

amuse bouche: \a-'myūz būsh\

[Fr.] to amuse the mouth, a small bite before the meal begins.

HA HA



by Chris Dee

As hostess for the Iceberg Lounge, Raven made a decent living, but she was still a working girl and vacations were an extravagance. She'd taken the occasional weekend upstate when it turned serious with this guy or that one. And there was a wild bachelorette trip on a train to Savannah with three other bridesmaids before her sister's wedding. That was really it. She'd never been out of the country before.

But the travel agent Oswald sent her to, called Royal Wing Excursions, booked vacation packages for well-traveled Gothamites. Raven said she dreamed of going to Paris, but the City of Lights must have been too familiar to the Royal Wing clients because she only got a day there. Once her plane landed, she got to see the Eiffel Tower, eat in a real French café, and take a cruise down the Seine. Then she had to find her bed & breakfast in Monmartre and, first thing in the morning, catch a special train to a place called Savigny les Beaune where she met up with Florent her guide, her fellow travelers, and a not-too-intimidating bicycle.

They set off the next morning for Nuits St. Georges and by the time they arrived at their first vineyard, everyone was on a first name basis. There was one other Gothamite in the group, Leland. He didn't seem to know any more about wine than Raven did, but he was quite an expert on the food. He said he'd just read *Barefoot in Paris* on the plane, Ina Garten's wonderful cookbook on classic French dishes made easy. Raven had worked in enough nightclubs to know the value of attaching herself to a knowledgeable man of a certain age. Those men of a generation that, well, they were allowed to talk, and they seldom got the chance anymore. The women Raven's age rarely shut up and listened, and it was a shame, really; you could learn a lot. Take Leland. Her uninformed trial-and-error way of ordering in the French bistros would never have happened upon so many local delicacies: Celery root *rémoulade*, beef (No... "Boeuf," she heard Leland correct playfully in her head) *bourguignon*, peaches in a sweet white dessert wine (what had the server called it? Oh yes, *sauternes* with an "s" on the end that you didn't say, but it had to be there or it was a completely different wine), and something called plum cake "*tatin*"—which absolutely melted in her mouth.

But it wasn't some pompous bore telling her what she should eat; it was an adventure they were having together. Leland didn't know the first thing about the Burgundy wines, so at each vineyard they learned something together. By the end of the first week, when they reached Chateau de Cormartin, Raven realized that she liked Leland more than she'd ever expected... so much that the revelation of who he was came as a... a pretty disturbing shock.

The Chateau had welcomed them as esteemed gourmets, which was a kick. By then, they knew enough about food and wine that everyone in the group could hold up their end of the conversation—but there was a surprise to come, something they hadn't encountered before. They all sat down to dinner and, before any soup or appetizer, they were served these three dainty bites arranged prettily on the plate: a single dumpling on a white china spoon, a simple oyster with a dollop of salmon roe, and a sea scallop in the tiniest puddle of *crème fraiche* with a small sprig of rosemary laid artfully across the top.

“Amuse bouche,” the hostess explained. It was meant to be a small flavorful morsel that would set the tone for the meal to come. The problem was the literal translation: amuse bouche, what did it mean? “To amuse the mouth.”

To amuse the mouth. For a Gothamite, there were... connotations. Even ordinary Gothamites, cabdrivers and frycooks and doormen, saw those pictures on the news: someone helped into an ambulance, laughing convulsively, their mouth already seizing into one of those hideous deathsmiles. And those were the good stories. Sometimes it was way too late for an ambulance. They’d show the bodies too. Most stations wouldn’t, but the FOX affiliate showed the bodies. So an “amuse bouche” was not a particularly appetizing concept at the start of a meal, not for a Gothamite. Not for an ordinary Gothamite, but for one like Raven who lived at the rogue epicenter, the idea could make you downright ill. She tried her best to choke down the scallop and noticed Leland having just as much trouble with the dumpling. The oyster with that little half-circle of red salmon roe grinning on the top was unthinkable.

Raven excused herself and hurried out. Leland followed on the pretext of checking on her. They left the chateau and got on their bikes, found a simple bistro about a mile away, and ordered a bottle of the local red. Raven explained that she had first-hand knowledge of the colorful side of Gotham, the “nightlife,” if you know what I mean, more than your typical Gothamite that just sees the Batsignal now and then. She explained about the Iceberg, Penguin’s nightclub. Everyone who wore a costume, everyone who was anyone in the Gotham underworld, showed up there sooner or later. Most came sooner; most were regulars. Her regulars. She knew them on a first name basis, knew who was popping into beddies with who, knew who said their shiner was from Batman when it was really courtesy of Roxy Rocket because they’d made a snide comment about her coverage in the Post...

This was the part during all of the dates she’d been on, in all of the relationships she’d been in since she’d started working at the ‘Berg, where the wheels came off the cart... Not that dates of any kind were that common. There was just something about working when other people played, it made a social life with anyone other than coworkers dicey. And if you worked in a nightclub and didn’t happen to fancy the doorman, the waitresses or the bartender, or if getting caught in the crossfire of a DEMON assassination had soured you on the idea of dating the patrons... well, Raven’s social life just wasn’t what most people assumed. When she did happen to meet someone, this is the point in a new relationship where it all crashed and burned. Or at least where the downward spiral started. She knew what was coming next. She expected either shocked revulsion or a thrilled rubberneck response. Either he’d make a polite excuse, end the night early, and avoid her for the rest of the trip, or else he might get that groupie glint in his eye and start pressing her for inside dirt: What is Riddler really like? Does Two-Face really flip that coin like they say? Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn, just an urban legend or have they really got a thing?

She did not expect a scant half-second of mild surprise and then “Ah. You’re that Raven. I should have guessed. Not that common a name after all.”

