

Hub Magazine

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EDITORIAL:

by **alasdair stuart**

Making a Splash

Despite what R Kelly said, Gotham is not in fact a city of justice or of love. It's a hideous, ghastly Boschian nightmare of a city which grows lunatics and criminals like weeds and where the only hope lies in a tiny amount of hard-pressed cops and a man dressed like a flying rat. It's the tenth circle of hell, the part of the bible just before God got really angry.

As a result, it's great fun to visit and there's rarely been a better time. In the wake of the latest event-a-thon, DC have plastered 'Batman: Reborn' on all of their Gotham-set titles, cancelled a few and launched a few more. This is just the latest version of the endless cycle of launch, reboot, cancel, launch that more cynical writers will tell you is slowly choking the comic industry and will, eventually kill it.

But at Hub, we're not that cynical. At Hub we think good comics are some of the most fun you can have with pop culture and we're all too aware we've not given them due coverage in the past. This week, that changes. We're going to look at a couple of comics a week, ranging from superhero titles to horror, science fiction, crime or whatever else takes our fancy. However, we'll only review first issues or the start of a new plotline, meaning that you've got the best chance of jumping aboard the book with that issue.

So, join us on our ongoing journey through comics. Our first stop is Gotham City, so trust me when I tell you to keep your arms and legs inside the issue at all times and do not stray from the path. Especially you Mr and Mrs Wayne...

FICTION

The Bohemian of the Arbat

by sarah pinborough

This story originally appeared in the *Summer Chills* anthology (2007), edited by Stephen Jones.

Staring out of the hotel window, Anna could still feel his damp sweat clutching at her naked skin and her left palm throbbed slightly. Her nails had dug in a little too tightly as she'd gripped the mattress beneath them, the springs creaking rhythmically as she and Bob had gone through the motions of making love. It had been a relief when he'd rolled away, panting, satisfied and unaware of how untouched she was. It seemed to be that way too many times recently but once again she chose not to dwell on it. *If you marry for money, honey, then trust me, you'll earn every penny.* She pushed the memory of Jane's words away, just as she'd pushed Jane away when she'd strode out of their tatty London flat and into the glamour of Bob's world a year and a lifetime ago.

'Jesus, Anna. It just gets better and better between us, doesn't it?' From the bed she could hear her husband's breathing returning to normal and she fought the small trickle of revulsion that slid down her spine, peering instead through the old glass pane of the imposing Ukraine hotel. Down below, the sun danced on the surface of the wide river and alongside it, under the shadow of a resolute bronze statue, a young man in a gray military uniform removed his peaked cap as a plain, stocky young woman ran to greet him. Anna watched them as they walked away, for a moment fascinated by their blandness and their happiness with each other's bleak appearance.

'Are you okay?' Her silence obviously bothered him, his need for her approval almost cloying, but she paused for a second before answering.

'I didn't expect it to be so hot. Last night it was so warm I couldn't breathe.' She watched her reflection shaping the words, taking comfort from the sensual smoothness of her lips and face and teeth.

He laughed, amused by her, and patted the bed sheets. 'Even Russia has a summer. Although Perestroika or not, they've still got a bit of a way to go with air-conditioning.'

Turning away from the window, she moved back to the bed, pretending not to see the way his eyes ran over her body, assessing her, evaluating her, just as he had all those nights that he'd visited her in the club. Although then it had been different. Then she'd felt her power over him as she'd danced, her movements provocative, lost in the music until her own sweat covered her naked body and his eyes were so glazed that she was sure he couldn't see her properly, and then she would smile triumphantly and lean forward, brushing his face with her long sandy hair as she took his money and a small part of his soul, watching him tremble with the contact that hinted at so much more. She'd worked hard at him, that much was for sure, and each little victory, each affirmation of her allure, had been an aphrodisiac. Knowing how much he wanted her, what hoops he would jump through for her, made her want him.

Now that they were married things were different. She didn't dance anymore. He didn't want her to. *You've left all that behind you now.* She didn't like his eyes on her anymore. Things had changed. She had more. She was less.

Avoiding looking at his body, she looked into his eyes and smiled. It seemed to please him. 'You are so beautiful.' His words were as soft as his plump hand as it ran along the smooth curves of her skin, leaving a wake of goosebumps that perhaps he took as shivers of pleasure. 'And I don't mean just on the outside. It wasn't your body that made me want to take you away from that life and marry you. It was the inside.' He touched her face. 'That clever, witty brain is what won me over, Mrs Jackson.'

He'd said this many times, so many times that she figured he'd convinced himself that it wasn't his

desire that had made him chase her, that it wasn't her power over him that he'd wanted to tame, that it wasn't the need to reduce her by ownership that had driven him to risk shame and ridicule by marrying an *exotic dancer*. Not that many of the men that had seen her dance or strip or something in between would mock him for that. She was different from the rest; her abilities as a dancer matched by her sensuous beauty, and despite their jealousy she knew the other girls were as pleased as her customers were devastated when she dragged herself from the neon depths of the basement stripclub and stepped out into the sunlight.

Still, she thought, as she folded up the empty place inside her, Robert Jackson was a very wealthy man and if he wanted to think there was more to her than beauty – that there was more to anything than beauty – then she would let him believe it. He thought his intelligence and his money were powerful, but it was her beauty that had brought him to his knees, although she was clever enough never to remind him of it.

'That's why I wanted to bring you here. To show you Moscow. It took a long time to get that visa for you. Not many businessmen's wives get to see behind the Iron Curtain.' He smiled, pushing back the sheet and grabbing a towel, wrapping it across his thick, pale waist. 'I could have taken you to Paris or New York. But this place...' he gestured around the grandly old-fashioned hotel room with the slightly threadbare ornate carpet, 'this city is something not many people from the west get a chance to experience. And once the reforms are fully in place, it'll be changed for good and this way of life will be gone.' Heading towards the bathroom, he paused to kiss her. 'You're getting to see history, Anna.'

He could have taken me to Paris or New York. She returned his kiss mechanically. 'But it's so ugly. Everything's so dull.' The words were out before she could stop herself, and for a few moments he paused, his hand against her cheek, looking at her and into her. 'Beauty isn't always obvious. Sometimes you have to look past the surface.' He grinned. 'Anyway, today you're going to see lots of beautiful things. I've arranged for you to visit the Armoury of the Kremlin. It's amazing in there. A museum of national treasures. I've got meetings all day but a driver'll pick you up at ten and wait while you have the tour. Make sure you get to Red Square too.'

She frowned slightly, her brow furrowing. 'Why do I need the driver? Surely I can make my own way there.' She'd fought hard to shake off her gritty roots but the independent desire that had made her leave home at fifteen still occasionally roared inside. Sometimes it was only when she was alone and anonymous, surrounded by streets full of strangers, that she felt she could breathe and be herself, whoever that was. The Anna that she had left behind or the Anna that she had become. She didn't know if either really existed, but both were beautiful enough to make men and women stare as she passed by, and that was really all that mattered. That was enough to make her feel whole.

She watched her husband as he walked to the bathroom. Being owned was trapping her; something she hadn't banked on when she'd taken the gold band and the gold credit card and everything else that went along with it. She missed the admiration she'd received when she was single. *Available*. Full of potential promise. She was still admired, but now it was as Robert's appendage, as the cool and sophisticated wife of a prominent businessmen. It was tamed admiration. She reeked of aloof unavailability.

He turned the shower on and left the door open as he peed. 'This is still communist Russia, sweetheart. A driver is best. I don't like the idea of you getting lost in the city on your own.'

'I thought you said there was no crime here. I thought everyone was too scared to hurt Westerners,' she muttered, moving back to the window, away from the sights of the bathroom. There was no sign of the couple she'd seen earlier, but an old woman dressed in black apart from her colourful headscarf, waddled along the path clutching a plain bag, a few grocery items making jagged shapes in its sides where back in England a supermarket logo would have been. As they'd driven through the city from the airport, Bob had pointed out the lifeless shop fronts. Here there was no Sainsbury's or Waitrose screaming for customer attention, just the universal *gastronom*, literally translated as food shop, with no branding, no competition, no need to lure anyone in. It didn't matter which food shop was used. This one or that. The state owned everything. All the products were the same. All the prices were the same. Individuality was dead. The different culture seemed to fascinate her husband but it frightened Anna slightly that everyone

was supposed to be equal; exactly the same as everyone else.

