

**T**he banker was not so much a traditionalist as he was simply a man who, somewhat lacking in creativity or imagination, greatly enjoyed the comforts of consistency in his habits. When he drank scotch, he took no water, soda, or ice, never pouring more than two fingers into a wide-mouthed, heavy-bottomed glass tumbler. When he snorted cocaine, he always rolled a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill into a tube and used the same pearl-handled miniature pocketknife to form the unvarying inch-long lines of the drug.

That night he had many crisp one-hundred-dollar bills to choose from. Five hundred of them. Five packets of a hundred each. Though they would easily have fit in a large envelope, or even the pockets of his suit jacket, they had been delivered in a small plastic attaché case. He removed them and stacked them on the glass coffee table. The briefcase went by the door so that he would remember to put it out with the garbage when he left for the office in the morning.

The Glenlivet 18 was running low. He thought he would finish the bottle that night. He wrote a note to remind himself to have a

case delivered the next day. He was not an alcoholic—he rarely had more than two or three drinks in an evening—but he had a dread of running out and not being able to sleep. It was difficult to fall asleep alone. Ever since Agathe had taken the children and escaped back to his mother’s house in Cornwall, he had begun to have problems sleeping. The big apartment, taking up the top two floors of the building, with views of Hamilton Harbour, the islands, and Great Sound beyond, felt both much too large and uncomfortably small. The humming of the electric clock in the kitchen could be heard in every room on the first floor. The electronic click of the American refrigerator—the one thing that Agathe probably regretted leaving behind—when the circulating motor turned on, could be deafening in the vast lonely emptiness of three a.m.

The suspicion that fifty thousand dollars was too much—too big a bribe for the favor he had performed—nagged at him again. He sipped the whiskey, surprised as he always was by the strength of the peat in the long finish. There was so little in the nose, on the lip, but so much remained long after the swallow.

He had facilitated opening an account without checking the man’s identification. The man’s name was unknown to him, though the name on the account was not. He had seen that name on the pages of the *Financial Times* often enough. Questions as to why such a man would want to open an account at such a small private bank had been quashed by the first utterance of the man with the cold gray eyes across the desk. He was being paid not to ask.

Tomorrow he would write down all of the particulars—everything he remembered about the man, the words he spoke, the details of the transaction—and send the document to his uncle, a London barrister, to hold “in the event of my early demise.” Then he would forget about it all and enjoy the thought of fifty thousand dollars—invisible to the tax authority, to Agathe and her solicitor, and even to his grabbing bitch of a mother, whom he had been

supporting ever since his father's death a decade ago and who repaid his kindness, generosity, and filial duty by siding with Agathe in this latest episode of the guerrilla warfare that passed for their marriage, now halfway through its second decade of insult, degradation, and remorse.

He took the little polythene baggie from his pocket and shook it, admiring the mound of white powder. The American had offered a gram or two along with the cash, but the banker had insisted upon a full ounce. His business was negotiation; he never took the first offer. An almost iridescent light reflected off the rocks and shards of the coke. It appeared to be quite pure. Even at his current rate of consumption, an ounce of uncut cocaine would last him a month or more. Weeks of not having to speak to the acned social misfit in client accounting, who regularly supplied the banker and his colleagues with the crystalline spice that made life in the stultifying environment of Bermuda banking bearable.

The little knife made a grating sound as he chopped the larger crystals into a fine powder. The consistency of the cocaine was slightly different than he was used to—flakier, he thought—a factor that he attributed to the described purity of the drug.

The banker broke the wrapper on a packet of hundreds, removed the top bill, and rolled it into a short tube. He preferred using American currency; it seemed appropriate, as the price of cocaine was, like petroleum or gold, universally quoted in U.S. dollars. The conversion factor for British pounds was something he knew much about, as the most updated number flashed on his Bloomberg Terminal all day long. Every transaction he engaged in for his clients—from purchasing German stocks priced in euros to South African real estate trusts offered in rands—he thought of in terms of pounds, making the conversion automatically and effortlessly. It was what his clients wanted. But whenever he thought of cocaine, and he thought of it often, he thought in terms of dollars. And with only a

modest bit of self-discipline, he now had enough dollars to keep himself supplied for years.

He snorted the first line. The freeze hit immediately and he felt the left side of his face begin to numb. The cocaine was very good, possibly the best he had ever had. The big American with the odd request had outdone himself. The second line went up his right nostril, producing a similar glow and restoring his symmetry. He moistened the tip of his index finger and wiped up the remaining dust where the two lines had lain. He gently rubbed it across his gums and felt the cold numbness penetrate. Very good cocaine.