Neither was Bartholomew, but he’d only mentioned that once on the first day when everyone met up in Beaune. She only knew him as Leland; she never connected Leland with Leland Bartholomew, as in Doctor Bartholomew, as in Doctor Bart. Now it turned

out... Well, he was a doctor, technically that's a good catch but, still, YIKES! Doctor Bart. Or when Ed Nigma had a few too many: DOC BRAT ROT.

It freaked her out. Here she was taking her first real vacation ever, getting away from her everyday life and all the crazies in it. Now it turned out that this nice, normal, everyday (if a slightly older) guy that she really liked, knew all the crazies better than she did. Her instinct was to end it at once, leave the tour, go back to Paris and spend her last week on the kind of vacation she'd really wanted... But she really liked Leland. If she went back to Paris, she'd wind up ordering the dishes he told her about. She'd be drinking the burgundies they discovered together.

So she stayed.



So he stayed.

Raven was such a sweet woman (if a bit young), with just a hint of the wild-child underneath—the good kind of wild, not the “tear your lungs out because it’s Tuesday” wild. It was very appealing to a somewhat stodgy (though he preferred to think of it as dignified) doctor who hadn’t taken time to smell the roses in far too long. So he stayed with the tour, and each day when they stopped for lunch, he and Raven would still sit together and talk about the delights of French wine, French cooking, and the French countryside. But at night, they began sharing more of their everyday lives, and they discovered that they not only knew the same crowd of Gotham crazies, they had developed remarkably similar methods for dealing with the insanity around them.

As the week wore on, however, Bartholomew found himself growing more and more anxious. Soon the tour would end, Raven would return to Gotham and he... He had planned to see Bavaria next. He had not planned on returning to Gotham, not ever. When his money ran out, he was thinking of a small practice in a small town and...

And being alone every night just like he had been in Gotham. Let’s face it, it wasn’t “part of the dream,” growing old alone that way. But even in his dreaming moments imagining that picturesque little town, where he’d do his shopping on foot and those he passed on the sidewalk would all know him and say “Hi Doc,” he was shopping for one.

At his age, you did not dismiss a budding romance with a lovely twenty-something because you had other plans. At any age, a man who wrote off a woman like Raven for some vague idea of touring German castles would be a candidate for the patient’s couch at Arkham rather than Bartholomew’s old position there...

Of course, if he did return to Gotham, there would be no question of his going back to Arkham. He was through with that, without question. Patient J. He’d put up with that lunacy for far too long as it was. The last week had solidified that much; this was the life he was meant to have. This Joker-free existence. Nevertheless... Gotham was not Arkham. Arkham was not Gotham. He owned his house there. He could continue as a gentleman of leisure much longer living quietly in a quiet Gotham suburb than vagabonding around Europe like a kid with a EuRail pass. Without quite believing he

was doing it, Leland Bartholomew made a reservation to return to Gotham on AirFrance out of Charles de Gaulle airport, flight 319, row 9, in the seat next to Raven.



One thing to be said for monitor duty: control. There was no question who was sitting in the chair. There was no debate about the way each channel and sensor would be set. His way. Grunt.

Naturally, every time Batman entered the Monitor Womb, there were some personal adjustments to be made: he watched the news feeds out of Gotham, for one thing. And tonight he was keeping an eye on the Tokyo stock exchange, since Wayne Tech just released a new smartchip to the international market. But when he was relieving Flash or Green Lantern, there were other adjustments beyond tilting the seat or recalibrating the screen focal points: their “secret” backdoor, for one, overriding the satellite feeds to access unauthorized channels.

He sniffed disapprovingly. It wasn’t that Raynor was watching HBO-2 that pissed him off; it was that the highest level operatives in the Justice League couldn’t cover their tracks any better than this.

Checking the time in Gotham, he opened a channel to Oracle and had her patch him through to the Red Bird.

...: Robin here, ...: came the prompt and (for once) formal greeting.

“Contact West and Raynor in the morning,” Batman ordered. “Show them how to erase the feed-echo from a backdoor satellite uplink.”

...: Okay, sure thing. They expecting my call? ...:

“No, you’ll be ‘doing them a favor.’ You just found out that I know what they’ve been up to up here. And you’re trying to ‘save them some grief.’”

...: You mean you’re using me to rub their noses in it. ...:

“No. I’m ensuring that they’ll not only know how to cover their tracks in future, but that they take the time do it. Discomfiture is a powerful motivator.”

...: You want me to embarrass them. ...:

“I want you to be a ‘nice guy’ and show them how to cover their tracks because doing so will save them embarrassing scenes with me.”

...: ...: ...:

“Which it will.”

...: ...: ...:

“...”

...: Roger, Boss. Robin out. ...:

Batman re-accessed the OraCom and had Oracle connect him with Nightwing.

...: Hey ...: came the (typically) informal greeting.

“Next time you talk to West, mention the situation with Robin and Batgirl.”

...: Huh, why? ...:

“Make it casual. You and Batgirl used to make the same sort of bets, etc. but you had a better win ratio.”

...: In other words, you’re not going to tell me why. ...:

“Make it happen by tomorrow.”

Nightwing sighed—which did not produce a pleasant sound over the delicate OraCom microphone.

...: Sir, yes, sir ... he said at last.

Batman grunted, which ‘Wing knew to interpret as both a “Thank you” and “Batman, out.”

In the monitor womb, Batman surveyed the com panel with satisfaction. Tim was a better hacker than most of the Leaguers. His help, his “pity-help,” on its own might not be perceived as a slap. But pity-help volunteered by the kid who lost twenty-eight consecutive games of Phoenix Ninja to a teenage girl that never played before he taught her two months ago, that would get the message through.

