Getting To Know You

by Mums_the_Word

Summary

Pre-series: As we all know, Peter Burke was obsessed with catching Neal Caffrey from the very beginning. However, he was always a bit short on details. This story is a variation of the “Peter and Neal trapped in an elevator” theme.
The Beginning

Prelude

It had all happened in the blink of an eye. There had been no time for last minute appeals or bargains with the Almighty. Perhaps you cannot change what is already written in that mystical book somewhere in the ether—what is pre-ordained as the span of your existence. Perhaps you must simply accept the dispassionate log entries written there—a date that you were born; a date that you were to die—the beginning and the ending with nothing in between. But maybe this wasn’t an ending. Maybe this was a beginning, and just maybe there was even something in between.

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Peter Burke had not been in the FBI’s New York “White Collar” office for very long. He was a fairly new agent, but was already an overworked drone just barely a notch above a raw probie. His home turf was a cluttered, utilitarian desk sandwiched in among a parade of similar desks in the wryly-termed “Bull Pen.” He knew that he was coming into this new endeavor a bit late. He certainly hadn’t started out seeking a career in law enforcement. No, his dreams were much loftier—all the glitz and glamor that were the hallmarks of a professional baseball career. However, it was not meant to be. Fate had stepped in and quashed that vision, so Peter, being nothing if not practical, fell back on his college mathematics and accounting degrees. They were enough to get him a foot in the door at Quantico.

Peter had to admit that his expertise with numbers was rarely called into play these days. Oh sure, occasionally other agents deferred to his aptitude when trying to unravel a particularly complicated pyramid scheme or bank fraud issue. But, actually, his caseload was usually a lot more eclectic and interesting, and he was learning on the fly about all forms of artwork and, quite often, their forgeries.

Wanting to somehow make his talents stand out and get him noticed, Peter usually volunteered to take on the really tough cases that had other agents grinding their teeth and scratching their heads. That is how he had come to inherit the perplexing and frustrating case of “Neal Caffrey,” con artist, forger, and overall criminal genius. Nobody could be that good, Peter reasoned. It would only be a matter of time before Caffrey tripped himself up, and Peter was determined to be the one to put cuffs on the young scoundrel. More seasoned and wiser agents claimed that if the brash criminal were ever caught, it would be because of dumb luck on an agent’s part rather than skill. Peter was determined to prove them wrong.

A report had crossed Peter’s desk yesterday that looked promising. The esteemed Biltmore Estate, located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Asheville, North Carolina, had reported an audacious theft of two Renoir paintings and a pair of Ming Dynasty porcelain vases from the prestigious French Renaissance inspired chateau. Built in 1885 by entrepreneur George Vanderbilt, the 250-room mansion was now a heritage site that saw daily visitors trooping through more than four acres of floor space to gawk at stupendous architectural wonders and priceless artwork nestled among 16th century Flemish tapestries. The North Carolina branch of the FBI was stymied in their investigation, claiming in less-than-professional jargon that it was a “friggin’ slick piece of work.” That pinged Peter’s “Caffrey” radar and he made a call to the Deep South, located well below the Mason-Dixon Line.

“Listen, my friend,” drawled Amos Marsh, the lead agent in North Carolina, “if you think that
you can do better than us, then by all means, ya’ll come on down here!”

So, Peter did just that after cajoling Reese Hughes, his superior, into allowing him a bit of leeway. Hughes had a soft spot for Peter, and told him that he had three days to nose around down in the Heart of Dixie, but then he was to return to New York, with or without a lead. Peter knew that he shouldn’t push his luck and have the audacity to ask for an airline stipend, so the long twelve-hour drive by car would be on his own dime.

He took Interstate 81 almost all the way, briefly crossing into eastern Tennessee. The long North-South highway was almost a straight shot down alongside the ancient Appalachian Mountains. It actually followed a path that harkened back to the days when migrating animals, American Indians, and early settlers used the same trails in the early 19th century. The scenery was a continual rural vista of mountains and evergreen trees. The only other vehicles appeared to be tractor-trailers who eschewed the more congested I-95 route as they barreled along at well above the 70 mph speed limit.

Once Peter had reached his destination, he had to admit that the Biltmore Estate was breathtaking, but really, who needed thirty-five bedrooms and forty-three bathrooms? It was now December and the property was excessively festooned for the upcoming Holiday Season with a nod to a Victorian theme. Huge natural Christmas trees decorated with ribbons, candles and silver icicles abounded everywhere, as did pine garlands and potted poinsettias. Peter half-expected Ebenezer Scrooge in his sleeping cap or Tiny Tim with his crutch to come around a corner at any moment.

Peter talked to the estate manager and inspected the crime scenes, which happened to be a massive Great Hall and a dining room that he could fit his whole townhouse into with room to spare. He interviewed the army of staff, including groundskeepers and those employees who worked in the winery located on the property. The theft had been reported during the morning hours shortly before the premises opened its doors to the public, so the pieces went missing sometime during the night. A sophisticated alarm system, complete with infrared beams and pressure sensors, had been expertly circumvented. The North Carolina agents were right. It was an astounding piece of stealthy expertise.

Agent Marsh tried not to look smug when Peter came up empty-handed. “It’s really a shame that you made that long trip all the way from the Big Apple and got nothing to show for your trouble. You sure do have a bee in your bonnet about this Caffrey person.”

“Yeah, well, I hate to admit it,” Peter remarked with a slight grimace, “but the guy is pretty impressive. I suspect that it may have been him strictly by the extraordinary quality of the theft. I would hate to think that there’s more than one criminal just as proficient as he is in the robbery business.”

The two agents eventually shook hands, and Peter climbed into his car to begin the long, northerly trek back to New York City.

