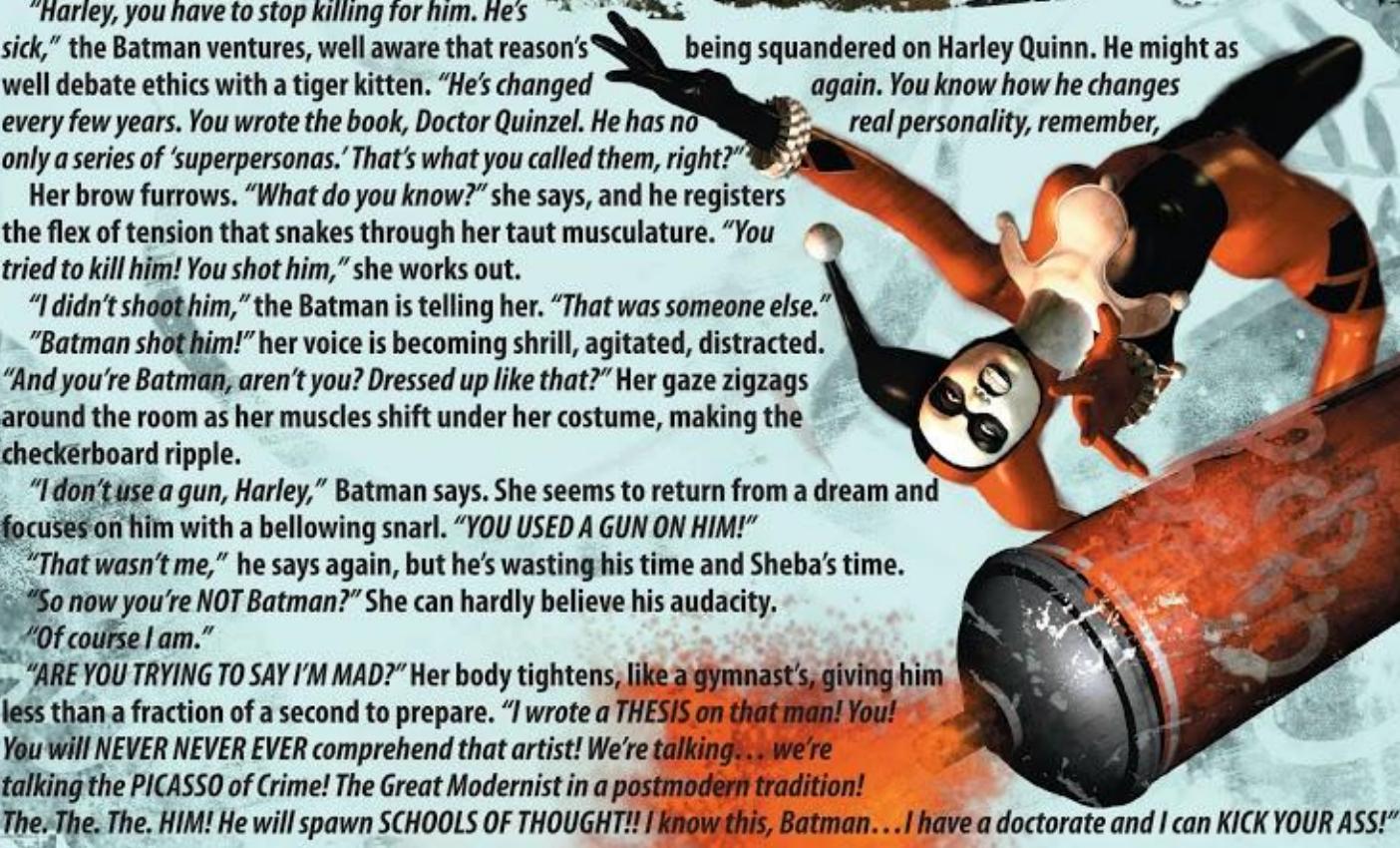
"I don't use a gun, Harley," Batman says. She seems to return from a dream and focuses on him with a bellowing snarl. "YOU USED A GUN ON HIM!"

"That wasn't me," he says again, but he's wasting his time and Sheba's time.

"So now you're NOT Batman?" She can hardly believe his audacity.

"Of course I am."

"ARE YOU TRYING TO SAY I'M MAD?" Her body tightens, like a gymnast's, giving him less than a fraction of a second to prepare. "I wrote a THESIS on that man! You! You will NEVER NEVER EVER comprehend that artist! We're talking... we're talking the PICASSO of Crime! The Great Modernist in a postmodern tradition! The. The. The. HIM! He will spawn SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT!! I know this, Batman... I have a doctorate and I can KICK YOUR ASS!"



Harley goes into action like her special effects budget is limitless and becomes a boneless whirl of red and black gymnastics that is suddenly whipping overhead, suddenly aiming, cocking, and firing her dainty little revolver in one movement so fluid, so economical, and so improbable that the Batman, astonished, almost forgets to react.

