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The cops sure as hell aren't any help and--

Well, now. Seems you came right on time, just like they told you to.

Hey, whoa, what's the problem--?



Your brother split on us before he paid us what he owes for some of the junk we sold him. When we heard you were looking for him, well, if we couldn't find him, we could always get it from you.

Yep. It's a setup. Damn!



But I can't just dive in without letting Melissa know I've been watching.

What to do...?
What to do...?



You look scared. Good.

I ain't scared of you.

Yeah, he's not scared of you--

Don't help.



**CRASH
BLANG!**

The hell is--!



THUD-CLANG!

AAAAAH!

Holy--



Let's go! Move! Get out of here!



You see anything out there, Harold?

Harold's an idiot, he never sees anything.

What's all the racket? What? What?

See?



C'mon, Mel.

Thanks!



One more crisis averted. I'll let the neighborhood deal with these guys. I gotta keep my eye on Melissa.



Tomorrow I'll figure out some way to keep her out of trouble at least for one night so I can be alert, and awake, and get some serious investigation work done. Shouldn't be that much to ask for...

...and the coefficient, over here, relates to the numeral over here but... well, it doesn't, they don't get along, but--

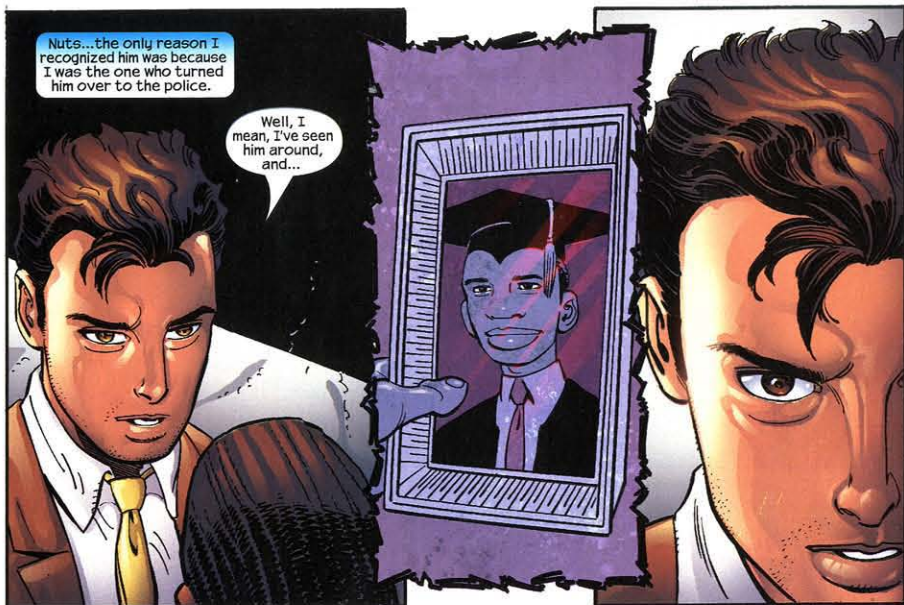
Mr. Parker?



Mr. Parker, the bell rang a minute ago! Yo!

It did?





Nuts...the only reason I recognized him was because I was the one who turned him over to the police.

Well, I mean, I've seen him around, and...



So *you're* the creep who flunked him out of senior bio, huh? *You're* the reason he ended up on the streets.

That's why you... I mean, no, I--

That's why you've been trying to be nice to me, to make up for being a creep.



No, that wasn't me. I haven't been teaching that long. I just started here this semester.

Oh.



...you know, if he hadn't flunked senior bio, he'd have been a high school honors student. When he failed that class, he graduated, sure, but he didn't get to go to college.

Sorry to hear that.



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He'd probably be a whole 'nother story if he met someone like you in school. Sorry for being mad, Mr. Parker.

Well, anyway, I'd better get inside and crack open the books.

Right. See you in class tomorrow.



If I don't sleep through class again, that is... I wonder if I could get Miss Dickens to substitute for me tomorrow. She doesn't have a life either. I could use a whole day's sleep. I--

Wait. Aren't those the guys Melissa was hanging with last night?



I told Mel there's a few spots we can check out before I get back to my usual all-nighter. It's a pain, but she's persistent, y'know?



Oh great.

