

THE INNOCENCE OF SEDUCTION

(Part Two of The Four-Color Trilogy)

Sample Draft

By
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"Comics are one of the five native American art forms,
including banjo music, jazz music, musical theatre, and the
mystery story as invented by Edgar Allen Poe."

- Harlan Ellison

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ACT ONE

ACT ONE - SCENE ONE

The lights rise. A desk, littered with various crime and horror comics of the 1950's. Behind it, a bespectacled, gaunt, cadaverous, ghoulish figure that invokes thoughts of the EC Comics Crypt-Keeper. This is DOCTOR FREDERIC WERTHAM, and he speaks to us with a deep German accent...

WERTHAM

Hello, there my sweet little schöne kinder, how lovely you all look today! My name is Doctor Frederic Wertham. I have practiced psychiatry and neurology since 1922. Some part of my research in that time was on paresis and brain syphilis.

How very horrible that was...The stuff of nightmares. One poor man could not stop screaming...

It came in good stead when I came to study comic books! Some of these comic books are before me here. Such as this one, in particular.

He waves a comic book, quickly, so as the title and issue are completely missed.

Projected: CITATION MISSING

WERTHAM

Here is the lecherous-looking bandit overpowering the attractive girl, who is dressed...If that is the word for it...For very hot weather. "She could come in handy, then!" He bellows, "pretty little spitfire, eh!"...In the typical pre-rape position. Here is the repetition of violence and sexiness which no Freud, Krafft-Ebing or Havelock Ellis ever dreamed could be offered to children, and in such profusion.

Projected: an image of teen "delinquents" of the 1950's

WERTHAM

I examined a boy who had threatened a woman teacher with a switchblade knife. He was enthusiastic about comic books filled with alluring tales of shooting, knifing, hitting and strangling. Everywhere children see this, and finally they become, as Saint Augustine said...Unconsciously delighted. Innocents seduced by the bestial nightmare of a moral apocalypse foisted by a corrupt industry.

Lights shift.

ACT ONE - SCENE TWO

Lights shift to a darkened office, WILLIAM "BILL" GAINES appears behind the office desk, sleeping, face down on the blotter.

WERTHAM

Here, we find the beast himself. A pathetic man-child with deep, psychological scars.

Wertham recedes into the shadows. The voice of MAX GAINES, Bill's father, floats out of the darkness.

MAX

William!!

Bill shifts, but does not awake.

MAX

Why must you always disappoint me!?!

Max steps into the light, looming over his son's sleeping form. He is dripping with water, his face and chest torn with gore and gristle. He grabs the younger man, Bill awakes, sees the gruesome form of his father, and screams.

MAX

LOOK AT ME!! YOU DID THIS TO ME!! It's your fault! You broke your mother's heart. She spent months to convince Hazel that you were worth her time. All you had to do was be a good husband, and you failed!!

Max begins to remove his belt.

GAINES

I tried!!

MAX

IT WASN'T GOOD ENOUGH!!

Max raises his belt above his head, about to strike.

MAX
YOU'RE NEVER GOOD ENOUGH!!

Bill Screams, and falls behind his desk, the spectre of his father swings the leather strap downward.

Blackout.

Another voice, of SHIRLEY NORRIS, his secretary, comes from the darkness.

SHIRLEY
Mister Gaines?

GAINES
DEAR GOD, NO!! HELP ME!!!!

The lights come on in Gaines' office, he is still crying out, hidden behind the desk. Shirley is standing in the doorway.

SHIRLEY
Mister Gaines!? Are you all right!?

Long beat.

GAINES
Yes?

SHIRLEY
I heard something.

GAINES
What? Oh, nothing. Just my new hi-fi system.

SHIRLEY
It sounded like screaming.

GAINES
Oh, that! It's one of those spook-house sound effects records. "The Chilling Sounds of Terror."

SHIRLEY
Why are you on the floor?

GAINES

Back problems! Trying to relax it. Nothing to worry about.

SHIRLEY

Your mother is here.

GAINES

Oh dear God.

Gaines' head slowly rises into view from behind the desk.

GAINES

Tell her I'm out?

SHIRLEY

I think she heard you screaming.

He sinks back behind the desk. Beat.

SHIRLEY

I'll just bring her in then?

The secretary turns and begins to exit.

SHIRLEY

That is a weird guy.

Shirley exits, Bill rises. He straightens his shirt and makes a half-hearted attempt to compose himself.

He picks up a photo from the desk.

Projected: A photo of a non-undead Max Gaines.

GAINES

Bastard.

JESSIE GAINES enters the room in a whirlwind.

JESSIE

My God, William, what were you doing in here?

