

[Excerpt]

## What Will Happen To You?

A Novel

Robbie sat in his cubicle pretending to examine a column of figures until his eyes blurred. ‘Pretending’ was how Robbie spent a lot of his time—it was how he survived his day. He popped an antacid from the tin on his desk. He chomped down hard on the tablet. Snapping the tablet in two with his teeth produced an audible crunch. Robbie looked up and glanced to his left then to his right across the rows of cubicles, but no-one appeared to have noticed the sound, or if they did, they didn’t show any signs of it bothering them, and it, the ‘crunch’, failed to disrupt the unrelenting accounting activity going on in the department. Robbie wasn’t surprised that no one noticed—he preferred no one did, especially not Bentley.

Robbie Carton was a twenty-nine-year-old accountant with a slim build, a mop of black stylishly untidy hair and quiet dark eyes. He had clear pale unblemished skin and a boyish smile which wasn’t often seen. He worked in a large mining company with offices and mines all over the world. Robbie didn’t bother himself with the global reach of the company. He rarely thought about it and when he did think about it, he knew he was only pretending to think about it. What he did think about was how anxious being in his cubicle made him feel. He looked up to see if anyone else on the floor was showing signs of feeling anxious. He couldn’t tell. He popped another antacid out of habit. He found the crunch satisfying on some primal level. ‘Crunch’.

‘You lose things, Carton.’ This was Bentley Herbert, Robbie’s supervisor. Bentley was three plus years older than Robbie, but Robbie thought, no wiser by any measurable measure—maybe Bentley was taller by a centimetre or two, with nostrils that flared at you at the end of his sentences. Bentley didn’t wait for a response to his claim that Robbie lost things. The phone on Bentley’s desk rang and he returned to his cubicle to answer it. Robbie felt some relief. Robbie had no response to Bentley’s accusation—however vaguely plausible it sounded the moment Bentley said it. Robbie hoped no one else nearby on the floor had heard the annoying Bentley. Robbie had no idea what he’d lost, or if he did lose things, or how serious ‘losing things’ might be in life. He had no clue as to what Bentley was talking about. This worried Robbie. And this meant now he was worried as well as anxious. Robbie’s degree of anxiousness was multi-layered, multi-dimensional, multi-faceted and probably ambidextrous, even multi-ambidextrous, he mused. The word ***Panic***, typed in bold italics, but not with quotation marks, was pinned to his partition at eye level just above his laptop. Robbie Carton wanted more *for* himself and more *from* himself.

To be precise, Robbie Carton was a reluctant accountant—and so he delighted in anarchy, though as an accountant, anarchy made Robbie uneasy. But precision, he could handle. Existence also troubled him. He knew he was an accountant, ‘but how do you know you exist?’ He asked this question of anyone handy, but usually when he was drunk or well on his way to being drunk at the Stalwart pub most Friday nights.

He sent his question about existence out in an email to selected people in the office. He received no reply. He wasn’t expecting any. Robbie, according to anyone who knew him, was squandering himself. Robbie agreed. The problem was that no one, himself included, knew what particular talents he might possess, if he possessed any at all. Indeed, being an accountant didn’t amount to a talent of any note, he supposed. Other-self (his internal voice) was sure he

was a talent-free zone. Robbie, on this matter, had to agree with other-self. Usually though, Robbie disagreed with other-self—it was dangerous to do otherwise. Other-self was a self-proclaimed actual anarchist, not a pretend anarchist like Robbie. Other-self was always trying to make trouble for Robbie. So, the question remained as to how these ‘talents’, if they did exist, might be used to the good of himself, or on a grander scale, to the good of the planet. Robbie’s anxiety multiplied—not only did he have to worry about losing things, he also now had to worry about not using his ‘talent’, whatever it may be.

At the Stalwart pub on Friday nights, when Robbie had drunk too much, he would argue on the question of existence. ‘Let’s say you don’t exist,’ he would regale to no one in particular, ‘then why would you “not exist” as an accountant, for crying out loud? Why not “not exist” as a matinee idol, or the inventor of the cure for cancer, or Mick Jagger and so forth? You get my drift? The fact that I’m an actual plodding accountant is insistent proof I must exist, or not, yes? I mean, it’s an absurdity, is it not?’

He didn’t expect an answer—he knew there was none. He was drunk and aware he was slurring his words. He also knew no one was listening. He knew Sophie Fanshawe couldn’t hear his extemporaneous mumbling over the din in the pub while she tended the bar. He knew the two other regulars sitting along the bar from him would not indicate they had heard what Robbie had said—they feared engagement with a drunken accountant. They were drunk themselves and never spoke except to order their drinks, and even then, they would only scrape a finger on the beer mat or tap their empty glass once. Robbie both admired them for it and was frustrated by it.