Hey guys, thanks for waiting! I had to ditch my teacher. Anyway, I only have 'til six o'clock 'cause then Mom's home between shifts for dinner--so let's get going!



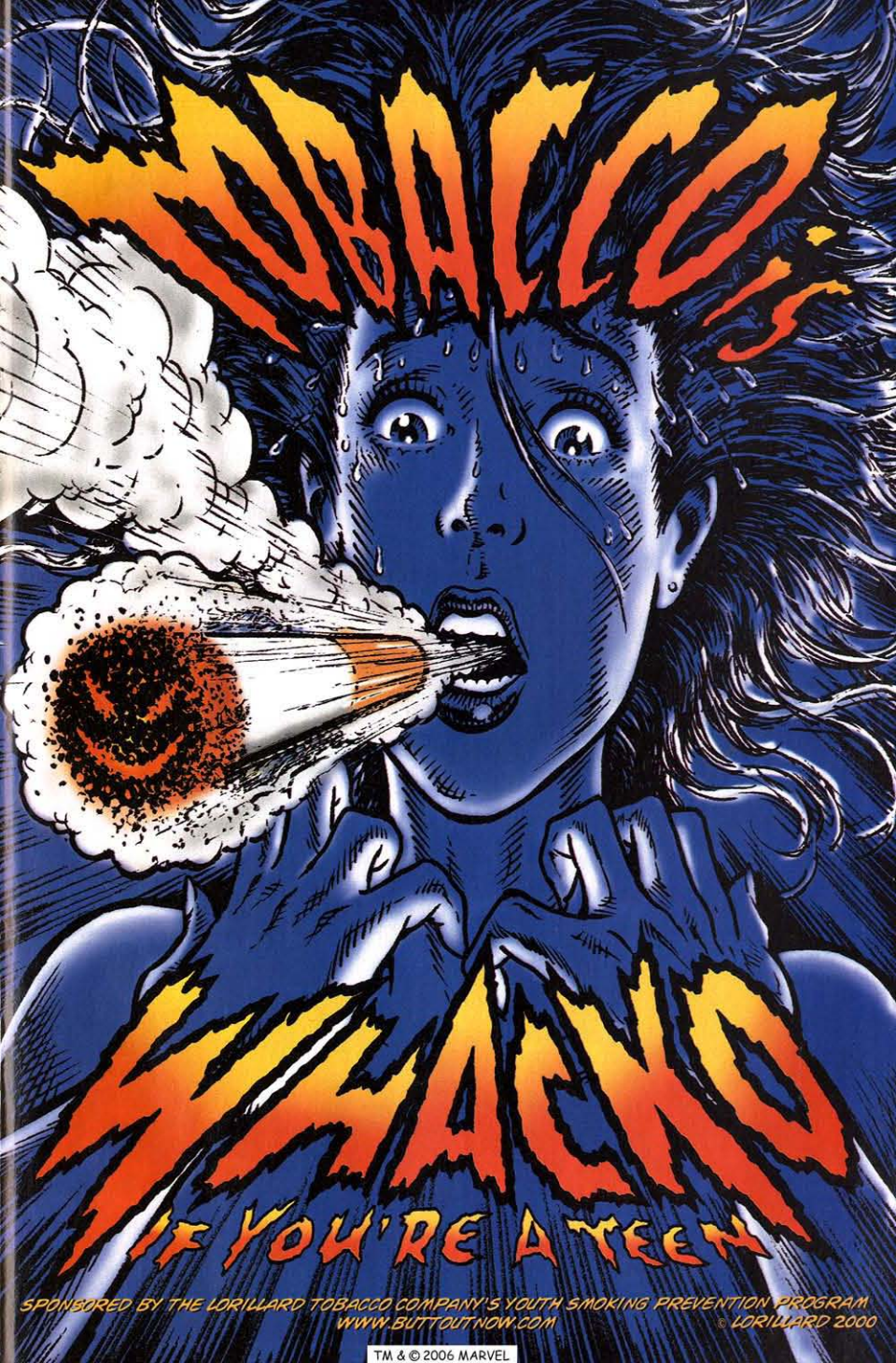
"Ditch my teacher"?!

At least she's only gonna be out until 6 p.m. But I can't just follow them around like this. Gotta try another approach.



Well, there is one option available to me to keep her caged in overnight at least.