Almost. The bullet chops a silver-gray furrow out of the Kevlar shielding of his cowl, pulverizing chunks of protective fabric in hard slo-mo. He wants to applaud and award marks out of ten. Instead, he calculates her speed and momentum, spinning on his heel to be ready for her next attack.

Harley lands behind him, soundless, a deadly human chessboard that unfolds to be everywhere at once and knots her arm around Sheba's neck, pulling it back to expose the plush white skin to the edge of her blade.

"Jokerday begins at midnight," she cackles with the creepy, wasted, little girl voice that she can make sound as if it's coming from all the shadows in all the corners of the room. "Mistah Jay says he's putting his past to rest!"

Batman tries to speak, to warn her, but she shouts him down and presses the blade closer to Sheba's throat. "We're celebratin' the resurrection with the ultimate sacrifice!" As she drags the squealing underground superstar backward to a funereal flower display, Harley and her captive seem to transform into an absurdist performance troupe, dying a death in front of an audience of one.

"But first... time to smell the roses, Sheba! Mistah Jay says a big new world is coming over the hill, like the circus!"

Harley squeals, and draws blood from the wailing, pop-eyed Sheba. "What do YOU got to offer?"

"Fireworks," Batman answers.

First he torches the murder blossoms with incendiary pellets from his utility belt. It takes two seconds.

Then he rescues the squalling, hysterical Sheba, who's spinning in her wedding dress like the shuttlecock in a badminton game. Three seconds.



Then it's Harley's turn, but she's already gone, back-flipping into toiling smoke and flames that burn black and red and where she disappears, camouflaged like a chameleon, invisible in the inferno.

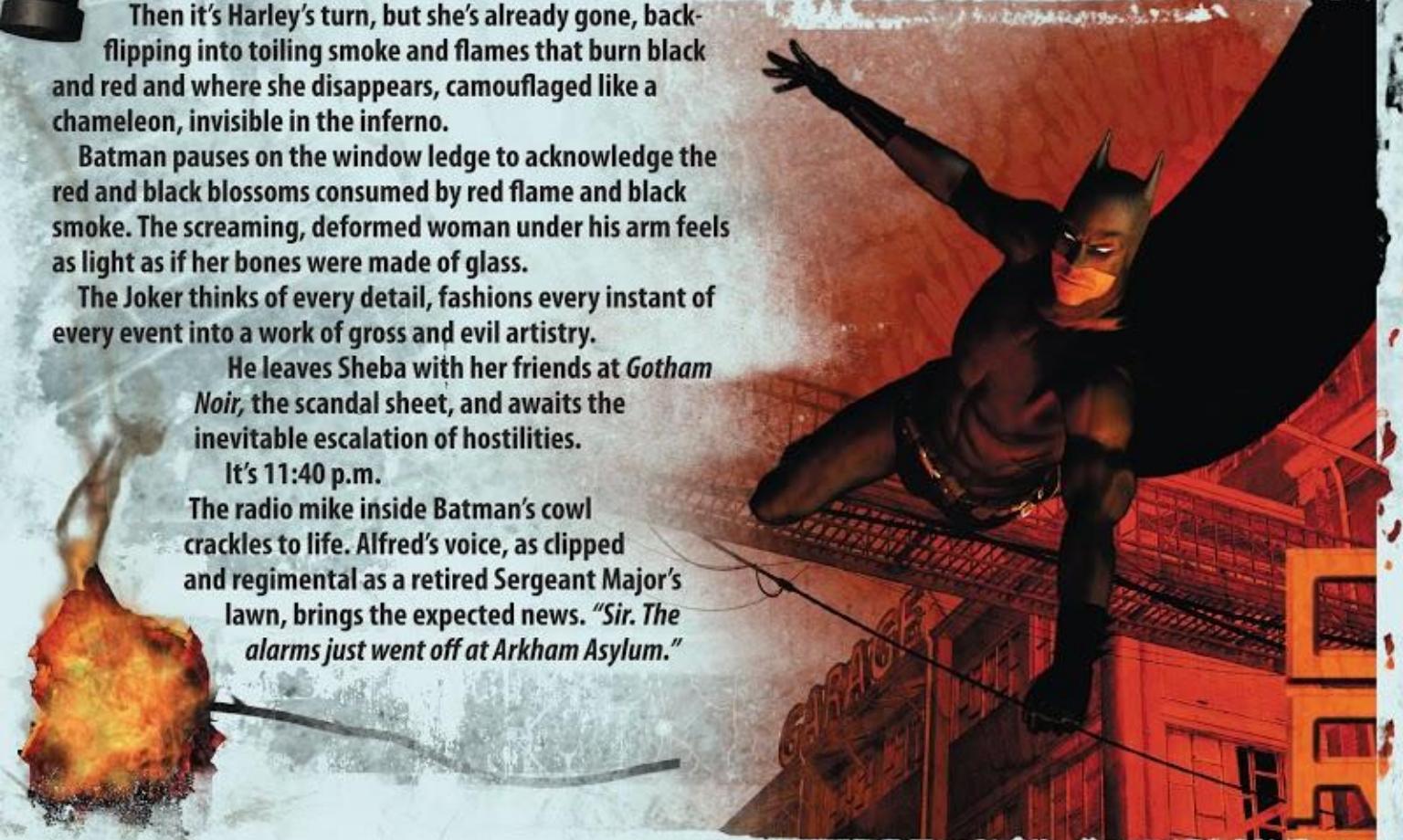
Batman pauses on the window ledge to acknowledge the red and black blossoms consumed by red flame and black smoke. The screaming, deformed woman under his arm feels as light as if her bones were made of glass.