The degree of love Robbie felt for Sophie Fanshawe increased in direct proportion to his inebriation. He could graph it if he put his accountant mind to it—love intensity versus degree of inebriation. He knew that thinking about graphing something as absurd as this confirmed his

accountant credentials, and this depressed him, and caused him to order more drinks. Robbie hated being an accountant. Robbie hated being Robbie. Drinking at the Stalwart on Friday nights liberated Robbie from the tedium of both being Robbie and an accountant.

As was his habit, he pencilled the word ‘Panic’ above the column of figures on the sheet of paper in front of him and slid it into his outbox for Bentley to collect. Robbie glanced over at Bentley, who was still on the phone. Bentley was a surreal character, according to Robbie. If Bentley was surreal, that would mean everyone else in the department must be normal by comparison. Robbie thought that seemed improbable. Robbie argued Bentley would be hard to invent if he hadn’t already existed—hard to invent, but not impossible. Bentley had heard Robbie’s dissertation on ‘existence’ many times. Robbie had no idea where Bentley stood on the subject, but then neither did Bentley—for Bentley, according to Robbie, such notions were not the natural terrain of accountants. Bentley would have considered it a risky proposition to look too long and closely into such ideas, or into the abyss, as Robbie described it. Bentley was true to his profession and, as such, risk-averse—‘risk’ being an anathema to an accountant, but not to Robbie. Robbie liked to think he was a risk-taker, even though that seemed not to be the case. Do risk-takers suffer from anxiety? Probably not, he had to admit.

On the rare occasion Robbie trusted himself, he thought that Bentley might be the sanest person he knew. That scared Robbie, who had legitimate concerns regarding his own sanity. According to other-self, Robbie’s hold on sanity and reason was a joke. Robbie was inclined to agree. Robbie didn’t smoke or wear singlets, but other-self did, and Robbie had no clue as to why.

Robbie was best described as forlorn. A man who lived alone in a one-bedroom rented flat in an inner-city suburb and worked during the day adding and subtracting numbers. At night, he could see the lights of his office building in the city from his apartment. During the

day, Robbie could see his dark apartment from the east side of his office floor. Apart from Friday nights at the Stalwart, Robbie's life consisted of being in one of two places—his apartment, or his office. Wherever he was, he was looking at wherever he wasn't.

Robbie lived his life trying to minimise his discontent. In his apartment, Robbie kept little in his fridge apart from some bottled beer and the occasional half-empty container of leftover takeaway curry. He longed to find meaning in what seemed an absurd world, but so far, exhaustive examination had not revealed anything of substance, meaning-wise. 'Absurdity abounds, but meaning is in short supply,' he would often say. Nonetheless, he continued to hope that meaning did exist but so far, he had failed to unearth any, especially in his department.

Bentley Herbert was still talking on his phone and, in his odd way, represented 'meaning', well, a kind of meaning, Robbie argued—the kind that tends to define something, in this case meaning itself, by not defining it. Robbie devised the notion that Bentley's meaning defined meaning more from what it wasn't than from what it was—its absence more than its presence. In the same way that a hole is defined by what's around it. This frustrated Robbie, as did many things, Bentley being prime among them. Robbie suspected there was a good chance meaning existed in his apartment, but whenever he opened the door, it disappeared. Meaning disappeared, not the door, or the apartment. Robbie added this for his own amusement—he loved a dangling modifier. Robbie was left with trying to find meaning in a fluid world, in particular, in a fictional world where you could reinvent yourself, if only temporarily. He worried though, that if you reinvent yourself, would you be someone else or still the same person? Could you be someone else? You would look the same. You would sound the same. Other-self was all for giving reinvention a try. Robbie typed, '*Absurdity abounds, but meaning is in short supply*' and sent it as an internal email to Bentley. Bentley ignored it. Robbie followed up with, '*If your boomerang has come to the end of its usefulness, how do you throw*

*it away?*’ Bentley again made no indication he had read Robbie’s email, but Robbie knew he had. Bentley read all of Robbie’s emails. Robbie sent a third email with the statement, *‘I’ve thrown my colander out, it leaked like a sieve, or like a colander.’* Again, no facial response from Bentley that Robbie could discern.

At this moment, Bentley Herbert was back and standing right behind Robbie. Bentley was dressed in body-hugging, iridescent green lycra. He was holding some files, a black bike helmet and his New England red lunchbox with the words ‘Grafton Village Cheese Company’ written on two of its sides. On one of the sides, the first letter of each word was missing. Such things exhausted and confounded Robbie. Robbie spent an inordinate amount of time being confounded by things that most other people wouldn’t notice, or if they did, they wouldn’t choose to be confounded by them. Robbie did, but it wasn’t as though he had a choice.

