

"Gasp, Choke, Good Lord!" is a Black Centipede novella I did a couple years ago, a very early take on the character. This is not quite the Centipede of "Creeping Dawn" and subsequent works. I don't know when or if "Gasp" will ever see print; the Centipede stuff I'm doing for Pro Se now is going in chronological order, beginning in 1932, and this novella is set in 1952. If it ever gets published, it will require a massive overhaul, since there are continuity conflicts with what I'm doing now.

Be that as it may, I hope you will check it out and enjoy it. Fans of the old EC horror comics should get a kick out of it. What REALLY happened with Doctor Fredric Wertham, William M. Gaines, and the dread Comics Code Authority? The Centipede knows. And so can you. Download it as a pdf from Mediafire. Again, my sincere thanks to everyone who has helped make my first year as a pulp writer so enjoyable.

LINK:

I should mention that everything in the pdf associated with EC Comics-- characters, stories mentioned, art-- is the copyrighted property of EC Comics. I own nothing and profit not from it.

<http://theblackcentipede.blogspot.com/>

## **‘GASP, CHOKE, GOOD LORD!’**

### **A tale of the Black Centipede**

*From his secret archives*

*As told to Chuck Miller*

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## ***PART ONE:***

# **“TAKE ME DOWN AS THE BALLGAME”**

## **CHAPTER ONE**

Revenge, they say, is a dish best served cold.

For a time, back in the early 1950s, there was a regular Meals on Wheels operation going on, and quite a few individuals with nasty skeletons in their closets had heaping plates of preternatural vengeance delivered to them in a manner that was very cold indeed.

Before it was all over, I learned a few things I was going to have trouble digesting, and I bore witness to a turning point in the history of American mass culture.

And I saw once again just how little difference there really is between the darkness and the light, and how neither of them can be relied upon to reveal the unvarnished truth.

My involvement in these bizarre events began on what was a red-letter day for a large segment of the population—the opening of baseball season. I had been summoned to the Central City Ball Park in Zenith (which was actually on the outskirts of town) by the Commissioner of Police, Stanley Bartowski, with whom I enjoyed a reasonably cordial working relationship.

The park was cordoned off, police guards stationed at every entrance. They waved me on through, which earned me malevolent looks from a gaggle of reporters, and I made my way onto the playing field proper. The place was crawling with uniforms and crime scene techs.

I caught sight of Bartowski, in the center of the diamond beside the pitcher's mound. He was barking orders at eight or nine subordinates. A couple of uniformed cops were leaning on shovels, clearly unhappy with their current task, wiping sweat from their faces. The mound appeared to have been excavated to a depth of at least two or three feet, and plainclothes forensics men were carefully removing things from the hole and placing them into plastic bags. A couple of police shutterbugs were snapping shots of the proceedings.

I headed in his direction. When he saw me, he waved his hand and yelled.

"Centipede! Good to see you, man. This looks like the kind of thing you'd take an interest in. Weird doesn't begin to describe it."

"What's up?" I asked, as I shook hands with the Commissioner. That was the way it was in those days. I had passed the peak of my fame a few years earlier, with the cancellation of my pulp adventure magazine, but I was still treated as one of the guys by law enforcement. Though I had no real official status, I enjoyed the kind of deference that would be shown a high-level consultant.

"What's down?" Bartowski countered, waving a hand at the hole in the ground. "One Edgar 'Fast Eddie' Guzman, pitcher for the Zenith Centrals. We're fairly sure everything we found here belonged to him, but the lab boys'll have to have a go at it downtown before that's official."

I squatted down to have a closer look. There was nothing left in the hole at this point other than some tattered bits of cloth and a couple of crime scene guys. As I watched, one of them brushed away a little mound of soil and uncovered what appeared to be a human eyeball.

"Damn," he muttered. "Missed one."

"Hmm," I said, "I have the feeling that this Guzman was ill-used."

"That's putting it mildly. He was literally torn to pieces, limb from limb."

And everything that had been on the inside was pulled out. I haven't seen this kind of carnage since the gang war between Doctor Almanac and the Stiff, back in '38."

A young man in a sweater and khaki pants was gingerly lifting the eyeball with a pair of forceps, to deposit it in a plastic evidence bag.

"The first game of the season was today. It barely got started, though, before someone noticed something very strange about the pitcher's mound."

"Such as?"

"A small marble plaque was sort of embedded in it. Covered up with a thin layer of dirt until the game began and the pitcher took the mound. He uncovered the thing. Very nicely done, actually. Just like a foot marker in a cemetery, only smaller. Now, get this: On that plaque was engraved the words, 'Edgar "Fast Eddie" Guzman, Pitcher, Murderer, R.I.P.'

"And that's when he noticed a couple other weird things. The mound looked as though it had been disturbed, like it had recently been dug away, then replaced. The game was halted so someone could have a closer look. When they did, they found what appeared to be a severed arm just beneath the plaque. The game was called off and the manager called the cops. We came out, dug up the mound, and found the rest Mr. Guzman buried a bit deeper.

"We collected the parts-- most of 'em-- bagged 'em, and sent 'em downtown. The coroner was here earlier, supervising, and he rode with the remains. And that's where you came in. Literally. Just now."

"Cut to pieces, was he?" I asked.

"There was evidence of a few cuts, yeah," Bartowski said. "Mainly, though, he looks to have been torn to pieces, like I said."

I stood up. “That’s not something you see every day.”

He snorted. “Funny you should say that. “Here lately, we have been seeing things like this pretty much every day. Some of ‘em a lot worse than this. We’ve kept it out of the press so far. I’m surprised you don’t know about it. You been out of pocket for a few weeks, I guess. I tried getting hold of you two or three times.”

I nodded. I’d been down in Argentina for almost a month, trying in vain to get a lead on the whereabouts of Bloody Mary Jane. She’d been working with some Nazis who had taken a powder after the fall of Berlin and were trying to set up a sort of floating Fourth Reich. I finally tracked down her headquarters, but I arrived thirty minutes after she’d departed for good. The fact that she had double-crossed her Aryan pals, killed most of them, and absconded with their smuggled loot was some small consolation-- as was the opportunity I was given to kill the handful of goose-steppers she had left alive—but all in all, I could not count the soiree an unqualified success.

“Fast Eddie here doesn’t really fit the pattern,” he said. “But it’s a level of weirdness we’ve never seen before, so... You wanna drop by the office later, I can let you look at the files. I’d tell you wouldn’t believe a word of any of it, if you were anybody else but you. I couldn’t believe it—wouldn’t believe it-- myself until I just had no choice.”

“What’s the big deal?” I asked, intrigued.

“Not here,” said Bartowski. “This thing is... Well, you’ll see what it is when you come downtown. I’m hoping you can make some kind of sense out of it.”

“That’s me,” I said from behind my black mask. “A bringer of light into the darkness.”

Bartowski looked at me as though he didn't know what to make of my remark. I'm sure he didn't. He really didn't know just what to make of me in general. He looked on me as an ally, and even liked me after a fashion. But he knew or sensed that I had been steeped in things he wasn't equipped to understand, and that made him leery. He might even have been a little afraid of me. I was something dangerous and potentially volatile in a way that made him glad I appeared to be on his side.

I told him I'd like to look around a bit on my own, and he turned his attention back to the gaggle of cops and techs in and around the hole.

I wandered around the field more or less aimlessly, eyes closed, to see what I could perceive. There was definitely something strange in the air, something I could not define. I just knew it shouldn't have been there.

I walked around the bases, paying close attention to the lines in the dirt, examining the bases themselves. Then I gave my attention to the area around home plate. After a few minutes, I came to a rather shocking conclusion. As soon as I was sufficiently convinced that my idea might hold water, I went and spoke with Bartowski.

"Stan," I said, "I don't know what you'll make of this. I don't know what I make of it, frankly. You did say that the body had been torn to pieces, right?"

"Yeah. All in pieces. And it didn't look like it was done on the spot, there in the hole, either. There was very little blood, for one thing. And the body parts looked like they'd just been dumped in any which way, piled together all willy-nilly."

I nodded. "That fits. Judging by some traces of things I've observed on the field here, I'd say somebody had a little fun with Fast Eddie's remains before they buried them."

"Fun?" he said, with a terrible expression on his face. I read trepidation,

disgust, and possibly a little fear. I couldn't imagine what kind of "fun" he was imagining, but it must have been unspeakably unpleasant.

So I imagined I'd better lay out my hypothesis for him, in the hope that it wasn't as bad as whatever he was conjuring in his mind.

"I think somebody used the body parts in a game of baseball."

"Come again?"

"There are very shallow impressions in the dirt along the base lines that look as though they were made by unraveled human intestines. Faint smears of blood and fluids on the bases themselves that might have been made by various excised organs.

"There are some odd splatter marks in the area in front of home plate, and what might be small bits of brain matter. I'll detail it for you later, but right now you should tell your people not to disturb things any further. Cover up those bases and take them downtown where they can be tested. Tell the techs what I said, and have them go over the scene with my hypothesis in mind. Same thing with the coroner or whoever examines the body."

"Yeah," he said with a sort of stricken look on his face. "I will. Jesus, Centipede... Who would do such a thing? And on opening day, no less! Why, it's... it's sacrilegious!"

"A shocking breach of protocol," I agreed. I made arrangements to meet the Commissioner downtown later in the afternoon.

I was on my way out of the stadium when something caught my eye. Up in the stands, which should have been empty, I saw two people. I was sure they weren't cops. One of them, a stocky young man with dark hair and horn-rim glasses, was standing behind a seat about halfway up to the top row. And ten or twelve rows behind him was a small girl, perhaps eight or

nine years of age. They did not seem to be together, or even aware of one another. The man was gazing blankly out over the field. The little girl seemed to be looking directly at me. She gave me a strange feeling.

Be that as it may, I figured I had enough on my plate right now, so I turned and proceeded on my way. When I glanced back over my shoulder at the exit, I saw that the man and the girl were no longer there.

## CHAPTER TWO

I had one or two errands of a personal nature to run, and it was just getting dark when I arrived at police headquarters. I walked in through the lobby, where a desk sergeant named Essex was having what looked to be a slightly heated conversation with an older gentleman in a nice suit and tortoise-shell glasses. Not the type one usually sees in police stations. I couldn't hear what was being said, and probably wouldn't have cared if I had. I nodded at Essex, who gave me a sort of "save me" look (A desk sergeant's life is made rich by the steady stream of crackpots, lunatics and misguided solid citizens.), but my business was rather urgent, so I silently wished him well as I mounted the stairs to the second floor.

Bartowski was waiting for me. He didn't say a word, just gave me a look I could not interpret and waved his hand at several bulging file folders piled on top of his desk. His silence was eloquent, as I found out when I picked up the one on top and started thumbing through it. There was nothing he could have said to prepare me for what I was reading.

The better part of an hour passed in this fashion. Finally, I finished the eighth and last of the files. It was no easier to swallow than the first one had been.

I looked up from my reading. Bartowski was in his chair behind his desk smoking a cigar, his third since I had arrived. "This is extraordinary, Stan," I said.

He nodded. “I told you. Was I right or was I right? I mean, I’ve seen some weird stuff, okay? You have too. But nothing like this. Not ever.”

I just nodded. As far as weird stuff goes, Stan didn’t know the half of what I’d seen, nor did he need to. He’d sleep better if he didn’t. I’d been places he was literally incapable of imagining. Even so, the contents of his files were something special, even to someone with my experience.

“Stanley,” I said, “I have seen things that would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood, make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres, thy knotted and combined locks to part, and each particular hair to stand on end, like quills upon the fretful porpentine. But revenge murders committed by walking corpses is a new one on me.”

“What’s a porpentine?” he asked, scratching his head.

“It’s what they used to call porcupines. I was quoting Hamlet’s father. You’re not familiar with the story?”

“Nah,” he said. “My family wasn’t religious at all. I’ve never even read the Bible.”

“It wasn’t... Well, never mind. The point is, how and why is all of this happening?”

The earliest incident dated back some six weeks. It took place outside the city limits, in county jurisdiction, but city detectives had volunteered to lend a hand.

The thing had almost been overlooked because the initial report came from a pair of young boys. They claimed to have been in a cemetery one night performing some kind of a hoodoo ritual to get rid of warts. They said a pair of grave robbers had shown up and started to exhume a freshly-buried casket. The boys, who watched from hiding, were terrified when the grave robbers reached the casket. The lid had been flung open

from the inside, they said, and the recently departed had sprung up, grabbed the desecrating duo, and pulled them down into the grave. Then the cadaver began pulling the piled dirt back into the hole, at which point the boys fled.

A sheriff's deputy decide to have a look for form's sake, since the two boys had no reputation for hoaxes or tall tales, and seemed to be quite sincere. The grave did, in fact, appear to have been disturbed. Subsequent investigation revealed evidence that was consistent with the boys' story. There were three corpses in the grave, the old man who had died a few days earlier, and his two nephews. The nephews, who did not enjoy a good reputation in the area, had evidently intended to steal an expensive ring their uncle was wearing when he was buried. Examination of the coffin showed that the lining had been clawed at from the inside, and there were a few other indications that the corpse of the old man had indeed performed just as the boys claimed.

That one raised an eyebrow or two.

Two nights later, it happened again.