He checked the panel of clocks on the wall. His shift would be finished soon, and he’d have time for a half-patrol back in Gotham. But for now, there was that pesky illegal internet hookup that Eel had been abusing for far too long...



Oswald Cobblepot was no fool. He had sent Raven away for a change of scene until the Judge Bungaree matter was forgotten, and he would keep a sharp eye on her when she returned. In the meantime, he’d made do promoting Dove, his most experienced waitress, to the hostess position for those few weeks Raven was away. Dove didn’t have much style, but she knew the clientele. She knew the difference between a Ghost Dragon and a DEMON minion, a groupie and a henchwench. And, while she didn’t know the politics that dictated who was seated where, she did know in whose station they always sat. As long as she placed Edmund Dorrance along the back wall, it didn’t matter if she understood why. Sly and Oswald both kept an eye on the dining room, but by last call that first night, it was clear that Dove could cover Raven’s podium, temporarily.

Covering Dove’s waitressing duties, on the other hand, had proved a more grueling punishment for Oswald than the initial credit card bust might have brought down on him. It was only two weeks, but it was two weeks of incessant headaches during the day and incessant worry every night. Not one of the waitresses he brought in stayed more than a single night, and several didn’t make it to the end of their shift. So each day he had to line up a new replacement, and each night he spent worrying if the new girl would offend Killer Croc or cast aspersions on the Most Glorious Demon’s Head. (And what ill-bred creatures this new generation was—kwak! Staring at a rogue of Croc’s stature as if he were the Creature from the Black Lagoon. One really wondered if they had any social training at all. To think such uncouth peasants could aspire to know an aristocrat like Oswald Cobble-kwak-pot!)

So for two weeks, the Iceberg was a waitress short by ten o’clock on most nights. Midway through the second week, Sly had the brilliant idea of hiring a groupie. They knew enough to not offend the DEMONS or gawk at Killer Croc. Unfortunately, as a breed, they weren’t as bright as henchwenches, not when it came to taking orders—in the literal sense. The demands of waitressing were simply beyond them. The DEMONS weren’t insulted by slurs on the good name of Ra’s al Ghul, but they weren’t eating their beef skewers either. They were staring at pitchers of Rolling Rock while the Tataglia soldiers were given their beef skewers and King Snake was served their

uozo along with the Tataglias' chicken wings. Riddler got the Tataglias' grappa and a grilled cheese sandwich (that wasn't even on the menu!).

They all limped through to Raven's return, and Oswald welcomed her home with tears in his eyes. Then he turned to Dove and, with unprecedented liberality, said there would be something extra in her paycheck to make up for the tips she had lost. And, he added, he was sure that all her customers would be -kwak- expressing their gratitude as well as soon as she returned to her regular duties. There was nothing like having your dinner served to the Tataglias to make you appreciate a good waitress.

Then he turned to the groupie and told her if she ever showed her face in the Iceberg again, he'd have her shot on sight.



Catwoman prowled to be part of the city and part of the night. She didn't do it to get out of the house. Usually.

She wasn't in the mood for Cartier tonight. There were too many Bat-associations. So she headed for Tiffany to begin...

She'd seen the control thing before, of course. He was Batman. It was part of him. It was nothing she couldn't handle. And after an extended period under Ivy's spell, it was a perfectly understandable reaction.

It was also a damn shame. Just about everyone with a rap sheet was either in Arkham or Blackgate. Eddie was free and they'd just released Croc, but other than that there were no criminals around whose names you knew. Selina wanted to take advantage of the lull, take the Gatta out for a cruise or spend a few days at the Catitat... He said no. Of course. PsychoBat was in the building. Time to pummel.

It was perfectly understandable after Ivy, but it was still rotten timing. So fine, she would let him have his pummel fest. She'd make her own fun. She'd done it before. She used to do it all the time... Of course, back then, there was always the possibility that he might show up somewhere in the process. That was no longer the case, but she would manage.

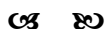
Catwoman always liked Tiffany's building better than their jewelry. Her personal taste ran to Cartier for their panther motif and Van Cleef and Arpels for the beautiful effect of their invisible mounts. Tiffany seemed so blah by comparison. It was first rate plunder, as plunder, but it seldom had that extra something that makes a cat want to paw at it. But now, now that she broke in for the challenge rather than to acquire specific jewels, she was finding that Tiffany's Fifth Avenue Showroom had a lot to offer. The people who lived in the 700-block of Fifth Avenue, Gotham City, one of the three or four most prestigious addresses in the world, were not about to do without the hallmarks of midtown prestige, like a rooftop garden and solarium. They didn't care that their condos were situated above a famous jeweler with a lot to protect, or that their rooftop indulgences made the whole building vulnerable to an astute catburglar.

Catwoman, on the other hand, saw a unique and piquant justice in exploiting a rooftop garden. She was still so pissed at Poison Ivy. Greening Batman was the first and worst of Ivy's crimes, but there had been other thorns inserted into Kitty's delicate paw, small and ultimately unimportant, but still painful. Ivy had taken Bruce away from her during this wonderful lull, when he was unwinding as never before, when

they were having such fun (he was having fun, whether he'd use the word or not) with her explaining the finer points of art theft. Ivy had wrecked it all, and now that she was safely confined at Arkham, she was still wrecking it. Batman was back in that he had control of his mind and body again... but Bruce wasn't. Not really. It was a perfectly understandable reaction: he needed to exert control, he needed to be PsychoBat for a while, he needed to pummel.

But the city was still quiet, and they could have gone away together. Instead, he'd become so cold and distant and... Woof.

So yes, Catwoman was royally pissed, and if she could exploit a rooftop garden to get into Tiffany—or better still into the condos of those smug, self-important, arrogant, dog-owning tree-huggers that had to have a rooftop garden in the first place, then she'd damn well do it.