GAINES

Hello, mother.

JESSIE

You haven't been home.

GAINES

Well, you forced me into running a company. It takes up a lot of my time.

Jessie runs a finger over the edge of the desk, checks the tip for dust.

JESSIE

Shirley out there tells me you spend most of your time sleeping.

GAINES

Well...I don't think that's any of her business.

JESSIE

It isn't, it's MY business. Your father built Educational Comics from the ground up, nothing else was important to him.

GAINES

I'll try not to take that personally.

JESSIE

Oh don't whine, William.

GAINES

It's Entertaining Comics now.

Beat.

JESSIE

Your father is probably rolling in his grave.

Gaines looks about nervously, expecting Max to appear.

GAINES

Probably.

JESSIE

How could you do this to him?

GAINES

Mother, Dad was losing money! What do you expect ME to do?

JESSIE

That can't be true.

GAINES

No one wants to read Picture Stories From The Bible! No kids, no adults, no one! I think we have to assume that you can't be successful if the only people buying your product are nuns and Sunday school teachers!

JESSIE

An affront to your father's legacy.

GAINES

I don't want this job. I never did, you forced it on me.

JESSIE

If only you'd been able to keep Hazel happy.

GAINES

If only you hadn't forced me to marry my second cousin.

Jessie slaps him.

JESSIE

I did what you couldn't, or wouldn't, do for yourself. Hazel was a lovely girl, and you failed her. Now you're going to fail your father!

GAINES

(quietly)

All I wanted was to teach chemistry.

JESSIE

I wanted to grow old with your father, but an out-of-control speedboat tore him to shreds.

GAINES

Always with the speedboat.

JESSIE

You have a duty to me, his memory, and the family name.

Jesse marches out of the room. Bill sits silently behind his desk for a moment.

GAINES

I wonder if I could pay that speedboat to run me over?

Lights shift.

ACT ONE - SCENE THREE

Wertham steps back out of the dark.

WERTHAM

Mein Gott, Mister Gaines is a damaged personality! Arrested in his development, bordering on retardation, and prone to fantasies of violence and persecution. Unfortunately, as you will see, he longs to share this condition like a psychological plague through his grotesque "art" and unseemly "publications."

Projected: A series of pre-code panels featuring violence and sexual content.

WERTHAM

Of course, he was not alone. An entire industry rose up to claw at the ripe young mind of the American child!!

Lights shift, and Wertham slips back into the darkness.

Lights up on the office of JOHN L GOLDWATER, publisher of MLJ Comics. He sits behind his desk, shuffling papers. The door opens, and JANICE VALLEAU sticks her head in the door.

JANICE

Mister Goldwater? You asked to see me?

GOLDWATER

Janice! My secretary tells me I won't be seeing your smiling face after today. I am not happy about this. I'm going to be stuck looking at that pack of sad-sack mugs out there every morning.

JANICE

If you paid them better, they wouldn't be such sad-sacks.

GOLDWATER

Y'know, it wasn't that long ago that the idea of a woman working in this business was unthinkable. That's what happens when you have a boom. Anybody who walks in the door that can draw more than a stick figure gets hired.

JANICE

Is that what you think of my work?

GOLDWATER

Hardly! I kept waiting for you to get tired of the Betty and Veronica backups, and try to knock that dunderhead Bob Montana out of a job on the main feature.

JANICE

Bob is VERY CLOSE to reading now. Way past dunderheaded.

GOLDWATER

(laughs)

Always the go-getter. I'm honestly surprised you aren't moving into my office.

JANICE

I needed to knock Bob off, first. I tried everything, poison, knives, booby traps...

GOLDWATER

Just shoot him. If it's worth doing, it's worth overdoing.

JANICE

Noted.

GOLDWATER

Quality's not going to pay you any more than I am.

JANICE

I don't think that's any of your business, Mister Goldwater.

GOLDWATER

Janice, I have lunch with Busy Arnold twice a week.

JANICE

That so?

GOLDWATER

You want to work with Reed Crandall.

JANICE

He IS the best, Mister Goldwater.

GOLDWATER

Janice, in 24 hours you won't be my employee anymore. In that spirit? I'm going to give you some advice. Don't get star-struck.

JANICE

I'm not star-struck.

GOLDWATER

This business is no damn good.

JANICE

How can you say that?

GOLDWATER

Oh, it's made me a good living. I'm not discounting that.

JANICE

Then what?

GOLDWATER

We peddle trash, Janice.

He holds up an issue of Archie comics.

GOLDWATER

Archie and Jughead are basically luke-warm water, and that's what keeps me above the slime. There are people watching us, and they don't like what they see.

JANICE

But I do.