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It had been five days since Neal Caffrey had disabled the sophisticated alarm system in the Biltmore Mansion. As a straggler in the last group of sightseeing patrons during a late afternoon tour, he had managed to peel off from the herd unnoticed and to secrete himself in a strategically located storage closet until nightfall. When the early winter darkness had descended, he had silently emerged, slithered under the strafing sensors in the Great Hall, and made his way to the main circuit panel where he had done the deed. Then he meticulously circumvented the wiring for the pressure plates that held the invaluable antique treasures. “Challenging, but not impossible,” Neal thought to himself, but then Neal thrived on defying the odds. He thought that it would be a
prudent gesture on the Biltmore’s part to upgrade their security system once he had made his exit!

For all of his hubris, Neal actually had a bit of assistance. His prepared invasion into the inner sanctum was thanks, in large part, to Mozzie’s previous meticulous reconnaissance. The little bald man had finagled a temporary job in the estate’s well-regarded winery for the Yule season. He gave tours in the wine cellars and conducted upscale tastings for the throngs of oenophiles who showed up each day. To say that he was in his element was an understatement. During his downtime, Mozzie had fostered a casual friendship with a docent who was only too happy to give him a private, behind the scenes tour of the manor.

Neither Neal nor Mozzie hightailed it out of town right after the robbery. Neal kept a low profile, cooling his heels for a few days in a nearby Ramada Inn so that Mozzie could finish out his workweek at the Biltmore, thereby not raising the suspicions of the teams of federal agents who had descended in mass after the theft was discovered. Eventually, when the hew and cry had settled, the wily little man gave notice to his supervisor, using the excuse of a sick mother in Chicago that necessitated his abrupt departure. Everyone was sorry to see him go and wished his mother a speedy recovery from her illness.

The temporary motel account eventually was settled with cash, the Renoirs were carefully rolled and placed in tubes, and the Ming vases were meticulously swaddled in cotton batting and blankets. With Mozzie at the wheel of a nondescript Toyota Camry, the two con men then set out following Route 26 East until they connected with that really long stretch of highway that eventually snaked its way first through Virginia, then all the way to Upstate New York. They hadn’t been on I-81 for more than three hours when Mozzie informed Neal that he had to attend to a call of nature.

“Prostate problems, Moz?” Neal teased, earning him a look of venom from his friend.

“No, smart-aleck, too much coffee! Just remember, mon frère, youth is a fleeting thing. Enjoy it while you can because one day you will be where I am and we’ll see how you fare.”

“My bad,” Neal apologized.

The two kept their eyes alert for mile marker signs that displayed toilet facilities. This interstate was a far cry from the more user-friendly one closer to the coast that had sprawling centers of fast-food vendors, gift shops, and gasoline pumps every twenty miles or so. Finally, when the issue was getting dire for Mozzie, they managed to exit a ramp displaying the easily recognizable symbols. After cruising several hundred feet, they discovered a small, rustic shelter, with a door on either side, nestled in the trees. Surprisingly, there were two other vehicles parked on the gravel turn-around. One was a Ford Taurus, and the other was a rusted crate of a car that had probably been abandoned after the owner discovered that it had given up the ghost with no hope of ever being resurrected again.

While Mozzie hastened to attend to business on the unoccupied side of the simple little structure, Neal exited the car to stretch his legs. He studied his surroundings and saw a seemingly never-ending panorama of hills and an accompanying evergreen forest. He noted that the weather had gotten considerably colder than when they had left Asheville earlier in the day. The sky now looked leaden gray, and there was definitely moisture in the air that he could feel on his skin. Neal had just turned to re-trace his steps to the car when he froze mid-stride. It couldn’t be, but yet it was. Peter Burke, big as day, looked up and met his stare from across the lot.

Just as Peter Burke had diligently studied Neal Caffrey, the con man had also gleaned everything that he could about this tenacious FBI agent. Know your enemy—right? Sun Tzu knew his stuff and so did Neal. Well, right now, the enemy was right in Neal’s face and looking just as surprised as the con man! Neal immediately slewed around and broke into a run with the
agent hot on his tail. Most of the retreat was uphill, and Neal’s shoes kept slipping on the
groundcover of wet pine needles. He swore that he could feel Burke’s breath on his neck. At one
point, the agent managed to grab onto his coat, but Neal agilely slipped out of his grasp and eeled
away. However, the FBI agent was not about to give up so easily.

When the two crested a slight rise and started downward, Peter executed a flying tackle,
catching Neal around the waist and sending them both sprawling to the ground. Landing heavily
on the con man’s back, the older but heftier man had succeeded in knocking the wind from his
target’s lungs. With a pathetic effort, Neal tried to raise up on his forearms, but Peter pushed his
head down roughly with a hand to the nape of his neck.

“Stay still, damn you!” Peter rasped out, breathing just as laboriously as his trapped prey.

He kept his full weight on the slimmer man until his heart rate had returned to something closer
to normal. Peter’s cynical co-workers had been right. It was true that finding Neal Caffrey was the
result of dumb luck. However, actually taking him down was the result of extraordinary athletic
prowess on his part, Peter mentally crowed. Congratulations were definitely in order!

Eventually, handcuffs materialized and Neal’s arms were wrenched behind him. Then Peter
reached under the fugitive’s coat and began to run his hands up and down every part of the young
man’s body in search of a weapon as he simultaneously recited the Miranda warning.

“Let me go!” Neal demanded. “You have the wrong man.”

“Oh, is that so?” Peter challenged. “Then why were you running from me?”

Neal was quick to respond. “Look, Dude, we’re in the middle of nowhere, you give me a
peculiar look, and then you suddenly start chasing me. I thought that you were some kind of
pervert that hangs out in men’s rooms, and maybe I’m not wrong. Your hands have been groping
every part of me!”