He put his head back and waited for the rush. A moment later, his eyes closed. He sat up abruptly. That was the strangest reaction he had ever had to the drug. He felt good, warm and safe, languid, and at the same time sexually aroused. His whole body had become a single erogenous zone. A momentary flash of paranoia tripped through his numbed consciousness. This was very unusual. But the thought was gone before it had fully taken shape. The soaring euphoria erased all fears. He may have been a very small god, even a lonely one, the ruler of a small bit of couch in an empty apartment, but he was still a god. He took a breath. He was suddenly very aware of his breathing, not that it took effort exactly, because he was all-powerful on this couch and effort had become a meaningless concept, as though the very air had become irrelevant.

The cocaine dripped from his sinuses down to the back of his throat, coating, soothing, numbing. He lost all sense of taste; his sense of smell was already gone. His fingers seemed to be a long distance away. They were clumsy and thick and wooden. He forced them to pick up the paper tube and they answered slowly and reluctantly. He leaned over and snorted up the two remaining lines and felt the top of his head lift off. His eyes bulged, and he exhaled in a hoarse rasp, unable anymore to control even his vocal cords.

The hundred-dollar bill dropped from his fingers and slowly

unraveled on the glass table. He stared at it, trying to think of why such a small piece of paper had any importance in his life, but his eyes closed and he forgot about it. He kept sinking. It was a long way down. Already half-dreaming, he took one last gasping breath. His heart continued to beat for a short while before it too gave up and surrendered.

**W**e hadn't walked to school since Angie, my ex-wife and the mother of my unusual child, had been murdered on Amsterdam Avenue, shot by members of a South American drug cartel. She had been protecting the boy, throwing her own body between a hail of bullets and her son. I should have been the target, not the Kid, not my ex-wife. Angie and I had our history and our baggage, and her death had not released me from all the anger, resentment, hurt, and betrayal. I carried all of those, plus the guilt that if I had done things differently, or been a different man, she would still be alive.

My second career—the first as a Wall Street trader and manager having ended with a two-year stint in a federal prison—often put me in dangerous spots. I investigated fraud, sometimes acting as a fixer or a finder in situations where street smarts met up with prison yard ethics. I straddled both worlds, in ways that often surprised me. The work had changed me—was still changing me. I had become both more tolerant and more skeptical, stronger and less fearful, yet more thoughtful and forgiving. What was legal was

sometimes just not right, and those who broke the law were more often merely weak rather than evil.

The Kid had changed me, too. My son. Now six years and eight months. I had barely known him when I was sent away. I certainly had not known of his autism. Seeing life through his eyes had opened mine. If you graphed the spectrum with Asperger's on the far left, the Kid was definitely right of center, but he was verbal and a bright and curious learner. He was also a handful. And though I would not have wanted my ex back in my life in any capacity, my son deserved a mother.

The school was just a mile up Amsterdam and a half block over. The Kid used to run ahead each block, dancing impatiently at the cross streets, waiting for me to catch up and burning off a small percentage of his post-breakfast energy spurt. Not *spurt*. Explosion.

I had changed our route these past six months.

When we left early enough, we would take the bus, the M104, up Broadway and get off at Ninety-sixth Street. The Kid liked the bus. It was rarely crowded at that hour, as we were heading in the opposite direction of the morning commute. The Kid would take one of the handicapped seats up front—though he was not physically challenged, his autism gave him squatter's rights to those seats—and I would stand over him. The Kid watched the driver, and I watched him.

Most mornings, though, we were in a hurry and took the subway. The Kid was not an easy, nor an early, riser, but there were other issues that slowed us down. Getting his shoes on was near the top of the list. I had bought him more shoes than worn by the whole cast of *Sex and the City*, in a futile attempt to find ones that did not "hurt." It took the two of us a year to accept the fact that, though shoes are generally less comfortable than going barefoot, you can't

go barefoot in New York City—especially in December. That morning we took the subway.

We were a few minutes behind schedule as we came out of the subway at Ninety-sixth Street and quick-walked toward Amsterdam. The Kid ran. I watched him as he bobbed, weaved, ducked, and sprinted, avoiding the many obstructions in his path—some of which were imaginary. I loved watching him run. When he walked, he tended to lock up his knees and hips, as though in constant fear of falling, so that he looked like a mechanical man, made up of nonmatching spare parts. But when he ran, he looked like a child. If not happy, at least untroubled. Free.