If I don't find out where her brother is, she's gonna get herself into more trouble. And I can't keep this up forever.



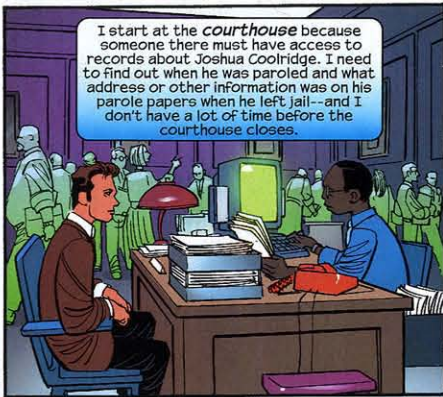
KACK
IF YOU'RE A TEEN

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One slightly illegal action and thirty minutes later...



I start at the *courthouse* because someone there must have access to records about Joshua Coolridge. I need to find out when he was paroled and what address or other information was on his parole papers when he left jail -- and I don't have a lot of time before the courthouse closes.



The woman at the counter isn't exactly helpful. It was a lot easier getting information as a photographer for the paper. These days, "Science Teacher for High School Kids" doesn't allow me to swing my weight around properly...



Joshua Coolridge was released on good behavior by Judge Simon. That's all I can tell you. I will not divulge other parts of his record such as street address, when he was released or any other personal information.



Can you tell me where he's staying now?

I have no information on his current whereabouts. Only his parole officer would know, but he wouldn't release it either. That's strictly *confidential* material.



So, *that* expedition was about as helpful as snot.



Ezekiel?

Peter. Hello.

What are *you* doing here?



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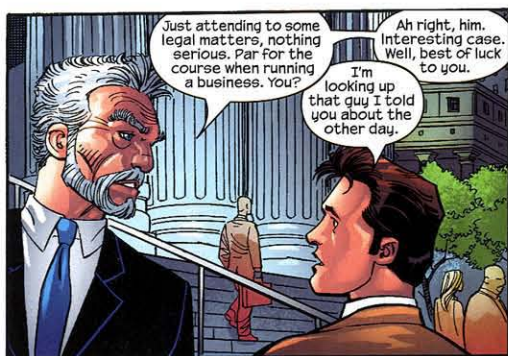
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Just attending to some legal matters, nothing serious. Par for the course when running a business. You?

Ah right, him. Interesting case. Well, best of luck to you.

I'm looking up that guy I told you about the other day.



Yeah, you too...

I don't believe him, but a man is entitled to his own private life, after all. Besides, I have important stuff to attend to tonight and--



Wait a minute. "Interesting case"...

But as usual, he's gone. Now I know how it feels when I do that to people.

Maybe it was nothing.



Hey MJ, it's me. I'm gonna be working late again tonight, but I think this should be the beginning of the end.

Hey, you got that part? Great! Listen, I'm gonna be on the Spidey phone tonight--

What? What's wrong with calling it the Spidey phone? I mean I'm not gonna be on this one, okay? You have the number for the other phone. Right. Feel free to call me. No, it's okay, I have it set to buzz before it rings. Right, bye!



It was time to do some old-fashioned journalistic investigation.



A few of my journalist pals used to frequent this place, because there was one particularly good informant who used to hang out inside.

I started checking with him for leads on Spider-Man. That way if anybody suspected anything, started asking around if I was doing my job, I had him to confirm that I was checking around, which I wouldn't do if I were Spider-Man.

I live a complicated life.

Yo, Pete! Long time no see! What'll it be?

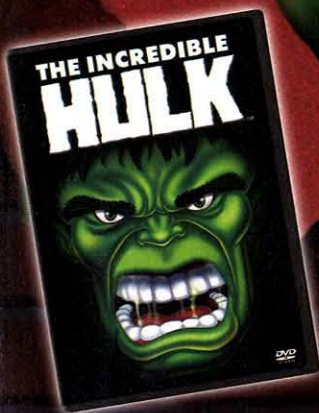
A tomato juice.



One tomato juice coming up, ya stud.