'Well that's true,' he called out to her. 'But a couple of months ago the wife of an American diplomat went missing and was never found. She was quite a stunner, by all accounts. They'd only been here a few weeks.' He poked his head round the paint-chipped doorway. 'I would hate to think what I would do if anything happened to you.'

She felt his love tighten like a noose around her neck, and glanced into the mirror on the other side of their tarnished suite, soothing herself with her reflection as she waited for him to go to work and leave her in peace.

Once he had gone, full of promises to return early to have some time with her before they met his government contacts for dinner and an evening at the Bolshoi ballet, she leisurely dressed herself, picking out a pale pink silk shirt dress, that pulled in tight around her slim waist. If Bob was with her, she would have worn a full length slip demurely under it, but she left it off, knowing that without it the sun would shine through, outlining the toned curves underneath. She pulled her hair back into an easy chignon, a few strands casually loose, as if blown free rather than carefully arranged, and then slipped her feet into the soft leather matching high-heeled sandals. Looking into the mirror, she could see that she oozed Western affluence, beauty and style in equal measures, and as she left Stalin's gothic skyscraper hotel, all eyes following her, she felt happy for the first time since she'd stepped down from the plane.

Even without any modern air-conditioning, the inside of the armoury was deliciously cool on her bare arms as she followed the small group of quietly whispering tourists through the open wooden doors, and despite herself her eyes widened. The hall yawned wide ahead of them, the polished ebony-inlaid parquet floor covering at least a hundred yards before the next set of doors, beyond which, no doubt, another hall lay. The bloody crimson of the walls oozed down from stripes in the high white domes of the ceilings as if the bodies of those murdered throughout Russian history were piled high and leaking somewhere above. Opulent golden chandeliers sparkled light onto the huge glass cabinets militarily lined in three columns leading down to the far exit, each shelf within ruby velvet coated, soft for their delicate contents.

The guide smiled, pleased with her small crowd's response, and Anna watched her as she spoke, first in Russian and then in English, her accent thick and monotone. '*The Kremlin armoury is a unique treasure store of decorative and applied art. The museum's foundation dates back to the beginning of the nineteenth century and its oldest exhibit is the helmet of Prince Yaroslav which dates back to the early thirteenth century. Our tour today should last approximately two hours.*' Above the obligatory gray military uniform, fitted to show the woman's shape but deny her sexuality, the guide's hair was over-bleached and her lips just a little too red against her pancaked face. It was a look Anna had seen on several Muscovite women who seemed to grab at an ideal of glamour borne out of movies from the forties, a look that was forever to be out of their reach in this equal society. The woman didn't fit into these surroundings that leaked whispers of a decadent past. She was too coarse. Too obvious.

The first hall was filled with ancient firearms and weaponry, none of which really held her interest, but Anna moved dutifully from cabinet to cabinet, glancing at the exhibits and letting her eyes drift across the small information cards next to each. Her companions on the tour seemed to mainly comprise of about fifteen middle-aged Russian men and women that had been climbing down from a bland Intourist coach as her car had dropped her off. One man however, seemed different, his suit tailored and sophisticated on his tall frame as he kept himself apart from the rest. Anna had noticed the guide giving the man a small smile and nod when she saw him, and for a moment had wondered if perhaps there was romance between them, but then dismissed the idea. Anna knew men and a man like that would not look twice at a woman like the guide in her sensible uniform.

Bored with the exhibits, she moved around to the other side of the cabinet and studied him through the glass. For a moment or two she feigned interest in a pair of ornate pistols and then let her eyes slide to the left, through to where he stood. How old was he? Maybe forty? Perhaps slightly older? Not a bad age for a man, she concluded. His dark hair shone slightly in the light where it had been combed backwards above the worn skin of his face. His eyes flicked up and met hers, twinkling slightly as if he had known she was watching him, and they were a brighter blue than any she had ever seen. Her insides warmed as she

looked away. The day seemed at once more interesting and, as she followed the guide into the next hall, she could feel the stranger's gaze still on her, rising and falling with her walk. As she allowed herself a tiny secret smile, she wondered if the light was shining through her dress.

For the next forty minutes they carried on their secret dance, pretending ignorance of the other's presence as the guide led the group through collections of carved gilt carriages, breath-taking sleighs and an array of heavily jewelled gowns owned by Catherine the Great and some less famous Russian Tsarinas, whole surfaces of faded fabric covered with priceless rubies, diamonds and emeralds.

Staring up at them, Anna wondered how a nation had given this elegance up, opting instead to become the mediocrity of the masses, and for a moment the dark stranger on the other side of the room was forgotten. How she would have loved to have lived in the grandeur of these palaces, fires roaring in the grates as winter turned the gardens outside into a frozen sculpted wasteland, inside a constant swirl of parties and witty flirtations to keep out the cold. She would have been queen of them all, and if not in title then in beauty. She always was. Those days wouldn't have been any different.

It was the final hall that held the Armoury's greatest treasures though, the delicately painted and gold inlaid icon frames, pocket watches, and the pinnacle of the exhibition, the world famous Faberge eggs. Moving from cabinet to cabinet, each display seemed more enchanting than the last. It was when she was gazing at one of the eggs, its intricate ebony and silver lid open revealing a perfectly detailed replica of the winter palace, tiny windows with lights inside hinting at a miniature world within still enjoying the glamour of the old regime, that the man came alongside her, his reflection filling the range of her vision on the glass like a ghost.

'They are beautiful, are they not?' His voice was low, speaking only for her, and although coated in the guttural Russian tones, his words were melodic and smooth.

'Yes. Yes they are. Exquisite.'

He turned to her and smiled. 'As, if I may say, are you.' He held out his hand. 'Gregori Ivanovitch. A pleasure to meet you.'

'Thank you.' Her lips hesitated over her married name unable to let it out. 'Anna.'

He raised a dark eyebrow. 'Anya. A Russian name.'

She didn't correct his pronunciation, taking pleasure in the exotic sound of it.

'Are you enjoying looking into our past?' He said.

'Yes. Yes I am.' She met his confident gaze with one of her own, before taking a few steps to the side and looking back into the cabinet, knowing that he would follow her. 'Are you with the group?'

He laughed, amused, the loud noise echoing slightly in the hush, as if he, like her, were born to fill this room. 'No.' He looked over to the huddled group on the other side of the hall. 'No, I'm not with them. They are factory workers from Kiev on their first visit to our great capital.' He leaned in to whisper to her. 'If you stand close enough to them you can smell their awe and their fear.' He chuckled. 'As well as the stench of boiled cabbage.'

From the heat of his skin she could smell a hint of cologne. Not one she recognised, but warm and musky. She kept herself close knowing that he too would be drinking her scent in. 'Why would they be afraid?'

'I think maybe you understand very little about this country of mine.' He looked across the room again and then back at her. 'Sometimes invisibility is not such a terrible thing.'

Her finger, elegant and manicured, traced the outline of one of the exhibits while inside she brushed away his words. There was nothing worse than invisibility.

'So, is this your first time to the Armoury too, Gregori Ivanovich?' Her tone was light and playful. It would draw him in, she was sure, this routine being a game she had played out many times with many men. Where this particular version of the game would lead, she didn't know and she didn't care. Robert and the chill of her life with him were back at the hotel. In the here and now she was herself, or maybe not herself. She was Anya, something new, something more. She could feel the power tingling in her fingertips.

'No,' He shook his head. 'I come here often to look at the pieces in this hall. I like to look at things of beauty to inspire me in my work.' He looked down at her, those blue eyes twinkling. 'I have, what I think in your country would translate as, a free pass.'

'What is it that you do? Are you an artist?' She looked once again at the fine wool of his suit. There was no smell of the death of the individual clinging to this man who she thought would be as at home strolling down Bond Street as he was here. He stood out against the backdrop of this modern Moscow as much as she did.

He pointed into the cabinet of priceless decorated eggs. 'My great-great Uncle was Faberge's assistant. He worked on many of the internal decorations for these creations. In fact, I think the miniature Winter Palace that you were looking at is one of his pieces.' His voice dropped to a murmur as he stared through the glass into the past. 'But, as there would always be with two great craftsmen, they had a falling out, and my great-great Uncle left Faberge and St Petersburg and came to Moscow to make treasures of his own. Come. I'll show you.'