A blast of chill wind blew dust in my eye and I put my head down, taking the irritating assault on my nascent bald spot. For that one moment I was not watching my son.

The sidewalk was narrow just there, and broken, a nondescript and barren tree having driven its roots laterally in an attempt to seek nutriment in a concrete wasteland. On the other side was a short, spiked, black iron fence guarding the basement entrance, and empty garbage cans, of a six-story apartment building.

I looked up and my eyes watered and blurred in the wind, but I could tell that the Kid was not ahead, waiting at the corner. A momentary flare of anxiety caught in my chest and I whirled around in a panic. The Kid was a half block behind me, squatting at the curb and trying to engage the attention of a piebald pigeon.

Almost shaking with relief, I walked back to him, not trusting my voice to call, nor trusting him to come without an argument—and cursing myself for my inattention. I squatted down next to him. The pigeon ignored both of us.

“Come on, Kid. Time for school. Ms. Wegant will be worried about us if we’re late.” I had never seen his teacher worried, nor flustered, nor impatient, nor happy, for that matter. Mr. Spock had a wider range of emotion. “Come on,” I tried again. “Mrs. Carter



will be mad at me.” This was much closer to the truth. Mrs. Carter held the desk in the entryway at the school, checking in all students and keeping out anyone who did not have a well-documented reason for being on school grounds. She was a large woman, but with both the strength and agility to carry it off. I was sure that I could take her in a fair fight, and I was just as sure that she wouldn’t fight fair.

I took his hand. I was impatient. I knew better. He screamed.

I let go and stood up. The screaming stopped. A childish and unworthy thought of just walking away flashed through my head. I forgave myself. If I beat myself up every time I succumbed to despair, I would have been permanently covered with black-and-blue marks. I thought about just kicking the pigeon, but held back. I would wait. Patience was the best medicine I could offer my son. It also did wonders for me.

A sudden flash of *déjà vu* hit me. Not really *déjà vu*, more a distorted memory. When my ex-wife was killed, one of the assassins had escaped by running down a side street. Could it have been that block? Or was it a few blocks farther uptown? The Kid and I would have had to move out of Manhattan altogether to avoid any reminders of his mother, or her death. I had a touch of dizziness. Possibly, I had stood up too quickly. I was disoriented, the wind blew and my eyes blurred again.

Two men turned the corner, coming down from Amsterdam. They were short, squat, and brown-skinned. Latinos. One had a black brush of a mustache; the other, slightly taller, had a badly broken nose. Despite the cold, they both wore nothing warmer than dark hooded sweatshirts, their hands tucked into the pouches in front. They looked just like the men who had killed my ex-wife—who had attempted to kill my son, and who had threatened to kill me. And I had wondered ever since if they were going to come back and finish the job. Or when. And here they were. Moving quickly.

Stone-faced. Not angry, but determined. I imagined their hands coming out, holding small guns that grew in size every time I blinked.

*The white van jumped the red light, accelerated across three lanes, and suddenly slowed. The sliding panel door opened and a long-barreled weapon emerged and began spitting red flashes. Phwat. Phwat. Phwat. Like the sound of slapping a rolled-up newspaper against your thigh. Only, it wasn't a rolled-up newspaper, and people were falling.*

“Kid, get up. We go. Now.” I took his hand and walked back toward Broadway. The Kid must have heard the fear in my voice because for once he did not scream or fight. He stumbled along with me, his feet barely touching the ground.

Just as we approached the entrance to the next building, a woman emerged with a small dog on a leash. I rushed forward and grabbed the door before it closed, pushed the Kid inside and followed him. The lock clicked as the door shut. We were inside and the two Latinos were outside. For the moment, we were safe. But only for the moment.

The Kid stood behind me, whimpering. He had caught my fear and absorbed it. His teeth were chattering and he was shaking. There was a mail alcove to our right. I pushed him toward it and backed him against the wall. I could see the street, but it would be very difficult for anyone to see in at that angle.

“It’s all right, Kid. We’re safe. Those men won’t find us here.” I didn’t believe it and neither did he. He was crying and beginning to gasp. The gasping sometimes prefaced one of his seizures.

“I pick you up,” he whispered. He never wanted to be held or picked up. Never except for the few times when that was all he wanted. I took him in my arms and held him tight. Squeezing helped. It helped both of us.