The Joker thinks of every detail, fashions every instant of every event into a work of gross and evil artistry.

He leaves Sheba with her friends at *Gotham Noir*, the scandal sheet, and awaits the inevitable escalation of hostilities.

It's 11:40 p.m.

The radio mike inside Batman's cowl crackles to life. Alfred's voice, as clipped and regimental as a retired Sergeant Major's lawn, brings the expected news. "Sir. The alarms just went off at Arkham Asylum."



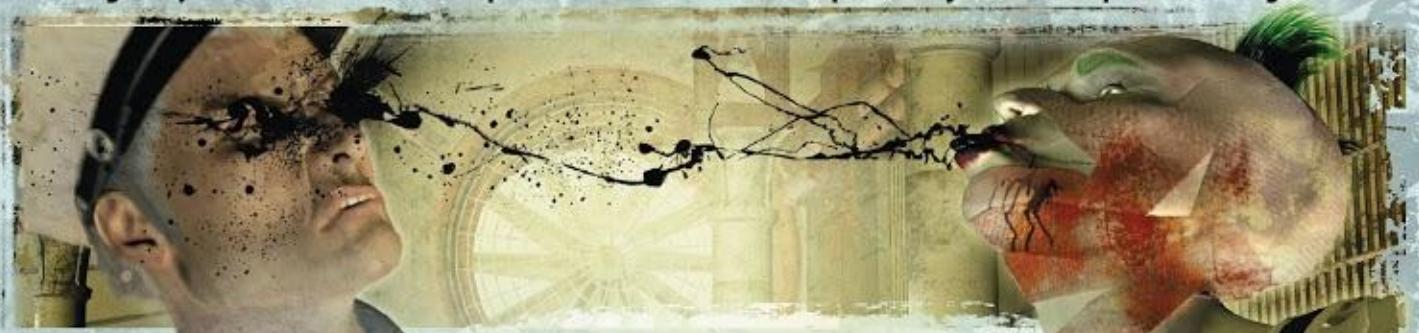
Chapter 8 – JOKER UNBOUND



The fiend stops chewing, mouth filled with a swirl of black bile. As an avid consumer of his own chemical experiments, the Joker's immunity to poison concoctions that might kill another man in an instant has been developed over years of dedicated abuse. The capsule of venom that his "speech-therapist" passed him on a spatula before the electro-therapy sessions is where it belongs beneath his tongue, dissolving in his mouth, releasing its contents slowly in the form of an acrid black liqueur that burns as it melts across his tongue and the roof of his reconstructed palate.

He savors the stinging hallucinogenic heat and, like the god Shiva, holds the poison mix in place, thickening it with more and more saliva. "UMMM," he gobbles in a fearful, quavering voice, "UMMMMMMM! UMMMM!," rattling his chair wildly until the cell door unlocks and the curious Screw is drawn closer to see what's up.

In less time than it takes for this second to become the next, Lou Perroni (37, a bodybuilder and collector of Ramones memorabilia, GSOH) is pedalling backward, making the noises cattle make at the slaughterhouse gate, clawing at his face where the adhesive spit burns black holes in his skin. It doesn't take much longer for the contaminants to go to work in his bloodstream and for Lou's shocking, inhuman lowing to contort into the biggest, most awful howl of laughter you ever heard. The skin splits at the corners of Lou's lips but he just can't stop the churning carnival



inside. He's laughing red and black and red and black till there's nothing left to laugh. Until, almost tenderly, he turns inside out through his mouth.

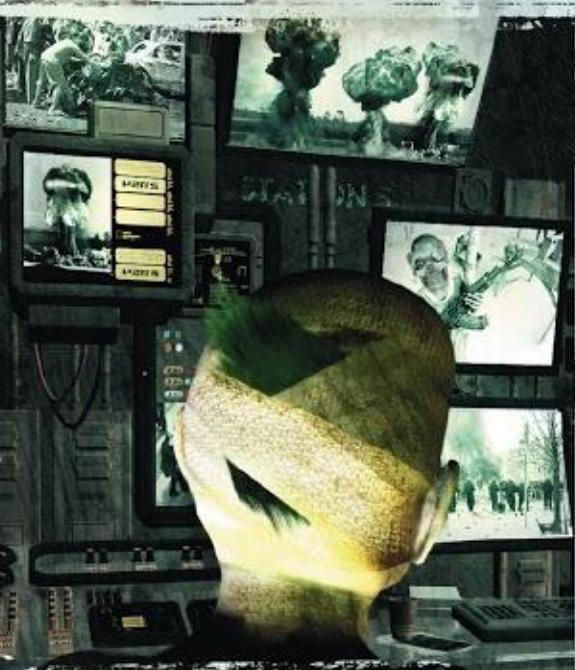
Sliding in the rubbery red chaos that was lately a drinking buddy, Cassius Collins (26, fond of violence, karaoke, conflicted) performs a spectacular, impromptu pratfall, then, astonished, watches the Joker rising from his wheelchair, the way a rabbit watches car headlights bearing down, unable to move a single, spotlit muscle. The madman's limbs appear to unlatch as though some psychotic god has chosen to give life to a complicated Swiss Army knife. The Joker's head rotates, with black contagion drizzling off his chin onto his chest in slow, syrupy drips. The green lasers of his eyes target the keys at the big man's belt, and he shakes his head.