“Oh, you’re a funny boy,” Peter quipped.

“I have my moments,” Neal retorted.

“Nice try, Caffrey, but I don’t think that lame excuse is going to fly at your arraignment.”

Now securely shackled and jerked to his feet, the con man knew that he wasn’t going to talk
his way out of this one. He petulantly leveled a narrow-eyed stare at Peter.

“You certainly don’t know how to play nice with others, Agent Burke. It’s possible that you
may have cracked one of my ribs with your over-zealous efforts.”

“Now, Caffrey, you know that even if I had asked nicely, you wouldn’t have been very
cooperative,” Peter smirked.

“Well, it would have been nice to be given an option, maybe after a few drinks and an intimate
dinner. Who knows—you might have gotten lucky!” Neal was quick to respond.

It took awhile to return to the parking lot because Neal made it a point to be the antithesis of
“cooperative.” He was dragging his feet the whole way causing Peter to tug and pull while trying
to keep his own footing in what had suddenly become a sleety rain. Finally, pushing Neal up
against the Taurus, Peter extricated his cell phone to call the Virginia State Police for assistance.

So began just the first of the agent’s many problems—his cell phone showed no bars for
reception. Struggling with a squirming prisoner, he then yanked Neal over to a freestanding shell
that housed a landline. More bad news. Vandals had decorated the small structure with profuse and explicit graffiti. For good measure, they had also yanked the receiver from its base.

Before this trip, Peter had the foresight to study a map of the route. He was pretty sure that he was close to a midsize town—maybe Roanoke or Lynchburg, if he remembered correctly. There should be no problem with communication once he cleared the mountainous valleys and managed to detour to whichever town came first. After he had reached civilization, he would secure Caffrey properly and contact a regional FBI office.

Peter had surmised that the white Toyota Camry belonged to Caffrey. He would make sure that it was towed to police headquarters as soon as possible after he had gotten Caffrey in a lockup. Only later, would the distracted and preoccupied federal agent realize his mistake. He should have searched the vehicle for evidence of the stolen articles from the Biltmore Estate instead of wrestling a wiry, wriggling con man into the passenger side of his own car. No way was he putting Caffrey in the back where he couldn’t keep an eye of his every move. Of course, in order to buckle the prisoner into the bucket seat next to him, he first had to re-position Neal’s manacled hands in front.

“Look, Caffrey, behave yourself. If you try anything stupid like jumping from this car, I swear that I’ll shoot you before you can get ten feet. Just don’t make me do that,” Peter warned sternly.

Neal just gave Peter a droll look and refused to promise anything. He had intentionally been trying to sidetrack Burke and keep him busy in an attempt to give Mozzie time to decipher the situation and to stay hidden. It looked like he had succeeded because the agent ignored the Camry and concentrated on securing, then threatening Neal, and there was no sign of Mozzie.

As they started their journey, it was as if the sky had suddenly split open causing the freezing rain to fall with a vengeance. It pelted the windshield relentlessly and coated the wipers, which then smeared the glass. Visibility was now dangerously impaired. Peter activated the defroster and blessed warm air filled the car. Both men were damp, cold, and shivering from their little jaunt into the wilderness. Peter realized that any progress in finding a haven was going to take some time because there was no way that he could maintain a 70 mph speed as he had done earlier.

They slogged on mile after mile for a few hours, with Peter glancing at his phone every so often to see if he had any reception. Unfortunately, it remained stubbornly disconnected from the world around it. Where were the damn mile markers and signs for upcoming towns? Had he missed them because they had been covered by icy slush? A few times, the tires seemed to lose their traction on black ice, and Peter slowed even more. He hated to negotiate every oncoming bend in the ribbon of highway, and grasped the steering wheel tightly. He noticed that Caffrey seemed as tense as he was, and had one foot on a phantom brake on his side of the car. After one harrowing skid, the con man actually reached up with his bound hands to clench the handle above his door in a white-knuckled grip.

Perhaps to help with his own nervousness, Peter broke the heavy silence. “You know, Caffrey, you are going to make my career. Capturing you will be a feather in my cap at the Bureau!”

Neal just kept his eyes trained on the road as he responded snarkily, “With the way that you drive, Agent Burke, your Fed cronies may have to give you an award posthumously.”

How prophetic that remark turned out to be! Just minutes later, a small animal—perhaps a fox—darted out into Peter’s lane of the highway. The agent instinctively swerved, causing the car to slew across the frozen asphalt and then crash through a guardrail. Temporarily airborne, its momentum continued in an arc until it finally descended to earth on a hillside littered with boulders. The Taurus then flipped and rolled, colliding with trees and rocks before ultimately coming to a halt. The only sounds in the night came from the hissing steam wafting from under the
hood.
At some point, Peter swam back to a reality that was fuzzy and confusing. At first, he felt disoriented and disconnected, as if he was watching an old movie in black and white. As his brain sorted it out, he realized that he was in the driver's seat of a car—a car that obviously had been in an accident because a deployed white airbag now lay in his lap. He didn’t remember the crash and wondered where he was.

Little by little, his body began sending him signals alerting him to his injuries. His head was pounding and his neck hurt where the seat belt restraint had bitten into the soft tissue and tendons. With shaking fingers, he gingerly explored a swelling on the left side of his scalp. His fingers encountered no blood, just one hell of a lump that was throbbing. He tentatively moved his arms and was gratified that the range of motion caused no additional pangs of pain. However, he was on the verge of panic when he couldn’t move his legs.