GOLDWATER

Young lady, that's just crazy talk.

JANICE

It's my crazy talk.

GOLDWATER

OK, just trying to give you some advice.

JANICE

I can take care of myself.

GOLDWATER

Clearly. I just want you to remember what I said. Every boom ends. The job isn't drawing the pages. The job is finding the next job. Everyone is expendable. One month of bad sales away from being on the street.

Goldwater shakes her hand.

GOLDWATER

Miss Janice Valleau, MLJ comics will, officially, miss you. Good luck over at Quality.

JANICE

Maybe I'll drop by from time to time to remind you all of what you're missing.

GOLDWATER

Don't take any guff from Busy Arnold.

Janice rises to leave.

GOLDWATER

Usually when one of my artists quits, I just sign a final check and shove them out the door. What is this power you hold over grumpy old men?

JANICE

I'm a younger woman.

She opens the office door.

JANICE

Onward and upward!

She exits. Lights fade.

ACT ONE - SCENE FOUR

Wertham steps out of the darkness.

WERTHAM

Such a pretty little fräulein, Miss Valleau. You may look at her and see an innocent young girl. A fabrication! An insidious vixen using her budding sexuality to manipulate these poor, innocent men.

Projected: a series of Matt Baker cheesecake images from various books.

WERTHAM

Comic books stimulate children sexually. A twelve-year-old sex delinquent told me "In comic books sometimes the men threaten the girls. They don't get me sexually excited all the time, only when they tie them up."

The lights shift and we see MATT BAKER in a room with ARCHER ST JOHN and his friend, FRANK GUISTO. They are pouring over art boards.

ST JOHN

Do you think it's too sexy? Sex sells, but...

BAKER

I'm not drawing for kids here, but I'm not pushing pornography on you, Archer.

Projected: The cover of IT RHYMES WITH LUST

St Johns holds up the art board to the other two men.

ST JOHN

No one ever called me a prude, but, I mean, c'mon. Wertham will have a field day with some of this.

BAKER

That twisted old quack sees what he wants to see.

Saint John pulls a bottle from an office bar and pours a generous glass.

ST JOHN

You've got a book here that's sex or violence on virtually every page.

BAKER

I didn't say it was Pollyanna. It's supposed to reach a wider...an older, audience. It's not really a comic book.

ST JOHN

You could fool me, Matt. Panels, word balloons.

GUISTO

It's a whole new thing. A picture novel, long form comic storytelling.

BAKER

Frank...

ST JOHN

Matt, who is this guy?

Frank Guisto .

BAKER

Colleague and Best friend!

GUISTO

You don't say...

ST JOHN

Known each other for years.

GUISTO

And you bring him to a business meeting?

ST JOHN

He's...

BAKER

It's a more developed comic book. A deliberate bridge between comic books and "book" books.

GUISTO

Are you his friend, or his agent?

ST JOHN

Beat.

GUISTO

Little of both?

BAKER

This could be a new thing. A series of action, mystery, western and romance movies...on paper.

Saint John has finished his drink and pours another.

ST JOHN

I've heard the pitch two or three times, between you and the writer. Four if you count this squirrley kid, here. Drink?

GUISTO

I'd sure...

BAKER

We're good. The idea is to redefine the business. Open it up to adults, as well as kids.

ST JOHN

Reads like a soap opera.

BAKER

Black and white, a paperback. Not stocked with the comic books, or even the magazines.

ST JOHN

That might get Wertham off our backs.

BAKER

Wertham will blow over. This could open a whole new audience.

ST JOHN

Blow over? Have you heard him?

BAKER

Who listens to that kind of nonsense?

ST JOHN

You'd be surprised.

St John holds up a page to Baker.

Projected: an image of Rust Masson from IT RHYMES
WITH LUST.

ST JOHN

Rust Masson doesn't exactly look like a nun, but I guess that is why we hired you, Matt.

GUISTO

I'm an artist, too. I thought maybe I could pitch a couple ideas of my own...

ST JOHN

No.

GUISTO

Hey, c'mon! I may not sling the cheesecake like Matt, but I got the goods!

ST JOHN

One stud is all we need, around here.

BAKER

What does that mean?

ST JOHN

I just hear tell you're a, uh, ladies man.

BAKER

My private life, and how I spend it, is none of your business.

Beat.

ST JOHN

I respect that.

BAKER

I sincerely hope so.

ST JOHN

You might be surprised how much.

Beat.

BAKER

Mister St John...

ST JOHN

Please call me Archer.

BAKER

Look, Mister St John, I think we've got a book that people will like...

ST JOHN

Let's get more social. I know a place...

GUISTO

Sounds great!