In the silence that follows Cassius Collins' seedy, humiliating death at the hands of the Master of Mirth, the lights crackle and fizz like children suppressing giggles behind the teacher's back. Blood puddles thickly around his specially soft hospital slippers as the Joker pads down the soundproofed halls, leaving sticky red prints on the tiles, killing everyone he meets, effortlessly.

It's not quite twelve and he has a little time to spare before the climactic debut of *The Clown At Midnight*, his latest reinvention.

Dazed, hyperventilating, and stinking of blood, he finds himself exhilarated, in a room where they keep all the TV screens and decides to watch the news for a few seconds, to see what's been happening while he's been tucked away in his coma.

What face, he wonders, will the bogeyman of this dark century wear?





In the tidy little operating theater, he selects a pair of sharp scissors, carefully opening and closing several of them until he finds the one with the perfect creak. It's time to peel himself from his dead skin like a snake, and only the finest tools will do. He clips the bandages away in a stately, ritual procession that lets them fall in dirty ribbons to the floor.

It's time to meet the man in the mirror.

He hears himself gasp as the final layers are shed, feels the jolt of shock.

A screaming schizophrenic, tripping on LSD, might grab a pack of crayons and scrawl this face before digging out his own eyes with teaspoons. The face in the glass looks like a stopped clock, flash-frozen at some desperate eternal midnight of the soul, and no matter how hard he tries the smile is stuck there, as if on hooks.

His remarkable coping mechanism, which saw him transform a personal nightmare of

disfigurement into baleful comedy and criminal infamy all those years ago – happily chuckling to himself in the garage as he constructed outlandish Joker-Mobiles which gently mocked the young Batman's pretensions in the Satire Years before Camp, and New Homicidal, and all the other Jokers he's been – now struggles to process the raw, expressionistic art brutal of his latest surgical makeover.

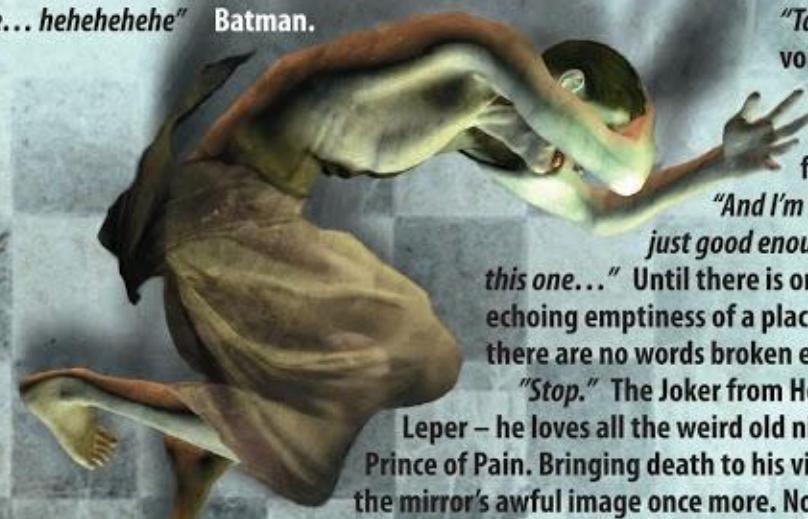
He tries to remember how the doctors in Arkham say he has no Self, and maybe they're right, or maybe just guessing. Maybe he is a new human mutation, bred of slimy industrial waters, spawned in a world of bright carcinogens and acid rains. Maybe he is the model for 21st-century big-time multiplex man, shuffling selves like a croupier deals cards, to buffer the shocks and work some alchemy that might just turn the lead of tragedy and horror into the fierce, chaotic gold of the laughter of the damned. Maybe he is special, and not just a gruesomely scarred, mentally-ill man addicted to an endless cycle of self-annihilating violence. Stranger things have happened.

His body goes into spasm. His gut cramps down as if gravitational forces have conspired and shifted to bring him to his knees. From there he rolls onto his side, whining horribly. The whine is the signal, the radio, the new sound of his self coming through like a frequency.