Raven moistened the filo dough just as Leland had showed her, while he gave the filling a final stir.

"It's really weird," she was saying. "I know Ozzy sent me away because he doesn't trust me. But now that I'm back, it's like I'm his daughter or something. He couldn't be sweeter. And 'sweet' isn't really a word you'd use to describe Oswald Cobblepot."

This was their routine since they got back. Once she finished work, Raven went to see Leland at his house in the suburbs, so much nicer than her cramped midtown apartment and he had such a big kitchen. He'd have some cooking project or other all picked out, and they'd cook together, then enjoy a nice meal. It was much quieter than the nightlife other men showed her, but working as she did in the Iceberg, Raven wasn't a big fan of clubbing in her off hours. As she told her sister, socializing isn't a high priority when you watch Jervis Tetch and Jonathan Crane sharing a drink over Batman stories three times a week. And she had enough riff-raff and DEMON flunkies hitting on her at work, there was no need to go out and suffer it more.

"Ahem, no," Bartholomew agreed. He was careful during these conversations not to reveal anything he knew from his former patients in their private sessions; the doctor-patient privilege was sacrosanct. But there was enough about the rogues that was common knowledge within their world, he could usually hold up his end of the conversation whenever Raven talked about her day. That was certainly true in this case. No one, in public or private, had ever used the word 'sweet' to describe Oswald Cobblepot.

"The rogue mentality is essentially a childlike one," he declaimed as he dolloped filling onto each square of filo dough. "They don't perceive the substance of another person except in relation to themselves. Before, you were perceived as a threat to Cobblepot and he treated you accordingly. Now that your absence has been seen to cause him great inconvenience, he values you."

"Wow, thanks for the insight, Sigmund," she joked playfully as she dabbed a glop of filling on the end of his nose.

He chuckled as he wiped the dollop off of his nose with a finger, then licked his fingertip. In France, he'd mostly avoided psychoanalyzing everything as part of his "new life" approach to things, but being back in Gotham, and particularly this talk of

his former patients, seemed to bring it out in him. And it hadn't gone unnoticed; Raven delighted in ribbing him whenever he went all "doctor" on her.

She smiled and placed a top square of dough over each dollop of filling.

"Well, it's not just Ozzy," she said with a sigh. "Dove and Sly have been just as nice. Must've been a real trainwreck... I'll open the wine." She broke off to take a bottle from the refrigerator and then continued. "And it was a really thin crowd too. Even now, it's thin. Almost like Hell Month. Apart from Croc and Riddler, the name villains are all up at Dr. Jerry's... oh. I mean, up at Arkham."

Leland laughed and told her not to worry. Arkham was no longer his concern. The criminal wing being packed to capacity was not his concern. And if she wanted to follow the lead of her customers and his former patients in referring to the asylum as Dr. Jerry's House-o-Fun, he would be the last to take offense. Then he asked if there was "other news," and this time it was Raven's turn to laugh. He sounded just like one of them. He couldn't realize this, she said, but "Any news?" was the standard opening for a rogue gossip fest.

As a matter of fact, he did know. He'd heard the term often enough, both in private sessions and in the common room at Arkham. He had not realized the extent to which he'd picked up those little verbal ticks, not until Raven came along and noticed. He smiled in an embarrassed, self-deprecating way, and they moved on. There was news:

Batman had gone missing for a while. Nobody was sure how long; the optimists said a week, the pessimist said four days tops. They could never be sure, the grapevine being what it was. Just because none of the DEMONS or the Ghost Dragons saw the Bat on a particular night didn't mean he wasn't around. Still, when several nights had passed and none of the Iceberg faithful had a Bat-encounter, tongues started to wag.

As always, once tongues started wagging, one of the henchmen—either an old Two-Face thug called Deuce or a Cluemaster stooge called Dice—had appealed to Oswald to declare an open bar. The Bat was dead, and if that wasn't a cause for celebration... It didn't work. Having fallen for that once and then, some forty cases of premium spirits later, seen Batman show up on CNN in the B-roll of a JLA assault in Kurdistan, Oswald swore he would never again declare an open bar without a genuine Bat-cowl sitting on the bar, preferably with severed Bat-head still inside it. But anyway, open bar aside, Batman had gone missing for four days to a week, depending on who you asked. And once word reached the gang at Arkham they got pretty antsy.

Bartholomew winced. He could only guess what caliber of on-site behaviors at Arkham would be described as "pretty antsy" by the time the accounts reached the Iceberg. He closed his eyes and murmured a silent prayer of thanks that this was no longer his problem. Then he sipped his wine and brushed a thin glaze of eggwhite onto the filo pockets. Raven continued her "news."

On hearing they were all missing out on a Bat-absence, Hatter organized a competition to see who could escape first. He divided all the rogues into teams—except for Poison Ivy. (Details there were sketchy, but it sounded like she wasn't in the criminal wing this time. Nobody knew why.) Anyway, they were all set up in teams and ready to begin this Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World-style race to the escape hatch, when they called it off.

Raven stopped talking and sipped her wine. Bartholomew waited impatiently, put the appetizers into the oven, and set the timer. When Raven was still sipping her wine and not finishing the story, he could maintain his professional detachment no longer.

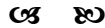
"Well?" he prompted eagerly.

"Well, what?"

"Well, why did they call off the competition?"

"I dunno," she shrugged. "That's all I heard."

Bartholomew grew very quiet. The entire time his filo pockets baked, he searched his memory of Patient Tetch's sessions for some insight. There must have been a reason.