This time, a criminal bottom-feeder named Jimmy Cooper showed up at the home of the judge who had sentenced him to death several months prior. The truly odd thing was that the sentence had been carried out three days before Cooper showed up at the judge's door. He had been pronounced dead and his body had been buried. Or so everyone thought. It appeared that the deaths of a couple of the jurors from Cooper's trial had also been Jimmy's handiwork. Acting on a tip, the cops opened Jimmy's grave and found an empty casket.

The judge got lucky, though. He took a swing at the ambulatory cadaver with a fireplace poker. The blow knocked the late Jimmy Cooper off his feet, and he fell in a heap on the floor. Literally. His body was in a fairly advanced stage of decomposition, and the judge's lucky swing proved to be his undoing. By the time the cops got to the scene, Jimmy was acting

like a dead body ought to act.

That one caused a mass dropping of jaws.

Then, as Bartowski had said, similar incidents started to unfold every couple of days. I will spare you any further details. I'll just say that each new incident was more bizarre, more fantastic, and further beyond the reach of rational explanation than the last.

"We're stumped," Bartowski admitted. "We are stumped and then some. Nobody knows what to think, say or do. We've been keeping a lid on this stuff, hoping that we can somehow find an explanation that makes sense." He shook his head. "This is like black magic or something. I mean, this stuff isn't supposed to HAPPEN, for God's sake."

"I doubt that's whose sake it's happening for," I said. "But one never knows. Right now, I cannot offer you any insight or hope. I'll check with some of my contacts, see if I can get some sort of a lead. Meanwhile, I'd like to have a look at Fast Eddie Guzman's remains."

"How come? He's one of the few corpses we've found lately that wasn't up walking around!"

"True. But I have a feeling it's related just the same. Say, what happened to the other cadavers? The ones that got caught red-handed, as it were?"

Bartowski shrugged and shook his head. "They've been confiscated. The orders came from higher up. And I mean higher up than me, the chief, the mayor and the governor. I don't know who has them or where they are now."

"Hmm. Curiouser and curiouser. Well, let me get started on this. I'll call you as soon as I know anything."

"I'll call Spangler at the morgue and tell him you're coming. Thanks,

Centipede.” He seemed not to have a whole lot of hope, but I thought I detected a tiny glimmer of something, perhaps a bit of faith in the wonder-working power of the famous Black Centipede.

As I took my leave of him, I hoped I could live up to it.

But I would not have bet the farm.

### CHAPTER THREE

When I left the Commissioner’s office, I noticed the same little man I’d seen on my way in. He was still railing at the poor desk sergeant. Actually, I wasn’t at all interested until he said something that caught my ear.

“His name,” the little man said shrilly, “is Albert Fish. And he wants revenge!”

I slowed down.

“Yes, doctor, you’ve said so a number of times,” replied the long-suffering sergeant. “And you have also advised me that this Mister Fish died in the electric chair in 1936.”

“Yes indeed,” the man snapped back. “And what has that got to do with anything?”

The sergeant rolled his eyes. “Well, sir, it’s just that we don’t get a whole lot of harassment complaints against people who have been dead for more than fifteen years.”

“Well,” said the Doctor with considerable hauteur, “then it looks like you’d take it more seriously when you do!”

This actually sounded like something that might be relevant, in light of

what I had just been reading, so I resolved to do my good deed for the day by rescuing the doctor and the desk sergeant from one another.

There was only one Albert Fish who had died in the electric chair in 1936 that I knew of, and that was one too many.

Fish had been a thoroughly revolting piece of work. There is evil, and then there is just plain scum, and Fish was the latter. I became the Black Centipede in order to pursue a quest. I wanted to understand the dark power I had perceived in the background and beneath the surface of all things. I have contended in one way or another with such agents of that power as Bloody Mary Jane, Doctor Almanac, Professor James Moriarty, and a great many others. While I didn't exactly respect any of them, there was always a level below which I knew they would not sink.

Not so with Albert Fish. He was a below-the-bottom feeder of the worst imaginable sort. Had I been involved in the case, and had I been the one to capture him, I would have killed him as quickly as possible, burned the body to ashes, then burned the ashes.

"Good evening, Sergeant Essex," I said. "I couldn't help overhearing your conversation. Perhaps I can be of help to the doctor."

Essex looked incredibly relieved. "Perhaps you can, sir," he said. He addressed the doctor. "Doctor Wertham, this is the Black Centipede. Maybe you've heard of him?"

"Oh, I have indeed," said the doctor, grabbing my hand and pumping it with more enthusiasm than tensile strength. "A true-to-life superhero! This is quite a thrill, and an honor, sir. My name is Wertham. Doctor Fredric Wertham."

"A pleasure to meet you," I said, gingerly but firmly reclaiming my hand.

"The pleasure is mine, I assure you," Doctor Wertham assured me. He

seemed to think he was still shaking my hand, though it was back under my sole control. I touched him on the wrist and he stopped pumping thin air. "I am what you might call a fan of yours, sir. I was quite addicted to your adventure story magazines and comic books. They left a void when they disappeared from the stands, sir! How wonderful it is to learn that you are still active!"

"Well," I said, "I tend to keep a rather low profile these days." I lowered my voice. "And, if you don't mind my saying so, anybody who believes he has had recent dealings with the late and universally unlamented Albert Fish might want to do the same."

The Doctor glanced at Sergeant Essex, who was gazing longingly at an unfinished game of tic-tac-toe on his desk blotter.

"Yes," he said, "I suppose you're right. I must admit, the situation is somewhat... unique. It may be that you are better qualified to hear my complaint than this... civil servant."

Essex rolled his eyes again. The little doctor tended to inspire a lot of eye-rolling, I imagined. I gave the sergeant a sympathetic look, which, unfortunately, he could not see through my mask.

"Ah, yes," I said. "I do specialize in unusual cases."

"As do I, Mister Centipede," said Wertham, "as do I. Perhaps as two men of the world, we can sort this thing out."

"Quite. If you'd care to accompany me to my automobile, we can go someplace less... public, and discuss your situation."

Wertham agreed, Essex grinned, and I steered the little doctor out through the front entrance, and down the street in the direction of my car.

As we passed a small newsstand on the corner just past police

headquarters, Wertham exclaimed, “One moment, sir!”

He dashed over to the newsstand and started riffling through the comic books on display. I said hello to Freddie, the newsboy, and we exchanged pleasantries while Doctor Wertham made his selections.

“I hate to miss an issue, and what with all the confusion lately, I...” He had picked out four comic books. I glanced at the titles as he dug in his pockets for the forty cents he owed Freddie. “Haunt of Fear,” “Vault of Horror,” “Tales From the Crypt” and “Crime SuspenStories.” He tucked them under his arm and we continued on our way.

“You actually read those things, Doc?” I asked.

“Oh my, yes,” Wertham said. “I find them absolutely delightful. The horror comics in particular. “ He waved “The Haunt of Fear” under my nose. “The reader receives a wonderful moral education from these tales, Mister Centipede. Fabulous use of allegory. Murder will out, sir, that is the lesson. There is no such thing as a perfect crime. Retribution is always assured.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, taking the comic from him and thumbing through it.

“These magazines specialize in tales of the supernatural in which someone believes that he has committed the perfect murder, or some other act of depravity, and gotten away with it,” Wertham explained. “In every instance, they have taken great pains to escape human justice, and it appears as though they have succeeded.

“However, they find themselves taken quite by surprise when their victims return from the dead and mete out justice. Rather in the tradition of Poe’s ‘Telltale Heart,’ you see, except they are much more literal, and thus, I believe, more effective. The message could not be more clear: CRIME DOES NOT PAY.

“I believe, sir, that if every child in America read these comics on a regular basis, we would see the problem of juvenile delinquency virtually eliminated. In fact, I have been compiling data with a view to writing a book on the subject. ‘Salvation of the Innocent’ is the title I have in mind.”

I handed him back his comic book as we reached my car and I unlocked the passenger door for him. All I had noticed in my cursory glance through its pages was one lurid illustration after another of badly-decayed corpses doing nasty things to living people. I wouldn’t have had any use for it at all had it not been for the police files I had so recently perused.

I got behind the wheel and started the engine.

“A fascinating theory,” I said, “but for the moment, let’s stick to the problem at hand. What about Albert Fish? I’m familiar with his history. I’d like to hear about your recent experiences—whatever it was that prompted you to come down to the police station today. I trust you won’t mind accompanying me to the county morgue? I need to have a look at something over there that pertains to a case I’m working on.”

“Not at all,” he said. “I’m a medical man myself. A psychiatrist, actually. And it was in that capacity that I first met Albert Fish.

“I examined him for the defense. My conclusion was that Fish was hopelessly insane, and not responsible for his actions. I testified thus at his trial, in fact. It didn’t help much. He was sentenced to death, and that sentence was carried out on January 16, 1936, at Sing Sing Prison in New York.

“You know, Fish appeared to be nothing more than a meek and innocuous little old man. He seemed gentle and benevolent, and was always friendly and polite. If you wanted to entrust your children to somebody... he’d be the one you would choose.”

He shuddered. “That’s exactly what happened, you know. That poor little girl, Grace Budd. He took her from her family on the pretext of escorting her to a child’s birthday party. And then he...”

“Yes, Doctor Wertham,” I said. “I know what he did.”

The psychiatrist nodded. “Albert was what I call a ‘polymorphous pervert.’ A rather colorful term for a rather colorful collection of disorders. I do believe he practiced, at one time or another, every perversion and deviation known to man.

“In any event, he was, as I say, executed. He was buried shortly afterward in the prison cemetery. It may interest you to know that his body is no longer there. This I have learned from contacts I have in the prison system. Nobody knows just what happened. One morning they simply found a hole where Albert was supposed to be. This was about six weeks ago, shortly before he first showed up on my doorstep.”

“Ah,” I said. “We have arrived at the crux of the matter. I believe it was at this point that you lost the attention of Sergeant Essex.”

“Small-minded man, I must say.”

“Well, be charitable, Doctor. You’re a psychiatrist, so I’m sure you’re aware that ninety-nine times out of a hundred, when a person claims to have seen a walking cadaver, it can be rightly attributed to mental disease.”

“Granted. I suppose. But I would think my standing as an expert on mental diseases would lend my story that much more credibility.”

“Yes, but you know how laymen can be,” I commiserated, with the sort of heartfelt sympathy I had long ago learned to fake brilliantly. “Men of your standing have to make allowances at times.”

“Well, there is that,” he allowed. “At any rate, Albert, as I say, showed up on my doorstep—literally—two days after the disappearance of his body was discovered.

“It was him, no mistake. He was instantly recognizable to me in spite of the fact that he was... oh, let’s say considerably the worse for wear. Possibly not as bad as one might expect from someone who had been rotting in the ground for fifteen years, but please don’t quote me on that.

“He hammered at the door, loudly demanding to be admitted to my house. I opened an upstairs window and declined—very politely under the circumstances, I thought. This seemed to agitate him, and he proceeded to berate me in the foulest language I’ve ever heard from anyone, living or dead.

“He accused me of deliberately botching my testimony at his trial, and blamed me for the death sentence he had received. Well, as I tried to point out to him-- gently but firmly, you know-- the fact that he had killed and eaten a little girl had more to do with the harshness of his sentence than anything I did or failed to do at trial. But I fear he was beyond the reach of logical argument.

“He eventually gave up and left, just as the sun began to rise, but he promised he’d be back, and he has kept that promise every two or three days since. I relocated temporarily to Zenith in hopes of eluding him, but he found me almost immediately. At my wit’s end, I appealed to the police department, with the shameful result that you witnessed earlier.”

“All of that is quite interesting in light of certain recent events. And then, of course, there is the remarkable parallel with those comic book stories you like.”

Wertham looked puzzled. “What sort of parallel do you mean?”

“Well,” I said, somewhat astonished, “the whole thing with the dead coming back to life to have their revenge on the living.”

He looked thoughtful for a moment, then he said, “Why, by Jove, you’re quite right! I hadn’t made the connection. Interesting, yes, very.”

It was my turn to roll my eyes. Fortunately, the Doctor couldn’t see me do it. Even more fortunately, we had arrived at the County Morgue.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The morgue was in something of an uproar. A rather small one, but unusual for a place that was normally—forgive me for this—so dead. I parked in the lot and Wertham and I got out. Vincent Spangler, the night attendant, was standing outside the front door, talking to a couple of uniformed cops. He was being rather shrill, and I couldn’t quite get the drift of what he was saying. When I did, I wished I hadn’t.

“Somebody stole the body?” one of the cops was saying as I edged into the conversation. Vincent gave me a look, and the cops nodded politely in acknowledgement of the mysterious hero in their midst.

“No,” said Vincent with exaggerated patience. “I didn’t say that. No one has been in here. I said he’s GONE. That’s all.”

“What do you mean, he’s gone?” I asked. I knew what it had to be about, but I asked just the same

“I mean he isn’t here,” said Vincent, his voice climbing into the upper registers.

“Who?” I asked.

“The guy you came here to see,” said the exasperated attendant. “Fast

Eddie Guzman. The guy they brought here all in pieces. In fact, I no sooner got off the phone with Bartowski, who told me to expect you, when... Well, none of him is here. It's all... GONE! So I called the cops."