‘Did you hear me, Carton? I said you lose things.’

Robbie still had no immediate answer to Bentley’s accusation and felt his stomach clench because he couldn’t fathom if Bentley was joking, being sarcastic or deadly serious. It wasn’t lunchtime, so why was Bentley carrying his lunch box? Robbie had no idea.

‘I heard you the first time,’ Robbie mumbled.

What had he lost? Did he lose things? Robbie worried about tone and inference. He had trouble reconciling these things. He didn’t have any idea what Bentley was talking about, but it caused him to feel tense. He hated feeling tense, almost as much as he hated feeling forlorn, which was pretty much his default state, along with exhausted—tense, forlorn, exhausted, that was how Robbie felt most of the time. And now confounded.

‘I was thinking about it, riding my bike, on my way in this morning. Yeah, you lose things.’ Bentley Herbert said this with considerable smugness, as though he had found the key

to Robbie. ‘I don’t know what will happen to you, Carton. I really don’t.’ Bentley, repeating the statement, reiterated each word with a strange emphasis on the word ‘will’ and with lengthy pauses between each word. ‘What Will Happen to You?’ Robbie assumed Bentley had capitalised the first letter of each word. Sweat formed on Robbie’s brow. He felt light-headed.

Bentley spoke to himself and for his own amusement with a rhetorical flourish, though Robbie would argue that a rhetorical flourish was beyond Bentley’s remit. Robbie felt there was an implied threat underpinning Bentley’s words, but wasn’t sure Bentley meant it that way or was even capable of such a thing. Nonetheless, Robbie felt threatened. And why had Bentley Herbert been thinking about him on his way to work? Tense, forlorn, exhausted, confounded and now worried and threatened, that was Robbie Carton in a nutshell. Robbie, for his own amusement, emphasised the word ‘nut’ in ‘nutshell’ but it provided no tangible relief.

‘It’s a worthy question and one you should ponder on, Carton. What will happen to you?’ Bentley repeated to Robbie, who was at that moment in a land far, far away.

Robbie added to his stream of thought and typed the following words, *What Will Happen to You? A Novel by Robbie Carton*. The problem with this though, Robbie thought, as good a title as it was for a novel, was that it begged the question of how was he to write a novel with a title that asked a question he had no idea how to answer? That would indeed be a mystery novel, even to its author. Robbie considered the title for a second or two, and on the screen, removed the question mark. *What will happen to you*. Robbie typed the following question: *When a sentence is obviously a question as this one is, are not question marks redundant?*

Robbie typed this up and sent it as an email to Bentley even though Bentley was standing behind him. Robbie thought to strike-out the question mark after ‘redundant?’ but he couldn’t.

Bentley, not a man to be distracted, nor one to concern himself with repetition, repeated, ‘What will happen to you, Carton?’

Robbie knew Bentley would use a question mark because it was a grammatical rule. Bentley repeated the question on his way back to his cubicle, but with a grin in his demeanour, as though he had Robbie ‘bang to rights’, as they say on British police procedural shows. Robbie couldn’t think of a reply, and this further unsettled him, and like anyone in an unsettled state, it was difficult to think of a good riposte, to use a word Bentley would favour. Robbie felt buzzy and nauseous. He hated feeling like that at work, or in his flat, or anywhere for that matter.

Later, for the sake of the exercise, Robbie mumbled Bentley’s words to himself, ‘What Will Happen to You?’ And then he typed, *What Will Happen to You, Robbie?* Robbie deleted his name. It didn’t look right, and it did no work, but some names do. Some names do a lot of work, but that was a topic for another time. If he disappeared and reinvented himself in another universe, he’d like to say to people, ‘Call me Ishmael. You haven’t seen a white whale anywhere, have you? A friend of mine is missing one.’ This assumed that in the reinvention of himself, he retained his sense of the absurd—he would also hope not to lose things as Bentley had forewarned. But then it wouldn’t matter because he would be in another universe, where Bentley wouldn’t be. Robbie wondered if Bentley’s absence would loom larger than his presence, or the other way round. Confounded again, Robbie popped an antacid and closed his eyes.