He led her to a smaller cabinet, less well-lit, pressed against a crimson wall. Anna peered inside and gasped. 'They're dancers!' There were six female figurines within, each on an ivory pedestal, and gazing at them, Anna was intrigued by their detail and life-like qualities. One woman, her brunette hair piled high, twisted in a loose pirouette on the stand, the shape of the movement unconventional but natural as if she were dancing for no-one but herself. Pressing her face closer to the glass, it seemed to Anna as if there were a bead of sweat trickling down the dancer's flushed face. Each of the others was equally detailed, but unique, as if they were photographs rather than china.

'They're magnificent.' She breathed eventually. 'The colours are so real. They don't even look like china.'

'They're not. They're made from a clay compound, a secret mixture that my Great Uncle developed.'

'Why are there so few? And why are they over here rather than with the main exhibits? They're far more beautiful than most of those things.'

'His career was ended rather abruptly by death. He was murdered. I don't know the exact story, so much of our history has been re-written or lost, but I know that the husband of one of his aristocratic models was executed for the murder, not long after the sixth doll was completed. He was rambling like a madman about magic and the Devil all the way to the executioner's block. His wife went to a nunnery where she remained in seclusion until she died.' He smiled slightly. 'How lucky that we have killed God now, eh? No nunneries, no Devil. No magic. Not in Mother Russia.'

Anna looked at the dolls again and shivered pleasantly thinking about the story. There had been passion in Russia once at least, even if it seemed dead now.

Looking up at him, she raised a curved eyebrow. 'You still haven't answered my question. Are you an artist?'

'Of sorts. I am a doll-maker like my Great Uncle. I have a small showroom and studio on the old Arbat. I don't pretend at his talent, but I have my own successes. Most of my clients come from the new aristocracy, the polit-buro and the KGB. These things allow me certain freedoms that perhaps aren't extended to most of my comrades. Even in these times, people still appreciate things of beauty.'

The guide was ushering them out, and Anna and her companion walked in silence until they were back in the sticky heat of midday Moscow. As the tourists from Kiev were herded back onto their coach, she looked at her waiting driver with dismay, the shackles of her life closing around her.

'Is he waiting for you?' His breath tickled her ear, and she resisted the urge to tilt her neck and feel his lips there.

'Yes. I'm staying at the Ukraine Hotel. I was going to get him to take me to Red Square before returning though.'

'I could show you Red Square, if you like. We can walk from here along the river and he can pick you up at the bridge later. Would you like me to speak to him?'

She smiled up at him. 'I would like that very much.'

The driver stood tall as Gregori approached, and watching them talking, it wasn't long before Anna saw some folded notes exchanging hands. Always money, she thought. She would always be able to value herself on the money men spent to be with her. But maybe with this man it was different. He wasn't as needy as the men in the club, *as Robert*, and that set her pulse racing. Not because of love or passion, but

because of the thrill of the challenge. The need to subdue him. The driver got in the car and pulled out of the Armoury gates, and smiling as she took the Russian man's arm, Anna felt free.

Red Square was not what she had expected. She had thought to find something like the famous squares in London, with one central statue or feature and perhaps some gardens, but as with everything else in this city, she found it strange. The vast uneven area to the right of the walls of the Kremlin was paved with huge slabs of gray, like cobbles for a giant, one corner taken up by an imposing non-descript building that her new and more charming guide told her was GUM, the city's largest department store. When she had asked to see inside, he had smiled and said that there was nothing to interest her within its walls, and after only a few minutes she knew he was right. It was more like a bland indoor market than a store, full of necessities rather than luxuries, and it reeked of the stale sweat of those that worked too hard for a living. He must have seen the displeasure rippling on her face, because they were swiftly outside again.

Passing Lenin's tomb, and the long shambling queue outside it, they strolled towards the bridge.

'And this,' Gregori said, gesturing to his left as he brought them to a halt. 'Is St. Basil's cathedral; one of the most famous pieces of architecture in the city. It was built nearly five hundred years ago, and took five years to complete, the workers out in all weathers, several dying during their labour. Imagine spending so long on one project. How much dedication would that take? But it was worth it don't you think? All art requires sacrifice.'

Anna stared up at the church that looked like nothing she had ever seen before. To her it was a garish mass of colour, too many domes for its small size, and each one and the area below it decorated in a different design with a different bright shade. There were candy-stripes and zig-zags, gold and red, too much for the eye to take in. To Anna it was like the Armoury guide's make-up and hair; ugly from trying too hard.

'You don't like it, do you?' He asked, and she shook her head, honestly.

'I think it's too much. It all jars on the eye.' She paused. 'It stands out in all the wrong ways.'

Gregori didn't seem to take offence at her comments, but laughed gently. 'That is because you are not Russian. In the west you can only see what is obvious. You look for obvious beauty and never test your vision by looking closely. It is all too easy for you.' He raised his hand, pointing at the shapes and colours of the church. 'To me, this is a glorious symbol of all that is mysterious and misleading about Russia, in the old days and now. Its symmetry is not easy to detect, nor its glory immediately apparent. Because you are a foreigner, you cannot see past its mixture of dissonant shapes and colours but if you could you would be able to discern the intrinsic harmony, the clever design, and the beauty of the streamlined contrasting contours and the cathedral would leave you as breathless as Faberge's eggs did.'

She smiled at him, almost absently. Why did all men want to teach her? Improve her. Imprint their mind on hers as if she were a blank canvas to paint on and own. Because it's part of the game, that's why. The power struggle. What will win, brain or beauty? She already knew the answer to that; it was the men that didn't.

'Tell me, Anya,' his voice was thoughtful, 'what do you see when you look at Moscow and her people?'

For a moment, she let her eyes wander around the square, at the soldiers and the queues to see the corpse of the long dead leader that had brought them to this stale existence, and the others that scurried from work to home or back again, all dark overcoats and hunched shoulders. 'I see equality of the lowest level.' She couldn't keep the disdain out of her voice and he smiled.

'Very good.' He stood behind her, his hands on her shoulders, the silk thin between them and her naked skin. 'Now tell me what you don't see. Tell me who you don't see.'

'I don't understand.' She could feel his chest against her back, and she wondered if touching her was sending the same electric tingle through him that it was through her.

'Look again. Is this what the capital city in your England would look like? This mixture of people?'

She stared, lost for a few seconds, and then his meaning dawned on her and she sucked in the hot, muggy air. 'Oh, I see. I think I see...' She turned to him. 'There are no black people. No ethnic people at all.'

'Who else?'

She could feel herself flushing, as her mind scanned back through her memories of her experiences

here. 'There are no disabled people. None.' She turned to look at him, confused. 'How can that be?'

He smiled. 'Equality comes at a price, Anya. The weak and those considered inferior aren't allowed in the city. Not in the greatest city of the Soviet Union. Maybe in Kiev or Siberia. But not Leningrad or Moskva.' He drawled the last syllable of the Russian word, and despite herself Anna was fascinated. She stared out at the moving people, for a moment her over-whelming sense of self forgotten.

'So what happens to all the disabled people that come from here? Born deaf or blind or with something like cystic fibrosis? Surely there must be some native to the city. I can't imagine parents banishing their children so easily.'

Gregori smiled again, his teeth straight and white against his weathered skin. 'Ahh, so you have a sharp mind under that beautiful face.' He moved away and started leading her slowly to the bridge where her car would soon be waiting. 'Now you just have to learn to see my city properly.' He put his arm around her shoulder as if she belonged to him. 'You look around and you say you see equality. But you know as well as I that true equality cannot be. It is a veneer, a pretence. Perhaps not for everyone. Maybe for those poor, exhausted workers that we saw back in the Armoury the dreams of Lenin are reality. But existence for the rest of Russia? For the passionate artists that litter our history and still must exist today? To see *their* lives you need to look for the things that move in the corner of your eyes. The blackmarketeers. The whores and the pimps. The whole communities that live beneath Stalin's great Metro network. Those are the truly alive Moscovites.'

She frowned slightly, a wisp of hair blowing against her face. 'It all sounds a little ugly to me. I don't think those are my kind of people.'

'Oh Anya.' He whispered. 'You'd be surprised. One day you will learn that there are so many more interesting things than beauty and that beauty and ugliness are sometimes so close they are indistinguishable.'