The two uniforms exchanged a glance that was just short of an eye-roll.

"Where did it... Where did he go?"

"Out!"

"Out where?"

"How should I know? He's just gone. Fast Eddie Guzman—every fragment of him—has left the building."

I had known Vincent for several years. I liked him, though I had no particular reason to. He and I had seen some unusual things pass through the Zenith County Morgue, but none of them under their own power.

"Well, then, HOW?" I had a bad feeling that if I managed to drag an answer out of Spangler it would be the one I was afraid of. It also appeared that he was afraid to say it.

The cops stood back and folded their arms across their chests, obviously relieved to have someone to whom they could pass this particular buck.

I looked them over. One of them I knew slightly, a young guy named Kelso or Kelvin or some such thing. "How much do you guys know about... what's been going on?"

This got me a couple of blank looks. I figured the need to know had not yet trickled down to the uniforms on patrol. "Maybe you two should call the Commissioner. I just left his office. Tell him I'm on the scene here and

tell him Fast Eddie Guzman... isn't. He'll know what you mean."

"I hope so," said the older cop, "because I don't know what I mean." The two of them headed back to their patrol car to use the radio. Evidently young Kingston, or whatever his name was, had arrived independently at something approaching the right conclusion, because I heard him grousing to his partner as they walked away:

"Things have been getting weird in this city lately. I hear stories. And I'm sorry, but I draw the line at corpses that get up and walk. They never covered such things at the police academy. I swear, I'm moving out to California, where stuff like this doesn't happen..."

I turned back to Spangler. "Okay, Vincent. Give."

He sighed and chewed on his lower lip. "Okay," he said. "Okay. You're the Black Centipede. You specialize in..." He waved his arms to represent the nebulous and unspeakable things I specialized in.

"Come on," he said. "I'll show you."

He strode off down the hall, and Wertham and I followed. Into the cold room we went. One of the bank of large drawers set into the wall was pulled all the way out. It was empty but for a pile of black plastic bags, also empty.

"He was here," Spangler said. "And now he's not. I did not remove him. I do not believe any employee of this morgue removed him. But he is gone. He got out somehow. Nobody did it. What does that leave?"

I knew the answer to that, but didn't dare say it out loud. Vincent had no such compunctions.

"What it leaves is that Fast Eddie somehow pulled himself together—literally—then forced open his drawer and walked out. Did you

notice the footprints?”

In fact, I had. I notice just about everything. But I have the ability to instantly prioritize, and some items automatically go onto the back burner.

The footprints Vincent referred to were faint but unmistakably the tracks of human feet, bare and rather large. They would have taken a size 11 or 12 shoe. They were a reddish-yellow color, as though the barefoot individual had been tracking blood and other human ichor all over the clean tile floor. I had noticed them in the hall. The toes were pointing toward the exit door. And the tracks appeared to have started here, in the cold room, right beneath the empty drawer.

Which, added to the things I had learned earlier in the day, was conclusive enough.

“But nobody actually saw anything?” I pressed Vincent. I sensed he was holding something back.

“Well-l-l...”

“Who, Vincent?”

He glanced around. “Well, he’s not really supposed to be down here. But he takes such an interest in it. The work, I mean.”

“Vincent...”

“Okay, okay, jeez... It’s my boy. My son. He likes to come help out.” Vincent smiled, displaying a bit of macabre parental pride. “He’s a natural, my Gordon. Nothing fazes him. He’s a regular little ghoul! Well, nothing fazed him until tonight...”

“Where is he?”

“The break room. C’mon.” I followed Vincent and Wertham followed me. I had almost forgotten the little psychiatrist was there, he was being so uncharacteristically quiet.

“It’s got me worried,” Vincent confided. “I think he’s in shock.”

We made our way to the rear of the building, and ended up in a space a little bigger than a walk-in closet which contained a small card table and two chairs, as well as a Coke machine. Sitting in one of the chairs was a boy of about 12. He had a thick mop of yellow hair, but you could tell by the shape of his head that it wouldn’t be long before it started to recede, and when it did, it would make a thorough job of it.

He was sitting there, elbows on the table, an untouched bottle of Coke in front of him, staring at something far beyond the wall in front of his face.

“Gordie,” Vincent said gently. “There’s a gentleman here who’d like to talk to you.”

The boy swiveled his head and gave us a dull look. He seemed slightly taken aback by me, but one got the impression I wasn’t the strangest thing he’d seen tonight.

“Uh,” he said. Which didn’t give me much to go on.

I was casting about for an opening when Wertham stepped in. he sat down in the other rickety chair and gave Gordie a big smile.

“You’ve had some excitement tonight, eh? Extraordinary goings-on, yes? I must say, I envy you, young sir.”

Gordie looked to his father, who had nothing for him. He gave me a cautious glance, and got even less. So he turned back to Wertham.

“Well,” he said. “I didn’t... I mean, that is to say... Uhhh.” Gordie’s normal speaking voice was even higher-pitched than his father’s near-hysterical keening had been. “I didn’t say I actually SAW... what I, uh... saw.”

“But you did see something,” Wertham pressed. “Something out of the ordinary.”

Gordie closed his eyes and gripped his Coke bottle. “Son,” Vincent said, “I understand if it scared you. I mean, nobody’s going to make fun of you...” This earned him a fierce scowl from Spangler the Younger.

“Oh, no,” said Wertham, clapping young Gordie on the shoulder. “This is not a young man who gives in easily to fear, I can tell. It’s evident from the set of his jaw!”

Gordie, who had begun nodding enthusiastically, shot Vincent a nasty “so there” look, and turned his attention back to the wise and perceptive stranger. “I wasn’t afraid at all,” he squeaked. “It’s just that sometimes when you see something you never saw before, you don’t know what to do with it, y’know?”

“Indeed I do,” Wertham said, nodding. “I see a lot of unusual things in my professional life, too. And I can tell that you are a man after my own heart, one who does not allow himself to be rattled by the unexpected.”

“That’s absolutely right, sir,” Gordie beamed, turning briefly to spear his father with another pointed glance, this one containing more smugness than anger or shame. “I am pretty much fearless, I guess. You know, I’ve been around dead people since I was just a kid. I ain’t afraid of them at all. A lot of the kids I go to school with are.”

“Foolish children,” the psychiatrist commiserated.

“And how!” Gordie agreed. “I always tell them how dumb they are. Dead

people can't hurt you, I tell them. How can they hurt you when they don't do anything?" Then he stopped, and a stricken expression passed across his face.

"At least... they didn't before tonight," he finished, casting his gaze down to the floor.

"Ah yes!" Wertham said brightly. "Tonight you witnessed an extraordinary phenomenon, correct? Something very few others have ever seen." I had to hand it to the doc. He sure knew how to milk it.

Gordie looked up, the expression of horror that had been dawning on his face giving way to a puckish grin. "You ain't just whistling 'Dixie!' I saw that drawer pop open, and then all the parts that man had been cut up into sort of slithered out of the plastic bags they were in and put themselves back together! Honest to gosh!"

"Yes," Wertham said gravely. "This is a unique situation. We are fortunate that our witness is a man such as yourself, rather than some frightened, superstitious youngster. What else did you observe, Mister Spangler?"

"Well, not much else. Once he was all together—he didn't look very good, you know, but he was together—he hopped off the drawer and walked out."

"Quite," the doctor said. "It may interest you to know that I myself have seen a man who had been dead for fifteen years get up and walk around. I found it very unnerving. I marvel at your composure in the face of such a spectacle."

"Aw, it's nothing, sir," Gordie allowed modestly. "He didn't even seem to know or care that I was there. He just took off toward the exit like his drawers were on fire, like he had somewhere he needed to be right away."

Wertham, Vincent and I exchanged grave and ominous glances. Of the three of us, I was the only one who understood the full implications of Gordon's statement. I didn't know just what Wertham knew or thought he knew or deduced, and Vincent was clueless, of course.

The boy narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "Y'know, it seems like information like that ought to be worth something to the person who gets it."

Wertham's eyebrows went up. Vincent pinched his son's arm hard enough to draw a little squeal. The psychiatrist smiled and reached into his pants pocket.

"You're quite right, young man," he said. "The entrepreneurial spirit should be encouraged in people your age." He fished out a quarter and handed it to Gordie. The boy gave it a mildly sour look, but pocketed it just the same.

I saw nothing more to be gained at the morgue, and felt an urgent need to do something productive, though I had no idea what form it should take. I only knew I needed to do it immediately. We took our leave of the Spanglers. Gordie had an expression on his face that made it plain he would be insufferable for quite some time to come. Vincent had an expression on his face that made it plain he knew and dreaded it.

On the way to the parking lot, I had an idea. I exchanged a few words with the two cops, who told me that Bartowski was unavailable, but Lieutenant Davies was on his way.

The only thing Davies and I had ever agreed on was that the world would be a better place if one of us was either retired or dead. I saw no point in hanging around. I asked the cops to give him my regards, and to instruct him to talk to the Spanglers. I would be in touch soon, I said, not knowing whether or not I was lying.

Heading toward my car, I said “Doctor, I plan to pursue a lead. I can leave you here to talk with the Lieutenant when he arrives, if you’d like. But I would prefer that you accompany me.”

After witnessing Wertham’s performance with young Gordon, I had realized the value of having a trained psychiatrist in tow.

Especially since the man I proposed to visit was criminally insane.

“I’d be glad to,” said Wertham. “I can be a sort of Robin to your Batman, eh? You know, I think those comics do society a real service by portraying a wholesome, nurturing relationship between a man and a young boy. The sort of thing that would build real confidence, along with trust and responsibility, in a boy at that stage of his development.”

“Yet another fascinating theory,” I said absently as we headed back to my car. “When it comes to keen psychosocial savvy, Doctor, you are full of it.”

“Thank you,” he beamed.

So Robin and I piled into the Batmobile and headed off to pay a visit to a crazy dead man.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

The crime lord known as the Stiff had once been a very different sort of animal-- a brilliant young prosecutor with the Zenith District Attorney’s office.

That had been a lifetime or two ago.

J. Russell Melchoir had been a rising star, showing nothing but golden promise, until an attempt on his life changed him forever, both physically

and mentally.

In 1934, a group of thugs, on orders from the reigning mob boss at the time, beat Melchoir savagely, then sealed him inside a barrel of formaldehyde, which they dumped into Zenith Bay. This, obviously, was not meant as a warning to back away from his anti-mob activities. This was meant to be terminal, and by all rights it should have been.

But Melchoir came back.

How he survived, nobody knows. Of course, “survived” is something of a relative term, because the man that came out of the Bay was not the same one who had been thrown in.

Speculation is as abundant as it is worthless. Some believe Melchoir died that night, and returned to the world by way of some supernatural agency. Others aver that his survival was a medical fluke of some sort.

It is clear that immersion in the formaldehyde and the waters of Zenith Bay transformed Melchoir physically. His skin was badly damaged, permanently bleached out and scarred. It seemed to have shrunk and drawn itself tight, so that the outlines of the bones underneath were plainly visible.

Once a handsome and healthy young man, he now looked like a mummified cadaver, and always would. There were no chemical or surgical solutions available to him. He soon began to see himself as an avatar of living death, a creature of the netherworld who maintained tenuous ties to the world of the living. His earlier ambition and altruism gave way to twisted narcissism and criminal tendencies of a subtle but ruthless and implacable nature.

Melchoir developed a death fixation, if not an outright fetish, and the Devil only knows what else.

The first thing the Stiff did following his “birth” was to find the gangsters who had done this thing to him. He killed them all in ways that I see no need to describe here. Suffice it to say that the third- and fourth-hand stories I heard gave me nightmares.

Me, the Black Centipede.

Following his orgy of retribution, the Stiff rapidly seized control of Zenith’s organized criminal underworld, a process that called for a great deal more killing. Many people, myself included, saw this as a sort of community service. Sociopathic degenerates who had been invulnerable to the law for decades started to disappear. Soon, all the bosses and underbosses were no more, and the foot soldiers belonged body and soul to the Stiff.

After he won the mob war with Doctor Almanac—with a covert assist from yours truly (and thereby hangs a tale for another day)—the Stiff and I had established a sort of detente. We had a relationship that was not remotely chummy, nor was it especially antagonistic. I reasoned that there would always be crime in Zenith, and that it would always organize itself under someone’s banner. I’m talking about things like gambling and prostitution, the so-called penny ante stuff that makes up the foundation of every mob fortune. That being the case, the Stiff was a much better expression of the inevitable than Almanac or any of a dozen or so other contenders who emerged over time. I imagine he had probably come to a parallel conclusion about me.

It was understood between us that he had nothing to fear from me, so long as he remained within certain parameters, and vice-versa.

I walked a fine line with the Stiff, shielding him from the law when I could, and working to keep his more violent and bizarre impulses in check. And, of course, we played endless mind games with one another. But we were careful, because if anybody on either side of the law found out about our arrangement, there would be serious repercussions for both

of us.

As for what he really was... That was a question I simply could not answer.

My feeling was that he had developed some genuinely otherworldly qualities in the years he had been the Stiff. The exact form these may have taken, I did not know. But there was something about him, a fey quality that had increased over time.

