

Paralysis

by MJA Smith

Tuesday: Jason was sat at the hotel bar, drinking soda and reading a turgid John Grisham novel. It wasn't something he would usually have chosen to read, but when his flight was cancelled and his stay in London extended, it was the only thing he could find in the nearest bookshop that remotely appealed.

His flight back to JFK was supposed to be the Thursday before but thanks to an ash cloud from a volcano in Iceland, all flights out of the UK had been cancelled and at that point he had no idea when he would be able to get back to New York. The airline weren't responding to calls or emails and no-one seemed remotely certain when airspace would re-open.

He had come across for an interview, though he couldn't understand why. The firm he was meeting were a US investment bank, and he had interviewed – surprisingly successfully – at their Manhattan offices a month ago. For some reason, which he hadn't bothered to ask, they had decided that the next stage of the interview process should be an interview with a senior team in London.

Jason had never been out of the US before. He had only ever been out of New York State a handful of times. His parents were excited for him; they said it could be a huge springboard for his later career, but Jason was nonplussed. He sensed it was probably quite something, but he couldn't feel excited about it. He didn't feel excited about anything.

His father ran a trading floor in the Financial District and his mother worked in an insurance firm in Midtown; finance was the only world they could conceive of, but Jason wasn't so sure. On the one hand he saw the comfortable lifestyle he had enjoyed thanks to his parents' success, but he also saw the stresses and tensions that had made him feel like an intrusion for much of his childhood and teenage years. Of course they were excited; it was the only career they could consider him having. His elder brother was working as an oil analyst in Tokyo and his sister had married a stock broker. Going to Wall Street was expected of him.

Jason had no life plan. He didn't know what he wanted to do; he wasn't even sure who he was or who he wanted to be. He had lucked his way through school, the benefits of an expensive private education, but it had been undertaken with little enthusiasm. At NYU he had become introverted. He had few friends, barely spoke in class, and his teachers commented that he seemed to have spent the final part of his education withdrawing from the world.

His parents had taken him to a doctor on the Upper East Side who suggested therapy, and also prescribed some pills for anxiety. Jason thought this was strange; whilst he had barely opened his mouth during the consultation, he thought he had made it clear, despite the way he had struggled to answer the doctor's questions, that he was depressed, not anxious. He had tried to overdose once, but his parents just brushed the incident to one side like it had never happened. The doctor seemed to have latched onto the fact that Jason was about to take his final exams – which Jason's mother had told him before the appointment – and just assumed that the stresses of revision and sitting the papers was the root cause. As he left the doctor's neo-Georgian office the doctor had said that the only people he was seeing these days were the kids of bankers stressed about sitting their finals. Jason had just shrugged, rolled his eyes behind his sunglasses and went to Central Park to meet his dealer.

Jason knew him as Flick. He thought his real name may have been Richard or Rupert, but for the purposes of purely transactional activity, his name was Flick. Jason had begun taking coke routinely since he turned fifteen, when his brother left a line on his bedside table that morning as a birthday present. He showed the doctor's prescription to Flick who just sighed and shook his head. 'I sometimes think I could do a better job myself,' he said from behind his sunglasses, sipping a Diet Coke. 'Doctors today are keener to get you hooked than dealers. They're the menace to modern society, not us.'

When he got home later that morning, prescription pills in one pocket, coke in the other, Jason was surprised to find his mother in the kitchen making espresso.

'I spoke to Doctor Sewell,' she said, smiling and just a shade too excited, 'and I just want to say that I think therapy will be good for you. You can see Marianne. I've already called her and she has a gap at four

this afternoon.'

Jason didn't know what to say, but managed an unenthusiastic 'Thanks,' anyway. Marianne was his mother's psychotherapist, who she had been seeing on and off for as long as Jason could remember. His father had a different one, someone called Jacob. Jason wondered vaguely whether his father would be disappointed he wasn't seeing Jacob. He also thought his father might be sleeping with Jacob, though he didn't know for sure, didn't really know where the notion had come from.

'I'll come with you,' said his mother. 'I've cleared the whole afternoon. Perhaps we could grab an early dinner and a movie?' Jason felt tears developing in the corners of his eyes and said, with a small, genuine, smile, that it would be nice. He couldn't remember the last time he had gone anywhere with his mother. But then again, he hadn't really expected that it would actually happen.

