

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Doctor Bentiron

In a psychiatry office high on the seventh floor, an agitated Herbert searches for cameras and listening devices. His eyes blink as if punctuating every thought.

A seeming *tween* in a lab coat sits behind a large desk, checking his phone whenever Herbert isn't looking. He is Dr. Bentiron, not yet 30, physically fit, no history of original thought, adorned with long hair and a two-day stubble.

After 18 minutes of legal disclaimers, he had opened the session to Herbert's perspectives, saying he is happy to let the patient "express his wildest dreams, fantasies, and fears verbally, physically, and even through dance, if he so chooses."

Herbert now gets close to Bentiron's ear and whispers, "That was no accident."

"Why are you whispering?"

Herbert scribbles on a pad, "I don't feel safe here."

Dr. Bentiron scribbles back. "All allegations were dropped."

Herbert has no idea what he is talking about and presses forward in a low voice. "Someone is trying to kill me and I don't know whom to trust. Mrs. Pearbottom said she got rid of George and Michael, but no offense, the two new ones look just like them, except for dyed hair. And they forgot the eyebrows."

Dr. Bentiron is horrified. "How can you tell?"

“Black eyebrows don’t go on a blonde head. It’s unnatural,” Herbert scoffs. “And it’s not just that. The other day I saw a new, though rather old, cleaning lady who looks just like someone who used to try to kill me a lot. For decades, really.”

“Oh, Herbert.”

“Don’t *Oh Herbert* me! I’m not imagining these things. Something is going on here, my good boy. Or Doctor.”

“Herb,” says Bentiron, a buddy when you need one. “Herbie! Have a seat. We all know retirement has been hard on you.”

“Oh, don’t give me that malarkey, Junior!” Herbert sits down and speaks loud and clear to whoever may have bugged this office. “Ok, listen, whomever you are.”

Dr. Bentiron points to his own name placard. “Dr. Bentiron.”

Herbert dismisses him and continues for unseen listeners. “I am not here to talk about my general hopelessness, or my complete and utter despair, as I enter my final years, without any meaning or purpose in my life.”

The young doctor looks surprised. “Why are we here, then?”

“I am here to talk about an obvious murder that was clearly meant for me! I know you people hear me, and I know you are after me. And you should be, because I am now after you! And I will find you, whomever you are, and it won’t be pretty! In fact, it will be very ugly.”

Dr. Bentiron is concerned. “My goodness! A little anger and self-expression are good *Herbster*, but—”

“Don’t call me that, you pimple-faced prick!”

“Don’t you mean, *Quack?*”

“You may certainly add that!”

“Mr. Bigglesby, can we just focus on pure logic first? Let’s review the facts. Forensics examined the glass and did an autopsy. They found no evidence of foul play.”

Herbert is ready to argue point for point. “No, they were given *a* glass, but not the actual glass, which disappeared moments after the incident. Plus, some poisons don’t even leave a suspicious trace.

On the flipside, nothing racial intended, what we do know for certain is that someone who has worked here, for less than a week, offered me a drink, which was then swallowed, by someone who died moments after drinking it.”

“Of a heart attack!” recalls Dr. Bentiron. “On a tennis court! At a senior living community! Or frankly, dying community. Though worth investing in.”

“But he only got off two serves!” counters Herbert. “I do see the optics, Doctor. How it seems completely open and shut. But it was a murder and not an accident. Those Twins are working for someone and I intend to find out for whom.”

“That’s interesting,” observes Bentiron. Herbert eases up, finally feeling heard. The doctor continues, “I never know when to use *who* or *whom*, but that sounded right.”

Herbert’s muscles tighten. Dr. Bentiron sees it and tries to sound empathic. “Herbert, I realize it’s hard to separate happenings that happen so close together in time. Yet a first rule in science is, *correlation does not imply causation*. I mean, just look at where we are! People and food expire here all the time.”

Herbert looks away dismissively. He walks over to the window and confesses, “Perhaps you’re right. Frankly, Doctor, I’ve been wanting to expire myself.”

The doctor looks nervous.