This time it was she that laughed; a flirtatious throaty sound. 'Ah, but then there will hopefully be an obliging plastic surgeon ready to fall in love with me and literally save face.'

He raised an eyebrow, his own smile soft. 'Perhaps. Perhaps not. I wonder how you would live without your beauty.'

'I don't intend to find out.' She paused. 'What do you mean there are whole communities under the Metro?' Ahead a black Zil pulled to the curb of the road and her driver stepped out.

Gregori kept his voice low, as if even he, with all his elusive debonair charm and Polit-Buro privileges, was still a little afraid of the power of the system, the big brother of the KGB. 'Where do you think all the people who refuse to be equal live? Those that don't want to be, or can't be, worker ants of the state?' He pointed downwards. 'They're under our feet, pretty Anya. The gypsies, the hermits, the political refugees and the eccentric artists that seem to like to be free, all tucked away in the old tunnels and boiler rooms and bomb shelters, living in tribes. Scurrying like rats in and out through the ventilation shafts at dusk and dawn. Invisible and yet alive. Fascinating, isn't it?'

Watching the dark humour in his eyes, Anna wasn't sure how seriously to take him, but there was something romantic about the idea of a whole second civilisation beneath her feet. It made her think of the strip club and her Soho friends that only ever came out at night, as if drawn into town by the rhythm of promised music and laughter and the buzz of neon as the sun went down.

They were only a few feet away from her car and the driver opened the rear door, the gloom within uninviting, and Anna sighed. Her little day-time adventure was over. In the distance she could see the peaked towers of the Ukraine reaching dauntingly into the hazy sky, waiting to suck her back into Robert's world. *Her world now. Whether she liked it or not.* She bit the inside of her mouth. She would like it. She *did* like it. It was an easy life.

She tilted her chin upwards. 'It seems that it's time for us to say good-bye. Thank you so much for your very charming company, Gregori Ivanovich. If the art doesn't work out, I will be more than happy to give you a reference as a tour guide.' For a fleeting moment she saw his eyes linger on her lips and felt once again the *frisson* of the unspoken attraction, the whirs and clicks of the game playing out.

'Perhaps it doesn't have to be good-bye.' He pulled a small notebook and pencil from his pocket and scribbled on a sheet before ripping it out and handing it to her. *Arbatskaya*. And then the word written

again in the strange shapes of the Cyrillic script. 'I would very much like to use you as a model for one of my dolls. I think you would make one of my best works, and I don't yet feel ready to say farewell to you.' He smiled. 'If you find that you are free this evening, then take the Metro from the Kievskaya station outside the hotel four stops to the Arbat. When you leave the station, the old Arbat is on your right, a long pedestrian road. You won't miss it,' He flashed his dangerous white teeth. 'It is a place that comes alive at night. That's why I like to work there. By day, the shops selling the memorabilia of the revolution rule, touting the posters and badges that we all must wear to prove ourselves. But by night?'

He leaned in, brushing his lips against her cheek with his whisper. 'By night the Arbat belongs to the vodka drinking Bohemians.'

'I'm not sure that I'll be able to...'

He shrugged, cutting her off. 'If you come, you come and I shall immortalise you in art. If not, then it has been a pleasure, if only a brief one, to know you my Anya.' He winked. 'As we say in Russia, dos vidanya.' He kissed her hand before turning and walking away.

Anna watched until he had disappeared into the milieu of Red Square. He didn't look back and that made her smile. Maybe he was going to be as good at this game as she was.

The room was stifling when she returned, the old windows refusing to open, as if not even air was allowed freedom to move without the state's permission, and drawing the heavy curtains Anna peeled away the clingy skin of her dress and lay on the bed. Beneath her the sheets were pulled tight into regimented hospital corners, their tension palpable even with the bedspread over them. She stared up at the ceiling and at nothing as her mind drifted contentedly through the memories of the morning. Her new admirer was interesting, that was for sure, and she wondered how he would react if she danced for him. Not like Robert had done certainly, all wide-eyes and open lust, and for a moment she imagined herself back in the club, but this time it was Gregori Ivanovich watching her dance, his dark eyes following her twists and turns, watching her as if she was a beautiful object rather than an object of lust. But still, she thought, closing her eyes and savouring her private darkness, how they viewed her was almost irrelevant. It was always with desire of some kind. *I would like to use you as a model for one of my dolls.*

Sleep crept in at the corner of her eyes and she let it take her into vague dreams of haggard strangers that she could almost see hiding in dark corners, their faces twisted, all of them staring at her as she danced.

It hadn't taken much to convince Robert that she had a headache, given that she was fast asleep when he'd returned back. His disappointment at what she would be missing out on almost made her smile as she slid under the covers and allowed him to fetch her some aspirin and bottled water. The Bolshoi held no interest for her, ballet too technical and anodyne to truly enjoy, all about the story and classical music instead of the freedom of movement that she loved. And having sampled a Russian dinner for the past two nights, the idea of more vegetables in aspic and home-grown too-sweet champagne in the company of fat men and their dour wives held no appeal for her.

'I probably won't be home 'til after one, sweetheart.' He said, gently kissing her on the forehead. 'I'll try not to make too much noise.'

Her heart thumping, she waited in bed for twenty minutes after he left, just in case he popped back, and then when she was sure he had definitely gone for the night, she leapt up and into the shower. It was seven o'clock, which gave her a safe five hours until Robert got back, and, she reasoned as the water ran steaming through her hair, even if he came home before her she could always say that she'd just gone out for some fresh air. He wouldn't question her. He never did.

Wanting a different look, something that she could feel good dancing in, she left her hair loose and pulled on some ripped jeans that sat suggestively on her hip bones, and a tight-fitting black vest top. Jane had liked her in this outfit best, in the days when they used to disappear into the London nights and taken them by storm. It made her look wild and sexy, and tonight that was exactly how she wanted to feel.

Checking her handbag to make sure she had her passport and money, she tugged on her boots and headed out into the night.

It was eight o'clock when she took the stairs down into the opulent marble of the Kievskaya Metro station and although there were still a few people milling about, mainly young people wishing there was somewhere to go, rush hour was over for the day and she was alone as she pushed her five kopeks into the turnstile slot and passed through to the long escalator leading down to the trains. The walls were mosaic with glorious images of Stalin and Lenin and the people of the Revolution, and Anna was surprised at how superior the décor was to that of the grimy London equivalent.

The platform was clean, with a huge open space between it and its counterpart for trains going the other way that was filled with a huge bronze statue of Lenin, one arm raised with a flag lifted high, and around it were circular seating areas. Looking at the map against the wall, Anna checked that she was on the right side and then waited, peering into the dark gaping tunnel. Behind her legs she felt a blast of warm air and, looking down, saw a large square vent.

No one else being on the platform with her, she crouched and peered into it thoughtfully, her conversation of earlier with Gregori still fresh in her mind. Surely there weren't whole communities of people living down there in the dark and gloom? That couldn't be. She waited, peering through the grate until a train rumbled by somewhere else in the system and another stream of air rushed past her face. She wasn't certain if it was her imagination, but she was sure it carried the warm sweet but sickly scent of birth and death and everything in between.

A little disgusted, she stood up and was pleased to hear a train approaching on her platform. She turned in time to see a small, huddled figure in a black, hooded coat, pressed against the far wall by the mouth of the tunnel. Anna's brow furrowed. Where had she come from? The stairs from the turnstiles and escalators above led into the mid-point of both platforms. She was standing only a few feet away from them so surely she'd have heard or seen someone else arriving. How odd. Something about the way the figure seemed to be staring unsettled her, and she was glad that the train was slowing to a halt.

From speakers above her head a female voice blasted out foreign words, but Anna was sure she heard Arbatskaya amongst them. She took one more look at the strange figure in black as the doors of the train opened, and thought about the smell of the air coming from the vent. *The only place the woman could have come from was the tunnel!* It was the only logical answer. Shivering slightly, she was pleased when the doors closed behind her and the train moved away, letting her mind look forward to the pleasures of the evening ahead and Gregori Ivanovich.