He had gone upstairs, pulled the drugs from his pockets and vowed to take neither, throwing both into his underwear drawer. Later, feeling bruised at the therapist's intrusive and unpleasant questions, and when his mother told him she now had an urgent dinner appointment with a prospective client of the firm, he took the whole wrap of coke.

'Do you know any dealers in London?' Jason had asked Flick when the second interview had come through.

Flick looked genuinely perplexed by the question. Normally he was hyper-confident about everything, but at this question he had been lost for words. At first Jason thought Flick was about to say 'Where's London?' but instead he just said that he had come up with someone by the next day.

Jason's father had been embarrassingly enthusiastic when the interview came through. He whirled round their dining room, gulping down Scotch, the letter in his hand, telling Jason just how exciting his life was going to get, not for one second asking whether it was something Jason actually *wanted* to do. He was also making an assumption that Jason was guaranteed to get the job. Jason didn't even know what the job was, nor whether he had even applied for it, nor what he had said during the interview in the tall tower in the Financial District. He could barely remember what he had eaten for breakfast. Jason just sat there, murmuring and nodding when changes in his father's flow indicated that he was perhaps waiting for some sort of acknowledgement from his son, all the while feeling the continuous downward pressure of both the chronic expectation from his father, and the Valium he had taken half an hour earlier.

His parents suggested an extended trip to London might be a nice gift for getting through his exams. They had packed him off on the plane from JFK business class, and booked him a week's stay in a modern tower hotel in Canary Wharf near where the interview was due to take place. He thought the name of the place was stupid, and the landscape, which tried too hard to replicate Manhattan, served only to remind him how much he wanted to be at home. When he turned on his cellphone after the plane landed at Heathrow, after deleting separate messages from his mother and father wishing him luck and imploring him to stay in touch, he was pleased to see a message from Flick telling him he had found the name of a dealer in London from some sort of underground online drugs message board. Maybe this could be bearable after all, thought Jason.

He had almost a whole week before the interview; he was scheduled to fly back the day after, Thursday. His parents had given him plenty of sterling and an extra card on their Amex. They told him to spend what he wanted. He intended to. Perhaps they hadn't intended for him to ask the taxi driver to make a detour into some shady area of the city to allow Jason to score a week's supply of coke from the dealer Flick had recommended, but that's what he did anyway.

At first he just spent the time in his room, devouring the coke and draining the mini-bar while blankly watching endless cartoons or pay-per-view porn, until he couldn't stand it any longer. He hadn't bothered to read any guidebooks and his father's recommendations just fell on unreceptive ears, so he caught a cab and asked to be dropped somewhere where tourists went. The driver had muttered something incoherent about not being a bloody tour guide and drove west. Jason stared out of the cab window vacantly behind his sunglasses, the words of a song he vaguely remembered running round his head perpetually. Something about drowning. At the Tate Modern he had sat on the floor of the Bruce Davidson exhibit on the fifth floor and wept at the shots of people on the Subway sunsets that made him think of home until someone, a young Japanese girl with rainbow-coloured hair and a tongue piercing had asked him if he was okay. She smelled of strawberries. He nodded, sniffed and wiped his eyes and went back outside into the stark, cloudless afternoon where he leant over the railings next to the river and sobbed uncontrollably.

He retreated back to the hotel, ordered a bottle of Absolut Citron from room service and resolved not

to leave the room again until he needed to head back to Heathrow, or he ran out of coke, whichever came first. He hated it there; he hated everything at that point. When the day of the interview came, he didn't show up, didn't phone them to cancel and kept his cellphone off for the remainder of the stay. The phone in his room flashed red with waiting messages and notes were pushed under his door but he ignored them all, until the hotel reception told him his parents would be conferencing him to talk about how it had gone.

When they called, he told them he didn't go; that he had literally done nothing but take drugs, drink vodka and cry; that he wanted to be home but that he also wanted to be dead, that he resented them for forcing him to go to London to satisfy their unrealistic expectations of him, but they didn't seem to hear him. Either his line was muted or they just refused to hear what he was saying. Jason wondered if he was actually saying what he thought he heard coming out of his mouth, or whether it was his imagination, or the drugs. They just told him how proud they were of him over and over again, like it was a perpetual pre-recorded loop. He hung up before they had finished talking and without bothering to say goodbye.