As Herbert gazes at the alley with dumpsters below, his view spins with vertigo (Hitchcock, 1958). Suddenly he slams the desk and regains his balance. “This changes everything, Doctor.”

“Good! I mean, about not wanting to die anymore.” Dr. Bentiron looks down at the alley. “I don’t know why a depressing nursing home would be this tall.”

“Senior Living Community,” corrects Herbert.

“Of course.”

Herbert continues. “Doctor, the help I need isn’t about perspective, or having happy thoughts. It’s about security.”

“Were you anal attentive as a child?”

“Only at church. With everybody facing forward. But don’t you mean *retentive*?”

“That too.”

“Doc, I need to know who’s after me and why. And we need to do something about it.”

“Yes, I think that’s right!”

“Then you’ll help me?”

“What? No! I’m talking about *who*’s after you and not *whom*. But then is that *who*’s with an apostrophe or *whose* with an ‘e’ at the end?”

Herbert struggles to not kill *this idiot*. He continues, “And you know what’s hardest about it all?”

“Good, don’t hold back. Get it all out.”

Herbert deflates. “Never mind.” He does not want to keep talking but then can’t help it. “I gave my whole life to you-know-whom and here they are leaving me high and dry like a sitting duck. Quack!”

Dr. Bentiron can’t tell if Herbert just called him a duck or was quoting one. As an enlightened person, however, he chooses not to be offended since it is within his personal autonomy to do so. He makes a mental note to bring it up as a small victory in his supervision this week.

Herbert continues. “I can’t believe our agency has ignored me like this! Despite all the concerns I’ve raised! Where is the loyalty? I’m not some teacher or prison guard to be betrayed by my union!”

“Is that an important value for you?”

“Betrayal? Dryness?”

“No, loyalty.”

“I don’t really think of *no loyalty* as a value. It’s more like a problem. For me, at least, but I’m old-stool.”

“School? Never mind, flexibility is important.”

Herbert grows suspicious as a new idea forms. “Wait, do you think I might just need to relax and trust headquarters more?”

“Maybe. What do you think?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Touché.” Dr. Bentiron checks an email. “Well, at least know that you’re safe, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I see. By the way, on a completely different note: Are you and Mrs. Pearbottom an item? I won’t judge. But she does have a thing for the younger ones.”

Dr. Bentiron tries to hide his shock. “Can we stay professional here? I understand you’re alarmed, and I hardly think you’re crazy, if that’s any consolation.”

“Why, thank you!”

“Of course! Your feelings of insecurity and betrayal make sense to me. Many people in our line of work end up bitter, depressed, and questioning if they really accomplished anything with their lives.”

“Bitter about the job?” asks Herbert. “I have no regrets about that. I mean, world peace is world peace. Now, can we get back to Bob being poisoned and me being in danger, or at least about you and Peaches getting it on?”

“Toxicity really pulls at you!” says Bentiron. “Have you ever noticed that?”

Herbert is almost in despair. “What are you talking about now?”

The doctor takes a deep breath and tries to get the session back on track. “Herbert, I’m trying to meet you where you’re at.”

Herbert looks around. “I’m here in your office. Where are you at? Is this a hologram?”

“I wish. But let’s get back to your own troublesome reflections.”

“Good. Let’s.” Herbert relaxes.

“So, when did you first begin to question everything you did in your former career? And how exactly did you live with it at the time? I mean, for every one disaster averted, weren’t three more created?”

Herbert can’t believe what he is hearing. “Whom do you work for again?”

Dr. Bentiron looks at his watch; he needs to move this meeting along. “Mr. Bigglesby, in my professional opinion, I believe you’re showing symptoms of PTSD. Our friend Bob died unexpectedly, and your survival instincts flared up, which used to be appropriate

and necessary. But now they are overreactions, though it's great that you don't want to die anymore. So, here's what we're going to do. I'm going to write you a prescription for something to help you relax, play some golf..."

"And help me sleep while my enemies slit my throat?"

"Yes, sleep is important—wait, no! Mr. Bigglesby, I don't want to use words like *paranoid* or *delusional*. Nor recommend antipsychotics just yet. But you might be having difficulty with reality testing, if you know what I mean."