Catwoman headed for the Iceberg. She needed a drink or three. She would have preferred a different bar, but it's not like she could stroll through the lobby of the Hudson in a mask and catsuit. Even if they would serve her, it would attract attention. So she'd put up with Oswald strutting around, wanting to know when he'd get his cut from her partnership with Clayface, and she'd hope Eddie wasn't around. He was the last man she needed to see.

Second to last.

She'd been so close to taking that still life; it scared her.

It was the 21st Floor, furnishings were a little stodgy, senior partner at a big corporate law firm. The art was conservative but not soulless. Two gorgeous landscapes, American painters, not the French Impressionists you'd expect this guy to go for on name recognition alone. Then there was the Harold Altman. Guy does parks all over the world but favors those in Gotham and Paris. This particular print was Robinson Park. This particular print showed a bikepath less than sixty feet from Ivy's last lair in Robinson Park. You could see the clearing where Selina had bargained, cajoled, and pleaded with Hella to close a door to the underworld that Ivy opened by mistake... Right above Altman's signature, you could just make out the opening onto the street where Hella had been intent on twisting Batman's head off... You couldn't quite see the point where Batman had stumbled out of the park carrying Ivy in his arms, not in the Altman print, but you could make it out from the condo's picture window, for, of course, they had a park view.

Selina had about had it with this rampant love of nature, when she saw the still life. French. Probably Latour. Flowers and fruit. The detail. The delicate, knowing eye, the genius touch of an old master evoking the splendor of each and every petal. Selina's hatred of flowers, plants, and those who liked them spiked as never before. It would serve them right.

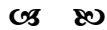
She examined the frame, checking to see what kind of added security they might have on the painting itself, beyond the pitiful burglar alarm that she'd already neutralized. There was nothing. Fucking idiots. It would serve them right. Goddamn flower-loving morons. And it would be so goddamn easy.

She was ready to do it. She was really ready to do it.

And it wasn't any thought of law or right and wrong, or even an unpleasant aftermath with Bruce, that stopped her. It was the sudden realization that she was

taking it for spite. Catwoman had always stolen for profit and excitement— and, she eventually realized, to fill a certain unfillable emptiness from long ago. She had never taken anything for the sole purpose of hurting the people she took it from. She never even considered them before. But now, she wanted to take this painting not to have it for herself, not for the 300,000 Euros Igor would get her for it in Brussels. She wanted to take it to hurt these people, to make them feel loss, to...

It was sickening. She left at once, not even bothering to reconnect the pitiful burglar alarm on her way out. That would be hurtful too, or at least a headache for the owners, when they woke up in the morning and found that their (mediocre) security had been deactivated but nothing was apparently missing. Depending on what kind of people they were and what they might have to hide, they might have some sleepless nights or worse wondering what had happened, and/or making sure all their belongings were still intact. But Selina couldn't worry about that. Yes, leaving the alarm off might disturb them, but she wasn't doing it to be spiteful, she was doing it to get the hell out of there as quickly as possible. Nobody wanted to wake up in the morning to a dismantled burglar alarm, but neither did they want to wake in the middle of the night to the sound of the burglar retching in their living room.



Word spread through the asylum like wildfire: there were no Twizzlers in the candy machine. Any other place in the world, on any other day, under any other circumstances, it would be too trivial to mention. But now, here, today... In the staff breakroom, there was a candy machine. Snickers bars, M&Ms, Almond Joy, you know, the usual. But no Twizzlers. Couple days ago they ran out, guy came to refill the machine, and still no Twizzlers. What could it mean? It wasn't only the paranoid obsessives asking the question, it was the staff. The inmates and mental health professionals alike were terribly worried about the absence of Twizzlers in the candy machine. The reason was simple: Joker.

Joker had been depressed. Everybody knew it. Since his incarceration right before that Gotham Post party, he was depressed and despondent. Then he hooked up with Harley again, and everything seemed to change. Talking about all that had happened to him since their separation tended to flush it from his system. Opinion was split among the medical staff as to whether he even remembered it anymore.

It was not good news. Any other patient emerging from extended depression would be a victory for psychiatry, but Joker... He had been depressed and now he wasn't, which meant his focus had shifted. Not. Good. News. You never knew what he might shift his focus TO. Just look at the way he'd imprinted on Bruce Wayne, didn't even know why anymore, just knew his good buddy Brucie was a man among men. And just the way it was a positive fixation on Wayne (that time, it could always change), it might just as easily have been a negative one on YOU, and nobody, rogue or staffer, needed that. Not even Killer Croc needed Joker to decide he was a worse plague on the world than Batman.

Plus, Dr. Bartholomew was on extended leave, and Joker was more than a little upset that his favorite (read: already broken-in) headshrinker had flown the coop HAHAAHAHAHAAA! Oh yes, he was laughing on the outside but crying on the

inside, he made that very clear. And every time he did, there was a new incident “breaking in the replacement”—or rather, the replacements. First guy was “not so much with the caring, nurturing”... introduced him to his intestines, HA! Second guy, tried to be the buddy-buddy type... showed him how to be buddy-buddy with a stapler and his desk blotter, HA! HA!

Which of course led to the hugging-jacket and dark room time... No fun at all for Patient J, but he had plenty of time to think. And that’s what had the whole asylum, staff and inmates alike, so terrified they were spinning conspiracy theories about red licorice missing from the candy machine. The first time Joker spent this much time in solitary (not a single Arkham employee remained from those days, but they’d all heard the story), he came out with a new outlook on life: “I never met a spleen I didn’t like.”