I am not an adept by any means, but I have a certain sensitivity that I have cultivated over the years. I can sense things without being able to pinpoint them. And I had been sensing something all day. At the ball park, in the Commissioner's office as I read his files, and again at the morgue. Something was going on, of that much I was certain. I hoped the Stiff might have some insight, because beyond the fact that *something* was there, I had none.

But the whole thing seemed to revolve around murder, resurrection and retribution—the very stuff upon which was laid Stiff's foundation. If anyone in Zenith had an inkling, it would be him.

Whatever dehumanizing effect the Stiff's experiences had had on him, they had done nothing to dampen his sense of the dramatic. He approached the whole death fetish thing with the flair of a Republic movie serial villain. He generally dressed in the sort of monkey suit people get buried in, and his "secret" headquarters were in an old funeral home out on Mockingbird Lane.

That was where we went.

I parked, told the doctor to stay in the car, and circled the building on foot. I saw no sign of life. All the windows were dark. I pressed a very sensitive listening device to a couple of the doors and windows, and heard nothing. This was curious, as the Stiff never had fewer than a dozen bodyguards on

hand at any given time.

I got a hollow feeling of disappointment. It seemed obvious that the lord of the manor had gone elsewhere. But, since he was the best lead I had—slender though it was—I decided to make absolutely certain. I went back to the car and told Wertham to lock the doors and stay put. Then I made my way to the rear door and had it unlocked in less than a minute.

The interior was dark and forbidding, and smelled faintly of flowers and formaldehyde. There was nothing there that shouldn't have been, as I ascertained from a quick inspection. But I had a feeling, so I continued to poke around. I checked the ground floor and the second story, and came up empty.

That left the basement. The place where the embalming was done. This funeral home was not a front, I should mention. It was a viable commercial establishment, and ordinarily did a pretty brisk business. Most of the clientele were on the shady side of the law. The mortality rate among gangsters is pretty high to begin with. And, in addition to the regular mob funerals, the Stiff operated an unlicensed disposal service for those who had bodies they needed to get rid of for good, with no questions asked.

I found him in the basement, in a small room—more like a cubbyhole—off in the corner of the large facility, with its steel tables and unspeakable machinery. This tiny room was fitted with a thick steel door that had been bolted and padlocked on the outside. I peered in through the little Judas hole and saw him sitting on the edge of a cot. Apart from that, the room was utterly bare.

“I’m in here, William,” he said.

It is a disconcerting fact that the Stiff somehow knew my real name. I’ve no idea how. I hadn’t used it in years. I had, I thought, erased every trace of the boy I had been before I met Lizzie Borden.

“So I see,” I replied. “How did you come to be in there?”

“I locked myself in.”

“Why did you do that?”

“Because if I were not locked in here, I would murder everyone in Zenith.”

“On a whim?”

“Obviously not. There is a Spirit of Vengeance abroad in the land right now. It has been gathering strength for some time, and it is so strong now that it calls the dead from their graves. Knowing what you know of me, my past and my present, it won’t surprise you to learn that I am particularly susceptible to it. When I felt the call becoming too strong to resist, I resorted to this. I’ve sent everyone else away. If I ask you—if I implore you, or threaten you, or entreat you to release me, you must refuse.”

“I can do that. What do you know of this spirit? I believe it has been causing a great deal of trouble, and I’d like to come to grips with it.”

He chuckled. “To do that, William, you may have to walk right into its mouth. Are you strong enough to do that without succumbing?”

“Perhaps. I have spent much of my life staring into the abyss, and I have yet to blink.”

“I see. So you view yourself as incorruptible?”

“Hardly. I am spectacularly corrupt, but on my own terms.”

“I’ll give you that. Are you certain, then, of your invulnerability to this thing?”

“Hardly. I am certain of almost nothing. ‘If you can look into the seeds of time, and say which grain will grow and which will not, speak then unto me.’ But I have to do what I always do. I have to go where it lives.”

“Suppose it comes to you where YOU live?”

“Home court advantage.”

He laughed again. “Well, if anyone can manage it, it’s you. May I ask a favor of you, William?”

“Of course.”

“I feel that I may be of help to you. With your influence, I am sure I can resist the call. Release me, please, and let us begin.”

I shook my head. “That was so transparent, I won’t even embarrass you by commenting on it.”

“Good. Good.” He was silent for a moment, then he continued. “Of the nature of this spirit, I know almost nothing. But I can tell you this: It wears the face of absolute innocence. ”

“Wonderfully cryptic.”

“Thank you. Now, listen to me. If you do not release me from this cell immediately, I promise you I will kill you horribly when I finally do get out. If you do release me, however, I will spare your life.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Of course you won’t. If I could somehow get that door open, I’m the first one you’d kill.”

“True,” he said. “Very few people, apart from you, understand my capacity for ruthlessness. The fact is, if I had ever truly wanted to kill you,

I would have tried and failed by now. And you would have made an attempt on me, which also would have been unsuccessful. We could go back and forth that way for years. What a waste of time that would be. I think our private arrangement is much better.”

So did I. That was the psychology of our relationship.

“Nevertheless,” he continued, “if I could get out of here right now, I would rip out your throat with my bare hands for daring to refuse my demand.”

“Even though you told me earlier not to release you under any circumstances,” I observed.

“Even so. And... If you did release me, I would kill you for defying my earlier request. Or try to kill you. I might not succeed, and if I didn’t, then you would kill me. Knowing all this, I would still make the attempt. That is how overwhelming this spirit is. I am aware of it, I know it for what it is—in a broad sense, of course—and I have considerable mental defenses against such things. And, in spite of all that, I cannot control my reaction to it. This thing is a grave danger to the peace of the world, William.”

“Yes, I get that impression. You have no further suggestions for me? No clue where or how I might find it?”

“I’m afraid I don’t. Though I have a feeling-- not quite a certainty, but a strong hunch-- that it will find you.”

We were silent for a moment, letting that sink in.

“One more thing,” I said. “Now that you’re a captive audience, I’ll make my usual pitch yet again. Won’t you at least give the orgone accumulator a try? What could it hurt?”

I was then, as now, a believer in the work of Wilhelm Reich. His

discovery of the existence and properties of orgone radiation was, in my view, one of the most significant breakthroughs in the history of mankind.

I was not alone in this belief, but I was part of a negligible minority.

I had constructed several orgone accumulators in my headquarters, and I used them periodically. I credit them in part for my incredible longevity.

That night, for perhaps the hundredth time, I told the Stiff I believed orgone radiation could restore him to his former appearance. I offered him the use of one of my accumulators.

As usual, he didn't seem remotely interested.

"Why do you assume," he asked, "that I want to be returned to that which you consider normal? And who are you to make determinations like that? Are you remotely normal? Do you represent any kind of status quo? No. No. I am what I am. This is what is right. This is how I belong."

I wished him luck, promised to check back when—if—the crisis ended, and took my leave.

Regarding the orgone, the Stiff still wasn't buying any, but somebody else had been very interested in what I had said. But I wouldn't find out about that for a few more hours.

I rejoined Wertham in the car. Both of us were blissfully unaware of what had silently climbed into my trunk while I was inside.

## ***THE STIFF***

# CHAPTER SIX

“Where to now?” Wertham asked.

“I haven’t got the faintest idea, frankly. There has to be something I’m missing. Somebody is making these things happen, of that I feel certain. And whoever it is has a lot to answer for. I fully intend to even the score.”

Then it dawned on me. Revenge. A spirit of revenge was in the air, the Stiff had said. And it was affecting the living and the dead.

The plaque left on top of the pitcher’s mound had identified “Fast Eddie” Guzman as a MURDERER. Somebody killed Fast Eddie for revenge. I didn’t know of any charges or even any accusations of murder against him by anyone, but somebody obviously believed he was guilty of something.

And according to Bartowski, there was no evidence that Guzman had been done in by a walking corpse. It seemed likely, then, that the pitcher had been killed by a living agent, some person or persons seeking revenge for a real or imagined murder. Perhaps this Spirit of Vengeance had entered into it, and made whoever it was bloodthirsty enough to pull Guzman to pieces and use him for a game of stickball.

Who would do that? That was a question I knew I could not answer, so I asked myself another one.

What *kind* of person would do that?

There was only one answer.

“We’ve got to get to the Central City Ball Park.”

“What is at the ballpark?”

“Fast Eddie Guzman, if I’ve figured this right.”

“Why?”

“This morning, I was at the park while they were collecting Eddie’s various bits. There was a plaque. On top of the pitcher’s mound, beneath which Eddie lay unquiet. It said ‘Edgar “Fast Eddie” Guzman, MURDERER, pitcher.’ What with one thing and another, it didn’t occur to me to ask who Eddie was supposed to have murdered. I imagine it did occur to Bartowski.”

I had a little radio set in the car that I had rigged up to send and receive via ordinary telephone. My signal was relayed to a station on top of the Benway Building, where it was routed into a phone line. I tapped in the code that rang the commissioner’s number.

“Commissioner Bartowski’s office,” came the voice of Madge, his secretary.

“Madge, this is the Centipede. I need to find out what Stanley knows about Fast Eddie Guzman’s past—specifically any allegations or rumors of murders he might have committed. Then I need him to meet me at the Central City Ball Park. If I’m correct, there may be some bloodshed out there that will make this morning look like...”

“I can’t give him a message,” Madge broke in, “because he’s not here. Shortly after you left, he met with Detective Ditzman, who had been assigned to dig into Guzman’s past. After about ten minutes, the Commissioner got a call on his private line—I don’t know who from—and he and Ditz lit out of here like scalded cats. He just barely bothered to tell me they were on their way to the Central City Ball Park.”

“Well,” I said. “That’s what I call service.”

Madge laughed, but when she spoke, her tone was as grave as I’ve ever

heard it.

“There’s something weird going on, isn’t there? I mean REALLY weird.”

“Yep.” I saw no reason to lie to her, or to elaborate.

“Weird as in end-of-the-world weird?” she continued. “Some of the stories I’ve heard...”

“I hope not that weird. I don’t think so.” Being reassuring is not my strong suit. Particularly since I wasn’t at all sure this was *not* the end of the world.

“Well,” she said. “You take care, then. Okay?”

“I will,” I promised, and broke the connection. We had arrived at the Central City Ball Park.

I pulled up and parked behind Bartowski’s car. As Wertham and I got out, we heard gunshots echoing from somewhere inside the stadium.

We followed the noise to the locker room behind the home team dugout, where we found a scene that would have made Hieronymus Bosch give up and become a landscape painter.

Detective Ditzman was on the floor, dead or unconscious. There were body parts and blood all over the place. It was tough to estimate, but I thought that the scattered remains must have belonged to at least five or six now-defunct citizens. Most of these appendages and organs appeared quite inert, but a loosely-connected amalgam was staggering across the floor toward Stanley, who was backed up against a row of lockers. The shots we heard had come from the Commissioner’s service revolver, which he was now frantically reloading.

Positive identification of the walking pile of parts was impossible, but I

thought it safe to assume that the ambulatory hamburger was the technically late Mr. Guzman.

The Commissioner snapped his revolver shut and pumped some more shots into Guzman. Bits and pieces flaked and chipped and splattered off, but the main mass kept moving. It was no more than five feet from him when the hammer came down on an empty chamber. Stanley got a look on his face that seemed to me to convey a certain regret that he hadn't been more of a churchgoer.

Part of me hated to throw a wet blanket on his Saul on the road to Damascus moment, but my more practical and humane side dictated my next action.

“Stanley!” I shouted. “Get down!”

I whipped a small thermite grenade from a jacket pocket, thumbed the pin out, and knuckleballed it right into what was left of Guzman's torso. It was a pity, I thought, that the former star pitcher was in no condition to appreciate the irony.

Stanley hit the floor, arms over his head, as the thermite went off. Guzman was consumed utterly by painfully bright white flames. He collapsed into a small, smoldering pile. The Commissioner crab-scuttled out of his way.

Getting to his feet, Stanley said, “Now that's what I call a foul ball.”

Wertham giggled. I just shook my head.

Stanley walked stiff-legged, feet splashing in puddles of blood, over to where Ditzman lay.

“He's breathing,” Stanley said, “thank God.”

I reserved my opinion on who ought to be thanked for what, and whether or not they should be thanked at all. Wertham identified himself as a doctor, and moved to the prone man's side.

I joined the Commissioner and we stood watching as Wertham squatted down to examine Ditzman. After poking at him, touching various pulse points, and pulling back an eyelid the doctor announced that the detective had merely been knocked unconscious, and did not appear to be injured in any other way.

No sign of concussion," Wertham said. "He should regain consciousness on his own soon enough." He stood up and looked around him at the clutter on the floor.

"My goodness," he said mildly, "this place seems to have been turned into a sort of charnel house. I'm afraid I can't do anything for the rest of these poor men."

"Well," I said. "If you wouldn't mind looking after Ditz until the Commissioner can radio for some backup, we'd all appreciate it."

Wertham smiled and nodded. I took Stanley by the arm and led him to the other side of the room, close to the door.

"What happened here?" I asked.

Stanley just looked at me. He didn't say anything, but the look on his face was eloquent. He was beyond stunned, probably well on his way to shock. He had seen something that was both monumentally horrible and completely impossible. Few people ever see things like that, and when they do, they all get the same expression on their faces. I have not yet worn it myself—I can't imagine what it would take, frankly-- but I've seen scores of others who did.