"I'm a cockroach!" he squeals, and kicks first one leg, and then the other, acting out a disturbing can-can of contraction, labor, and birth as the Asylum alarm bells ring wildly. "La Cucaracha! La Cucaracha! The pain is terrible! I want morphine! I'm having a baby!" he wheezes, then cackles, then coughs, jazzing like a showgirl delivering a donkey onstage. "La Cucaracha-hahahaha!" Multiple Joker voices vie for control as he prepares to give blasphemous birth to himself like the Word of God in reverse. His only regret is that Batman isn't here to witness his obscene display, his rampant pathology in full flower.

Batman.

"They can't keep me here I know a way out... You see I hold the winning card..." he says, before the voice changes to a throaty theatrical chuckle. "You're in my power Batman Ho Ho! I could pull off your mask now – and end your reign! I could even kill you but I won't! HAHAHAHA Let him live!" Then a nasal, aristocratic whine. "He's so amusing when he tries to match wits with me... hehehehehe" Batman.



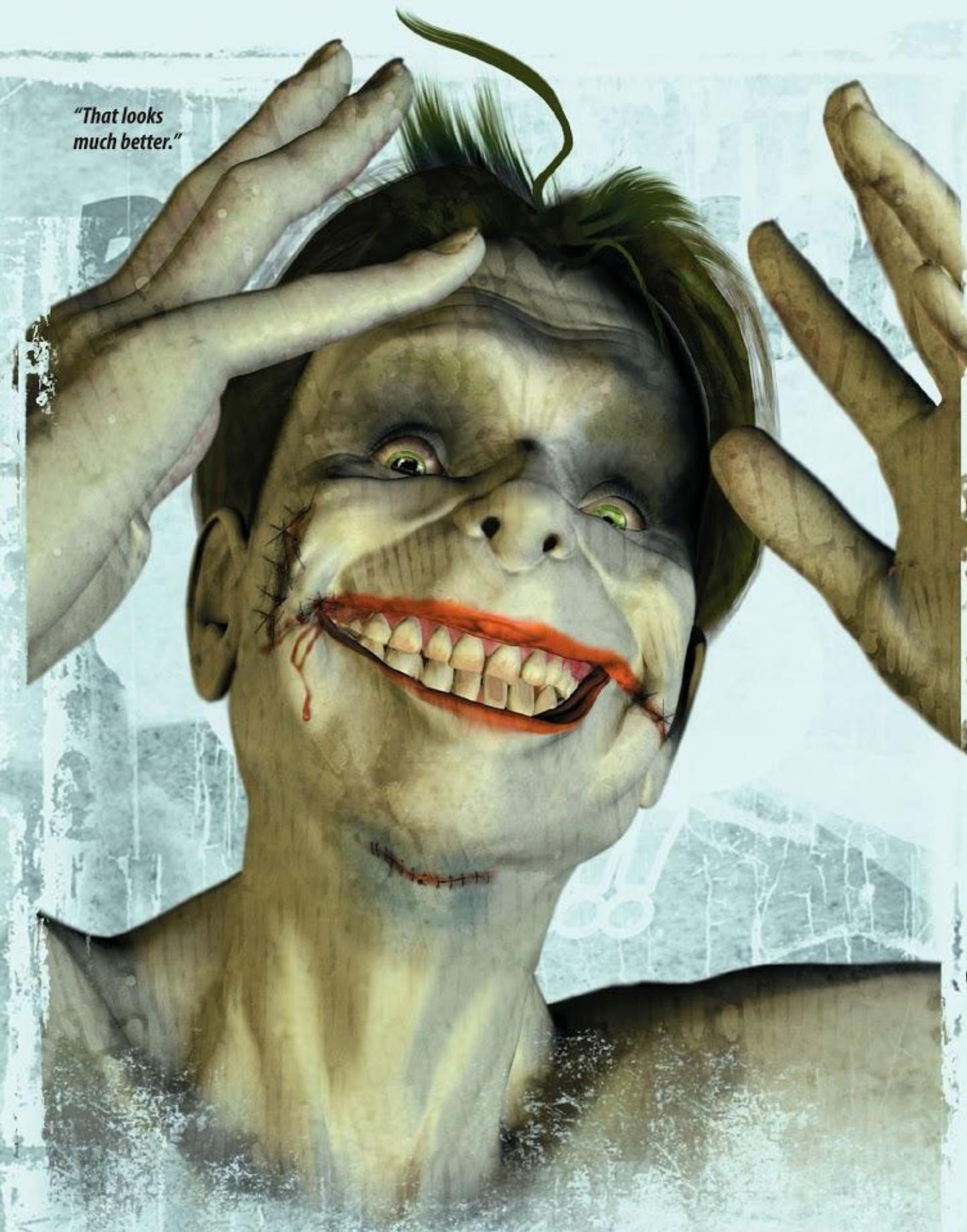
"And I'm loony, like a lightbulb-battered bug. Aren't... aren't I just good enough to EAT! Stop... stop... stop me... if you've heard this one..." Until there is only a single Joker voice smacking its lips in the huge echoing emptiness of a place, let's call it his soul, of such utter dereliction there are no words broken enough to describe it.