Beat. St John side-eyes Frank.

ST JOHN

Let me clarify. MATT, since my office liquor isn't tempting, would YOU like to get a drink someplace more casual? I was thinking we could drop by Stewart's.

BAKER

Stewart's Cafeteria?

ST JOHN

Yeah. You know the place?

BAKER

I've...heard of it.

ST JOHN

Well, they know me there. You'd be welcome. Let me get my coat.

St John Steps out.

GUISTO

Well, nobody ever said Frank Guisto doesn't know a cue when he hears it.

BAKER

Frank, don't...

GUISTO

Matt. I try to be a worldly, open-minded man, but I know when I need to bow out.

Guisto exits. Archer re-enters.

ST JOHN

Ready to go?

BAKER

What are you after, Mister Saint John?

ST JOHN

Matt. Call me Archer. It'll be fun. I promise you'll be right at home.

St John Reaches out and places his palm lightly on Matt's chest. Lights shift.

ACT ONE - SCENE FIVE

Wertham steps out of the darkness.

WERTHAM

Well, well, well....Isn't THAT interesting? I wouldn't dare assume anything, of course, being a man of science, but...They seem to be heading for a gay old time, as they say.

Wertham Chuckles.

WERTHAM

The time when children are most susceptible to social and psychological influences is in their leisure hours. Have no doubt, children's leisure is on the market. Of course children also get hurt at home and by their parents.

The lights shift to a shadowy Gaines office at EC Comics. Bill is face-down on his desk.

A large profit graph is projected, with a downward trajectory.

The Undead Max Gains emerges from the shadows.

MAX

Well, now you've done it. You killed me, and then you killed my company.

SHIRLEY

(off stage)

Mister Gaines?

MAX

It was my legacy!

SHIRLEY

(off stage)

MISTER GAINES!!

Lights full up. Shirley stands before Bill, who's head rises from the desk. Max freezes.

SHIRLEY

YOUR THREE O'CLOCK IS HERE!!

Beat.

SHIRLEY

Should I show him in?

Gaines stares at her, then at the specter of his father.

GAINES

I guess?

Shirley sighs, then turns to leave.

SHIRLEY

Mother told me working here was a one-way ticket to the funny farm.

She exits. Max springs back to life.

MAX

You failed me, William!

Lights back up and Max vanishes. AL FELDSTEIN has entered, unnoticed by Gaines.

GAINES

(to Max)

WELL AT LEAST I'M NOT AN ASSHOLE!!!

FELDSTEIN

I'll let you know after the meeting.

GAINES

How did you get in here?

FELDSTEIN

Your secretary let me in.

Beat.

FELDSTEIN

We had a three o'clock?

GAINES

We did?

FELDSTEIN

Yeah. I'm Al Feldstein.

He extends his hand, which Gaines seems to not notice.

GAINES

Right, OK...The artist with the "headlight" girls?

FELDSTEIN

What can I say? I like boobs.

Gaines takes the portfolio, places it on his desk. He opens the portfolio, removes his glasses, places them carefully in a case, and drops his face inches above the paper. His nose is nearly resting upon it.

Examples of Feldstein's "headlight girls" from "Junior" comics are projected.

He flips several pages, repeating his close observation like a dippy-bird. His head shakes as he chuckles.

GAINES

You weren't kidding! Headlight girls? Hooo Boy! More like kleig lights!

FELDSTEIN

Well, I...

GAINES

They're bigger than her head!

Gains face rises from the sample, he looks at Feldstein.

GAINES

Do you use live models?

There is uncomfortable moment of silence. Then Gains barks a laugh.

FELDSTEIN

Was that a joke?

GAINES

What was your name again?

FELDSTEIN

Feldstein. Al.

GAINES

Well, you can draw.

FELDSTEIN

I write too. I usually get saddled with romance books...

GAINES

What? You don't want to do "Picture Stories From the Bible?"

FELDSTEIN

I would think a Virgin Mary with a double D cup would be frowned upon.

GAINES

Depends who's reading it.

FELDSTEIN

When was the last time you published one of those Bible comics? Has to be back before your father died.

Lights darken as if Max will reappear. Bill reacts. Al does not. The lights shift back.

GAINES

Don't say that too loud!

FELDSTEIN

Why?

Gaines leans forward. Waves to Al to lean in. Looks around.

GAINES

(whispers)

The walls. Have ears.

Beat.

FELDSTEIN

OK.

GAINES

Did your father love you?

FELDSTEIN

Excuse me?

GAINES

My father hated me. This company meant more to him.

FELDSTEIN

At least he didn't ignore you.

GAINES

I'd have preferred that.

FELDSTEIN

No, you wouldn't.