I reached into my jacket and produced a pint bottle of very good whiskey,

which I handed to Bartowski. Without any hesitation at all, he accepted it, removed the cap and drank.

He was drinking more than just whiskey. The contents of the bottle were laced with a little concoction of my own invention, something I used when I was pushing myself too hard and suffering the effects of exhaustion and stress. It produced a mild but profound euphoria, sharpened mental acuity, and calmed the nerves. In short, it was exactly what the Commissioner needed at that moment.

“What happened here?” he finally said. “You’re asking me? I can tell you what I saw, but I have no idea what happened. Something that shouldn’t.”

He looked at me and in his eyes I saw desperation. His world had stopped making sense, and he badly needed someone to put things right.

“What do YOU think is going on?” he asked, so plaintively that I handed him the bottle again. As he drank, I shook my head and sighed.

“Stanley,” I said, “I don’t know either.

*“And graves have yawn'd, and yielded up their dead;  
Fierce fiery warriors fought upon the clouds,  
In ranks and squadrons and right form of war,  
Which drizzled blood upon the Capitol;  
The noise of battle hurtled in the air,  
Horses did neigh, and dying men did groan,  
And ghosts did shriek and squeal about the streets.  
O Caesar! these things are beyond all use,  
And I do fear them.”*

He gave me a skeptical look and said, “Is that the Bible again?”

I nodded and said, “Yeah. It’s from the Second Book of Julius Caesar.” I thought of Madge and her Apocalyptic fears.

“Never heard of that one,” he said. “But I might just start reading that stuff after tonight. I never knew you were so religious.”

“Neither did I.”

I thought about all the things I knew, and all the things I didn’t know. There were too many of both. I finished off my bottle of whiskey plus and asked myself a question:

*Where to now?*

**“GASP, CHOKE, GOOD LORD!”**

***PART TWO:***

**“ANGELS AND MINISTERS OF GRACE”**

**SEVEN**

“Tell me what happened, Stanley,” I said. “Not in any metaphysical sense. Just tell me what you saw. I need you to be existential for me right now, okay? What that means is, just the facts. No emotional subtext. Strip all of that out and just tell me what happened.”

Stanley nodded. His color was much better, and his eyes were now a trifle glassy. My concoction was doing its stuff. The drug-induced euphoria would take the edge off. It would get him through this.

I hoped.

“Well,” he said, “not long after you left, Ditz reported in. He’d turned up a whole raft of rumors about ‘Fast Eddie’ Guzman. Bad stuff, really nasty.”

“Such as?”

“Allegations. Stories. Tales. Nothing that would stand up in court. He's supposed to have killed a couple guys. Maybe more. I don't... Well, it's confusing, especially since... Anyhow, it wasn't even enough to amount to probable cause to have him arrested. He was clever, I'll grant him that.”

He glanced back over his shoulder at the smoldering pile of Guzman.  
“Clever enough to get out of a drawer in the morgue and come back here, to where he was...” Stanley closed his eyes, let out a little gasp, made a choking noise in the back of his throat, and said, “Good Lord,” in a voice so desolate and full of anxiety that I did not hesitate to deploy the second bottle of doctored whiskey I just happened to have in another coat pocket.

He administered himself a respectable dose and handed the bottle back to me. “Okay,” he said, wiping his mouth, “That’s better. Gotta get myself together. I’m the police commissioner, dammit. Neither rain nor gloom nor walking stiff nor... whatever.” He waved a hand at the carnage behind us.

I thought it politic not to point out that he had confused himself with the Post Office.

“Come on,” I said. “You can use the phone in my car to call in your backup.”

As we walked out to the parking lot, Bartowski gave me the lowdown.

“To cut a long story short, these rumors Ditz picked up on pointed in the

direction of five men. That's them over there. We came out here and confronted them and they confessed almost immediately. Said they didn't know what came over them. They had intended to take what little evidence they had-- all circumstantial, and just barely even that-- and go to the police with it. They said that it somehow just didn't seem like it was ENOUGH.

"So they... did, y'know, what they did."

"Yes. And you and Ditz came here and confronted them?"

"We did. Wasn't much of a confrontation, really. They confessed immediately. They told us they came to their senses a few hours after they finished their... Ah, their game and buried Guzman's remains under the mound. And put the plaque on top."

"Nice touch, really."

"I suppose. Anyhow, we were about to take them downtown for questioning, when that... you know... showed up. It knocked Ditz over the head and grabbed me. Before I knew what was what, it had tossed me halfway across the room. Before I could get back up and get my gun out, it started tearing the men to pieces. It was over before I could do anything at all. Finally, I fired a couple shots at it, and it started coming after me. And then you showed up. Jesus, Centipede, thanks."

We got to my car and I punched in Madge's code again and handed the receiver to Stanley.

While he was speaking, I saw something moving near the main entrance to the park.

There, standing by the door, was the heavyset man with glasses that I had seen up in the stands that morning. And he wasn't alone. The little girl was there with him, holding him by the hand. I had the curious impression

that she was the one doing the leading, not him.

It sounded as though Stanley had quite a lot to relate to Madge, and he was paying no attention to me. So I began moving toward the doorway and the odd pair standing there.

When I was halfway across the lot, I looked quickly back to my car to make sure Stanley was still occupied. He was. When I looked back at the park entrance, the girl was gone.

The stocky man was still there, though, and he was looking back and forth in mild astonishment at the palm of his hand and the spot on the pavement next to him where the child had been. He looked startled, but not stunned.

I walked up to him and spoke quietly.

I got right to the point. “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

He looked up at me. He seemed less startled by my appearance than he was by the girl’s disappearance.

He squinted at me through his glasses.

“Ah,” he said, “I know you. I mean, I know who you are. The Black Centipede! I had actually been hoping you’d be here. I saw you this morning, you know.”

He seemed primed to ramble on like that at some length, so I repeated my two part question, in the tone of voice I use when I want to let someone know that the time for screwing around has passed.

It is almost always effective, and it didn’t fail me this time.

“Oh, my name is Gaines. Bill Gaines. William M. Gaines, that is, but you can call me Bill. As for what I’m doing here, that’s kind of a long story.”

“I need to hear it,” I said.

Before he could respond, a voice came from behind me.

“Who is this?” Stanley Bartowski asked. He was just ten feet away, walking in our direction. “Who are you? Have you got anything to do with the...?”

I cut him off.

“Stanley,” I said, “This is Bill Gaines. He’s a... reporter. I called him, asked him to come out here. He might have some information I need.”

He eyed Gaines skeptically. “A reporter, huh? I’ve never seen him.”

“I, ah, just transferred here,” Gaines offered, “from New York.”

The Commissioner sighed. “Well, if the Centipede vouches for you, I guess... Ah, whatever. Forget it. I’m going nuts, I guess.” He turned to me. “I have a couple squads coming out here. I’m not looking forward to trying to explain this. Davies is coming, so it might be better if you weren’t here. You know how he is about you. You should probably take your doctor and your reporter with you. I’m going back in, I’ll send him out.”

Stanley started for the entrance to the park, but stopped halfway there and turned back to me.

“Centipede,” he said in a tone of voice I had never heard from him before. “Find out what this is. Make it stop. Okay?”

I nodded. “I will, Stanley. I promise.” I almost hated myself for making such a promise when I had absolutely no idea whether or not I could keep it. But it was what the Commissioner needed to hear.

I would just have to do everything I could to keep from being a liar.

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When Stanley was out of earshot, I turned to Gaines.

“Where’s the girl?” I asked. “She was just here.”

“You see her too?” Gaines wanted to know. He seemed incredibly relieved. “My God, I thought she was... You really saw her?”

“Yes. This morning, and then again just now. Right here.”

Gaines nodded. “She brought me here.” He looked around. “I don’t see her now. I didn’t think anyone but me could see her. I would have thought I was going crazy when she showed up, if it hadn’t been for the... others. I’ve been seeing them for years.”

This sounded interesting. Maybe even promising. Before Gaines could say anything else, Dr. Wertham came trotting out of the park.

“Ah, Mister Centipede, there you are!” He came over and joined us. “And you have a friend! Who is this, if I might inquire? Is he another superhero, perhaps?”

“No,” said Gaines. “Actually, I’m a publisher. My name is Gaines.”

“Gaines?” Wertham said with great apparent interest as he shook the man’s hand. “Not William M. Gaines, surely?”

“Why... yes, I am.”

“You know him?” I asked the psychiatrist.

“By reputation only. And by his work, of course. Why, this man publishes those wonderful comic books I told you about earlier.”

“Well,” I said, giving Gaines a fresh look of appraisal. “That is interesting indeed.”

I could hear sirens in the distance. It seemed a good idea to clear out immediately.

I was wondering where we ought to go, when I remembered what the Stiff had told me. And then I knew. Of course.

“Come with me,” I said to Wertham and Gaines, leading the way back to my car. “I need to hear the rest of your story, Gaines, and I think I know where we can wrap this thing up, one way or another.”

“How?” asked Wertham.

“Where are we going?” asked Gaines.

I slid behind the wheel and started the engine, as Wertham and Gaines climbed in.

When they got settled, I said one word:

“Home.”

*Bill Gaines, way back when*

# EIGHT

For me, that meant the Benway Building, right across the street from City Hall in downtown Zenith.

As we sped away from the park, we passed five or six police cars going in the opposite direction. I caught a glimpse of Lieutenant Davies in the back of one of the cruisers. Suddenly, I was almost overcome by a powerful desire to turn around, chase down his car and run it off the road, and strangle him to death with my bare hands. I actually went so far as to tap the brake in preparation for the turn. But I swiftly got control of myself, and continued on my way.

It was, I assumed, the Spirit of Vengeance at work. The Stiff hadn't been whistling "Dixie" when he warned me. I wasn't as far out there as the Stiff, but I was sensitive, and attuned to wavelengths that were outside the range of normal human perception. I had another slug of my whiskey, earning a look of mild reproach, accompanied by a discreet clearing of the throat, from Wertham. Since Gaines looked like he needed it more than I did, I gave him the rest. He accepted the bottle with evident gratitude, and quickly gulped down several swallows.

It would take us about 20 minutes to get to the Benway, so I asked Gaines—who now appeared somewhat restored-- to elaborate on the little he had told me back at the park.

"Okay," he said. "No point getting coy about it now. I think you might just believe what I'm about to tell you. That makes you a godsend.

"The whole thing goes back a couple of years. I took over the publishing company from my father. He died in '47. Boating accident. Really. An accident. I swear."

“I never would have said otherwise,” I told him.

“Agh. I know. I guess I’m just getting paranoid. What with... everything.

“Well, up until then, we’d been doing some pretty tame stuff. Or the company had. Educational Comics, it was called. Boring, really. Bible stories, funny animals, that kind of thing. I wanted to do something that would pack more of a punch, y’know?”

“So we started doing more edgy stuff. Changed the name from Educational to Entertaining. Then changed the content to match. True crime had caught on in a big way, and we were, I think it’s safe to say, on the forefront with that. Somehow, the horror seemed like a... I dunno, a natural outgrowth of that, somehow.

“Even so, it was fairly tame stuff. Until...”

He fell silent, so I prompted him:

“Until..?”

He sighed. “Until I met Them.”

“Whom?” I hoped I wasn’t going to have to pull every bit of information out of him as though I were extracting teeth.

“Just tell it, Bill,” I said as gently as I could manage. “Don’t worry about anything else. We don’t have that kind of time, frankly.”

He nodded. “You’re right. Okay. I met these three... I don’t know what to call them... Ghouls. Lunatics. GhouLunatics. Whatever.

“At first they came to me in dreams. I thought they were just some manifestation of my subconscious. I was struggling to come up with good

stories. It's not as easy as you might think. I mean, it's kind of a sweatshop deal, the comics industry. You have to have umpteen original stories every single month. Now, obviously, there's gonna be some cutting of corners. I'm not kidding myself that I'm Dostoyevsky or anything. Though he, actually, did a lot of deadline work, too. I mean, he knocked out some stuff that he probably wished he'd had more time to develop.

"Anyhow... That's how it is, but I wanted to at least make a stab... uh, an *effort* at putting out stuff that was, you know, unique. A cut above... Ah, that is to say, better than average, maybe. Why not? Maybe it's just 'funny books,' but I thought... Well, no delusions of grandeur, but maybe delusions of... sustainable above-averageness. God, maybe it was my hubris that..."

He shook his head. I pointed out that he was still rambling, and suggested that he take the remainder of my whiskey on board, which he did, with obvious relish.

"Well, as I say, I started having these dreams," he went on, reasonably coherent, handing me the empty bottle. "What I didn't know was that, at the same time, Al Feldstein was having them, too.

"At first, neither of us actually remembered these three weirdoes. Just the stories. It didn't seem all that unusual, getting ideas from dreams. It didn't seem remarkable enough to even mention, really. I figured I was just on a roll. Or good karma, maybe. I was getting all these neat ideas. Twist endings, O. Henry type stuff, you know? Maybe not the most totally original ideas..."

"But it worked. It caught on. It was a whole new trend.

"We ended up with three horror books. And we came up with these characters... we thought we made them up. A Vault Keeper, a Crypt Keeper and an Old Witch. Each one hosted their own book. Introduced

the stories, you know, made goofy remarks, that sort of thing. They became quite popular.”