He needed to tamp down his fear and assess the situation. Closer inspection in the dim light showed that the Taurus’ front end looked like an accordion. Although the actual engine block had dropped down as it was supposed to do in a front-end crash situation, enough metal had been pushed back into the interior that it had trapped the agent’s legs. Peter took a breath and cautiously tried to wiggle his toes within his shoes. He almost cried with relief when he succeeded, even though the effort caused his calves, knees, and thighs to complain bitterly. He didn’t note any blood anywhere around his legs, so that was a good thing, he told himself.

Peter had the sense to know that he had to summon help, so he glanced down at the center console where he kept his phone propped for easy access. It wasn’t there, no doubt having been jolted from the space when the car had performed its summersaults. Peter frantically turned his head to try to locate it, and that was when he first noticed the dark haired young man in the passenger seat.

The other occupant was a mystery at first, but then images began to cascade through Peter’s addled brain. Of course, this was Neal Caffrey. He had apprehended Neal Caffrey and had taken him prisoner as evidenced by the handcuffs around the fugitive’s wrists. That was why they were in the car together; he was taking the fugitive to …… now Peter lost that train of thought because he didn’t know exactly where he was at present.

Caffrey was ominously still. A laceration above his right eyebrow had bled profusely as evidenced by a shirt still soddenly wet with the gore. Peter saw the man’s chest slowly rise and fall, and was gratified to feel a carotid pulse on the left side of his neck. Peter tried shaking Caffrey and calling his name, but got no response. It was impossible to tell the extent of his injuries; there could be life-threatening ones occurring right now on the inside that he couldn’t see. Besides the cut to the head, the only damage that Peter did see was a diffuse, angry swelling encircling the guy’s left wrist that still remained encased within the handcuff. The FBI agent speculated that it might be broken, so he fished in his jacket pocket and withdrew the key. By leaning over the unconscious man, he was able to first release the seatbelt restraint and then jostle the limp arms to unlock the manacles. When he twisted the swollen hand, Caffrey moaned and his eyes opened to slits.

“Come on Caffrey, come back to me,” Peter demanded.

True to form, Neal did not comply with Peter’s orders and sank back down into oblivion. It was so much better than having to wake up. However, Peter was not about to be ignored.

“Caffrey—Neal—wake up! Open your eyes and talk to me. I need to know how badly you’re
hurt!”

“Go ‘way,” was the slurred response that he got from the young thief.

Peter sighed with relief. “Well, that’s not gonna happen anytime soon, Buddy. You’re stuck with me for the duration until we are rescued. Now tell me what hurts.”

At first, Peter didn’t think Neal was going to answer, but eventually the blue eyes cracked open a bit, and he mumbled something that Peter couldn’t quite make out.

“Say that again,” Peter demanded.

“I said that what hurts is my pride,” Neal clarified. “I let myself be caught by a bumbling FBI agent who had just stepped out of an outhouse. That is really so bad for my image. I’ll get no respect after this debacle.”

“Cut the Rodney Dangerfield shtick, Caffrey,” Peter snorted. “Just tell me how badly injured you are.”

“How should I know,” the con man huffed, then closed his eyes once again.

“Caffrey, stay awake. You have a head injury and you shouldn’t go to sleep.”


Peter responded by vigorously shaking Neal once again and Neal let out a yelp.

“Please Agent Burke, can’t you get your jollies some other way besides torturing me,” Neal asked forlornly.

“Well, Buddy, you’re all that I have right now. Listen, you need to get help. I have no idea how long we both have been down here lying unconscious since the accident. It could have been minutes or hours—no way to tell. But obviously, we are well off the beaten path and may never be spotted. It’s sleet outside and the temperature is probably dropping. If we aren’t found and rescued soon, we’ll probably succumb to hypothermia faster than from our injuries.”

There was no response from Neal and now the agent was really getting worried. “Caffrey? Caffrey?”

“Please stop yelling, Agent Burke. You’re hurtin’ my head,” Neal finally slurred.

“Did you hear anything that I just said, Caffrey?” Peter was almost afraid to ask.

“Why don’t you do it?” the young man said weakly, and his apathy frightened Peter.

Was Caffrey bleeding internally somewhere, he wondered? This situation was going from bad to worse. Whatever this con man had done with his life, he didn’t deserve to die this way. Come to think of it, Peter didn’t want to die this way either. He knew that he somehow had to coax this kid into wanting to survive. Next came the hard part. He then had to convince a fugitive to want to help his captor to survive as well. It was their only chance, and one hell of a long shot.

“Neal,” Peter said softly, trying to make a connection. “Please look at me.”

The injured passenger finally turned his head towards Peter and stared. Having secured the young man’s attention, the agent began his spiel.

“Neal, I can’t get out of the car because my legs are pinned down. You should try to open your
car door. If you make it out, you need to climb up the hill and flag down the first vehicle that you see. Please, Buddy, you gotta try to do this. It’s our only chance.”

Neal regarded Peter thoughtfully. “If I do all of that, Agent Burke, aren’t you afraid that I’ll run out on you—that I’ll simply save myself and forget the fact that you are still down here turning into a popsicle?”

“Yes,” Peter admitted. “That thought had crossed my mind. I guess it all comes down to what you’re made of, Neal—who you really are inside, and only you know who that person is and what he’s capable of doing.”

Neal continued to stare at Peter. “You’re taking a chance on me?”

“Yes, believe it or not, I’m placing my faith in you, Neal,” Peter said wryly. “Who knew it would come to this?”

Finally, Neal took a deep breath and grasped the handle of his door with his uninjured right hand while cradling his left against his chest. He pushed and shoved and finally, in frustration, painfully threw his weight against the unyielding impediment. Nothing budged. Moaning, he sank back against the seat.