The receptionist at the hotel told him about the flight restrictions because of the Iceland volcano when he went to check out. Jason wanted to feel crushed at the news, but he felt nothing more than indifference. The receptionist, a pretty Eastern European girl with an arresting smile and light tan told him that she could upgrade him to a suite for the night, or for as long as he would need to stay. He had nodded mutely, wondered idly if she would sleep with him just to help pass the time, and retreated to the new suite where he finished the coke, drained the new mini bar and sobbed under the new duvet until he fell asleep. When he woke, he called Flick's contact but no-one answered. He called again later and got through to someone else.

'What do you want?' said the voice, which sounded like it belonged to some sort of street-smart kid younger than Jason.

'I bought some coke off someone on this number last week,' said Jason.

'You mean Gary?'

'Yeah, Gary, I think,' said Jason uncertain. He wasn't sure Flick had even given him a name, but it sounded like a name he had heard recently, possibly.

'Well, Gary's gone. Nicked. Banged up. And the coke's gone with him. I can get you crystal meth or E, maybe some ketamine later in the week, but nothing else.'

Jason hung up and started crying again. He tore through the drawers and cupboards of his suite, hoping in vain to find some coke he had forgotten about, rubbing his fingers along the desk and table for the smallest amount of unused powder.

Desperate, but without a plan, he went down to reception and asked for a taxi. When the black Mercedes arrived, the driver asked him where he wanted to go. Jason just sat shivering behind his Aviators in the back seat. He tried in vain to remember anything, a landmark or a street name or just something that would help the driver know where to take him.

Seeing his confusion, the driver, a tall guy with no hair turned around. 'Listen, are you trying to get laid? Or score drugs?' he said, and Jason feebly nodded. 'Well, what is it? Sex or drugs?'

'Drugs,' managed Jason, feeling like his throat was constricting his vocal chords.

'Smack, coke or weed?'

'Coke.'

'Fine,' said the driver, pulling a cellphone from his jacket pocket. 'That wasn't so fucking hard was it?' He made a call then gunned the Mercedes onto the main artery road snaking around Canary Wharf.

Jason fell asleep in the taxi and only woke up when he felt the sound of the engine die away. The squat brick house with its unkempt garden looked threatening, even more so when the fat black guy waddled over to the car, and gestured at the driver with a flick of his head. The driver pointed over his shoulder at Jason in the back seat and the black guy opened the car door and sat next to Jason, with some difficulty.

'Rock or powder?' grunted the guy.

'Powder.'

How much?' Jason felt his stomach begin to cramp and his heart race. This didn't feel right. He didn't know where the fuck he was or what he was doing.

'Um...'

'Come on you little fuckwit, I haven't got time for this.' He fished in his pocket for a BlackBerry and dialled a number. 'Fuckin' timewaster,' he grunted into the phone and made a move to leave the car.

'I need □500 of coke,' Jason managed, feeling the sweat through his shirt against the leather seats.

'Now we're talking. Jesus, son, you must have some fucking appetite there. That really all for you?'

'Uh-huh,' Jason replied

'Wow,' said the black guy, whistling between his teeth. 'You got that much cash on you?' Jason nodded again.

'I mean, we don't take fucking *Amex* here, you understand.' He laughed, breaking the tension and causing the driver, who had been reading a tabloid newspaper throughout to join in. The black guy put the BlackBerry back to his ear. 'Okay T, he's serious. Or he trying to fucking kill himself.' Jason didn't know which it was himself. He spent the weekend and most of Monday in bed channel hopping.

The next afternoon, when Jason woke he found his pillow covered in blood from a nose bleed and called for a maid, who came into his room while he was finishing another bottle of Absolut; she simply replaced the sheets and pillows and didn't react at all, leaving the room without saying a word.

Jason decided to phone the airline, who just kept him on hold for fifteen minutes until he realised that they had disconnected him. 'Shit,' Jason muttered from behind the sunglasses he was too scared to remove, and decided he needed to do something, saw the wraps of coke on the desk and did a couple of lines just to feel comfortable leaving the room. He slung on a pair of shorts and a Polo shirt and headed out.

He took a walk into the nest of buildings they described as skyscrapers, but which were just squat little stumps of structures compared to Manhattan, and tried to find something to do. He could only find offices and restaurants; he didn't feel hungry and just wanted to look in some shops, get an espresso, whatever. He sat at a bench in a dusty plaza next to some confusing sculptures that made him feel nauseous and asked a passing guy in a Hugo Boss suit and Hermès tie where he could get a magazine or book or maybe some music, and the guy, a Canadian, told him he needed to get below ground to find the retail mall. The guy told him he had a nosebleed and offered him a Kleenex. Jason was so touched by the guy's generosity that he began to sob uncontrollably until the guy walked off, confused.