Wertham piped up from the back seat. “Yes, and they are delightful, sir. They are part of a long cultural and literary tradition. Mystical storytellers. Rather like Virgil in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.”

Gaines grinned for the first time since I’d met him.

“Yes, exactly,” he said. “That’s very perceptive of you, doctor. They sort of tied everything together, gave it structure.”

“I quite agree,” Wertham replied.

I questioned the wisdom of giving the loquacious psychiatrist free rein, but at the same time, it seemed to be doing some good. If Gaines relaxed a bit, we might get further faster. My prodding was probably not a psychologically sound technique.

“So, this went on for quite a while,” Gaines continued. “And the dreams became more vivid. The GhouLunatics were there, and I came to realize they had been there all along, even before Al and I ‘created’ them. Still no big thing, though.”

“No,” Wertham interjected. “All of this is well within the bounds of recognized psychological phenomena. A function of the right brain, really. There is a fascinating body of theory on the bicameral mind...”

Okay, not *entirely* free rein.

“Mr. Gaines,” I said, politely but with the same vague threat in my tone that I’d used earlier, “tell us what’s happened recently. The little girl. When did you first encounter her?”

“Ah, that was recent. Just the other day, in fact. She was the capper on a

very strange few weeks for me. Everything kind of turned... upside-down.”

“All right,” I said. “That sounds promising.” I felt as though I’d been listening to Gaines for a week or more, and didn’t know anything now that I didn’t know before. The short ride to the Benway was passing at glacial speed. Time seemed to have distended itself just for spite.

“Everything was okay. Until it suddenly got weird. By which I mean really, really weird. This was... Oh, just about six weeks ago.”

I exchanged a meaningful glance with Wertham, though he could not of course see mine through my mask.

“What happened six weeks ago?”

Gaines sighed and gave me a goofy grin.

“The GhouLunatics showed up at the office.”

## NINE

From a dramatic standpoint, that was the perfect cue for a break in the dialog. It came in the form of my realization that time had apparently contracted again and we were almost at the Benway Building.

I have certain secrets that I protect from absolutely everyone, under any circumstances. My tenancy in the upper floors of Zenith’s tallest skyscraper is one of those.

The Benway was built and owned by my grandfather. Now it is owned by me, but you could never prove it. Strictly speaking, I have no real “civilian” identity. I am the Black Centipede. The name I used before that

has no meaning for me. But I have dozens of fictitious identities I use for a variety of purposes. Two of them are on the bogus board of directors of the phony front corporation that owns the Benway.

My father became estranged from my grandfather when I was still a child, the reason being that Dad was a moral, upstanding citizen, while granddad was a “ring-tailed sonofabitch, crooked as a dog’s hind leg.” Those were a couple of Dad’s many colorful terms of endearment he had for his sire. Another example of filial affection was the oft-repeated assertion that “the old bastard would steal the pennies off a dead man’s eyes.”

Which was nothing short of slander. My grandfather would never stoop to stealing two measly cents. Not when he was raking in millions per annum from graft, racketeering and sundry other forms of corruption.

Shortly after I broke with my family in 1927, I secretly reconciled with the old reprobate. He was delighted with this turn of events. I think he saw in me the full flower of corruption that had mysteriously skipped a generation with his son. I saw a source of wealth and property that would be invaluable to my activities as the Centipede.

By the time the old man passed away in 1932, everything already belonged to me. I had swindled, duped and outmaneuvered him time and again, draining his fortune into my own secret coffers via a dozen or more fictitious persons and business entities, without once tipping my hand. He believed almost to the end that he was a victim of the Depression and an incredible run of bad luck.

When he was on his deathbed (ostensibly with leukemia, but in fact with a rather virulent “social disease”), I confessed to him what I had done. The last thing he said to me before he expired-- gripping my hand, his eyes brimming with tears-- was, “You are truly the son of my heart. I am proud of you, boy.”

On this particular night, though I honestly didn't see much point, I went through the top-security motions. When we were still several blocks away, I instructed Wertham and Gaines to put on a pair of blindfolds I handed them, and I turned the radio up loud to kill any possible telltale noise from outside.

I took a short but circuitous route from where we were to an alley that ran behind the Benway. I had a secret entrance around back. Real pulp hero stuff. I used an electronic control and watched part of the wall slide up into a hidden recess, then I pulled my automobile into a heavy-duty elevator. This lifted it all the way up to the 62<sup>nd</sup> floor. Floors 62 through 70 were reserved for my exclusive use. On paper, these floors were occupied by an outfit called Worldwide Charities Inc., but in reality, those nine floors were the Centipede's Lair.

I parked the car in the garage and led my two guests to the regular elevator that would take us up to my living and working quarters.

None of us saw what happened a few minutes after we left the garage. The trunk opened slowly, and out crawled a figure shaped like a man. It was impossibly thin and wasted, so much so that it could not possibly be doing what it was doing—moving about under its own power. It tottered from the car over to the elevator that I and my guests had just used. A bony finger touched the button. This particular elevator had no locks or other security devices on it, since it was only available for use between the top nine stories of the building. Theoretically at least, I was the only one who had access to it.

The doors opened and the apparition got in. It sensed the button that I had pressed—the one for the 70<sup>th</sup> floor—and touched the second one below it. The figure debarked on the 68<sup>th</sup> floor and glanced up and down the corridor. Its rheumy eyes found what it was looking for, a piece of equipment that it somehow recognized.

It moved over to the small orgone accumulator—slightly larger than a

standard telephone booth-- opened the door, and got in.

It pulled the door shut behind it and sat down. The orgone accumulator has no moving parts, no bothersome buttons or switches. It is always “on.”

The cadaverous intruder settled back on the little bench and waited...

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Upstairs, my guests and I settled ourselves around a table in the kitchen, and Gaines continued his tale.

“Four weeks ago, I was working late. Must have been about midnight. I was there by myself. Al and everyone else had gone home. I was in my little office, going over some artwork that I’d just received from Graham Ingels, one of our artists.”

“Ah, yes,” Wertham said. “His work appears primarily in *Haunt of Fear*. ‘Ghastly,’ he is nicknamed. An exquisite draughtsman.”

Gaines nodded. “That he is. Anyhow, I was making some notes in the margins with my blue pencil when I suddenly just knew that I wasn’t alone. I hadn’t heard or seen anything, but I knew someone was there.

“I kept my eyes glued to the page of artwork. I knew that whatever I would see when I looked up was something I’d be better off not seeing. I also knew I had no real choice.

“The page I was looking at was what we call a ‘splash.’ The first page of a story. It was slated to appear, as you are aware, Doctor, in *Haunt of Fear*. As is customary, the page featured a large rendition of that book’s ‘hostess,’ the Old Witch. Graham’s Old Witch can be pretty... unsettling. I stared at the black-and-white face for a few more seconds, then bowed to the inevitable and looked up.

“I was looking at the same face. Only this one was three-dimensional, in color, and moving.

“And as if that weren’t bad enough—which it was—she wasn’t alone. She was flanked by the other two GhouLunatics, the Crypt Keeper and the Vault Keeper. Large as life... Well, maybe not life, exactly, but large. And real.

“I was surprisingly calm at first. Since what I was seeing was obviously impossible, I figured I was just dreaming again, or somebody was pulling a prank. We did a story one time in which Al and I actually met these... freaks. We liked to have fun like that, you know. So, if I was actually awake—which I confirmed by pinching myself on the arm—then Al or somebody was having a little joke.

“ ‘Good evening,’ the three said in unison.

“ ‘Good evening to you,’ I said back.

“ ‘We’re here,’ the Old Witch said, ‘to thank you for doing such a wonderful job. Our work has entered the final stage, and you are largely to thank for that.’

“ ‘We do aim to please,’ I said glibly. I didn’t recognize the voice, and I was straining to figure out who was behind that incredible mask.

“ ‘Then your aim is true,’ said the Vault Keeper. He reached into his robe and pulled out a small stack of newspaper clippings, which he tossed onto the top of my desk.

“ ‘What’s this?’ I said, picking the clippings up. Thumbing through them, I saw that they were very recent crime stories from several different newspapers.

“I was a little bewildered, but as I glanced through them, I noticed something. Every one of the stories contained some element from one of our horror tales! Though none of them actually said a walking corpse was involved, you could sort of read between the lines and see that the situations were identical.

“So I figured it was some kind of publicity gimmick someone had come up with, you know. Mockups of news stories based on our comics. It was a great idea, I thought, and I was going to say so, but when I looked up, there was nobody there. I was all alone in my office. I hadn’t heard or seen anything, but my inner door was closed!

“I jumped up and went to the outer office. There was no one there, either, and the same thing was true for the hallway outside.

“I asked around the next day, and nobody would own up to having done it.

“On an impulse, I went down to the public library branch closest to our office, and started combing through recent newspapers from all over the country. I found most of the stories that were in my little bundle, and more besides.

“Now, here’s the weird part. I know the whole thing is weird, but this is where it got worse.

“These newspaper accounts corresponded not only to stories that we had already published, but others that were only in script form—not even illustrated yet, much less printed. There were even a couple that fit with some embryonic ideas I had that I hadn’t written down yet!”

“Well,” I said. “You were right. That is weird.”

Gaines nodded. “And how. Well, every day I went and checked all the newspapers, and every day there were two or three new stories like the first ones.

“This went on for a few days. I was at a loss as to what I could do. I didn’t even dare talk about it to anyone. I am regarded as... eccentric by people who know me, and if I started talking about what seemed to be going on, I just might cross the line from eccentric to committed. I was frantic, trying to find a rational explanation. I started to feel like I was a character in one of my own stories.

“And it seemed like I wasn’t the only one, either. Every day, someone was living—and dying-- out one of our stories. Nobody else seemed to notice it. Understandable, because no one else had any reason to.

“I thought about quitting. Just putting an end to it. The comics, I mean. And I tried to. I didn’t say anything to anyone, but I made plans. I was going to disappear. Just slip out of town, you know. But there were problems. Whatever happened to me, the company would carry on. Al Feldstein or someone else would keep writing the same kind of thing, since it was so popular. You can’t fight profit.

“As it happened, though, I just couldn’t do it. The GhouLunatics started visiting me at night, in the flesh. They didn’t actually threaten me, they just made it clear that my only option was to continue.

“For a while... Now, this might sound crazy, even in the context of everything else, but I started to think... Well, to wonder if, perhaps, I didn’t possess some unknown power. That I was somehow MAKING these horrible things happen.”

“Not crazy,” said Wertham. “Such a belief is certainly solipsistic and possibly narcissistic, but in light of the evidence you had...”

I jumped in before Wertham could get cranked up. “Yes, absolutely. What happened next, Bill?”

“And then the little girl showed up. She came to my office the night

before last. She never explained who or what she was. She told me that I was being used by what she called a Spirit of Vengeance. Something about creating a climate. She said the whole thing was about to come to an end, that ‘the pieces are almost in place,’ and she wanted me to be there to see it. She told me to come to Zenith and she’d meet me here.

“And that’s what happened. I took a bus out here from New York. I got a hotel room and waited.

“The next morning, I had a visitor. It was the little girl.† She just sort of... appeared in my hotel room. She told me to follow her. It... was strange. When I was with her, it seemed like nobody could see either one of us. We got on a bus without paying, and rode out to the Ball Park. Walked in right past the police and everything. I saw them retrieving that... you know, stuff, body parts, whatever, from underneath the pitcher’s mound.

“And I saw you, too, Centipede. I saw you and I heard what you said about somebody using the... you know... for a baseball game. And you were right. Dead right. I knew that’s what had happened, because I’d experienced it all before. My friend... my co-worker, Al Feldstein, he’s a writer and an artist, and he... He wrote a story a few months ago, and... And it was exactly what happened here, in Zenith, at that ball park, last night!

“And this story... ‘Foul Play,’ it’s called... Nobody but me and Al has ever seen or read it. It hasn’t been published yet! Not even illustrated. It’s just a script, and it’s locked in a file cabinet.”

He spread his arms. “And, so, hey presto, here we are!”

“Indeed,” said Wertham.

“Indubitably,” said I.

“What now?” asked Gaines.

“Now we wait,” I told him. That didn’t go over too well. Both Gaines and Wertham insisted that we ought to be doing something. They got quiet, though, when I asked them to suggest a course of action.

I, of course, was remembering what the Stiff had said, that the Spirit would come to me where I lived. Which was where we were. I didn’t want to tell my companions about all that. No sense fomenting panic. I just hoped I could keep them pacified for however long it took.

“How about a bite to eat?” I offered after a few minutes of grating silence. “You two must be hungry.”

“Not at all,” said Wertham.

“I couldn’t eat a bite,” said Gaines.

“Well, I could,” came an unfamiliar voice from the hallway beyond the kitchen door. “In fact, I’m famished.”

I swung around to see who had spoken. A figure moved into the doorway. It was a man, somewhat stooped, rather bony, with protruding eyes and a large moustache. I recognized the face, though it looked quite a bit younger than most of the photos I had seen of the man. There was a sharp intake of breath from Wertham, followed by a gagging sound and a whispered “Good Lord.” He, too, had recognized the intruder.