The real problem was, you never knew. The next time Patient J went into solitary, he came out just as he was when he went in, except he’d decided that every sentence anyone spoke was automatically ten times funnier with the words “with fava beans and a nice Chianti” attached to the end. And FYI, any and all Arkham inmates, employees, and visitors were thoroughly briefed on *Silence of the Lambs*, “the greatest, most rib-ticklingest comedy of all time HAHAHAHAAAAAAAAA!” (It still happened every now and then: some Fed would be struggling with a psychopath case somewhere and would think “Hey! that was kind of a good idea. Maybe I should interview a psychotic killer and get some insight.” He’d strung the last one along for months, HAHAHAHAAAA. By the end, the man actually believed his killer was a diabetic hermaphrodite that worked in a 24-hour photo development lab, liked dressing up as a conquistador, and buried gerbils alive in cookie dough.)

In any case, Joker had gone into solitary, and all of Arkham waited on pins and needles to see how he would emerge. Not even the news of Batman made any impression. Batsy was spotted again, pummeling whatever bottom feeders he could find, what difference did it make? Their contest to escape was already forgotten. All anyone cared about was news of Joker.

The day arrived. He was released from solitary. And his focus had shifted, just as everyone feared. His focus had shifted completely and once again word spread through the asylum like wildfire. Joker’s focus had shifted, the “lucky winner” was... Harley.



Catwoman hadn’t gone straight to the Iceberg after the condo. She went to an auction house on East 61st that she hadn’t broken into for ages. She’d hoped to bury the troubling memory of the condo in a little harmless nostalgia. Unfortunately, the auction house security hadn’t improved much, and she found the whole experience too boring to take her mind off anything. Their vault was stocked for an upcoming sale of medieval swords and armor, none of it very good. None of it on par with Bruce’s collection—and that was a reminder she could’ve done without. That’s when she decided her present state of mind was not something she would solve with breaking and entering. It would be solved with vodka and vermouth.

So she’d gone to the Iceberg and, two martinis later, she’d reached a conclusion other Gotham criminals accepted years ago: It really isn’t that easy to get away from Batman

in this town. It's not something she'd ever really faced, since she liked it when he caught up with her. But now, when all she'd wanted was to put the thought of him out of her mind and sip her martini in peace, she had to hear the whole fucking story about Kiteman's capture not ten hours after he'd been released from Arkham.

Now exactly why this pestilence that went around in a tight green shirt with a kite insignia on his chest found it necessary to rob a brokerage house within ten hours of getting released from the nuthouse, Selina couldn't guess. But in her mind's eye, she could envision a pummel-starved PsychoBat clenching his fist as he heard the news. The rest of the Iceberg was wincing about the fate of Kiteman's hang glider and helmet. Selina just wondered what the idiot had expected? You strap a glider to your back in Batman's town to escape from a crime scene, there's a better-than-even chance he's going to fire a grapnel through it. And if you don't happen to know that quality helmets are good for one collision only, cracking and splintering on impact rather than passing the force through to your head, then he's probably going to show you.



HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

It wasn't funny.

It was not funny.

A man wants his girlfriend to be crazy, of course, that's a given. If he hadn't seen at once that he could drive Harleen Quinzel crazy, he wouldn't have bothered with her at all. A man wants his girl to be crazy—not NUTS! Not Cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA. No, not funny at all.

Before he'd gone into solitary, Harley let something slip about her adventures with the "Monarch of Menace." This wasn't a common title; Joker was more often referred to as the "Clown Prince of Crime," but he couldn't keep track of all of them. There was the Harlequin of Hate, the Prince of Pranksters, Jocund Jack of All Crimes, King of Jesters, Macabre Master of Mirth, Mad Manager of Menace, the Mad Merrymaker, the Merry Madcap of Mayhem, the Mirthful Mountebank of Mischief and Menace, the Mocking Mountebank of same, the Jeering Jackanapes, the Malevolent Mime, and Leonardo of the Larcenous Laugh. Fifty-four altogether when he counted them up. But that was a few years ago, there had undoubtedly been more titles added since then. Such as this Monarch of Menace. It wasn't bad really. It had the requisite style: "Hello, this is Joker speaking, Monarch of Menace. I'll be terrorizing you this evening..." Yes, it wasn't a bad title. But back to Harley.

Harley thought she'd been carrying on with this Monarch of Menace, robbing banks or some such rot. Harley thought she'd been with him all that time. The poor little thing, she'd snapped! The pain of separation must have been too much for her. The tragedy, that wonderfully twisted mind, shattered into a delusional loony tune.

He had to get her some help, obviously. Good help. Not these Arkham quacks. Barty! He had to get Harley to Dr. Barty's care before it was too late!



Kiteman was an idiot, and Selina had no sympathy for idiots, hero or rogue.

Getaway Genius, on the other hand, she did feel sorry for. It was martini number three when she heard that one. Nobody knew Roy Reynolds was back in Gotham. Or still in Gotham. He was too smalltime for anybody to notice or care about his comings and goings. Anybody. The Iceberg crowd or the heroes. His gimmick was clean getaways. Who cares? His gimmick was a gimmick, not a psychosis, not an obsession, not a superpower, and not even that interesting. It was only when every name rogue (except Riddler and, technically, Catwoman) were up the river, that anyone would even notice Roy Reynolds. Poor ass. He was a thinking crook, a strategist, not a fighter—which is why everyone felt bad. Even Selina... Especially Selina. She really hoped her dimension hopping, insistence on wearing costumes to the Gotham Post party, resolving the Ivy situation with Clayface rather than letting Batman take her down, and suggesting an outing on the Gatta and/or a drive up to the Catitat hadn't in some way contributed to the transformation of Getaway Genius into PsychoBat's punching bag...



As a mental health professional, Leland Bartholomew knew the dangers of self-delusion. The delicacies he and Raven were preparing tonight were amuse bouche and it was folly to pretend otherwise. Watermelon cube with aged balsamic vinegar, that was too small to be called an appetizer. It was too small and too stylized. It was an amuse. Blue cheese foam with port wine reduction. It was an amuse. A mouthful of crab soup served in a demitasse cup garnished with a fresh pea pod filled with crab, amuse.