"Are you serious? Calling a murder a murder *is* accepting reality! And decent grounds for concern. Why won't you help me?"

"Because..." Dr. Bentiron hesitates to say what he is thinking. He then does so in a low voice. "Because as important as you were earlier in life, it's sadly quite likely that the only people who care if you're alive or not are in Accounts Receivable."

Herbert is dumbfounded by the bluntness. Which is all he can think to say at the moment. So, he does. "I have to say, Doctor, I am quite dumbfounded by your bluntness."

"I thought you'd say that," answers the doctor. "And then you did. And I heard it. Look, I am sorry. I get that you're in a tough place. But instead of dwelling on whom you know that might still be out to get you, and instead of overlooking their advanced years and deficiencies, I suggest you focus on savoring your good memories while you still have access to them."

Herbert is shocked yet again. "First off, it's *who* you know, not *whom*. And what do you mean, *while I still have access to them*? Is headquarters going to have my memories erased?"

"Oh dear." Dr. Bentiron laughs and jots something on his pad. "What kind of powers do you think we have?"

"Stop! Erase that! I do not believe you have the power to erase my memories."

"Good. But as a point of education, your condition is not exceptional. Cognitive decline is normative at your age. You will soon have the experience of knowing you know some things but no

longer be able to retrieve them. It'll be on the tip of your tongue but be completely blank."

"I see. So, I should stop trying to create new memories and just be nostalgic till I'm a raving drooling idiot?"

"Even then, keep it up."

"And how exactly will my memory go?" Herbert scans the office like he has never been here before. "Like, what was for breakfast? And who are you, again?"

"See? That's exactly my point. I'm Dr. Bentiron. Your psychiatrist. You're a resident at Sunset View Senior Living Community Center, Regional Division USA. Wait, what are you doing?"

Herbert has stood up and is examining Dr. Bentiron's degrees on the wall. "I'm trying to see if you're actually a part of the intelligence community."

Herbert takes down one of the degrees to study it. Dr. Bentiron jumps out of his chair. "I can assure you—"

"Assurance? Like a third-party payor? I've been assured all sorts of coverage and left out naked in the wind."

He puts the degree back on the wall but crooked, which annoys Bentiron.

"But maybe you're right," Herbert continues. "Maybe I should just accept what's coming. What difference does it make if I live much longer or just move along now?"

"That's not what I'm saying," insists Bentiron loudly, as if worried about being misquoted in a postmortem review. As he speaks he tries to make his crooked degree look more on the level. "Herbert, you may still have another 15 years, for all we don't know. In fact," He then tries to lighten things up with a TV voice. "Your mission, and I do hope you choose to accept it, is to work on adjusting to this phase of your life and not comparing it to the past."

"Oh, I see! But then why preserve my life at all? Other than to make a killing, so to speak."

“You have a very cynical attitude, Herbert. I didn’t go to medical school to run a business. As long as there is a viable, non-dependent, fully formed human life, I’m all about it.”

“Oh, I wasn’t criticizing. I’m just saying maybe I’ve seen enough, heard enough, and done enough. Maybe I should cash out my chips. It’s just hard to do it alone.”

“Are you suggesting doctor-assisted—”

“Shhh! Nothing so crude. We’d have a gentle euphemism. Like, Librarian-assisted... demise.”

“L-A-D? L-O-L!”

“What are you spelling?”

“Sorry. Never mind. Let’s get back on track.”

“Good idea! Train tracks!”

“No! Herbert, you mustn’t conclude I recommended harming yourself. By the way, we did recall your cyanide diapers, right?” He jots himself a note.

“Yes, I can’t even wiz my way to oblivion now.” Herbert is not about to admit he still has a trick or two up his pant legs.

Dr. Bentiron glances at a clock. Herbert notices.

“Is it time to end it?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Then we agree! I’d rather go soon before they get another chance to do me in.”

“Herbert, please! Look, we’ve covered a lot of topics today. Can you summarize your takeaways?”

“Fine. Yes. Focus on the good times.”