Downstairs, Jason found a Starbucks and ordered three double espressos which he drank quickly at the cash register and which made his eyes feel like they were bulging out of his skull and almost touching the lenses of his sunglasses. He wandered round the labyrinthine mall until he found a bookshop, where he didn't recognise any of the authors apart from John Grisham. His father read Grisham. He didn't know whether it was some sort of latent need to get closer to his father, to be more like him, but he bought a book he had seen him read one summer. It reminded Jason of happier times and he actually managed a small smile when the guy at the till handed him the bag.

Back in the hotel he couldn't face sitting in the room killing himself and time any longer, so he tried to find out what was going on with flights from reception, flirting vainly with the Eastern European girl, and was told to check back tomorrow.

He went to the dark-lit hotel lounge and took a stool at the bar; surveying the rows of bottles made him feel queasy and so he ordered a soda from the barman. The barman asked him if he was hungry; Jason couldn't tell. He didn't even know the last time he had eaten a proper meal. The packets of Pringles and chocolate bars from the mini-bar probably didn't count. He ordered a burger and ate it slowly while trying to read the awful John Grisham novel.

An American voice to Jason's left caught his attention, and he turned slowly, staring at the young blonde woman – twenty-one, maybe twenty-two – with wide green eyes in a neatly-tailored grey suit who was taking a seat at the other end of the bar. He turned his attention back to his book but was aware of her sitting there, sipping a Martini.

'Are you staying here?' she said, in Jason's direction.

He turned his head to face her, swallowed the mouthful of burger, smiled casually. 'Yeah, second week. Not my choice.'

'Did you get a flight out already?'

'I can't get through to the airline.'

'Me either. I was supposed to fly back to JFK last Thursday. Fucking volcanoes.'

'United?'

'Yeah.'

'Me too,' said Jason, watching her as she drained the Martini glass and ordered another. 'Put that on my tab,' he said in the direction of the barman who nodded. She moved over to the seat next to Jason and extended a delicate, tanned hand.

'Hi, I'm Alix. With an i.'

'Hi, Alex with an i. I'm Jason. Without.'

She smiled, and he smiled back. 'You know, you shouldn't eat that shit. It'll fucking kill you.'

'Thanks. I'll try to remember that.' He gestured at the sweating Martini glass with the spine of his book. 'You know you shouldn't drink that shit. It'll fucking kill you.'

'Very good, touché, I like that. So,' she said, flicking her hair away from her face, taking a sip of the fresh Martini and staring Jason straight in the eyes. 'What's with the sunglasses? You stoned?'

Jason suddenly felt small and ridiculous and took the sunglasses off.

'That's better. You have nice eyes. You should probably take less drugs and have a fucking shave, but otherwise you're quite the preppy college boy.'

'Thanks,' said Jason, grinning, taking another bite from the burger.

'So, why're you here?'

'Interview.'

'Interview? With who?'

Jason told her the name of the firm he had come over to see.

'No way!' she exclaimed. 'That's who I came over to interview with.'

'Small world.'

'Sure is. How did it go for you?'

'Um. It was okay. Yeah, okay, I guess.' Jason had got to the point where he didn't know whether he had gone to the interview or not.

'What did you interview for? Commodities or bonds?' Jason didn't know.

'Bonds?' It came out as a question.

'Shit. So you're my competition?'

'Maybe. But I wouldn't worry. I fucked the, you know, the, er, the thing.'

'Oh, yeah, the *thing*. The thing was *hard*.'

Silence.

'Did you get to see much of London?' she asked, finishing the Martini.

'Not really,' said Jason, fiddling with the salad leaves on his plate, making them into a triangle.

'Did you see Big Ben?'

'What's Big Ben?'

'Okay. What about Hyde Park?'

'No.'

'Harvey Nichols?'

'Who's he?'

'Wow, you really didn't see much.' She stole one of his fries, bit it demurely in two.

'What about Buckingham Palace?'

'I really didn't see much.'

'What the hell have you been doing?'

He thought about what he should say, and then just said the truth.

'Well, mostly I've stayed in my room doing lines of coke, drinking vodka and jerking off to the shit soft-core porn they have in this hotel. That and lots of crying.'

'But you must have been to Tate Modern, right?' Jason wondered what she had actually heard, what he had actually said, whether he had said what he thought he had said. This seemed to be happening more and more.