"Stop." The Joker from Hell lives here, The Deathly Dandy, The Laughing

Leper – he loves all the weird old nicknames the papers used to give him – The Clown Prince of Pain. Bringing death to his victims, with a smile. He gets to his feet, confronting the mirror's awful image once more. Now he can see exactly where it's all gone wrong. He reaches up to smooth back a lock of oily green hair that feels as brittle, metallic, and unnatural as it did on the day he crawled from the oozing waste pipes at the Monarch Playing Card Company and was born a second time, slick with multicolored metals and unfiltered madness. "There," he says, setting the unruly strand in place...



"That looks much better."



The sirens are going off like a pack of wolves in heat.

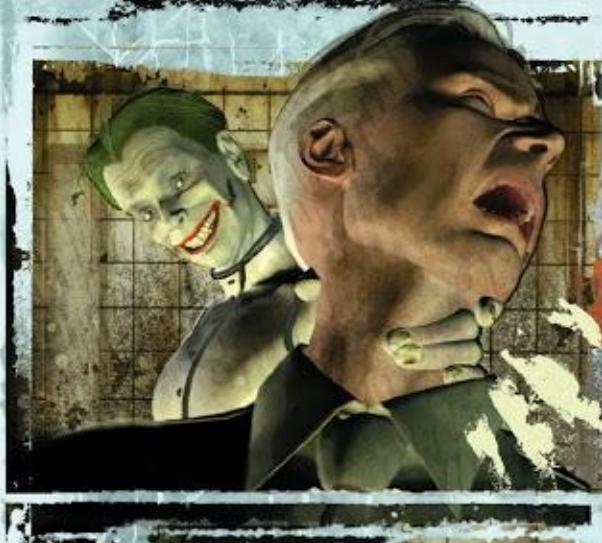
The Joker's metamorphosis is happening very quickly now. It feels like live current grounding itself in a volley of purple and green sparks. His new personality eats him alive from the inside out and he is gone, absolved of all blame for what he will do, now and forever more.

"Lock down! Lock down! The Joker's loose!"

People are screaming like children. Doors slam down. Locks whirr and gears hammer into place. The whole machinery of justice goes into action then breaks down just as swiftly as Harley's booby-trapped computer files release their secret instructions. Doctor Arkham locks himself in his office, calls the police on the red line, then, with trembling fingers, snatches his gun from the drawer.

But it's too late. Of course it's too late.

Chapter 9 – HARLEQUIN OF HELL



It's something that looks like the most boring board game ever invented, with pleady, needy blue eyes just made for gently slitting with razors, Andalusian Dog-style.

It's a dinner gone cold. It reminds him of something he once gorged on but never, ever wants to eat again.

"Puddin," it says.

The Harlequin of Hell cocks his head, the grin fixed, the bone and gum exposed as if in a biology demonstration.

"Puddin," he repeats. He hates board games. They're his least favorite dessert.

She runs to him across the tiles, suddenly uncoordinated and awkward, flushed with hormones and neurological seizures. Her little bells jingle like it's Christmas Morning in the madhouse.

"Puddin," she sobs helplessly. He looks so mean. Harley's almost scared to approach him. Everything she once recognized is gone now, seared, vivisected, or electro-shocked into extinction. The man she loved has been evicted from his own face, leaving these unfinished smudges of skin and bone and rouge, this radical grafting of tissue that passes for an expression. He has gone beyond her understanding into a religious agony of perfection. Harley Quinn imagines she can see radioactive light spilling from her Saint, her Joker, from his ears and eyes. The pure angelic rapture of his transformation strikes his motley disciple as a rattling concussion of black and red slates behind her eyelids, making her stammer like her tongue's caught on a nail in the wind.

"Suh-suh-sorry I was almuuh-most late, Mistah Jay. He's coming...the Batman's coming. I brung him for ya, puddin! Right on the stroke of midnight like ya wanted!" Dazzled by revelation, she gets this feeling that she's no longer worthy of him and can't seem to do anything but stutter in the phosgene flashbacks of his presence.

He thinks of Batman, smiling because he cannot stop. The Joker walks stiffly, growing accustomed to a new skeleton, new gravity, new rules. He feels like a god again – the Thin White Duke of Death with his graveyard grin and his eternal promise of humiliation and pain. Jack of All Crimes, the Knave of Razors. The surgeons have invoked a bony ghoul into being, a diseased demon jester from a negative world beyond all human laws, tuned to frequencies so fast and so hot that the skin of his brain feels like it's 8:15 a.m. at ground zero in Hiroshima. They have only themselves to blame.

The Joker wipes blood flecks from his cheek and dreams of his throne beneath a handicapped sun. He dreams of giving birth from his mouth to pestilence and desolation, soiling the world with flowers of death. He dreams of creeping through a million shattered windows where ten million terrified, vulnerable children hide behind couches and wait for night to fall and for him to find them. He dreams awake. His leprous skin crawling, his brittle ghost fingers twitching, as he reaches out to explore his new limits and finds there are none. There is only the horizon going on forever and a door that just opens and opens and opens. He's almost free again.