The two men stopped at the front door and stared in the window. The window was plastic—Lexan probably—with a wire mesh

running through it. An older building, a holdover from a less safe era. The one with the mustache pressed a button on the intercom and spoke briefly. He looked familiar. Had I seen him before or did he look like a thousand other Latino men I had passed on the streets of New York City?

No one buzzed them in.

We were trapped. We couldn't move without them seeing us, but they knew we had entered the building and it would not take much heavy-duty guesswork for them to realize we must still be hiding in the lobby. They would figure out a way to get in soon.

The mustache put his face up against the window and yelled. The blood was pounding in my ears and the Kid was crying—I couldn't hear a thing. The man grabbed the door handle and shook it. The door suddenly looked a lot less formidable a barrier than it had a moment earlier.

I pulled out my cell phone. Who could I call? How fast could a squad car get there? Five minutes? It seemed much too long. There was no one else. I punched in the numbers.

"911. State the nature of your emergency."

"I'm being followed. By two men."

"Are you in immediate danger?"

Define the word *immediate*. "I think so."

"Name and location."

"Jason Stafford. I'm in the lobby of a building just east of Broadway."

A short, thin Latino man in overalls and a red plaid shirt walked through the lobby toward the door.

"What's the address, sir?" the voice on the phone asked.

"Please hurry." I stopped and called to the man. "Hey. Hey. Don't open that door!"

If he heard me, he gave no sign.

"Can you give me the address, sir?"

“I don’t know. We just ducked in here.” We were on the north side of the street, so it was an odd-numbered building. Broadway divided the block in two. “It’s 249 West Ninety-fifth,” I yelled into the phone. I thought it was Ninety-fifth. Could it be Ninety-fourth?

The man in the lobby stopped and looked at us suspiciously. “Can I help you?” he said, sounding like he had meant to say, “Who the ‘f’ are you and what the ‘f’ are you doing here?”

“Don’t let those men in here. They followed us.”

“Those men? I don’t think so,” he said with a sarcastic cough that could have been a laugh.

“No, really. I’ve got police on the way. Please wait.”

“Hey! No cops. Shit! Look, I’m the super here. These guys work for me. They’re my painters.” He opened the door and spoke to the two men in rapid Spanish. The man with the mustache laughed. The other guy looked worried. Below their sweatshirts, both men wore paint-spattered baggy blue jeans and canvas sneakers. They no longer looked like hit men, they looked like painters. Mustache didn’t even look familiar.

“Sir? Are you there? Can I use this number as a callback in case we’re disconnected?”

“What? No. Sorry. Please cancel the call. I’m fine. It was a mistake.” The three men walked past. The one with the mustache was grinning. The other painter didn’t think it was quite so funny.

“Are you all right, sir? Are you under duress?”

“No, really. I’m very embarrassed. Everything is okay here.” I wanted to melt into a pool of slime and seep out under the door and into the gutter. “Thanks anyway.” I hung up.

The super was leading the other two through a door down to the basement. I called after them. “Sorry about that. Really.” The mustached man turned and gave a wave and a last grin.

The Kid began hitting me in the chest with the heel of his fist. “Down. Down. Down.”

I put him down. He shook like a wet dog and gave me a look of deep distrust. His beautiful strawberry-blond hair shimmered.

*Angie lay on the pavement, partially hidden from view by two parked cars. I stepped up and saw the blood. She looked so small. The breeze from a passing car blew her hair off her face. She looked surprised. Death was something for which she should have planned ahead.*

Nice work, I thought. I had panicked, managing to racially profile two innocent men, possibly causing them a hurricane of troubles if the police had arrived. And I had terrified my son. I was supposed to be his anchor, helping and supporting him against all of his usual terrors; instead I had created a new one. His father was nuts.

“Sorry, bud. I don’t know what happened.” Yes I did. I didn’t like it but I knew what had happened. “Are you all right? Shall we get you to school now?”

He walked to the door and waited for me to open it. I followed, feeling stupid and useless—and drained. My hand shook as I pushed the door open. It wasn’t the first time something similar had happened to me. I’d experienced those flashes of paranoia before. I needed to shake it off, get the Kid to school, do my morning run, and go to work. I didn’t need to spend a lot of time thinking about it, analyzing it, or explaining it to a child who would not understand anyway. Hell, I wasn’t sure that I understood it.