'Yeah, yeah, I think I did.'

'Isn't it incredible? I mean, I like MoMa, everyone digs MoMa, but this was something else, didn't you think?'

Jason was prodding the triangle of salad leaves, as if he was urging it to do something, like sing, or dance, or tell him the secrets of the universe, or how he could be happy again like he was when he was fourteen.

'I didn't really get it,' said Jason, sighing and spreading the salad leaves around his plate.

'You didn't get it.'

'I didn't get it. I don't really like art.'

'So what do you like?' She bit another French fry in half.

'I don't think I really like anything.'

'Nothing?' As she said this, she leaned slightly forward so Jason could see the black bra beneath her shirt. 'Really?'

'I guess I do appreciate some things.'

'Miss?' asked the barman. 'Would you like another?'

'Maybe,' she said, looking at Jason and smiling. 'Unless you have any other suggestions?'

Jason turned to the barman, ordered a bottle of champagne and slipped down from the stool, putting his sunglasses back on, Alix and the barman trailing behind him with the bottle and two glasses on a tray like some sort of phony royal entourage. In the lift Alix wrapped her arms around Jason's neck and kissed him so forcefully that she set his sunglasses askance, the barman trying to look like he was trying to be somewhere else.

In the room, Jason surveyed the reckless state of his suite and almost felt like making some sort of apology for the way he had left it, noticing the wads of blood-filled Kleenex lying around the bed.

'Nice suite,' said Alix, taking a seat on the edge of the bed, planting her palms either side of her and crossing her legs, staring at him fixedly and smiling.

Jason stared back until Alix diverted her gaze back to the barman, who was standing, looking awkward, until Alix smiled and said casually to just put the tray down on the glass-topped table, pushing her hair behind her ears as she did so. The barman had to move some of Jason's wraps of coke to one side just to make room.

'Shall I pour?' he stammered.

'I think we can manage,' she said, and he left. Jason popped the cork and poured two glasses carelessly as the barman left. They were sharing a couple of lines of erratically chopped coke when Jason suddenly remembered that he had left the John Grisham book on the bar, and despite the coke and champagne coursing round his system, all Jason could think about was his parents and how he had let them down. Alix saw Jason sobbing. 'I think I'd better leave,' she said, and was gone a couple of minutes later, taking the rest of the champagne with her. Jason fell onto the bed in a foetal position and cried himself to sleep.

The next morning the Eastern European receptionist phoned Jason's room, waking him up, and told him, first, that the airports had reopened and second, that his father had left him a message to say he had managed to get him onto a flight later that afternoon. She purred that she had printed his boarding pass and had ordered a car to take him to Heathrow. Jason croaked a half-hearted 'Thank you,' and dropped the phone. His nose burned and his head throbbed painfully.

Back in Manhattan, after an appointment with Marianne, Jason took a call from the company he was supposed to have interviewed with. They told him he hadn't got the job. Jason tried to sound disappointed, but he had just taken a Valium and he just didn't feel anything at all. He hung up, called Flick and went to the Park.

'How was London?' asked Flick when Jason sat down next to him on the bench. He was smoking a cigarette and had shaved his hair off since Jason had last seen him. He was wearing a Ramones t-shirt.

'It was... I don't know. I'm not sure that I was actually there.'

'You okay?'

'I don't think so,' said Jason.

'You wanna talk?'

'No.'

They sat in silence, the only sound the effeminate and slightly exaggerated sucking sound Flick made when he drew on the cigarette.

'I think I might be drowning,' said Jason, breaking the silence.

'We're almost at the highest point in the Park, dude,' said Flick gesturing vaguely toward Belvedere Castle behind them. 'Of course you're not fucking drowning. No-one fucking drowns in Manhattan. Hit by a cab, yes. Overdosing, yes. Heart attacks, yes. Whipped to death in some sado dungeon, yes. Cancer, yes. But not fucking *drowning*. Jesus.'

'I just feel like I'm drowning. I can't cope.'

'Jason,' said Flick, forcefully, as Jason began to weep. 'Just tell me you're going to buy some of this

coke from me, or go see a fucking shrink. I really could care less.'

'I don't know what I'm supposed to do.'

'And I can't fucking help you man.'

Flick finished his cigarette and stood up. 'Call me when you know what you want. You know where to find me.'

As Flick ducked under a tree and walked in the direction of Fifth, Jason realised that knowing where to find Flick was about the only certain thing in his life.