The man shouldn’t have been there at all, but if he just had to be, he should have been a decomposing cadaver. Contrary to all good sense, he appeared to be not only alive, but in very good health.

Albert Fish.

# TEN

There, in the very heart of my home, stood the resurrected mass murderer.

He stepped into the kitchen, and I saw that he had with him three of the most miserable-looking specimens I've ever seen. Obviously, these were Gaines' GhouLunatics. They might just as well have been covered in mildew, though they appeared to be clean, in a sort of nasty way. They looked like the sort that would attract mildew and other unsavory things. You'd expect a stench, but there wasn't one.

They looked incredibly old, yet ageless at the same time. Sexless, too. Indeed, the very thought of sex in connection with these creatures would be sufficient to induce permanent impotence. They wore ratty old robes, almost identical but for the colors: green, red and blue. Not festive hues at all. More like bile, dried blood and postmortem lividity.

They waved at Gaines. "Hello, Bill," they chirped in their dry, cracked voices. "We told you this was important, didn't we?" Fish stood still while the trio moved into the room, taking up positions behind Wertham, Gaines and myself and placing their hands on our shoulders in a way that was steely and unmistakable.

We were being restrained.

"Oh my," said Wertham. "Do you suppose poor Albert is the Spirit of Vengeance?"

"'Poor Albert?' " I repeated, aghast. "Doc, compassion can be a wonderful thing, but this character was a child-murdering cannibal!"

Wertham blinked. "Well, when you put it that way... But we all have our crosses to bear."

I shook my head in wonder. “And I’m not at all sure what he is now, but whatever it is, I think it means to do us serious harm.”

“Albert,” he said. “Is this about me? About what you think I did? Am I the reason for all of this?”

Albert Fish, looking anything but benign and innocuous, glared at the psychiatrist. “Yes it is,” he rasped. “It’s about you and it’s about everybody on this earth who treated me the way they did. All I was doing was God’s work. I was looking out for my own soul.

“I thought you’d understand that, and make all of THEM understand that. You didn’t even try. Don’t you remember what you did at my trial?”

“Of course, Albert,” Wertham said. “I did my best.”

Fish laughed. “Your best to get me electrocuted! That’s what kind of best YOU done. That fellow the defense lawyer called to testify—supposedly on my behalf! HA! Some behalf! He asked you that long, long question about me. Remember that? It was just one question, but it took more than an hour to ask it. He raked me over the coals. He brought in everything but the kitchen sink. And do you remember how you answered him?”

“Of course,” Wertham said rather primly. “I recall it vividly. I said, ‘He is insane.’ ”

Fish gritted his teeth.

“Three words! All you could say was three words!”

“Well, I did it for the dramatic effect, you know. Juries are usually susceptible to things like that. So I made it as plain as I could. And don't forget that I had already given quite a bit of very detailed testimony regarding your... impressive catalog of psychopathologies. When it came to my cross-examination, I felt that brevity would be the soul of

effectiveness. I suppose I may have... miscalculated.”

Fish snarled.

“It should have worked,” Wertham added weakly.

“Hell!” shouted Albert. “Should have worked! You know people only ever remember the last thing they hear. All they remembered was you not even defending me. Should have worked! I’m going to show you something that WILL work, Doctor High-And-Mighty! I’m going to have you for supper. Right now! Eat you alive! Monkey and all!!”

“Not in my house!” I shouted. It had no effect on Albert. He began moving toward Wertham. No sense of etiquette.

Fish looked at me and laughed. He jabbed a finger in my direction and started to shout:

“You! I know who you are, too. You want to stop me. I heard you. I was out there at that funeral home when you come in and talked to that feller in the basement. I heard what you said about that orgone accumulator! And you was right! I snuck in here and found one of them things and got in. And LOOK at me now! Resurrected! I am Christ! I AM CHRIST!”

I was reasonably certain Fish wasn’t telling the truth.

He turned his attention away from me and started creeping toward Wertham again.

The psychiatrist was maintaining his dignity, I’ll give him that. No sign of panic. No crying, no begging.

“Albert,” Wertham said reasonably, “there has to be more to it than what you’ve said. This whole Spirit of Vengeance thing you’re doing... It can’t just be about me.”

“No,” came a small, almost quavering voice from the doorway. “It isn’t about you, doctor. It’s about Albert. His hour has come ‘round at last.”

I looked around, and there stood the mysterious little girl. But she was more than just a little girl. Though she was tiny, no more than four feet tall, she filled the doorway, the room, the world. Smiling slightly, she took a step into the room, and she was radiant. That’s the only word for it. She exuded something that was dreadful in the power of its unimaginable, unbearable purity.

I thought of the fearsome angels mentioned in the Apocrypha. This child seemed to carry with her... No, to contain *within* her, such power as that wielded by Adoel, the Angel of Creation mentioned in the lost Book of Enoch. Not a particularly benign customer at all, I should mention. The awesome power of creation is also the power to obliterate whatever was there first.

The three flea-bitten GhouLunatics released us, bowed their heads, and dropped to their knees. Albert saw this and spoke to them sharply, ordering them to protect him, but they paid no heed. It didn’t look like they had any intention of leaving the dance with the one what brung them. The balance of terror had shifted dramatically.

The little girl advanced into the room, and something about her face was nagging at me. Beyond the obvious, I mean. I recognized her. Where had I seen her before?

“It’s over, Albert,” she was saying. “You had a little fun, and you thought you were the star of the show, didn’t you?” She shook her head. “I’m sorry, but no. Never again for you, Albert Fish. You know who I am.”

It wasn’t a question, and it didn’t require an answer. It was plain from Fish’s reaction that he knew perfectly well who this awesome child was.

And so did I.

The name entered my head one second before Albert Fish said it out loud.

“Grace Budd.”

This was the little girl who had last been seen by her family in June of 1928, leaving their tenement apartment in the company of an old gentleman calling himself “Frank Howard.”

“Frank Howard” had actually been the abominable Albert Fish. Instead of taking 10-year-old Grace to a birthday party, as he had promised, he took her to a little hovel called Wisteria Cottage in Westchester County, New York, where he had murdered her.

Over the course of the next nine days, he dismembered, cooked and ate her body.

But that was then. This time, one got the distinct impression that Grace Budd had the upper hand.

The GhouLunatics had gotten to their feet and moved into position behind Albert. They grabbed him by the arms and around the throat. He gasped, then choked a little, then said, “G-g-good Lord!”

Grace Budd shook her head. “Not for you, Albert. You’ve been horrible. Nasty, nasty old man. You are fond of the Scriptures, I understand. But you have no right to call upon their Author to save you now. Tell me, do you know the one about reaping what you have sown?”

She moved closer to the terrified Fish, who was trembling violently, straining to break the unbreakable grip of the three creatures who held him. He had thought himself their master, but...

I stepped forward. I removed both my hat and my mask. I wanted nothing

between me and this strange, terrible child. I dropped to my knees, not in worship as the GhouLunatics had, but to bring my eyes level with hers.

I stared deeply, desperately into her eyes, looking for what had to be there. I gazed into her and she gazed into me. I don't know what Grace Budd saw, but I saw something truly stunning. Staring into that radiant abyss, I saw the most intense, beautiful, painful purity—such as I had never imagined could exist. There was nothing in her eyes but the most unadulterated, most perfect, most seductive... *innocence*.

Then I remembered what the Stiff had told me about the Spirit of Vengeance. The face that it would wear.

And, for the first time in my life, I blinked.

That's when the radiant little angel went bad.

The room got cold. Grace's golden light turned black. She opened her mouth, her little jaw hinged open and extended several feet in front of her, making a ratcheting sound like an automobile jack. I stepped back. Hundreds of jagged silver teeth punched out through her gums, spraying blood and saliva all over the cowering Fish. Her jaw scraped the floor at the old man's feet.

Her voice came from every direction. "You said earlier that you were hungry, Albert. Remember? Have you lost your appetite? I haven't. I haven't had a bit to eat since the morning of the day you took me. You may be hungry, Albert..."

"But I'm HUNGRIER! And today is Friday. You know what that means?"

Albert was shaking his head frantically, crying and slobbering, unable to choke out a single intelligible word.

Grace Budd laughed. “It means,” she said, “*Fish for dinner!*”

And I remembered the rest of what the Stiff had told me. He said that in order to come to grips with the spirit, I might have to walk right into its mouth. Was I supposed to rescue Albert Fish? Would my selfless act, sacrificing myself to save a horrible reprobate steeped in the blackest guilt, defeat the bloody Spirit of Vengeance that had peeked out from behind the face of absolute innocence? Even now, the three servants of vengeance were pulling the regenerated degenerate closer to Grace Budd’s awful maw. Was it up to me, now, to save the world?

If so, I decided, the world was shit out of luck. I stepped back, replaced my mask and hat, and allowed Grace to go to it unhindered.

What came next, I will not describe. You have enough info to imagine a scene of your own, and you’re better off with whatever you dream up. I will say this, though: Whatever you’ve conjured, no matter how depraved your imagination, you won’t come within a hundred miles of the real thing.

Lucky, lucky you.

When it ended, the demon child was replete. There wasn’t a scrap of Fish left save for the gleaming white bones scattered around the room.

“That was absolutely disgusting,” I said.

“I have to agree,” said Wertham.

Gaines had lost his lunch, understandably, and just managed to gasp and choke out a weak but heartfelt “Good Lord.”

Grace had regained her normal appearance, and was picking her teeth with one of several badly-tarnished metal needles she had run across while ripping into a certain portion of Fish’s anatomy.

Wertham leaned close and whispered to me.

“Those are the needles Albert Shoved into his groin area over many years’ time. One of his catalog of perversions. There is a rumor that when he was executed, all the metal short-circuited the electric chair, and he had to be shocked several times before he finally died. I always doubted that story, but now I’m not so sure. I also thought the whole thing, if true, was dreadfully inhumane. Now I’m not so certain of that, either.”

I was staring at Grace. Something had changed in her. She no longer seemed fearsome. She was not a demon, and she was not an angel.

She was a little girl.

“So,” I said, addressing Grace Budd, “what happens next?”

“Next? Next, I take him back with me to the place where we both belong. I got what I wanted, and realize what a fool I have been. There is no profit in revenge. Not for anyone. It is a vain attempt to balance an imaginary set of books. By its very nature, it can never be successful.”

“You regret what you did, then?”

“No, not at all. It was part of the process. How could I have learned a truth like that without first tasting it? Experience is the ONLY teacher.”

“You are the Spirit of Vengeance?” I asked.

“Oh, no,” she said, shaking her head. “No, no, no, not at all. Neither was Albert. I’m just a fellow traveler. The Spirit is a very old thing. It has been around ever since the first of our furry little ancestors was eaten by one of the giant reptiles we were here to replace. It usually hangs around in the Land of the Recent Dead. Fittingly, because death and destruction and confusion are the only fruits of revenge.”

It was a bit surreal to hear Grace Budd express herself the way she did. This was not the sort of discourse one would expect from a poor, semi-literate ten-year-old. Clearly, something had changed her profoundly between the time of her murder and now.

“After I died,” she was saying, “I did not move on, as most souls do. I was angry. I was filled with rage at Albert Fish for what he had done to me and my family. I stayed where I was until he was executed. I was waiting for him. It seemed like forever.”

“But when he finally arrived, I was dismayed to learn that I could not harm him, could not even touch him. He knew I was there. He feared me. I prevented him from moving on. But that was all I could do, and it was not enough. Not nearly enough.

“For years, I paced around him at arm’s length, stalking him as a cat stalks a mouse. But he was a mouse that I could not touch. It became intolerable.

“So I conspired with the Spirit, whom I had come to know rather well. The Spirit had three familiars in the living world, and it communicated with them. Two Keepers and a Sorceress. Through the Spirit, I instructed these three to prepare the way for my and Albert’s return to the physical world, where I could do unto him as he had done unto me. For such a little girl, I had a monumental will, and I bent it to this task.

“The three approached Mister Gaines and fed him and his colleagues the stories that would attune more and more minds to our ‘wavelength.’ Stories, you know, are a bridge between this world and all the others. The concept of supernatural vengeance from beyond the grave took hold. Many of Mr. Gaines’ competitors in the horror comic business began to emulate these tales, and minds everywhere began to resonate with it, like a tuning fork, preparing the way for the Spirit and giving it power. I shared this power and I used it to send Albert back to his body, and the Spirit and I followed.

“We tore a gaping hole between the two worlds. Dozens of other souls, consumed with thoughts of retribution, as I was, came with us.

“The Spirit itself went a little amok, and so did I, I have to admit. I knew what I wanted to do to Albert. I had dreamed of it for many years. Of course, I had to steer him in the direction of your orgone accumulator.”

“Why?” I asked.

She smiled. “Mister Centipede, I don’t know about you, but I would not want to eat meat that had been hauled up out of the ground after being buried for fifteen years!”

She had a point, which I acknowledged with a brief nod. I actually wanted to laugh, but I was afraid of how it would sound when it came out.

“Since Mr. Gaines had been so crucial to my success,” she continued, “I visited him and let him in on the secret, to a degree. I wanted him to be present for the consummation of my plan. Now he knows all, which is only fair.

“My work is finished. You have seen the results. I did what I did, and now that demon within me has been laid to rest.