Robbie had a habit. He wrote random notes in a secret file on his computer, which was what he was doing when Bentley stopped behind him and accused him of losing things. The notes he kept in his secret file were about events and people and himself, but mostly his random thoughts. Sometimes they accumulated into micro stories—several micro stories. Robbie had

no idea how this happened. He wondered if other-self had anything to do with it. Some of these thoughts Robbie might one day use in his novel, should he ever get around to writing one. A novel, any novel, he contended, was meant to be a stand-alone universe. His universe was far from 'stand-alone'. He felt it was savagely unstable. Robbie's universe lacked a central core. It was in a heightened state of near collapse, so he held little hope that he could write a novel given his limitations in his universe, such as it was. He also contended that writing a novel would take so much out of you, change you so much, that at its completion, you would be a different person—you would disappear as the author. He thought writing a novel might be one of the most dangerous things you could do. So, if not a novel, he thought, then he might consider writing a play, but he had no idea how to start such a thing. He typed *What Will Happen to You? A play by Robbie Carton* but it didn't make any more sense than it did as a novel and seemed no less dangerous to its author. He thought, for the sake of this exercise, he might concentrate on writing micro stories, maybe a book of micro stories, but then he figured this would be harder than writing a novel, or a play, where you only needed one central idea. A book of micro stories would need many potent ideas, and he had none. He had a lot of micro stories, but none of them contained potent ideas, he didn't think. He could write something around Bentley or Sophie Fanshawe, or any number of characters he came across in his daily toil, but he was too exhausted, and he worried that it might change him into something, or someone, that might scare him, like a monster perhaps? Or perhaps it might reveal the monster he was.

For the amusement of all, himself in particular, Robbie truncated Bentley's last name to Bert. He did this because he knew it annoyed Supervisor Bentley Herbert and Bentley couldn't say it did because that would mean it did. To prove his childish petulance, as if he needed to, Robbie sometimes extended the truncated Bert to Bertram, or 'The Bertram' or 'The Bentley

Bertram' or 'The Bentley Bert' or his *pièce de résistance*, 'The Bent Bert'. It all depended on his mood, or how unbusy he was at the time.

He typed *Unbusy* on a blank screen and watched the cursor pulse. He continued typing.

*'Unbusy'. Being 'unbusy' was the preferred state of the fluctuating forty or so accountants who worked in the department. 'Unbusy' wasn't just being idle, it was far more sophisticated than that. 'Unbusy' was when you were busy not achieving anything productive but looked as though you were. Accountants understood this concept and admired it in other accountants.*

Robbie stopped typing.

In and around bouts of 'unbusy' periods, Robbie's main job was to reconcile expense accounts across the mining company's distant divisions. That was pretty much all he did, outside of annoying Bentley, which he saw as his real job, if not his life's work. When he wasn't a bored accountant, he was a cinephile and a bookophile, or a hyperlexiphile, whatever the term was for someone who loved reading. If you loved reading, wouldn't you know what the term for excessive reading was? Robbie often imagined himself as the literary figures he read about. It was a way of getting through his day. On any given day or night, he spent hours being Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis and pictured himself taking an axe to some of the accountants, and thus purging the world of several number-cruncher types. Or Holden Caulfield, where Robbie would spend the day picking out all the phonies on the floor, starting with himself to be fair. Or Mark Twain, where Robbie imagined his desk was a raft floating through the aisles of accountants, or a white whale in a sea of accountants. Robbie did this often, but it left him feeling unsatisfied and still himself—still himself, wanting to be someone who wouldn't have any pending files in his in-tray. No in-tray at all, much better.

Robbie thought that absurdism was as prevalent as the air here, in the ‘Department of Nonsense’, a phrase Robbie favoured when talking about the office. Robbie’s somewhat athletic build defied the fact that he did no exercise and spent most of his spare time reading and watching films, and drinking at the Stalwart pub, or standing in the dark in his apartment being watched by the twinkling lights of the city, feeling alone and forlorn, tense, and exhausted. This was on a good day. He didn’t have good nights. All these activities, in their way, had a particular purpose. They abetted his desire to disappear and start again. He wished there was a ‘disappear’ button on his computer keyboard. He imagined being in the middle of working on a column of figures, or midway through a discussion with Bentley on something inane, like the previous conversation he had had with Bentley, with his finger poised over the ‘disappear’ button. Then when he couldn’t take it anymore, he’d hit the button and ‘puff’, he’d be gone in a ‘puff’. He imagined popping out of the miasma onto a beach in Key Largo or Madagascar wearing a colourful shirt and sporting a limp and needing a walking stick or finding himself on a tautologically frozen tundra in the black winter of a distant planet in another galaxy, somewhere where he wasn’t known by any of the aliens and could start again. Of course, *he’d* be the alien, so no change there.