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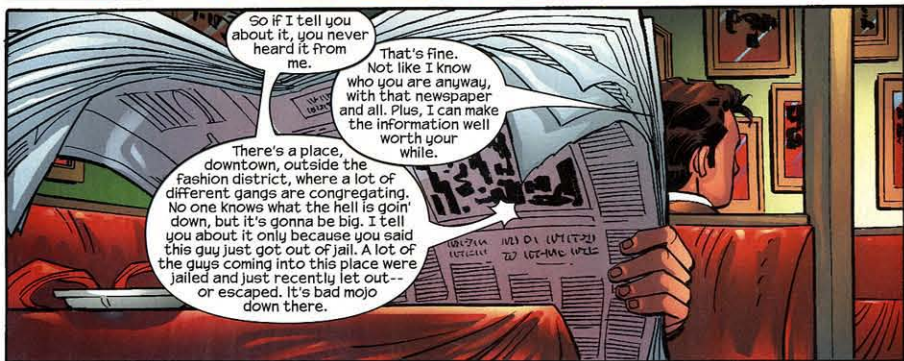
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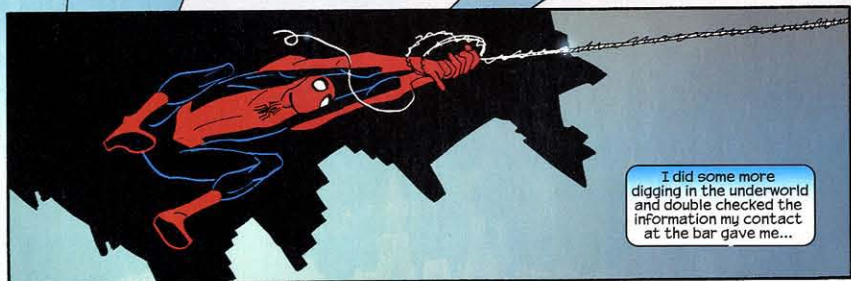
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Without the
babysitting part.



I did some more
digging in the underworld
and double checked the
information my contact
at the bar gave me...



And all arrows pointed to
the same part of town...

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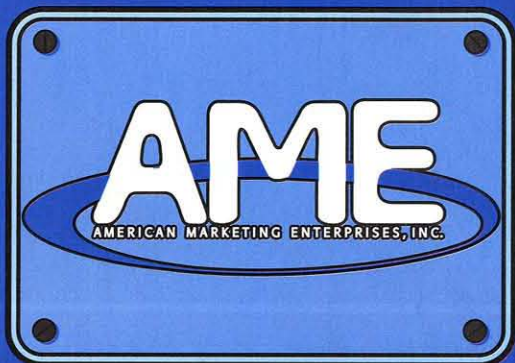
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Finding the right building turns out to be easier than I thought.



It's the only one that's radiating 'criminality' as brightly as the red-light district a few blocks away.



This looks too big to bust, plus I have no idea what they're actually doing.



Balcony seats... Looks like the show is about to start.



We accept that there are legitimate *causae* belli...

The Man is an identifiable human type, but on an unidentifiable scale. He is an enormous stirrer--a titanic mixer.



Where is the new recruit?

This is a vital question. Joshua?

Yes?



There he is. Good, because I was starting to feel lost in a Quentin Tarantino movie.

Oh crap--that's my phone! Gotta hang up before it rings.





I need a better look. Even if it's just a meeting where I can assess what they're up to, at least I'll get a good look at their faces and see if Mel's brother's here.



Causus belli? I have never heard guys like *this* use language like *that* before. In fact, I don't even know what the hell it means!



Okay this is tripping me out. Is this some kinda language for a massive takedown about to occur?

Look how he's shaken us up.

One could say, countervailingly, that when we said yes to this mission, we were truly visited by something very alien and unbelievably radical.

Keep your cool, and look for Joshua out there somewhere...

A completely new kind of enemy for whom death is not death--and for whom life is not life, either, but illusion, a staging-post, merely 'the thing which is called World.'



Whew. Safe. But what the hell was Ezekiel doing calling this phone? I never gave him the number.



I'll have to think about that later--right now--

DAMN! I FORGOT ABOUT THE MESSAGE BEEP!



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I'm right here, sir.

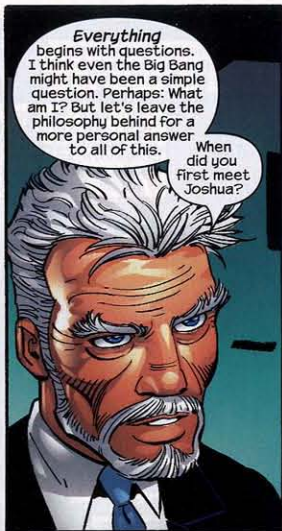


You can get these guys to call you "sir"? Nobody even calls me sir.