Her excitement was strangled somewhat when she stepped out of the train and on to the escalator and realised that the strange black figure was following her, a few steps behind, her reflection clear in the brushed steel of the parallel stairs. There was something repellent about the cowed woman, and although Anna wasn't afraid, she did feel unsettled. Still, eager to leave the ugliness behind, she started to walk up the moving stairs rather than letting them carry her. The woman behind did the same, even though she seemed slightly crippled, her back hunched over a little too far, and it must have taken some effort to keep up a matching pace.

Irritation washed over Anna. What did the woman want? Money? If she was a beggar then why didn't she come straight out with it and ask for something? She peered cautiously over one shoulder. The woman's face was down, but from beneath the hood Anna could see that her skin was covered in lumps or boils or symptoms of some kind of disease. One thing she was certain of was that she didn't want the hag any closer to her. The idea of being touched by such a creature made her feel slightly nauseous.

Gratefully exiting the station, Anna immediately saw the long cobbled street to her left, the strains of a Beatles track wafting out of it, old fashioned lantern-style streetlamps spread out evenly in the centre shedding a pale yellow light. It was the Arbat, immediately recognisable from Gregori's description. As she hurried down it, she was aware of the woman, *the thing*, that was following her, now trying to catch up rather than just keep up.

Moving quickly across the cobbles, well trained in managing the high-heels of her boots, Anna passed a small bar that was the source of the music. One neon light hung above it, the tiny dark space seemingly filled with young men and women talking earnestly and sucking hard on cheap Russian

cigarettes. No-one was dancing.

From another establishment a little further up, a group of men had taken a table and some chairs out into the muggy air of the street and were drinking shots of Vodka and laughing loudly, their easels and paints leaning up against the wall behind. Anna was pleased to see them, and at least if the woman tried to grab her there would be someone to help. Always aware of the disfigured creature's silent approach behind, Anna searched for Gregori's shop, and as she passed the group of men they wolf-whistled and called out to her, the words unfamiliar, but the language universal. She smiled at them, enjoying the way the calls increased as she sashayed away from them. Gregori must have heard them too, because he appeared from a darkened doorway, stepping out into the street so suddenly that it made her jump.

'So you came, Anya.' Although dressed in the same outfit as earlier, the suit jacket was gone, his shirt now untucked and loose at the neck.

'Yes, yes,' she looked behind her, to see that the figure had stopped a few feet away and now hesitated. 'But someone was following me from the train...that woman.'

Gregori looked up and his face hardened. 'Wait here.'

He ran over to the woman who had turned to go, and Anna watched as he spoke angrily to her, visibly terrifying her. After a moment he calmed down, and after talking quietly, Anna saw him reach into his pocket and hand her some roubles. She scurried away and he returned to Anna, his smooth smile back. 'Just a beggar woman. She shouldn't have frightened you.'

Anna watched as the figure ducked into a side street. 'You were very angry with her. For a moment I thought you maybe knew her.'

He laughed. 'Thank you, but I prefer my women beautiful. I just did not want her upsetting you. Or waiting for when you returned.' He stroked her face. 'Now come inside and drink some vodka, and let me immortalise you.'

The interior of the small shop was lit only from the cabinet lights, and she peered into them as he led her towards the door at the back. The mahogany cases were divided into individual show spaces and within each were one or two dolls, all female and engaged in some daily activity, their positions natural. Looking through the first few displays, the high prices marked on small hand written cards, Anna could see that he was a talented craftsman, but it was only when she reached the silver cases along the back wall that she gasped. There were no price tags on these dolls, and Anna knew why. They were priceless. As good as his great-great uncle's or maybe even better.

She stared at the one closest to her, the figure of a blonde woman in an expensive dress, one hand on her hip, her head thrown back as she laughed, hair falling loosely over her face and shoulders. She was stunning. The doll was stunning, and for a second Anna was glad that she would never know the woman who modelled for this, a small hint of green envy digging at her.

Gregori came alongside carrying two small glasses with thick brown liquid in them. 'Do you like my work?'

She nodded, still staring at the doll. 'Those other ones are good, but these, these are...' she hunted for the right word, 'these are magnificent.' The laughing blonde doll seemed to be taunting her, challenging her, and she turned to her host. 'Tell me. Are you going to make one of me like this one, or like those others?'

He smiled and handed her the shot glass. 'One of these of course, beautiful Anya. I think you could be my best doll yet.'

The answer pleased her. 'Will you make one of me dancing?'

He nodded. 'A dancing doll. Like one of my great-great Uncle's, but better.'

Anna grinned victoriously and knocked back her drink, the unexpected heat of it making her lose her breath and then giggle. 'What is this? I've drunk some vodka shots in my time, but this is something else.'

'Pepper vodka. Vodka Russian style, thick and passionate. The opium of the masses.' He took her hand and she let him. 'Now come. Let's go to the workshop, drink some more and find some music for dancing!' He laughed, and her face glowing from the heat of alcohol and freedom, she laughed with him, high on his promise to immortalise her beauty.

The vodka was strong, that much was for sure, and as she poured and drank her fourth, time

became as thick as the liquid, moving slowly around her, viscous to her mind's invisible touch. The small studio was lit only by one strong white spotlight above a slightly raised dais in the centre of the room, clean against the dusty floor. A few feet in front of the platform stood a workbench with a small pottery wheel. Next to it was a table with a bowl of dirty water, a cloth and a container that Anna presumed held the clay or whatever substance it was that Gregori's great-great Uncle had invented to make his beautiful dolls.

Even with her head giddy, the equipment seemed too crude to fashion the detailed work that filled the cabinets in the shop, and she wondered how talented his hands must be to work such magic. She swayed to the disco music that was playing from the tape recorder on the floor, the vodka evaporating any few inhibitions she may have had. The tune wasn't one she knew, the words foreign, but it had a good beat and it pumped through the soles of her boots. For a moment she felt as if she'd been transported back to her old life, and in her hazy mind she was surprised at how happy that made her feel. The predator in her was alive again.

Hair falling seductively over her face, she grinned at Gregori who lay on the mattress in the corner, resting up on one elbow, watching her from the gloom. Maybe she would sleep with him after dancing for him, maybe not. But one thing she was sure of was that he would want to. And maybe that would be enough.

She stepped up onto the dais, enjoying the heat of the light on her. 'Are you ready to immortalise me, then?' She turned in a mock pirouette, and laughing, Gregori pulled himself to his feet and peeled off his shirt. From under the work bench he pulled a different bottle, this time of flame-red liquid. He filled his own glass and then one for her. 'Let's make magic.'

His pale chest glowed in the light and for a second Anna wanted to lean forward and run her tongue along the muscles there, but it could wait. She lifted her glass to his and then drained the drink in one, in harmony with him. Expecting the harsh burn of vodka, she was surprised by the sweet warmth that slid down her throat, filling her chest and stomach and then exploding outwards through her nerves and capillaries, her entire body tingling.

Somewhere in the depths of her mind a small part of her thought she should be concerned. However, the heat was too good to ignore and, abandoning the voice inside that clamoured of drugs, she lost herself in the sensations. Seated at his workbench, she saw Gregori reach into the container and scoop out a lump of shiny, pink clay, the wheel starting to turn, and his hands shaping it while never taking his eyes from her. Watching the spinning wheel, she had the strangest feeling that something inside her was spinning too, but her mind was too numb to think about it, and she was sure it couldn't be important. Nothing seemed particularly important apart from her urge to dance. Vaguely she realised that the music was louder, and rolling her head backwards she started to move, lost in the light and the rhythm, the pink liquid and the spinning wheel.

Time passed in a kaleidoscopic blur and despite the alcoholic haze, somewhere deep inside, Anna was sure that she was dancing better than she had in her whole life. Her limbs and joints were fluid as she bent and stretched, hips twisting expertly, her hair slick with sweat down her back.

At some point, she dimly became aware that her heels and toes were blistering, or maybe bleeding, inside her boots her feet felt wet, and her knees were starting to ache, but she couldn't stop herself moving as if she and the wheel and the music were all tied in together. The foot pedal that was driving Gregori's pottery wheel was also driving her body, the control over it no longer hers. Cramp shot up through her right calf and she tried to cry out, but her voice didn't seem to work anymore. Panic and exhaustion fought for supremacy in her synapses and the bright light above filled her head, her movements so fast that it seemed like a strobe. Somewhere behind her eyes, tears formed, tears of confusion and fear, and her last thought before she passed out was of Robert and the realisation of how much he loved her.