“Do I regret it? No. I might wish that a gentler solution had been possible, but regret is wasted emotion.”

“What about all the people who were murdered?” I asked.

“What about them?” she said. Strangely, it did not sound at all callous the way she said it.

“How can you justify that?”

“I have no need to. Mister Centipede, people die. I did, Albert did. You will. We all do. One way or another. Keep in mind that my perspective is radically different from yours. In truth, there is no such thing as murder. You see death everywhere, and by your own standards, you are right. But your definition is too small. Death—your concept of it-- is indeed everywhere, in everything, every minute of every day.”

“And, at the same time, there is no such thing as death. The end contains within itself the beginning. That is its only function. Nothing is ever truly lost or wasted.

“I had something to learn, and I did. Albert Fish learned something too. And you, Mister Black Centipede, learned something. You don’t know what it is yet, but you will. You have your own process, of course. Nothing is static, and there is literally no end to what all of us must learn. That which you think you seek does not hold the answer you think you want.

“What I say won’t make any sense to you now. It may not make sense to you for a very long time. But I’m planting a seed. Because I am part of your process, just as you are part of mine. And this is what I will tell you:

“You seek answers. Actually, you seek THE answer, isn’t that right? Well... I have it. If you want me to tell you what it is, I will. But first, I want to ask you something. With regard to this answer that you seek... What is the question?”

I thought for a moment. I considered and rejected a number of glib remarks, then made a serious attempt to articulate the hunger, the desire that had driven me for so many years. Grace Budd sat smiling, infinitely patient. It seemed as though she and I had slipped outside of ordinary time. I pondered her words for what might have been weeks or months.

Finally, I said, “I don’t know. The answer I want is not the kind of answer you can get in response to a question. Nor even a thousand or a million

questions. Everything is either too big or too small. I don't think there IS a question."

She smiled and stood up. "Then you are wiser than you think," she said brightly. "You have hit upon the gist of the thing. There is no question. And as with the question, so with the answer. There isn't one. And THAT is both the question AND the answer!"

"I must go now. But you need to know that the Spirit of Vengeance will not go back with me. I am not the spirit. I do not even embody it. I was more like an avatar, I suppose. Or a conduit. The spirit came here with me, and found a place where it could grow stronger. When I go back, it will stay. If you want to get rid of it, make it go back where it came from, there is only one way. You must starve it. The Spirit will weaken considerably when I go back. Of course, it will regroup and seek nourishment. Eventually it will rebuild its full strength."

Her mouth and chin were shiny with grease, and she wiped them with the back of her hand. "If it eats too much, it sleeps," she said. "If it can't get enough, it goes away. And if it returns to the other side, it will be at peace for a time. Until someone like me waves another steak under its nose."

I didn't quite know what to say.

"I'll think about all of this, of course. You are a very extraordinary individual, Grace."

She shook her head. "Naw," she said, "I'm just like everybody else." She smiled and actually gave me a little wink. "That's one of those things you're going to have to learn."

I had two questions I wanted to ask her, but before I could assemble them in my head, Grace Budd was gone. She didn't use the door. I don't know what she used. She was simply gone, leaving not a rack behind.

So, I noticed, were the three GhouLunatics. Both Wertham and Gaines seemed greatly relieved by this development.

## ELEVEN

I straightened up the kitchen. I wore rubber gloves to gather up Albert Fish's scattered skeleton, which I wrapped in old newspapers and tossed into a chute that would drop it right into the incinerator, and good riddance. No sense hanging onto that junk.

Obviously, nobody was hungry, but both Gaines and Wertham seemed more than just mildly interested in the gallon bottle of whiskey I took from a cabinet and placed, along with three glasses, in the center of the kitchen table.

After a few minutes of serious, concentrated drinking, we began to talk.

"Did we actually accomplish anything?" Gaines wanted to know.

"Well, Albert Fish won't be troubling us any further," I said. I had pulled my mask up over my nose so I could partake of the whiskey. But I felt hot and uncomfortable, so I just took off my hat and peeled the mask the rest of the way off. I dropped the mask into the hat and tossed them in the direction of a countertop.

Wertham seemed greatly taken aback by this. "Sir!" he exclaimed. "You've just unmasked yourself in front of witnesses!"

"That I have," I agreed. It was really of no consequence. I honestly don't know why I persist in wearing the thing. A misplaced reverence for tradition, I suppose.

As I mentioned earlier, I don't have what is commonly known as a "secret identity." My true self—or, I should say my original self—had been

wiped away decades earlier. Not only that, but I had taken a rather extraordinary precaution with regard to other people's ability to identify me. By means of something that was more than science, but not quite magic, I had made myself impossible to recognize. To anyone who sees it, my face appears so generic, so unremarkable, that it does not register in an observer's long-term memory at all. It remains in the short-term memory for no more than thirty seconds.

So, no matter how many times you have seen my face, you'll never recognize it if you see it again, even if the interval is less than half a minute.

Wertham just shrugged. He turned to Gaines and said, "Well, sir, at least you have been vindicated. Your stories were not the cause of anything. You were used, it is true, for rather devious ends. But your stories, in and of themselves, are not in the least harmful. That should come as a relief."

"Yeah," said Gaines. "A little. But you heard what the girl said. The Spirit is still here. And it'll keep doing what it's been doing. The whole... I dunno what you'd call it... *collective consciousness* out there has been infected with the concepts in our stories. The momentum has built up, and I don't think I could stop myself from doing it now any more than I could over the past few weeks. I am absolutely compelled. Even knowing what I know, I can't make myself quit.

"And, anyhow, it isn't just me. Every publisher out there is doing the same thing."

"It is something of a pickle," Wertham acknowledged. "Perhaps things will improve when I come out with my book."

"Book?"

"Yes. I've been putting together a treatise on your magazines. I was telling the Centipede here about it earlier. I am a great admirer of your

work, sir. I believe your comics have a beneficial effect on young readers. I am something of an authority of child psychology. As a psychiatrist, I have been published both academically and commercially on a variety of subjects. People will listen to me. It is my hope that when I put my thesis before the reading public, you will see your sales increase tenfold.”

“Oh, no, Doctor,” Gaines said, aghast. “You can’t do that!”

“Why not?”

Time for me to dip my oar in.

“Doctor Wertham,” I said. “You heard what Grace told us about the Spirit. If you put out a book like that, not only will Gaines’ sales increase, so will the Spirit’s ‘food supply.’ ”

The psychiatrist grew thoughtful. “Well, now, the child said that if the Spirit ate too much it would go to sleep. Perhaps that gives us an out.”

“No,” I said. “We have no idea what ‘going to sleep’ means in this context, or what it would be like for us. If the thing went to sleep, it could be worse than what’s going on right now. What if it started dreaming? No. She said the only way to get rid if it is to starve it. That was unequivocal.”

“Very well. How do we do that?” Wertham asked.

Gaines looked at him.

“You do it,” he said.

“What?”

“You do it,” Gaines repeated. “The only way I or anyone else will ever stop publishing these stories is if we are forced to. You can make that happen.”

The doctor seemed stunned. “What? How? Shall I imprison you? Assassinate you?”

Gaines shook his head.

“Your book,” he said simply. “You have to change it. People will listen to you, you said so yourself. So you have to tell them something different. Tell them our comic books are harmful. Blame them for juvenile delinquency. Whatever. Call for them to be censored or banned outright!”

“Sir!” Wertham protested. “That is not only abominable, it is anti-American.”

“But it must be done, Doc,” I said. “The Spirit of Vengeance must be starved back to where it came from.”

Wertham scowled at me. “I won’t do it,” he snarled. “I see what you’re trying to do. You want to ruin me, discredit me. After all I’ve done to help you! You won’t get away with it, do you hear! I’ll get even with you!”

Then, incredibly, the little psychiatrist sprang from his chair and came at me, swinging his fists.

I had no trouble at all getting him under control. I had him in a very gentle headlock, and I opened my mouth to give voice to sweet reason.

That isn’t what came out.

“Shut up, you little turd,” I growled. “You come here, to my home, and threaten me? I’ll rip you apart!”

“STOP!” Gaines said, jumping to his feet. He took a huge slug of whiskey from the bottle, then pressed in on me and Wertham. That slowed us down, and we both drank. I got a grip on myself as the liquid burned its

way down to my stomach.

“Good Lord,” I said. “I wanted to kill you, Doc.”

“And I you,” Wertham admitted. He was still trembling, and he had another slug. It started him coughing, but he appeared to have regained his composure. When he got his breath back, he was once again the refined and gentle medical man.

“I’m afraid, Doctor Wertham,” I said, “that you and I almost fell victim to the Spirit of Vengeance.”

Wertham just nodded and put a hand to his mouth. He took several deep breaths.

“Now do you see what I’m getting at?” Gaines asked, patting the doctor on the back.

Wertham nodded again. He had to agree, but he didn’t have to like it.

## EPILOGUE

Wertham did what he had to do. He scrapped all his notes for “Salvation of the Innocent,” and, with covert assistance from Bill Gaines, produced the scathing “Seduction of the Innocent,” a no-holds-barred indictment of the industry and the reading matter he so dearly, and secretly, loved.

William M. Gaines, for his part, made a wonderful show of passionately defending a product he had come to loathe.

Not that he had any moral objection to the material that had been produced by EC Comics during its heyday. He could rightly be proud of it

from an artistic standpoint. And I think he regretted the necessity of trashing not only his own output, but the whole horror comics industry.

Be that as it may, he played his part brilliantly. While Wertham's book was still in the works, Gaines obliged the doctor and his new thesis by publishing stories that went way over the top—like the baseball story “Foul Play,” which mirrored the true-life (but top-secret) fate of Edgar “Fast Eddie” Guzman.

It took a couple of years, but Wertham's book came out and the comic book industry came under heavy fire. The United States Senate established the Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, and held hearings to examine the threat posed to America by the insidious perverts who pushed their trash to our precious children

Gaines became, in the public mind, pervert-in-chief. It was a role he seemed to relish. When he was called to testify before the Subcommittee, his tone was almost sneering, and contained more than just a hint of arrogant condescension, as this excerpt demonstrates:

*Chief Counsel Herbert Beaser:* Let me get the limits as far as what you put into your magazine. Is the sole test of what you would put into your magazine whether it sells? Is there any limit you can think of that you would not put in a magazine because you thought a child should not see or read about it?

*Bill Gaines:* No, I wouldn't say that there is any limit for the reason you outlined. My only limits are the bounds of good taste, what I consider good taste.

*Beaser:* Then you think a child cannot in any way, in any way, shape, or manner, be hurt by anything that a child reads or sees?

*Gaines:* I don't believe so.

*Beaser:* There would be no limit actually to what you put in the magazines?

*Gaines:* Only within the bounds of good taste.

*Beaser:* Your own good taste and saleability?

*Gaines:* Yes.

*Senator Estes Kefauver:* Here is your May 22 issue. This seems to be a man with a bloody axe holding a woman's head up which has been severed from her body. Do you think that is in good taste?

*Gaines:* Yes sir, I do, for the cover of a horror comic. A cover in bad taste, for example, might be defined as holding the head a little higher so that the neck could be seen dripping blood from it, and moving the body over a little further so that the neck of the body could be seen to be bloody.

*Kefauver:* You have blood coming out of her mouth.

*Gaines:* A little.

*Kefauver:* Here is blood on the axe. I think most adults are shocked by that.

With testimony like that, the outcome was a foregone conclusion. Gaines and Wertham had done their work brilliantly. It wasn't long after the hearings that the Comics Code Authority was established, emasculating the comic book industry, smothering its imaginary sins beneath a blanket of neo-puritanism by establishing standards that would absolutely prohibit the sort of tales Gaines and his competitors had told, perhaps not wisely, but too well.

Evidently, all of this had the desired effect on the Spirit of Vengeance. The world reverted to a more familiar, prosaic state of everyday hatred, suspicion and violence. The departure of Grace Budd and Albert Fish must have weakened it some. After a time, the dead stopped returning wholesale from the grave for revenge. Not all at once. It took a while. And during that period, I had a couple more related adventures. But those are stories for another day.

Meanwhile, Korea and the Cold War-- while perhaps more wicked, and certainly more difficult to comprehend-- at least did not smack of the supernatural. People forgot, in that curious way they have.

The old soldier Eisenhower moved into the White House, bringing his tricky Dick with him.

After the horror comics boom came to an end, William M. Gaines went on to achieve some success in the humor magazine field. He died on June 3, 1992, at the age of 70. I am certain he took with him to his grave the memory of what he witnessed on that long-ago night in the Benway Building.

As, I am equally sure, did Doctor Fredric Wertham, who departed this life on November 18, 1981.

And as, of course, will I.

If I ever get around to departing.

As far as I know, both of the men with whom I shared that remarkable and terrible adventure have rested in peace. I've seen nothing to indicate otherwise. Nor have I ever again detected the presence on this plane of existence of the appalling Mr. Albert Fish, the Gray Man, late of Westchester County.

Grace Budd, however, is a different story. And, again, it must be saved for a future installment of these memoirs. There was a day, many years later, when it became imperative that I learn the lesson Grace tried to teach me that night. She took it upon herself to return and see to it that I paid attention.

It was the most wonderful and the most horrible experience I have ever had.

And when the right time comes, I will give it to you.

**THE END**