Okay, I want answers--

We all want answers. It's the right questions no one's asking. That's where it starts.

That's where what starts?



Everything begins with questions. I think even the Big Bang might have been a simple question. Perhaps: What am I? But let's leave the philosophy behind for a more personal answer to all of this.

When did you first meet Joshua?



At a busy intersection, during a car-jacking. I left him for the police to arrest.

"And what happens to people who are arrested?"

"They go to jail."

"And what do they do in jail?"

"This is stupid."

"What do they do in jail?"

"Serve out their sentence."

"HOW?"

"C'mon, this is stupid."

"Let me put it another way... How many hours in a day are there? Twenty-four, yes? How do you spend twenty-four hours in jail?"

"Eating, sleeping, brawling, watching TV, I guess. Some probably get visitation."

"They also get books, if they think about ordering them. There are many people who spend their whole lives in prison reading books. What do you suppose inmates read about?"



"I'm thinking the self-help bestsellers are probably not really big with the inmates."

"There are a few people who start to read books by J. Krishnamurti, Benedict de Spinoza, Aristotle, the Buddhist Sutras, Plato, Marcus Aurelius. *Why?*"

"They *find* these books because they are *looking* for something...they are looking for pieces of themselves in authority...pieces they have failed to find in the authority of the world today."

"No, we don't ask questions. We do not think critically as a society. We are told not to think by TV, radio, pre-packaged processed foods, drive-throughs, aerobics classes, late night infomercials, or the news."

"We are entertained, yes, but we are not taught to ask the right questions. There are only a few books open to a few minds in this country. Even less in this world."

"Yeah well, we all do that. And most of us don't mug, rob or perform grand-theft auto."

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"Do you pay attention to all the men and women you have thrown in jail, Spider-Man?"

"I--that would be *thousands* by now--"

"And perhaps *one* out of ten thousand picked up a book one day, a book about revolution starting within, or about critical thinking, about finding one's own voice...Would you ever know about that moment?"

One fragile moment where they are alone with nothing to distract them from their own mind, a mind that they've been too afraid their whole lives to listen to, a mind that finally opens up and starts to learn. One day, in one jail cell, in one part of this city.

Would you ever know about it?

No.
That's what I *thought*. And *that* is why you still have a long way to go at being a true guardian in the mythic sense, even after all these years hard at work. To protect the public is to not abandon anyone, you know.

Sounds great. Does it bother you that it's impossible?

Ezekiel *is* the impossible! We work with him because he doesn't ask us to worship everything he has to say. He encourages us to think for ourselves and make things change.

Unlike you. *You* stop things as they go wrong, but you don't do anything to keep them from going wrong in the first place.

I see you're still sore about my choice of the word "loser" on your web-page.

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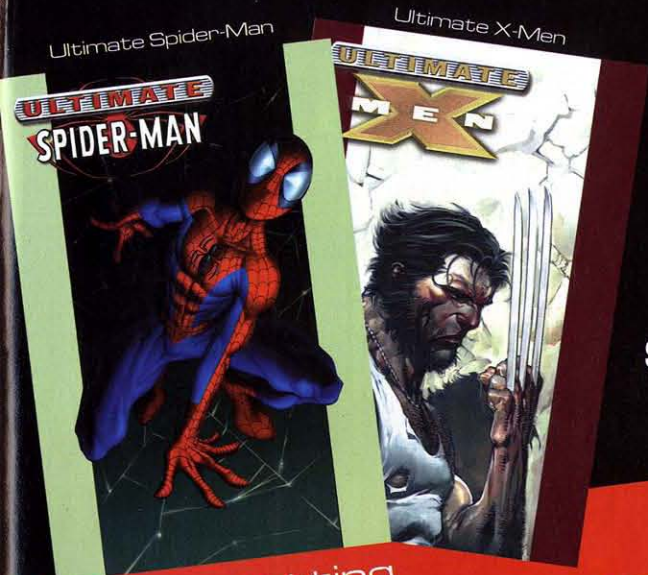
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