She knew something was wrong as soon as she opened her eyes. Her cheek was pressed into the dais, her body curled up in the foetal position, skin trembling and numb. Somewhere across the room, a woman laughed but from her place on the floor the sound seemed like an eternity away and she didn't yet have the energy to focus her eyes. What had happened to her? What was in that red drink? For a minute or two she didn't move, her head throbbing as she became aware of pins and needles tingling in her fingers.

Eventually, slowly accepting that this wasn't a dream, she lifted herself up slightly, pain in her joints flaring into life, deep in the core of her bones. Anna's heart trembled. This wasn't just stiffness, this was more than that. As if at some point during her dance she'd developed crippling arthritis.

Pulling herself into a sitting position, she moaned as she looked down at her hands. This couldn't be right, this couldn't be right at all. What was happening to her? What had he done to her? Where her skin had been pale and elegant, the fingers long and manicured, she was now covered in unsightly red and brown blotches and her left hand curled up like a claw. Trying to stretch it, she cried out in pain, dispelling any last shred of hope that this was merely a nightmare brought about by an excess of vodka.

Raising her head, she looked at the workbench. Frozen in a moment of sensuous movement, there stood a perfect replica of her, exotic against the rough wood. She stared at it. It wasn't just a copy of her; it was as if the model was imbibed with her beauty and sex, the tiny figure mesmerising. Looking down, her jeans seemed too baggy, as if she were just skin and bone underneath. Painfully she dragged herself to her feet, the crookedness in her back not allowing her to straighten fully. Tears prickled at the back of her eyes as she stepped down from the dais and shuffled towards the two figures on the tatty mattress.

Gregori had his arm around a peroxide blonde in a tight-fitting T-shirt dress who was laughing and speaking to him in Russian as she went through Anna's bag, removing her passport. Looking up, she smiled and threw the roubles from Anna's Gucci bag at her feet. Ignoring the money, not sure that if she bent down she would be able to get up again, Anna watched as Gregori kissed the woman with all that Russian passion. It was the guide from her tour of the armoury, and with sudden clarity Anna saw how beautiful the woman was without the overdone make-up and set hair. Sitting by Gregori, she was fresh-faced, her hair hanging loose, making her look like a young Debbie Harry. The woman looked at her with disdain, and then whispered something to the still bare-chested man beside her. Gregori stood up and walked to the work bench, picking up the doll. Anna stood silent, unable to move, unable to accept his duplicity. Unable to accept her own arrogant foolishness.

'So what do you think of my art, Anya?' He held the figurine up close to her face and seeing all of herself within it, the tears fell free.

'What have you done to me?' Even her voice didn't sound like her own, carrying a rasp in the words that was never there before.

He frowned, and she could see the hard cruelty in the lines of his face. He seemed younger than he had when she'd met him. The veneer of sophistication that he had used to lure her was gone, and in its place she could see the man that he really was. Cruel, talented and hungry to succeed in this equal society. 'I've made you immortal.'

From the corner of her eye she saw the tour guide slip her British passport into her own bag. Her soul numb and violated; she wondered briefly how much money they would get for it. Was nothing of hers to be wasted when it could be taken and bartered and used to escape from the equal life? What extremes of theft were these?

Still carrying the doll, Gregori went through the small door leading into the shop and Anna followed him, trying to grab at him, needing more of an explanation. Panic pumped at her tired heart. She needed to know when she was going to feel normal again. When these drugs were going to wear off. She couldn't go back to the hotel and Robert just yet. She wouldn't be able to explain herself. Glancing at her wrist, there was an empty space where her Cartier watch had been, and looking at the shop window she could see it was still dark outside. Maybe she would just tell him that she'd gone for a walk and had been robbed. He wouldn't need to know everything. As soon as her body got back to normal she would go back. Go back and forget that this had ever happened.

Turning to Gregori, her heart froze and she felt the tinkling of her life and soul breaking inside. She could see a reflection in the glass of the cabinets, a disfigured stranger staring out, and it was only when she met the terrified gaze that she realised the reflection was her own. One half of her face had sagged completely as if she'd had a stroke, and a series of lumps and boils were protruding over the skin that had lost its youthful tone.

She watched in horror as her reflection raised a hand, and then her own fingers confirmed what she was seeing, navigating the new shapes of her face with trembling digits. She stared, oblivious to both

Gregori and the woman now dressed in his shirt who stood in the workshop doorway.

Her head echoed with the story Gregori had told in the Armoury. The aristocratic model that had hidden out her days in a nunnery. The husband whose grief had made him a murderer. *He was rambling like a madman about magic and the Devil all the way to the executioner's block.* She stared at her stranger's face in the glass and then at herself bottled up in the vivacious doll behind it, and she knew that her beauty and sensuality was lost to her forever. What he had done, could not be undone. It was magic. Russian magic; cold and passionate and alien to her.

Watching her, the woman in the doorway laughed, the sound as thick with the Russian accent as her voice was. 'If he loves you, then you can still go back to your rich husband. He'll look after you.' She raised an eyebrow. 'If he recognises you, of course.' She'd gathered up the roubles that Anna had left on the workshop floor where they'd been thrown at her, and she now held them out with the same disdain that Anna had once felt when looking at her. 'Take this.'

Humiliated, Anna grabbed at the notes with her good hand and shoved them into her pocket, before Gregori grabbed her shoulders, pushing her towards the door. He opened it, releasing her when she was on the cobbles outside. Her boots wobbled; thin weak legs no longer steady in the heels. She was sobbing out loud, her vision blurring as he disappeared inside, abandoning her to the strange city. For a few seconds she banged on the door, but her own noise frightened her and she stood back, panting and lost.

The sticky air was still hot with only a slight breeze signalling that the night was nearly over, and although the streetlamps still cast light down, the walkway was deserted. Tears cast new paths in the unfamiliar contours of her face, and hunching over as she walked, she was glad that there was no longer anyone about to gasp at her body and face that made a mockery of the seductive outfit she wore.

About twenty paces from Gregori's shop, she leaned against the rough wall and slid to the ground, her spirit broken; the reality of her situation dawning on her. She was truly lost. Displaced. There was nowhere for her to go. Maybe a stronger person would have returned to the hotel and to Robert and told him the strange tale of the bohemian on the Arbat, hoping that he would still love her or at least show her pity. Maybe there would be something that plastic surgeons could do to restore some of what she had been before, making her less obscene to look at. But it would never be enough to replace what he had taken from her. That essence was gone for good. And without her beauty she was nothing. She couldn't go back to her life and be *less*.

She had been sitting there for an hour or more, curled in on herself, head buried in her arms, willing herself to die, when she felt the light touch on her shoulder and the warmth of a body huddling down beside her.

'I wanted to warn you.' The voice was soft, the accent American. 'I tried to catch you up, but I couldn't.'

Raising her head, Anna looked into the malformed face of the cowled black figure and saw that she too was crying. A long wisp of blonde hair fell out from the hood, and for a moment Anna thought she could imagine what this shell had once been, with her head thrown back in careless laughter.

'You...you too?'

She nodded. 'My name is Kate.' She pulled Anna to her feet, before peering cautiously over her shoulder. 'He called me Katya.' Her sadness made the words heavy as they drifted away with her breath into the humid Moscow night. Above them the stars were starting to fade, the first hint of dawn's arrival, and the two women shuffled towards the end of the street and towards the Metro station.

'Where are we going?' Anna's body ached, its supple flexibility gone for good and she clung gratefully to the American beside her. Her words were whispered, no longer wanting to draw any attention to herself. Ignoring the main entrance to the underground, Kate led them down the side of the building, stopping at a grate.

'Under the city. Away. There are others there.'

As the two women tugged the metal upwards, Anna took one long last look at the dawning sun, and then disappeared down into the safety of the invisible dark and the tribes that awaited her.

Sarah Pinborough will be one of several guests at the British Fantasy Society Open Night at The George in Fleet Street, London from 7.30pm on Friday 3rd July. Sarah is there to launch her Torchwood novel, along with fellow novelists Mark Morris and Guy Adams. Admission is free.

Detective Comics 854

reviewed by *alasdair stuart*



'Elegy Agitato' Part 1 of 4

Written by Greg Rucka

Art by JH Williams III and Cully Hamner

Colours by Dave Stewart and Laura Martin

Letters by Todd Klein and Jared K. Fletcher

In the wake of the 'Batman RIP' storyline, DC continue to ring in the changes in Gotham. However, whilst the new Batman and Robin and the launch of titles like Red Robin and Sirens of Gotham has got a fair amount of attention, arguably the most impressive book in this new line up is Detective Comics.