“I think the door frame is bent so that it’s wedged shut. It just won’t give at all,” he announced the fact unnecessarily to Peter.

“Okay, Neal. You’ll have to try to crawl over the seat to get to the back doors. Maybe they’ll open,” Peter encouraged.

It took a bit of slow maneuvering for Neal to turn in his seat. Finally, he managed to get onto one knee, but when he attempted to shimmy through the small space between the top of the seats, his side felt like it was on fire and a pitiful sound emerged that would have embarrassed him if he had cared at this point in time. He fell back weakly and continued to moan and pant through the pain. He was now positioned next to Peter, who spontaneously reached out and pulled the younger man to him, his hand cradling the con man’s head. Humiliating or not, Neal allowed the closeness while trying to catch his breath.

“I’m sorry but I just can’t do it,” he murmured into Peter’s chest.

“It’s okay, Neal. It’s okay,” the older man tried to sound reassuring, but apparently, he was not successful.

“So we’re definitely going to die here,” Neal decreed when he finally pulled away. “Thomas Hobbs sure knew what he was talking about when he said ‘The life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.’ I just didn’t think that my life would be this short or end this nastily.”

Peter was intrigued. This young criminal was quoting an obscure, long dead, 17th century English political philosopher. That image sure didn’t jive with his first impression of a smart-mouthed punk bent on breaking the law. Neal had always been an enigma to Peter. What was his past, and what were his driving motivations? Peter really wanted to know more and, apparently, the two adversaries were destined to have a lot of time on their hands, so this was as good an opportunity as any to go fishing. Besides, it would keep Neal awake and not sliding back down into unconsciousness again.

“Listen, Buddy, while we’re waiting for somebody to find us, we ought to get to know each other better,” Peter ventured.
Neal had finally gotten his breathing back to normal, and his eyes were closed once more. His mumbled response was accompanied by a sarcastically raised eyebrow.

“Agent Burke, if we’re not found soon, we’re going to freeze to death. And I hate to state the obvious, but I doubt anyone is going to come looking for us in this ice storm.”

“Then you have nothing to lose by sharing information, Neal. I’ll be taking all of your secrets to my grave. C’mon, kiddo. I’ll even let you call me ‘Peter.’”

“I think that I should have my lawyer present, Peter, before I admit to anything,” Neal answered warily.

“Now don’t get nervous,” Peter reassured him. “I won’t be asking about your long laundry list of crimes. We’ll start out with the small mundane details of our lives, okay? I’ll tell you a fact and then you tell me one, or I’ll ask a question and then it will be your turn to ask me. I’ll start—I was born on the outskirts of Ithaca in Upstate New York. Where were you born?”

“You’re really serious about this, aren’t you?” Neal stated incredulously.

“Come on, Buddy, don’t be a spoilsport. Play the game.” Peter cajoled.

“What the hell!” Neal capitulated. “I was born on the outskirts of Washington DC.”

It was now Neal’s turn, and his question was a challenging one. “Why do you want to know me better, Peter?”

His pursuer was honest. “Because I think that there is more to you than the shiny façade that you present to the world. Street cred is not the same as who a person really is.”

After a beat, Peter asked his next question, “How old are you, Neal?”

After laborious probing, the Bureau had finally unearthed a birth certificate for Neal George Caffrey that most likely was a forgery. They could find no evidence of the con man’s existence before his eighteenth birthday, which was highly suggestive that the official document was bogus. Peter knew that Neal was like a chameleon; he could pass for a suave, debonair “man about town” in his thirties, or he could transform himself into a callow youth barely out of his teens. Peter was leaning towards younger rather than older.

“So, Neal, what is your real age?”

Neal’s response was flippant. “I’m old enough not to get carded when I order a drink in a bar. How old are you, Peter?”

Peter matched Neal’s sarcasm. “I’m old enough to be paying into Social Security, but not old enough to collect it yet.”

“Okay, next question—what did you major in at college, Neal? Since you’re quoting Thomas Hobbs, I’m guessing maybe political science?” Peter would take anything that he could get in this scavenger hunt.

Neal’s response was succinct, providing no new clues in his answer. “Never went to college.”

“Seriously?” Peter was confused and surprised, and that was all that he could manage.

“Why is that so hard to believe, Peter? Some people get their education from the real world around them and they do just fine, thank you very much,” Neal seemed offended.
“Does the world around them make Thomas Hobbs required reading?” Peter queried.

“Why are you so hung up on that? I read a lot of things, Peter. Would you believe me if I told you that Marvel Comics are my favorites? Gotta love those super heroes.”

“No, I would not believe that!” Peter snorted. “You are not taking our game seriously. Why are you so set on deflecting and misdirection? What are you afraid of, Neal?”

Neal didn’t answer and there was only silence for the better part of an hour. The temperature in the car was dropping even though the pelting sleet had stopped outside. Peter could see his breath when he exhaled, and he was beginning to get lethargic. He knew that was a sure sign of hypothermia. He could hear Neal’s labored breathing beside him.

“Neal, are you done sulking yet so that we can get back to our game?” he prodded, hoping that the young man would respond.

Peter was eventually rewarded with a sleepy response. “Whose turn is it?”

Peter couldn’t remember, but he pounced on the opportunity anyway. “I played basketball and baseball in high school. Did you play sports?”

“Is eight ball a sport?”

“Do you mean like in pool?” Peter tried to clarify.

“Yeah,” Neal agreed. “If you want to classify it as a sport, then I lettered in it, ‘cause I was a hustler—a really impressive one.”

“Huh!” Peter responded. “Did your parents know that you were hanging out in billiard halls, Neal? My father would have had a fit if I had ever tried that venture.”

“My father wasn’t around. He died when I was three.” Somehow, this statement seemed to have a ring of honesty to it.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Neal.”