He typed, *Gone in a ‘puff’* but decided not to send it to Bentley. *Gone in a puff*. Not that anyone in the department would notice he was missing. That was how it was on the floor—accountants kept to themselves and would consider the business of someone disappearing not something they should concern themselves with, unless they coveted the empty cubicle because their own was not as well sited in the hierarchy.

Robbie felt that the one person in the department who might notice he had disappeared would be Bentley, his arch-nemesis, or maybe Gloria, who worked two cubicles away from Robbie, next to Bentley’s cubicle. Robbie looked over at Gloria. Her cubicle was smaller than

Robbie's. He could see her shiny hair above the partition—it was captured by her usual ribbon, which today, or at the moment, was white. Robbie was guilty of sniffing Gloria whenever the opportunity presented itself, like when she leant near him to discuss a file or walked past him and left a trail of her perfume for him to inhale. Gloria smelt exotic in a way that made Robbie think of white sandy beaches, cocktail umbrellas, exotic white drinks, and a red and white striped beach towel. Gloria was all accountant but also all 'woman'. Robbie, together with all the other male accountants on the floor, and quite possibly one or two of the female accountants for all Robbie knew—wanted to ravish her, and Gloria knew that. In Robbie's view, the word 'accountant' and 'ravish' should not appear in the same sentence. It implied a competency not ordinarily associated with accountants—male or female—according to Robbie.

Whenever Gloria swished past, everyone—the men in this case—would bite down hard on a knuckle, or a pencil, or a bone, or a car part, or whatever was handy, to keep themselves controlled. Not that they would do anything to embarrass themselves, but they might develop a line of sweat across the top of their lip for those who didn't possess a pencil moustache or, worse, underarm damp patches might appear. The women in the department all eyed Gloria as she passed by, but no one knew what they were thinking—at least Robbie was sure he didn't. Gloria excelled at rendering an excellent 'swish'. As she swished down each aisle with her practised rhythm, it was like a Mexican wave of accountants—all, in turn, bending after her like flowers following the sun.

Gloria was smart, very smart, and universally understood to be destined for advancement in the department. She was already Bentley's deputy. Robbie found the juxtaposition of how smart she was with the way she looked, a conundrum—another conundrum in a life full of conundrums or conundra, as Bentley would mischievously point out, even though the dictionary cited 'conundrums' as the plural of conundrum because conundrum was not a Latin

word, which Bentley would smugly reveal having suckered you into believing what he just said. ‘*Conundrums* is the plural, not conundra. It’s not Latin, you *fatuus* [fool].’ This was Bentley at full throttle. It was unspecified as to why or how Bentley knew any Latin, but he did, and he used it to make you look like an *idiota*—Latin for idiot, as he would disclose. Bentley could only be tolerated in *exiguus*—small amounts—Robbie thought. Robbie had looked up *exiguus*.

‘Well, Carton, what *will* happen to you? Or have you left us for one of your fantasy worlds?’ Bentley was back again, standing behind Robbie. Perhaps he’d never left. He repeated his question and laughed nervously to himself. Bentley, according to Robbie, had an infinite capacity to find himself amusing.

‘This *is* a fantasy world,’ Robbie muttered to himself.

Bentley remained behind Robbie. Bentley had primitive social skills, Robbie thought, and standing behind someone and waiting for a reply to what Robbie was sure was a rhetorical question, while others watched or tried to ignore the situation, wouldn’t have occurred to Bentley as being bizarre, or embarrassing, or peculiar, or socially inept. Robbie wished Bentley would disappear along with the heat of embarrassment, which had risen to the top of Robbie’s scalp and hovered like a heat-induced mirage over a dirt road in the middle distance on a hot outback day—Robbie enjoyed an overworked metaphor. Robbie searched his keyboard but failed to find a ‘disappear’ button labelled ‘Bentley’.

‘I heard you Bertie, loud and unclear.’ Robbie tried to sound breezy and unperturbed by what Bentley had said, but he’d lost control of his voice, and it sounded too high. He didn’t turn around to face Bentley, and he felt there was more agitation in his demeanour than he intended or wanted. This agitation escalated and graphed itself up to a more strident form of agitation, and the problem with that was Bentley might interpret it as proof he had gotten under

Robbie's skin, which he had, but Robbie didn't want Bentley to know that. Robbie minimised the secret file he had up on his screen. At that point, Bentley turned away and walked back to his cubicle, with another inane thought wandering around his mind. Bentley, according to Robbie, had the concentration span of a gate off its latch.

Robbie exhaled and thought it wasn't the best start to his morning. Bentley had ambushed him, and Robbie preferred it the other way round. Robbie could smell warm cucumber sandwiches from somewhere in the department, but it didn't help.