Greg Rucka remains one of DC's best, and frequently, least well used writers and the constant delays on the Batwoman reboot he pioneered have become increasingly representative of that. One of the architects of DC's first and to date most successful weekly comic, 52, Rucka is adept at dealing with street level characters, with people who are flawed and damaged and do the job anyway.

Which is why this four part story, focussing on the new Batwoman, Kate Kane, works as well as it does. Hitting the ground running, it follows Kane through a night trying to chase down the leader of the Religion of Crime, one of the most effective and unsettling elements of the new DC universe. She's fiercely good at what she does and feels at home on the Gotham skyline, a lighter figure than Batman but no less competent, no less terrifying for that.

However, it's in the transitions between the different parts of Kate's life that both Rucka and Williams III excel. Kate's nights swim in black and blue, a bruise coloured romance of crime fighting but her days are cold and stark, flooded with light and lacking in comfort. The failure of her social life and the profoundly unsettling, militaristic relationship she has with her father are laid out here with an economy and elegance of writing and art that's all too rare in comics. Williams III floods the Batwoman pages with dynamic, slanting panels that show Kate in constant motion, always fighting, always searching, an idea too big to be constrained by the page whilst the daytime panels are plain, blocky, restricting. The conflict between civilian and superhero, secret identity and mundane reality is a touchstone of most superhero comics but it's rarely been done better than it is here.

'Pipeline', the back up feature is equally impressive and deals with the other side of the super-heroic coin. Renee Montoya, former GCPD Homicide detective and inheritor of The Question superhero identity has re-located to California and set herself up as the super-heroic equivalent of a search engine, filtering questions asked through her website. Whilst most of them range from trivial (Where are my car keys?) to ridiculous (What happened to the Lindbergh baby?), one attracts her attention. Inevitably much shorter than the lead story, it follows Renee as she begins to investigate a human trafficking case, managing to set up her new status quo as well as get the plot into motion. Aided by typically impressive, burly artwork from Cully Hamner it rounds the issue off on a high.

'Elegy Agitato', and the return of Batwoman it represents is a long, long overdue breath of fresh air. Smart, dark and stunningly illustrated this is one of the best Batman family stories in years. Don't miss it.



Issue 1 'Union'

Written by Paul Dini

Art by Guillem March

Colours by Jose Villarubia

Letters by Steve Wands

Catwoman has had a hard year, having her heart torn out and then getting thrown through a car. To make matters worse, Gotham is still recovering from the anarchy surrounding the multiple Batmen and Catwoman is nowhere near as recovered as she thought she was. Reluctantly banding together with Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn, she decides that there's safety in numbers, but she may be wrong...

Paul Dini is rightly regarded as one of the best writers ever to work on the Batman family, having produced the definitive Batman cartoon in the '90s as well as numerous comic forays into Gotham. He's also one of the lynchpins of the re-launched Batman family, writing both Streets of Gotham and this title, focussing on three of the city's quintessential bad girls.

It's a shame then, that this is such a variable debut issue. After the street level pragmatism of Rucka's Detective Comics it's difficult to care about a skull faced, ultra-sonic gauntleted villain wannabe. The idea, that Boneblaster is a completely inept villain who still almost kills the weakened Catwoman is sound but the character is painted too broadly to even be a credible threat.

The other characters fare a little better, and Dini has a particularly good ear for both Catwoman and a newly concerned, focussed Poison Ivy. The best sequence in fact is when Ivy takes Catwoman back to the house she 'shares' with Edward Nigma, keeping the Riddler in a drug induced haze on the couch whilst she does what she likes with the building. Ivy is both resolutely normal and utterly alien and she's rarely been written better than she is here.

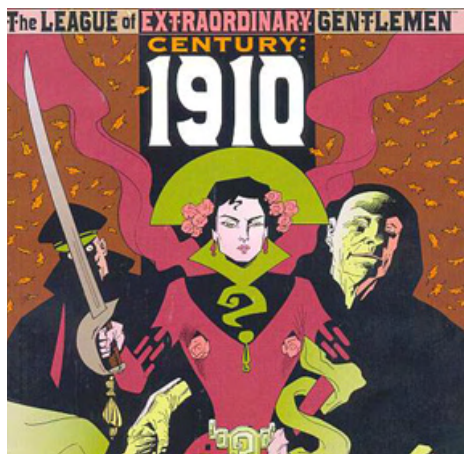
Harley Quinn, Dini's creation, is the third protagonist here and may well be the one that divides the book's readership. She's perennially cheerful, cheerfully insane and feels oddly dated, an iconic character from the '90s era who seems oddly out of place now. It'll be interesting to see how this book goes about changing that and the fact that Harley is the only character not in costume throughout may be significant.

Guillem March's art however is where the book is going to take the most flak. March has a tremendous sense of scale and the first page splash, of Catwoman tumbling across the Gotham skyline, is superb but his character work varies from excellent to borderline caricature. March does an excellent job of distinguishing between his leads, and his face work is excellent but there are panels here which aren't just cheesecake, they're anatomically impossible cheesecake. There's one particular shot of Zatanna picking herself up out of a Jacuzzi that's just plain bad artwork and March is capable of much, much better.

Gotham City Sirens has a lot of potential, especially in the interplay between the three leads and the clear implication this is going to be less than a happy union. However, the occasional lapses into cheesecake and the uneasy marriage of hard-boiled Gotham and superheroic pantomime do it no favours. There's potential here, certainly, it's just not quite realised yet.

The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen - Century: 1910

reviewed by *alasdair stuart*



Written by Alan Moore

Art by Kevin O'Neill

Published by Top Shelf

Available Now

Edward Carnacki wakes from dreams of an apocalypse. Captain Nemo breathes his last trying to make peace with his daughter. Jack MacHeath returns to London and begins to kill once again. The century has turned and Mina Harker and the League of Extraordinary Gentlemen find themselves racing to catch up with a plot that spans a century...

Moore and O'Neill's love for English fiction is visible on every page of this characteristically impressive volume. Moving to Top Shelf from DC, the series has also undergone a format change, with one graphic 'novella' released a year for the next three years. Each will be set in a different time period with this first volume set in 1910.

Much of the enjoyment to be had here comes from seeing Mina Harker, previously set up as a fiercely competent, controlled figure, struggling to maintain a grip on the most disparate league yet. Carnacki the Ghost Finder, Raffles the Amateur Cracksman, Quartermain's son and Orlando are all well drawn, entertaining characters with Orlando in particular a wonderful, tired, foppish figure who gets many of the book's best lines. None of these people are quite in control and none of them have the strength of personality of the previous League members, making for a far more forboding, doom-laden story. The League are out of their depth and that only looks set to get worse as the story continues.

It's also fascinating to see Moore playing in the ruins of the previous stories. The plot dealing with Janni, Nemo's daughter is presented as darkly comic tragedy, her story narrated by Suki Tawdry and played out against the return of James MacHeath to London. The collision of musical theatre with comics will be jarring for some readers but Suki's consistent sung narration of Janni's story is arguably the strongest element of the book. This is a world that's changing too fast for anyone to understand, and the League, immortal as some of them are, simply can't move fast enough to keep up.

This volume finishes with a moment of total, abject horror, a scene that draws a line underneath the previous two volumes and suggests the rest of the story will take an even bleaker turn. It's a tough read but also an immensely assured one, balancing the fanfiction elements of working with so many classic characters with a story about the end of a century and the start of another, a story filled with grandeur and gradual decay. This won't be a good century for the League, but it looks set to be a fascinating one for it's readers.

The HIPPIECast

reviewed by *alasdair stuart*

Written and read by Janet Neilson

Available now for free through Itunes, Podcast Alley, Podcast Pickle and more

It's very easy to do modern horror or urban fantasy badly. It's extremely difficult to do it well and it's all but impossible to do it well and make it look easy. Janet Neilson makes it look very easy indeed with *Chaos Magic*, the first podcast serial dealing with the staff of HIPPIE.

