



*TRUST*

A NOVEL BY PULITZER PRIZE FINALIST

HERNAN DIAZ



**ALSO BY HERNAN DIAZ**

*In the Distance*

# *Trust*

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H E R N A N  
D I A Z

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*To Anne, Elsa, Marina, and Ana*

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*by*

HAROLD VANNER

ONE



**B**ecause he had enjoyed almost every advantage since birth, one of the few privileges denied to Benjamin Rask was that of a heroic rise: his was not a story of resilience and perseverance or the tale of an unbreakable will forging a golden destiny for itself out of little more than dross. According to the back of the Rask family Bible, in 1662 his father's ancestors had migrated from Copenhagen to Glasgow, where they started trading in tobacco from the Colonies. Over the next century, their business prospered and expanded to the extent that part of the family moved to America so they could better oversee their suppliers and control every aspect of production. Three generations later, Benjamin's father, Solomon, bought out all his relatives and outside investors. Under his sole direction, the company kept flourishing, and it did not take him long to become one of the most prominent tobacco traders on the Eastern Seaboard. It may have been true that his inventory was sourced from the finest providers on the continent, but more than in the quality of his merchandise, the key to Solomon's success lay in his ability to exploit an obvious fact: there was, of course, an epicurean side to tobacco, but most men smoked so that they could talk to other men. Solomon Rask was, therefore, a purveyor not only of the finest cigars, cigarillos, and pipe blends but also (and mostly) of excellent conversation and political connections. He rose to the pinnacle of his business and secured his place there thanks to his gregariousness and the friendships cultivated in the smoking room, where he was often seen sharing one of his figurados with some of his most distinguished customers, among whom he counted Grover Cleveland, William Zachary Irving, and John Pierpont Morgan.

At the height of his success, Solomon had a townhouse built on West 17th Street, which was finished just in time for Benjamin's birth. Yet Solomon was seldom to be seen at the New York family residence. His work took him from one plantation to another, and he was always supervising rolling rooms or visiting business associates in Virginia, North Carolina, and the Caribbean. He even owned a small hacienda in Cuba, where he passed the greater part of each winter. Rumors concerning his

life on the island established his reputation as an adventurer with a taste for the exotic, which was an asset in his line of business.

Mrs. Wilhelmina Rask never set foot on her husband's Cuban estate. She, too, was absent from New York for long stretches, leaving as soon as Solomon returned and staying at her friends' summerhouses on the east bank of the Hudson or their cottages in Newport for entire seasons. The only visible thing she shared with Solomon was a passion for cigars, which she smoked compulsively. This being a very uncommon source of pleasure for a lady, she would only indulge in private, in the company of her girlfriends. But this was no impediment, since she was surrounded by them at all times. Willie, as those in her set called her, was part of a tightly knit group of women who seemed to constitute a sort of nomadic tribe. They were not only from New York but also from Washington, Philadelphia, Providence, Boston, and even as far as Chicago. They moved as a pack, visiting one another's houses and vacation homes according to the seasons—West 17th Street became the coterie's abode for a few months, starting in late September, when Solomon left for his hacienda. Still, no matter in what part of the country the ladies happened to dwell, the clique invariably kept to itself in an impenetrable circle.

Limited, for the most part, to his and his nursemaids' rooms, Benjamin had only a vague notion of the rest of the brownstone where he grew up. When his mother and her friends were there, he was kept away from the rooms where they smoked, played cards, and drank Sauternes well into the night; when they were gone, the main floors became a dim succession of shuttered windows, covered furniture, and chandeliers in ballooning shrouds. All of his nurses and governesses said he was a model child, and all of his tutors confirmed it. Manners, intelligence, and obedience had never been combined as harmoniously as in this sweet-tempered child. The only fault some of his early mentors could find after much searching was Benjamin's reluctance to associate with other children. When one of his tutors attributed his student's friendlessness to fear, Solomon waved his concerns away, saying the boy was just becoming a man of his own.

His lonely upbringing did not prepare him for boarding school. During the first term, he became the object of daily indignities and small cruelties. In time, however, his classmates discovered that his impassiveness made

him a dissatisfying victim and left him alone. He kept to himself and excelled, dispassionately, in every subject. At the end of each year, after bestowing on him all available honors and distinctions, his teachers, without fail, would remind him that he was meant to bring much glory to the Academy.

During his senior year, his father died of heart failure. At the service, back in New York, relatives and acquaintances alike were impressed by Benjamin's composure, but the truth was that mourning simply had given the natural dispositions of his character a socially recognizable form. In a display of great precocity that baffled his father's attorneys and bankers, the boy requested to examine the will and all the financial statements related to it. Mr. Rask was a conscientious, tidy man, and his son found no fault with the documents. Having concluded this business and knowing what to expect once he came of age and into possession of his inheritance, he returned to New Hampshire to finish school.

His mother spent her brief widowhood with her friends in Rhode Island. She went in May, shortly before Benjamin's graduation, and by the end of the summer had died from emphysema. The family and friends who attended this second, much more subdued memorial barely knew how to speak to the young man orphaned in the course of a mere few months. Fortunately, there were many practical issues to discuss—trusts, executors, and the legal challenges in settling the estate.