He was very firm with Raven. It was not healthy to construct denial mechanisms to hide from unpleasant truths, pretty soon you started believing your rationalizations and after that it was a short step to—

HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA.

Raven looked wide-eyed at Leland. The dead-on Joker parody was perfectly timed to make his point, but it seemed to have come from outside the door, not from Leland Bartholomew.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA," the cackle repeated.

"Oh shit," she whispered. It's not like anyone could throw their voice that far, even Ventriloquist. Not that anyone would want to sound like Joker on the doorstep.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA," sounded a third time, followed this time by a crisp ring of the doorbell.

Bartholomew didn't look any happier about the development than Raven was, but he went to the door and opened it—only to find no one standing there. In the kitchen, Joker's pasty but curious face appeared in the window, and Raven screamed when she saw it. Joker took this as an invitation, opened the window, and crawled in. He looked quizzically at Raven, as if he couldn't quite understand why she was there. But then he shrugged, the world often threw him curves like that and he'd learned to adapt.

"Table for one," he said politely, just as he would at the Iceberg.

"Leland!" Raven called out.

"Joker," the clown corrected.

Bartholomew entered hurriedly, and Joker ran up and hugged him. Raven screamed again, but neither Joker nor Bartholomew seemed to notice.

"DOC!" Joker began, practically panting in his excitement. "You gotta help me, Doc. You gotta. You gotta come back. It's Harls, she's gone round the mulberry bush. She's gone one clown short of a carload. DOC! Don't you understand? My Harley's little red choo-choo has gone chug-chugging round the bend!"

"Patient J," Bartholomew said firmly.

"Oooh, we're cooking," Joker said, his attention flickering to the diced chicken on the cutting board. "I used to love to cook. Pheasant chili, you gotta try it. Just the thing after popping the Bat into a death trap. Pheasant or pigeon, both make good chili, nice and gamey. So what are we listening to? Where's the Twisted Sister? You gotta listen to Twisted Sister while you're cooking, Doc. Or Quiet Riot! 'Bang Your Head' is THE song you want playin' while you're wielding a knife!"

"Patient J," Bartholomew repeated sternly, "I must insist that you leave. I am no longer affiliated with Arkham Asylum, I am no longer available for—"

"They said you were just on temporary leave," Joker interjected.

"—for therapeutic consultation of any kind," Bartholomew continued. "Even if I were, I would not be available in my home."

"They SAID you were just on leave," Joker repeated, tapping the knife impatiently on the raw chicken.

"They are misinformed," Bartholomew said dryly. "I will not be returning."

"DOC!" Joker howled.

"Leland," Raven warned, eyeing the knife.

"Now I will thank you to leave my home," Bartholomew said calmly.

"Not until I get one of those," Joker answered, pointing to the watermelon squares.

"No," Bartholomew said, maintaining the firm therapy-room manner with which he answered any rogue tantrum.

"Sure," Raven countered, bringing him the plate in the manner with which she answered any reasonable request from a rogue on the brink of a homicidal rampage.

"Hey, these are good," Joker said, popping four into his mouth. "Whatarethey?" he asked while he chewed.

"Amuse bouche," Raven answered automatically—then she gulped. "I mean, they're just, appetizers, little bite of fruit salad."

"Tasty," Joker concluded, and seemed ready to leave. He walked happily towards the door, then froze and spun. "Amuse bouche, but that means... Ha! Ha-ha! HAHAHAHAAHAAAA! 'Amuse the mouth,' why it's practically my trademark. HAHAHA-Hell, it IS my trademark. Amuse bouche, it's almost too on the nose. Doc, I told you, you're the only one to get it." He stopped and sniffed like an emotional drunk on the brink of tears. "You're the only one that truly understands me, Barty... That's why you HAVE to come back! I promise not to maim anyone for at least a week if you do!"



It's not that she wanted to get away from Bruce, she just wanted to do her own thing while he was doing his.

But that was impossible. He was Gotham. There was no getting away from him. Woof.

When Selina got home, there he was again. She'd come in through the cave entrance on a whim—admittedly, the kind of “whim” she used to have to hit the Egyptian wing at the Gotham Museum on a night he was almost certain to find her there—but anyway, she came in through the cave, and there he was: mask on, gloves off, click-clicking away at the keyboard at Workstation 1, typing up his precious logs. She wondered how his account of the grapnel-through-the-hang glider story varied from the Iceberg version.

She watched. He typed on. He was so focused and so intense. She loved him so much.

So she snuck through the trophy room, making her way to the costume vault without his hearing, and when he finally finished the log and opened the door to change, she pounced.

She should have expected what happened next.

In his present state, he responded rougher than he normally would... It wasn't exactly a deterrent. It had been quite a while since the sex was really angry...

And defiling his costume vault, inner sanctum of the mission, just made him angrier. It was good.

If somewhat uncomfortable.

The costumes always made the sex hotter. But she liked the costume on him, not under her back. What the hell was that under her ass? Was that a kneepad?



**DO NOT DISTURB
RED SESSION IN PROGRESS**

The sign outside Dr. Bartholomew's door warned all Arkham staff that Patient J was in session. That meant any interruption, from a knock on the door to a buzz on the intercom, was not to be attempted unless the building was on fire. In the early days, there had been some unfortunate episodes. Sometimes Patient J didn't mind, other times he said he didn't mind, and then a week later strangled the orderly who had interrupted his “breakthrough”. Another time, deciding one aborted breakthrough deserved another, he pounded a nurse's head into the wall until it chipped both the plaster and her skull. That's when Patient J's therapy became known as Red Sessions. Now they had a sign.