The Headquarters for the Investigation of Paranormal Phenomena and Interdimensional Entities are a group of five people with one job; guard The Way, keep the various denizens of the various types of London away from each other's throats and, if at all possible, get paid to do so. Actually, their job tends



to be pretty complicated and that's even before you get to the fact they're called HIPPIE.

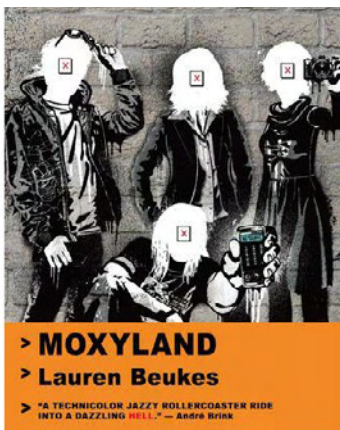
But now, something terrible is coming to London and Rachel Hutton, HIPPIE's resident psychic and Oracle has a single word clue; watch. But as she and her colleagues, perky DJ and witch Annette, foul mouthed investment banker and Celtic demi-god Carl, no nonsense Doctor Emma and newbie photographer Mike investigate it becomes clear that what they're dealing with is a city wide problem. Witches attempt to invoke the Aenid at a nightclub, frogs fall from the sky in the financial district and something as funny as it is unspeakably horrific happens in Hamleys. London is starting to losing it and the City of Complications appears to be living up to it's name...

There's a gleeful, uniquely English sense of the absurd to a lot of *Chaos Magic* that evokes not only the best elements of *Neverwhere* and it's ilk but also the sort of surrealism that lay at the heart of TV shows like *The Avengers* and *The Prisoner*. This is the absurd wearing a nice hat and smiling with a few too many teeth, a polite Armageddon that can only be stopped by five unique and uniquely likable people. The interplay between the perennially furious Carl and the perennially calm Emma is particularly fun, as is Annette's relentless cheerfulness in the face of supernatural doom but everyone gets their moment to shine. There's a particularly nice moment between Carl and new boy Mike that says a lot about both men as does Rachel's deep-seated, sleeves rolled up practical compassion and the way it contrasts with her otherworldly abilities. They're all refreshingly grounded, flawed people who do their best despite those flaws and as a result are a very unusual and highly likable group of heroes.

Chaos Magic is smart, frequently very funny and shot through with both darkness and a real sense of place. If you're even remotely a fan of urban fantasy or horror then you need to listen to this. Just be prepared to never look at a cuddly toy the same way again...

Moxyland

reviewed by ellen j allen



by Lauren Beukes
Published July 1st 2009
Angry Robot Books
rrp £7.99

Followers of cyberpunk have grown used to novels set in cities around the globe; LA, Tokyo, Chiba. With the exception of Tad Williams' *Otherland* series, South Africa has largely been passed over in favour of more technology-friendly places. *Moxyland* is set in a near-future Cape Town in which political instability and corruption provides the perfect home for big corporations to test out new products.

Cape Town, with its mix of corporate money and ghettos, is a city under strain. The police are brutal, quick to crack down with as much force as they can get away with without having to do extra paperwork. And in the event of a terrorist incident, they are allowed to use extreme measures, such as spraying crowds with a modified form of the Marberg virus - a virus similar to Ebola, which liquefies the insides of its victims unless they get to a government-controlled clinic in time for an antiviral to be administered. With such attacks happening across the city, unpredictable in their targets and timing, the city's inhabitants don't question the powers the police hold. Nor do they object to the stranglehold which the big corporations have on the city; a hold which keeps the disenfranchised on the streets. The ultimate threat is to be shipped out of the city, into the countryside, where epidemics rage and death is all-but-certain.

In this city, technology is pervasive. Anyone without a mobile phone is, de-facto, an outcast. Computer gaming can be a paid occupation, albeit black-market. And now the new nanocytes are joining the mix, with unpredictable and explosive consequences. Spraypaints combine with LEDs to display a new level of graffiti. Toby, one of the main characters, records his life with his BabyStrange coat, with which he can also edit, remix and upload his streamcast.

Everyone has a mobile phone. It is credit card, ID and door key all rolled into one. But each mobile phone is fitted with a defuser, capable of being activated by the police, which acts like a taser on the phone's user. Cause trouble for the police, and they don't even have to reach you to put you on the floor. Cause too much trouble, and they can fine you - through your phone - or they can disconnect you. If you're disconnected, you're out of society. You can't use public transport, go shopping, enter your own apartment.

Kendra, an artist hoping to break into the big time with her photographs, signs up to become a postergirl for Ghost, a new soft drink. The nanocytes produce a luminous green and silver tattoo of the drink's logo on her wrist, but in addition, they boost her immune system, her reflexes. They also addict her to Ghost, but they give her a high every time she drinks it - fully legal, and better than anything else.

Toby, a jaded streamcaster - a next-gen blogger - spends his time arguing with his mother, sleeping with a succession of beautiful young women, partying, and engaging in subversive criminal activities with Tendeka, an idealistic anti-corporate anarchist who is getting help from an anonymous source. With some of the disenfranchised street kids Tendeka is trying to help, they end up caught in a web of terrorist activities.

Lerato works for one of the big corporations. She was educated by one, head-hunted out by another, lives in corporate housing in a corporate zone of the city, and spends her time working on software projects and incidentally doing her best to gather top-secret information she can use to barter her way into a better position at another company.

In *Moxyland*, idealism is subverted into fighting for the very things the characters think they're fighting against. Life is cheap when profits are at stake, and in the end, the corporations will do whatever it takes to stay on top. But as the characters ricochet off each other's lives, changing them forever, the unforeseen consequences of technology 'in the wild' have implications that threaten to undermine the entire city.

Moxyland is bewilderingly fast-paced, slick; a next-generation cyberpunk that gets the heart pounding. My only complaint is how short the book is - I can't wait to read the next one. If you're a fan of cyberpunk, this is definitely a must-read. If you're not, give this a go anyway - you'll see what you're missing.

FEATURES

GUN FOR HIRE.

by *guy adams*

"Some people's photography is an art. Mine is not. If they happen to be exhibited in a gallery or a museum, that's fine. But that's not why I do them. I'm a gun for hire."

- Helmut Newton.

3. Work Avoidance

There is nothing quite so mentally fluid and ingenious as a writer avoiding work. We excel at it. If you want your house cleaned then give a writer a book contract and dump him amongst the dust bunnies and dirty crockery. Perhaps your garden needs sorting out? Ditto... just whisper that deadline in his ears and put the shears in his hands. Book and DVD collections get alphabeticised, pencils get sharpened down to their

erasers, tipp-ex graffiti fills the desk. The only thing you can practically guarantee will not happen is work. Anyone would think we hated this ridiculous dog's arse of an existence we stupidly call a livelihood.

Having our main writing tool hooked up to the internet is a godsend of course, now we can bother other Facebook and Twitter users with our alleged intention to extricate a digit and do some bloody work later. Either that or play Chain Rxn... for *days*... Certainly we'll get started in a moment but there are blogs to update, downloads to manage, news-sites to poke at and wonderfully disgusting pictures of people putting things in other people to pore over. The internet is a busy place, it distracts writers with its bright colours and sounds... At any given moment the internet contains five thousand writers staring vacantly at LOLcats listening to each others Twitter blips and trying not to fill their face with vodka or wine until a suitably respectable hour has been reached... say breakfast has at least begun to be digested.

We say that this "idler" phase *is* working and there's a degree of truth to that, a writer never switches off and sometimes his conscious mind and the silly flesh sock he carries it in are sent into silent running so that the subconscious mind can do its thing. An example: after a day of doing nothing much more constructive than poking the cats with sticks and organizing my DVD collection according to ISBN number, I was sat in the car park of Lidl (I'm not proud of it but we're a poor family and can't afford real shops) and was struck by a creative realization that turned a slightly dead-in-the-water story commission to one that positively spasmed with life. Not looking the problem directly in the eye had done its job -- though please don't think I'm signing up as one of the airy-fairy "sit and wait for inspiration" writers, more often than not storytelling issues are solved not only by looking them directly in the eye but also snapping their fingers one by one until the bastards behave... writing is contrary, like most things in life. The point stands: however indolent I may *appear* I am usually working in one way or another, just occupying the cumbersome physical bits of gubbins while the mental stuff falls into place.

Unless I really am just being lazy of course.

Enough, I've got work to do...



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