“Exactly! No one can take those from you.”

“He thinks the thinks that remind him of the good days. And perhaps of even better days?” (cfr. Chumbawamba, 1997).

“That’s the spirit. Gee, let’s end on a good note.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“Humor me. Tell me again about your time with Ms. Vesuvius.”

Herbert becomes mischievous. “Oh, she was quite the flytrap! Her scientist professor astronaut thing was...” he savors a memory.



“I had never seen such a great body of work! But, you know, it’s her personality I miss most.”

“See, aren't you feeling better already?”

“If by happy you mean sad.”

“Yes! Mental health is the bomb.” He takes to scribbling on his prescription pad. “Ok, so I'm going to add *Cycloticklefest*. Let me know if it has any side effects before I dole it out to my private cash-paying clients.”

“Do you smoke it in groups?”

“Mr. Bigglesby, this is serious medicine,” lectures Bentiron. “At least until a recall happens.”

Herbert remembers another concern. “While you're writing, Doc, I'm also having a little trouble going. Not coming, mind you.”

“I got you. We all *gotta* go sometime. No offense!” He keeps writing, then pauses. “*I* before *E* except after *C*.”

Herbert explains. “In the loo I went from reading a one-page flier, to a pamphlet, to a *Reader's Digest* all in one go. But now it's more like *War and Peace*” in there (Tolstoy, 1878/1993).

Dr. Bentiron is still writing. “It can be.”

“That's a book. Never mind.” Herbert can't help but test another title. “*Crime and Punishment?*” (Dostoyevsky, 1866/2006).

“Some people do believe in *karma*.”

Herbert goes to the window. “You know, statistically, white men *can* jump.”

“Ok!” Dr. Bentiron suppresses his alarm but his voice cracks. “Please don't!” Then he plays it cool, imitating a teacher he once had. “Look, who am I to judge? It's ultimately your choice.”

Herbert didn't expect that. “Where's Dr. Bentiron? I may come to respect you yet, young man.”

“Thank you. The only thing I ask is that if you do decide to... *unledge* yourself, that you wait till I'm not here or on duty.”

“*Unledge* myself? Never mind the respect comment. But I do think I'm ready to take your advice about joining a bridge club.”

“Oh, good!” responds Bentiron.

“Is there one that frequents the Golden Gate?”

“Herbert, please! Live in the now!”

Bentiron’s exasperation improves Herbert’s mood. “Why? It’s so fun to muse about ultimate departures. People have done so since time immemorial. But don’t worry, Medicine Man, I still plan to make the most of this life and go out with a laugh.”

“Yay!” responds Dr. Bentiron. “I’m glad. Life still has so much to offer someone like you.” He should have stopped there but errs by going into specifics. “Like bingo, and boneless chicken, and friendship in the Day Room.”

Herbert has a mischievous grin. “That’s not what I’m talking about.” He inches closer. “We only live once and there are so many things to try. I’m guessing you’re... try-sexual?”

Dr. Bentiron is intrigued but is too aware of surveillance devices.

Herbert continues, “What about having our own little psycho-tickle-fest right here?” His smile is reminiscent of Jack Nicholson’s in *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980).

Dr. Bentiron swallows the saliva that has been collecting in his mouth. He tugs at the fabric in his moist armpits.

For a brief, satisfying second, Herbert pictures himself tickling Dr. Bentiron, who laughs. He breaks away and shrieks about the office like a child who *does* and *does not* want to be caught. Like a true cat-and-mouse event, it does not end well for Bentiron. Herbert eventually takes hold of him and throws him out the window. The young man swims in the air, no longer laughing, and wondering where he went wrong despite years of top-notch programs.

Dr. Bentiron interrupts Herbert’s fantasy. “Mr. Bigglesby, I’m going to need to transfer you to a colleague.”

“But why? I feel so understood!”

“I’m afraid we’re done for today.”

“Then no catharsis for me.”

The doctor gives Herbert a silent *no* while thinking, *Maybe a straitjacket*. He recalls another Nicholson movie he never took quite seriously enough (Forman, 1976).