Then something is in his way, spoiling his big, fat visionary moment like that tall guy with the hairdo who sits down right in front of you at the cinema just when the movie's all set to start.



"Puddin," he agrees. He takes the last black death rose from her and pins it to his lapel. Then he grips her wrist and twists her arm up her back as he leans in close. Her eyes are bright.

"Batman dead at midnight on the steps of Arkham Asylum," she whispers. "Right?"

She can smell the lovely, rancid chemicals on his breath. She can feel his clammy fever heat and see his insanity purging like serum from every open pore. The pain in her arm intensifies.

"Batman?" he says. The Joker grins on and draws back his blade sharply, savoring the moment, as he prepares to gut the last and best of his lackeys like a playing card on the stroke of midnight.

"Harley!" The voice is like steel striking rock. She can feel the Joker jump and sees the sheet lightning of sheer terror flash in his eyes for just a second. "Red Hook. Black Brothers. La Maison Rouge," the Batman growls. "It's a picture of a checkerboard." Understanding knits itself across her brow – a little "H" under the domino mask. "Like you."

"That's not true," she stutters. Her arm is being stressed to breaking point.

"It's you, Harley, not me. He cared for you. Killing you will prove he's more than human. I'm only here because he wants me to watch."

She shakes her head, jingling, a court jester in denial. "He wouldn't..." she faces the Joker again.

"It's not like that, puddin! BATMAN dies at midnight, remember?"

His chest rises and falls. His face almost creaks as he tries to smile some more. And he shakes his head left to right, with a look that curdles the lymph in her glands.

"Don't make me hurt you..." she sobs, catching sight of the razor's stealthy movement. "You still love me, don't you?" He simply grins.

"I still love you," she whimpers. "I always will."



He whips his arm back and the blade draws a silver arc, a trajectory that can only end in her throat. But Harley Quinn, cornered, puts rats to shame and moves so much faster than even her beloved Joker can recall. It takes him completely by surprise when she punches her knee upwards. With the kind of splintering crack a bullwhip makes, the Joker's left forearm folds up like a blind man's cane and the razor flies from his dead fingers to clink across the tiles. Harley wriggles free of the flapping, smashed limb leaving the Joker a quiet moment to contemplate the splintered bone shards projecting at a fifty-degree angle from his skinny wrist. The grin never leaves his face and never will, despite the flaring up of agony that registers as a sharp constriction of his jet black pupils.

"I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry," she sobs. Her world is falling apart. Harley turns her panicked eyes to Batman, as if for advice, then back to the Joker.

"I'll let you live, but it would be better if you looked more like me," the Joker says, only it sounds like "Uffleff yoofla buf bef beffer lukked um lik me." So much for speech therapy.

"Harley, no..." the Batman whispers, as she makes the only choice her heart allows and tiptoes towards the Boss with her head lowered like a nun's. He tilts her chin up and gently trails a bloody razor's edge down the soft, fuzzy peach skin of her cheek. Harley closes her eyes and bites her trembling lip as it turns to jelly.

"Do it," she whispers "If that's what you want..."





The Joker hits a hospital gurney in a tangle of bones, then collects himself together the way a mantis might and springs at Batman, who drops flat on the floor as the maniac whips his arms in broad figures-of-eight that make the razors whicker overhead like propellers. Calculating, Batman spins on his shoulder, tangles the Joker's legs in a *silat* move, and levers him onto his back with a painful crack.

"I didn't shoot you," Batman says, as if talking will make a difference. As if anything will but violence. They pause for a moment, breathing rapidly, sharing oxygen.

The Joker strikes. The razor embeds in Batman's forearm then gets dragged down across the palm of his glove. Ignoring the chewing pain and the gash that gapes like a consumptive mouth in the flat of his hand, he grips the blade, snaps it, and drives his elbow into the Joker's chin.

The lunatic is still grinning, biting and snapping at Batman's face. His red-rimmed eyes are juicing, his florid lips dribbling and spitting a spray of liquid sparks that makes Batman's skin sizzle and raises tiny blisters. When he glances up, the corridors are empty, except for Harley Quinn sobbing in the corner like a rag doll some kid dropped behind her when she discovered ponies or boys.

The Joker doesn't care anymore. He's picking up speed, casting distorted shadows on the tiled walls, as he drags his foot like Asmodeus, the lame demon, the tempter and destroyer. Limping, he heads for the Asylum's wide-open doors, the shimmering wall of rain, and the city stretched out like a glittering necklace around a naked throat.

"They all used to ask me, 'What makes the Joker laugh?' and I'd point to YOU. We'd all laugh at you and your stupid bat-toys behind your back."

"Both of us trying to find meaning in a meaningless world! Why be a disfigured outcast when I can be a notorious Crime God? Why be an orphaned boy when you can be a superhero?"

"You can't kill me without becoming like me. I can't kill you without losing the only human being who can keep up with me. Isn't it IRONIC?!"

He thinks about trying to say all these things, but words seem so tasteless somehow. They fail to explain his feelings or to plumb the pure white depths of his loathing, his ecstasy.

