

[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.

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