“Don’t be,” Neal quickly brushed off any sentiment. “Ask your next question!” It must have been the cold that was making Caffrey forget that they were supposed to be taking turns with the queries. So Peter took unfair advantage of an opening.

“My father was a bricklayer. What did your father do?”

Peter could not have been more astounded by the answer. “My Dad was a cop.”

“Neal,” Peter began, but he was abruptly cut off when Caffrey’s brain finally caught up.

“Hey, Peter, you had two turns. Now I get to ask one.”

Collecting his thoughts, Neal began, “Okay, if you could be anywhere in the world right now, where would you be? I’ll even provide you with my answer so you don’t have to ask. I would be lounging on the beautiful Cote d’Azur on the French Riviera.”

This wasn’t a hard one for Peter. “Right now I would be sitting on the sofa beside my beautiful wife. My dog would be on the floor at my feet. The Yankees would be playing a double-header on the tube and they would be winning, and I would have a cold beer in my hand.”
When Neal didn’t respond with a snide comment, Peter asked, “Was my favorite place in the world too pedestrian for Mr. Sophisticated Globetrotter?”

“You really do have a low opinion of me, don’t you Peter,” Neal said almost sadly.

“That couldn’t be farther from the truth, Neal. I have a whole lot of respect for you. What you do is astounding and almost genius—even if it is against the law. You are a talented and gifted Renaissance man who seems to be able to master whatever he sets his mind to do. It’s really a pity that you don’t direct your energies to something on the right side of the law.”

Almost another half hour passed before a weak voice came out of the descending darkness. “Why do you do what you do, Peter?”

Peter roused from a light doze and, with an effort, sought to arrange his thoughts into some kind of answer that made sense. “I do what I do because the world needs order, or it all doesn’t make any sense. We need a trusted system that is fair and just and keeps us safe. We need to believe in that. When I do my job, I hope, in some small way, that I am making a difference—a good difference, a righteous difference.”

“Those are very lofty sentiments, Special Agent Peter Burke. No room for any shades of gray?”

“If you go down that road, Neal, it would lead to a very pernicious place, one that would be very difficult to come back from with your soul intact,” Peter answered.

Neal was still for a very long time. He had even stopped shivering, and it seemed cruel to keep rousing him from a soothing sleep. Peter had closed his eyes as well. It would just be so easy to give in to the allure of letting go and going gently into that good night. As he was finally surrendering, he thought he heard a soft, wistful response come out of the cold darkness.

“I do what I do to survive, and if I had made it out of here, I would have sent help back for you so that you could, too.”
Neal heard voices somewhere in the periphery of his mind, but he couldn’t make out the nebulous words. It was just white noise to his senses. After his mind cleared a bit, he recognized the drone in the background as the muted volume of a television. When Neal managed to crack one eye open, he was grateful that the light in the room was soft, as was the surface where he was lying. He also realized that he was warm—wonderfully warm while cocooned under a mound of thick blankets. Next he became aware that he hurt all over, and when he attempted to sit upright, that extensive pain intensified and temporarily took his breath away.

Suddenly, a voice came out of the shadows. “Neal, it’s okay. Just try to lie back and relax.”

Mozzie’s soothing tones had never sounded so good to Neal’s ears. The little man gingerly sat on the side of Neal’s bed and surveyed his now-awake, and hopefully lucid, patient.

“You look like hell, mon frère, so I’m guessing that you don’t feel much better.”

“What happened Moz?” Neal really was at sea right now, but he knew that Mozzie, of all people, would be honest with him. “Where am I?”

Mozzie got right to the point in bringing his friend up to speed on the recent developments in their odyssey. “Right now, Neal, you are lying in a bed in a Days Inn in beautiful, downtown Front Royal, Virginia. Excuse the hyperbole about Front Royal. It’s just a little backwater town in the grand scheme of things, but as close as I could get to Washington, DC on such short notice.”

From Neal’s blank look, Mozzie backtracked a bit. “Do you remember that we were in North Carolina for the last few weeks casing the Biltmore Mansion?”

“Sure, I remember that, and we managed to purloin two Renoirs and a pair of Ming Dynasty vases. It all went off like clockwork.”

“Exactly, my friend, we were golden. On the way back home, however, we got fucked by the fickle finger of fate. At a rest stop, your old buddy, Agent Burke, just happened to come sashaying out of the toilet and spotted you. He chased you, cuffed you, and loaded you into his car to take you God knows where. There certainly is not much to behold along Interstate 81, but, nevertheless, I guess the dogged gumshoe had a plan in mind. I jumped in the car and was determined to shadow the two of you at a discrete distance. I just had to hope that Burke’s bladder wouldn’t make it the whole rest of the way back to New York. My plan was to create a diversion of some sort when you stopped so that you could get away.”

“Aw, Moz, I appreciate that. You’re a real pal,” Neal said fondly.

“Well, save the accolades for now, Neal. My plan all went to hell because of the merciless weather. Some massive front coming in from the West had crested the mountains, and as it morphed into a nor’easter and began making its way up the coast, it started to dump freezing rain that made the Interstate so dangerous that the Virginia Highway Patrol temporarily shut it down. I was turned back somewhere near Staunton, Virginia.”

“Yeah, I think that I definitely remember the sleet and being cold,” Neal answered uncertainly, “but the total picture is a blank.”
“Well, that’s not surprising, my young partner in crime. You and the Fed had an accident. The car that you were in skidded off the road, went through a guardrail, and did some calisthenics before coming to a stop in a gully. You suffered a deep laceration above your right eye, and a resulting heavy-duty concussion from the trauma. It’s no wonder that your brain is muddled. You also have four broken ribs, a broken collarbone, and a sprained wrist. However, the most life-threatening thing to come back from was the hypothermia. I put in a call to a friend in New York who knows a buddy down here in nearby Washington, DC. The guy was a former medic in the first Afghanistan assault, and, with the right incentive, he made the fifty mile drive out here to the sticks to treat you.”