He simply wants to maim Batman. He simply wants Batman to lose his dignity in the dirt. He simply wants Batman to give in to chaos.

He simply wants the goddamn Batman to finally get the goddamn joke.



Chapter 10 – THE UNBEARABLE INEVITABILITY OF BATMAN AND THE JOKER

"When I get out of here," he begins boldly, but his reconstructed jaw and palate can only struggle with the demands he's placing on them as he mashes the words into a subhuman paste of slobbery vowels and clicking consonants, so that, *"I'll cripple and blind you! I'll cut out your frontal lobes! I'll castrate you and turn your precious city into a cesspit while you drool in your cave!"* becomes mangled phonetics and toxic intent.

"You're going nowhere," Batman says. It's the sort of all-purpose, semi-hypnotic phrase he often uses to draw fetish-compulsive criminals like the Joker into familiar patterns of interaction, to elicit familiar chains of response. It's not working this time; the lurching silhouette advances under the sparking overheads like a bad dream waking up to find it's real.

The Batman knows he has no choice: if the Joker takes one step past this threshold into the world beyond, it's red and black carnage all the way home. The threat in those sour green eyes is unmistakable. If he ever gets loose again, Gotham will face a one-man holocaust and witness the descent of an angel of snickering, mirthless death without mercy or meaning or restraint. No matter what else happens, the Joker must be contained here, tonight, as the second hand hesitantly, steadily approaches midnight's full stop.

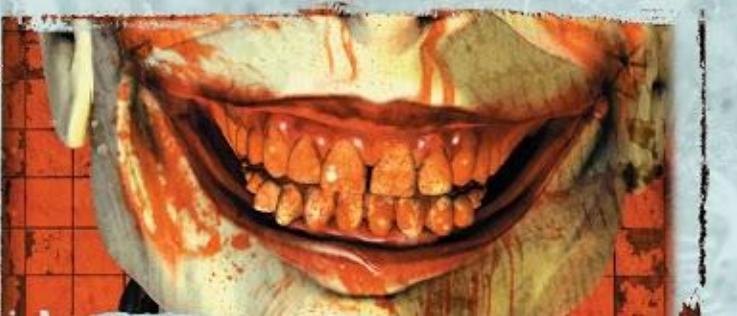


The eyes of the two men lock into place like dancers in a tango. It's as dangerous to look the Joker in the eye as it is to train a telescope on the sun, they say, but Batman has faced down this blue-hot blinding lunacy before.

"If you don't turn around and walk back to your padded cell, I'll put you down like a dog," Batman says. *"I promise."*

Unflinching, he nails his stare in place until it's the Joker who blinks and glances away, troubled by what he sees. His insanity is like an ocean he can barely stay afloat in; Batman's is like a searchlight.

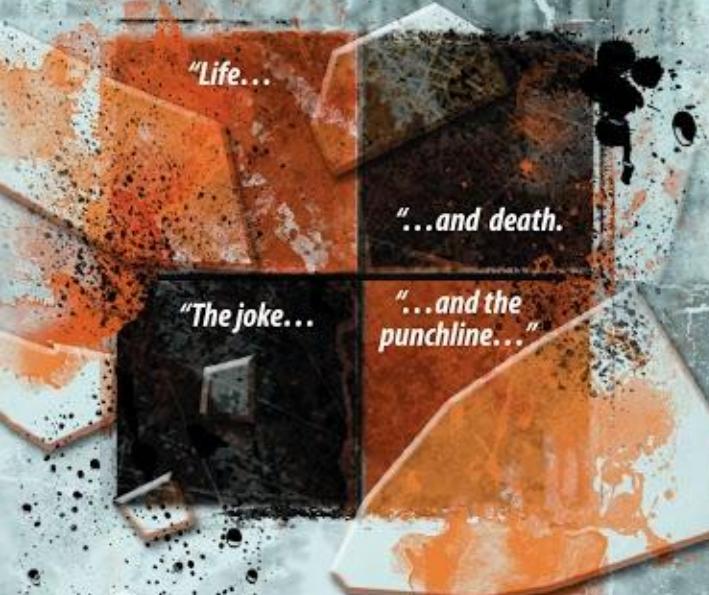
"It's the oldest, bestest gag in the book," the Joker spits and slurs, eager for the last laugh. *"Red and Black. Like a bat. In a dream. In a window."*



He runs at Batman, shrieking like an animal in a trap, and Batman silences the awful sound with a single punch that turns cartilage to shrapnel.

The Joker just smiles. He's way too busy blowing blood bubbles from his nose, so he doesn't even hear the gunshot's punctuation. Or the girl, claiming the last word like she always does.

"You gotta stop ignoring me, Mistah Jay," says Harley Quinn in a quavering voice that seems to taste of bitter cordite and cauterized flesh.



Batman shakes his head. *"I don't know what you're talking about."*

"That's why it could never be you," the Joker slobbers on, incoherently. *"I could never kill you..."*

"...Where would the act be without my straight man?"





*"Don'tcha
love me no
more?"*

PSYCHIA

*"Clickety-clack-tack,"
replies the rain.*