Behind the closed door, Joker repeated “the one about the egg foo young” and asked (again) why Dr. Bart wasn't taking this down. Bartholomew moved his pen lethargically, drawing a checkmark on his pad without looking down at it.

“Okay then,” Joker said, resuming his monologue. “Let's talk chickens...”

What choice did he have? What choice did he really have?

Leland Bartholomew went into medicine to help people. He chose psychiatry because he'd seen early on the special pain mental illness can inflict, both on the patients and their families. He'd had a seriously deranged lunatic standing in his kitchen, who was prepared to return to the hospital from which he'd escaped and

refrain from harming anyone for a week, if only “Dr. Barty” would accompany him. What choice did he really have?

As far as Arkham was concerned, he hadn’t quit. He was on a formal leave of absence; there was no reason he couldn’t suspend it, just for a few weeks. A few sessions with Patient J, a few with Harley, and then he’d be off again. Officially and permanently this time.

“Deregulation of the chicken’s side of the road was threatening its dominant market position. The chicken was faced with significant challenges to create and develop the competencies required for the newly competitive market. Andersen Consulting, in a partnering relationship with the client, helped the chicken by rethinking its physical distribution strategy and implementation processes. Using the Poultry Integration Model or PIM-HAHAHAAAA!”

Bartholomew drew another meaningless line across the top of his notepad.

He had assured Raven it would only be a few weeks, but she refused to believe him. “We all know how those things work out,” she said. What she meant by that he couldn’t say. Who were ‘we’? What were ‘those things’? And what did a glorified cocktail waitress know about the care of the criminally insane anyway?

He felt awful thinking of Raven in those terms, but it was true. She was so young and so limited in her experience. She seemed to feel his going back to Arkham was analogous to this Ricky Brown she’d dated in high school, who got accepted to the University of Metropolis and left after graduation, swearing he’d call twice a week, he’d visit and she’d visit... And then, after two phone calls, three emails, and one campus visit, he met some “marketing major” called Leeann Lissops, of all the stupid names, and Raven never heard from him again.

Bartholomew explained, as patiently as he could, that he had considerably more self-knowledge than an 18-year-old freshman at the University of Metropolis.

“Pretty soon you start believing your own rationalizations,” Raven had answered spitefully.

“I have a dream,” Joker declaimed (in what was assuredly the worst Martin Luther King impersonation on record), “of a day when all chickens will be free to cross roads without having their motives called into question!”

Bartholomew drew another line, his random strokes now resembling the gallows for a game of hangman. So he connected them while his patient continued to list reasons why the chicken crossed the road.

“Pretty soon you start believing your own rationalizations,” Raven had answered him.

So that was that. He and Raven hadn’t officially broken anything off, but she was so mad at him for “leaping back into the lion’s den” as she put it. She hadn’t heard one word he said about having a calling, about going into medicine to help people and honoring this opportunity to do so. It was as clearcut as such opportunities could get: Patient J, arguably the most demented and dangerous killer in the history of homicidal mania, had sought out Bartholomew’s help, sought him out personally. He’d made a personal appeal: He would refrain from further atrocities, albeit for only a week, in exchange for his trusted doctor returning to Arkham and treating Harley. HOW could a man of conscience turn his back on such an offer?

If she couldn't understand something that basic, what was the point?

"But like I was sayin', Barty. The real issue is Harley. You gotta fix her, Doc. She's got enough wrong with her without being CRAZY-HaHA!"

A stickman was now dangling from his notepad gallows. Unlike the typical hangman figure, this one wore spats...

"There's her affectations to start with. That squeaky voice and that phony hint of a Brooklyn accent. You know where she's from? Minnesota! HaHA! Not only that, northern Minnesota, that part that turned out to be in Canada when they resurveyed the border. She's a Canuck!"

... spats and a broad, toothy grin.

"A Canuck, I say. Unless that was the species on Star Trek that shot lasers from their tongues. So anyway, she's affected, Canadian, clumsy, scatterbrained, and she fills up half the fridge with Slimfast. I mean, she's a hoot and a half to be around and we always have a HAHA-happenin' good time, but there's only so much a man can take..."

"Enough!" Bartholomew exploded. "You know what, Jack? I was having 'a happening good time' with Raven, but no, you and your Psycho McHappypants had to come and ruin that for me too!"

He stopped, realizing he'd just mouthed off to the world's deadliest psychopath. A man who once severed a man's jugular by shoving the slat of a venetian blind down his throat... Who once superglued a construction worker to a wrecking ball and smashed him against a brick wall... He once performed "a reverse Hendrix," smashing the musician with the guitar and then setting both on fire... And Bartholomew had just called him Psycho McHappypants.

It was quiet. It was going on five minutes and neither man had spoken. Sensing these were his last moments on Earth, Barthomew reflected on his life. He'd never been what you'd call a social butterfly. Raven was one of the only "long term" relationships (all of 3 weeks) that he'd really had. He'd always been about work and work alone. And Raven helped pull him out of that. Now he'd seen it all slipping away because of... because of Psycho McHappypants!

"Well," he said belligerently, taking off his glasses as if preparing to "step outside" with the homicidal maniac and settle it with their fists.

"See, it's a good thing I got you to come back when I did, Doc," Joker said philosophically. "I don't know what that girl might've done to you if you stayed with her longer. Yelling at patients." He clicked his tongue. "That's pretty unprofessional, Bart."

Joker laid back on the couch, closed his eyes, and drummed his fingers together rhythmically.

"Yes," he announced with calm satisfaction, "It's a good thing I'm here to help you get back to normal... Ha... with fava beans and a nice chianti."