Mozzie took off his glasses and began polishing them to give Neal time to respond. Mozzie began to get worried when his friend didn’t add anything.

“Does anything seem familiar,” he asked hopefully.

“Sorry, Moz, I got nothing right now. Exactly what was the right incentive to persuade this medical person to aid and abet two fugitives?”

“Well, let’s just say that we still have the two Renoirs, but the Ming vases are going to be gracing someone else’s mantle in the future.”

“Were you the one who eventually found me?” Neal wanted to know.

“Yep! When the barricades were lifted from Interstate 81, I was off like a shot. I didn’t have a clue how far you and your escort had managed to travel, so I began trawling like a fisherman, hoping to catch something in my net. My hope was that the two of you had been detained by the roadblock as well, and I could eventually catch up. It was really hard to see anything in the dim early morning, but when I spotted that broken guardrail, it pinged my Spidey senses, and I stopped to investigate.”

Mozzie took a deep breath as he prepared to relate the most frightening part of his story.

“Neal, when I first got a glimpse of you in that wreck after I slid down the hill, I thought that you were dead! You were a mess—all bloody and so damn pale. I pounded on the window trying to get you to wake up and look at me, but you were just so still. And it was totally frustrating because I could not get to you. The massive dents in the sides of the car had jammed all the doors.”

“I’m sorry, Moz,” was all that Neal could think to say.

“Don’t worry, I’m nothing if not resilient and resourceful.” Now, after the fact, Mozzie had adopted a self-assured, cavalier attitude.

“Of course you are; I’ve never doubted that,” Neal agreed with a smile, and Mozzie was mollified and continued with his tale.

“The Interstate had a fair number of tow trucks out and about in the early morning hours scanning for the occasional stranded motorist that needed help getting back on track. I managed to flag one down. He was a really, really big guy, Neal, and with the aid of a pry bar, he was able to get the passenger side door open. Thank God, you were still alive, so he slung you over his shoulder and carried you up the hill and deposited you in my car. Agent Burke was alive as well, but getting him out would have required more sophisticated heavyweight equipment than ‘Wreck-It Ralph’ had at his disposal. He would be calling for assistance as soon as you and I made our getaway, and he promised not to divulge that he had found anyone else in the car.
“I take it that he didn’t agree to do that out of the goodness of his heart, Moz,” Neal ventured a guess.

“Of course not, Neal. The myth of being a Good Samaritan is long dead because people know that no good deed goes unpunished. However, I must give the man kudos for being a wily negotiator. When all was said and done, his forgetful memory earned him a little stash of $15,000 that he can now lose in an Atlantic City casino.”

“What about Peter, Moz? Did he survive?”

“Neal, why are you calling your pet Fed by his first name? That thump to your head must be worse than I thought. As to your question, I have no idea of the Suit’s status. My only concern was you!”

“You said that he had caught me and had me in handcuffs?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” the little man sighed. “Rousseau once said that ‘man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.’ Now I’m adding my own quote—‘It is our lot in life to endure, and ultimately, to overcome such persecution.’”

Neal smiled at the determined, righteous fervor of his friend. Right now, the young con man just wished that he could be sure of anything, especially the details of this recent nightmare. Little flashbacks teased the corners of his mind, but they wouldn’t solidify into an actual recollection. Lying in his Virginia motel bed, he finally verbalized the wisps of a distorted memory.

“I know this is off-the-wall, Moz, but I think that I recall a game like ‘Twenty Questions.’ As weird as it sounds, I seem to remember playing that game with Peter Burke.”

Mozzie’s brow furrowed in concern. “Maybe you need an MRI, Neal, ‘cause I think your bell really got rung!”

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Peter Burke was in a hospital bed in Staunton, Virginia. Elizabeth was by his side looking just a bit less worried and frazzled than she had twelve hours ago. That was when she had received the scary phone call telling her that her husband had been in an auto accident and was hospitalized in Virginia.

El knew that Peter was obsessed with the slippery forger, Neal Caffrey, and if there was even the slightest hint of his presence somewhere, Peter would follow like a bloodhound on the scent. Earlier in the week, having obtained the Bureau’s blessing, the trail had taken him to Asheville, North Carolina.

Elizabeth certainly was not happy with Peter’s almost manic fixation regarding a White Collar criminal. It wasn’t as if this young hoodlum was public enemy number one on the FBI’s hit parade. But Elizabeth had resigned herself to a husband who was totally committed to his work, and tried to keep her reservations to herself. Peter was the man that she loved, and she accepted the whole of him, even if she didn’t always understand the drive that impelled him.

The White Collar Division of the FBI was supposed to be benign, stable territory. She would not have to worry that Peter would be risking his life by dodging bullets day in and day out. That was why she had discouraged him from the bump in promotion that was offered in Organized Crime. She just wanted her man home safe and sound with her every night for dinner, even if their dining table, and sometimes even their bed, was strewn with pictures and reports of Neal Caffrey.
Earlier today, she had made the frantic journey down South with Peter’s immediate supervisor, Reese Hughes. On the outside, the older man wore the mantle of a curmudgeon, but Elizabeth knew that he liked Peter and had definite plans for him to move up in the Bureau’s hierarchy. The worried, mismatched pair had endured endless cups of stale vending machine coffee while waiting for Peter to wake up.

“I had talked with Peter just before he left North Carolina,” Hughes told her gently. “He had come up empty in his investigation at the Biltmore Estate and planned to head home. I was informed by the Virginia Highway Patrol that he was traveling in a northerly direction on Interstate 81 when he encountered a freak ice storm that barreled through the area. They actually had to close down the thoroughfare for several hours during the night until the temperature came back up above freezing. They are surmising that Peter lost control on black ice and veered into a guardrail, then careened down an embankment. He was trapped in the car for some hours until eventually a tow truck spotted the scene of the crash and went to investigate. Peter was choppered here to this hospital’s trauma facility.”

Hughes felt Elizabeth shiver beside him and noted that her eyes brimmed with unshed tears.

The trauma physicians had provided all the pertinent medical information to the pair when they had first arrived in the emergency room. Peter was suffering the effects of prolonged hypothermia, and steps were being taken to raise his core body temperature slowly. There did not seem to be any evidence of frostbite. The agent had lacerations and bruising to his lower extremities which, according to EMTs on the scene, had been compressed under the frame of the car that he was driving. Miraculously, he had sustained no fractures to either leg, and the blood flow in the arteries and veins of his lower limbs had been unimpeded during the ordeal.

The most troubling injury was the blow to the side of his head, which had most likely occurred on impact with the side window of the vehicle. A skull fracture had been ruled out after the necessary tests were performed. However, the diagnosis of a traumatic brain injury loomed over the patient. Peter was being carefully monitored for signs of increased intracranial pressure, which would necessitate immediate surgical intervention to prevent brain damage and death. If Peter remained stable, that was one huge hurdle down. The chief neurologist then went on to explain that a moderate brain trauma could manifest in many ways. Almost always, there would be confusion surrounding the injury, and, sometimes, complete amnesia of the event that had caused it. Cognitive functions could be impaired and emotions labile. They would just have to wait and see what the long-term ramifications of the injury would be.

Thankfully, after several hours, Peter did wake up to Elizabeth’s concerned face.

“Hi, Hon,” he managed to rasp out.

“Hi, Hon,” she replied as the tears finally began to fall.

Hughes stuck his head in, thereby photobombing the fragile moment between husband and wife.

“Hey, Peter, it’s really good to see that you’re now awake.”

“Reese,” Peter mumbled uncertainly, “what are you doing in my bedroom?”

Elizabeth and Hughes exchanged a concerned look. Between the two of them, they managed to explain what had happened while Peter had been on his way home from North Carolina. He now realized that he was being treated in a Virginia hospital and was apparently very lucky to be alive.
“Did Neal finally manage to get out and get help?” Peter asked.

Now the concerned looks returned once more. “Peter, are you talking about Neal Caffrey, because he wasn’t with you. You were alone in the car when you were found. You thought that he might have been responsible for the Biltmore robbery, but you came up empty-handed. You told me so on the phone just before you set out for home,” Reese told him.

“No, no, Reese. I managed to catch him and he was with me,” Peter said determinedly.

“Okay, Peter, just where did you catch Caffrey?” Hughes would hear his agent out, no matter how far-fetched this seemed.

“Outside of a restroom facility along Interstate 81.” Peter was adamant.

“So, let me get this straight. You and Caffrey just happened to have to pee at the same time, and you slapped the cuffs on him while he was distracted at the urinal?”

“No, Reese, he wasn’t inside. He was waiting outside when I came out. I chased him, tackled him, and put cuffs on him.”

At his boss’ skeptical look, Peter tried to convince him. “He was driving a white Toyota Camry with North Carolina license plates—I had memorized the tag number, but now all that I can remember are an ‘M’ or a ‘P,’ and I think an ‘8’ or maybe a ‘6.’ I neglected to check the trunk for the stolen items because I was too busy trying to subdue him and get him into my car. I intended to send someone back for it later after I had secured Caffrey in a local lock-up.”

“Well, the Bureau will certainly look into that, Peter,” Hughes tried to pacify his obviously befuddled agent.

“We were both trapped inside the car,” Peter insisted, “and he was hurt, too. We thought that we were going to die, so we talked for hours. He quoted an English philosopher and tried to convince me that he read Marvel comic books, but I didn’t buy that for a minute. Maybe he was boasting, but he also claimed to have been a pool hustler when he was just a kid. The jury’s still out on the validity of that one.”

Both Elizabeth and Hughes were looking at him strangely. Elizabeth actually appeared fearful, and Hughes expression was perplexed.

“Now, Peter,” Reese began diplomatically, “you have been through a major ordeal and the doctors all say that you may experience some confusion. Maybe what is happening now is that you are mixing up the facts that you think that you know about Caffrey with a traumatically induced dream. Your brain has made him real for you, even though he was never there in the car with you.”

“No, Reese, he was there! He was as real as you and El. The only thing that would explain it would be that he finally managed to get out of the wreck and got help. He’s a very talented escape artist, so it makes sense. I’m just surprised—well maybe not really—that he got help for me. There are a lot of layers to him, and I think that I was selling him short by pigeonholing him in a neat little niche. He is complicated, to be sure, and I suspect somewhat conflicted and vulnerable. If I ever do catch him again, maybe I can turn him around somehow.”

“Well, Peter, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Hughes sought to pacify this very confused agent. “Right now you need to rest, stop thinking about him, and just thank the powers that be that you survived.”
After his boss made his exit, Peter stared at his wife, willing her to believe him. “He really was with me, El. It wasn’t a dream.”

“I know, Hon. Neal Caffrey has always been too real for you!”

Suddenly, unbidden fissures began to appear in Peter’s wall of certainty. Lying in his Virginia hospital bed, a very determined Federal pursuer realized that, yet again, he had more questions than answers.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies to any readers who live in Front Royal, Virginia.

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