Benjamin's experience as a college student was an amplified echo of his years as a schoolboy. All the same inadequacies and talents were there, but now he seemed to have acquired a cold sort of fondness for the former and a muted disdain for the latter. Some of the more salient traits of his lineage appeared to have come to an end with him. He could not have been more different from his father, who had owned every room he had walked into and made everyone in it gravitate around him, and he had nothing in common with his mother, who had probably never spent a day of her life alone. These discrepancies with his parents became even more accentuated after his graduation. He moved back from New England to the city and failed where most of his acquaintances thrived—he was an inept athlete, an apathetic clubman, an unenthusiastic drinker, an indifferent gambler, a lukewarm lover. He, who owed his fortune to tobacco, did not even smoke.

Those who accused him of being excessively frugal failed to understand that, in truth, he had no appetites to repress.



THE TOBACCO BUSINESS could not have interested Benjamin less. He disliked both the product—the primitive sucking and puffing, the savage fascination with smoke, the bittersweet stench of rotten leaves—and the congeniality around it, which his father had enjoyed so much and exploited so well. Nothing disgusted him more than the misty complicities of the smoking room. Despite his most honest efforts, he could not argue, with any semblance of passion, for the virtue of a lonsdale over a diadema, and he was unable to sing, with the vigor that only firsthand knowledge can impart, the praise of the robustos from his Vuelta Abajo estate. Plantations, curing barns, and cigar factories belonged to a remote world he had no interest in getting to know. He would have been the first to admit he was an appalling ambassador for the company and therefore delegated daily operations to the manager who had served under his father for two faithful decades. It was against the advice of this manager that Benjamin, through agents he never met in person, undersold his father's Cuban hacienda and everything in it, without even taking an inventory. His banker invested the money in the stock market, together with the rest of his savings.

A few stagnant years went by, during which he made halfhearted attempts at starting different collections (coins, china, friends), dabbled in hypochondria, tried to develop an enthusiasm for horses, and failed to become a dandy.

Time became a constant itch.

Against his true inclinations, he started planning a trip to Europe. All that interested him about the Old Continent he had already learned through books; experiencing those things and places was of no importance to him. And he did not look forward to being confined on a ship with strangers for days on end. Still, he told himself that if he ever would leave, this would be the proper moment: the general atmosphere in New York City was rather glum as the result of a series of financial crises and the ensuing economic recession that had engulfed the country for the last two years. Because the downturn did not affect him directly, Benjamin was only vaguely aware of its causes—it had all started, he believed, with the burst

of the railroad bubble, somehow linked to a subsequent silver crash, leading, in turn, to a run on gold, which, in the end, resulted in numerous bank failures in what came to be known as the Panic of 1893. Whatever the actual chain of events might have been, he was not worried. He had a general notion that markets swung back and forth and was confident that today's losses would be tomorrow's gains. Rather than discouraging his European excursion, the financial crisis—the worst since the Long Depression, two decades earlier—was among the strongest encouragements he found to leave.

As Benjamin was about to set a date for his journey, his banker informed him that, through some “connections,” he had been able to subscribe to bonds issued to restore the nation's gold reserves, whose depletion had driven so many banks to insolvency. The entire issue had sold out in a mere half hour, and Rask had turned a handsome profit within the week. Thus, unsolicited luck, in the form of favorable political shifts and market fluctuations, led to the sudden and seemingly spontaneous growth of Benjamin's respectable inheritance, which he had never cared to enlarge. But once chance had done it for him, he discovered a hunger at his core he did not know existed until it was given a bait big enough to stir it to life. Europe would have to wait.

Rask's assets were in the conservative care of J. S. Winslow & Co., the house that had always managed the family's business. The firm, founded by one of his father's friends, was now in the hands of John S. Winslow Jr., who had tried and failed to befriend Benjamin. As a result of this, the relationship between the two young men was somewhat uneasy. Still, they worked together closely—even if it was through messengers or over the telephone, either of which Benjamin preferred to redundant and laboriously genial face-to-face meetings.

Soon, Benjamin became adept at reading the ticker tape, finding patterns, intersecting them, and discovering hidden causal links between apparently disconnected tendencies. Winslow, realizing his client was a gifted learner, made things look more arcane than they truly were and dismissed his predictions. Even so, Rask started making his own decisions, usually against the firm's counsel. He was drawn to short-term investments and instructed Winslow to make high-risk trades in options,



futures, and other speculative instruments. Winslow would always urge caution and protest against these reckless schemes: he refused to put Benjamin in a position to lose his capital in hazardous ventures. But more than worried about his client's assets, Winslow seemed to be concerned about appearances and eager to display a certain financial decorum—after all, as he once said, laughing shallowly at his own wit, he was, if anything, a bookkeeper, not a bookmaker, in charge of a finance house, not a gambling house. From his father, he had inherited a reputation for pursuing sound investments, and he intended to honor this legacy. Still, in the end, he always followed Rask's directives and kept his commissions.

Within a year, tired of his advisor's priggishness and ponderous pace, Rask decided to start trading on his own account and dismissed Winslow. Severing all ties with the family that had been so close to his for two generations was an added satisfaction to the feeling of true achievement Rask experienced, for the first time in his life, when he took the reins of his affairs.



THE TWO LOWER FLOORS of his brownstone became a makeshift office. This transformation was not the result of a plan but, rather, the effect of meeting unforeseen needs one by one, as they came, until, unexpectedly, there was something like a workspace filled with employees. It started with a messenger, whom Benjamin had running all over town with stock certificates, bonds, and other documents. A few days later, the boy let him know he had to have help. Together with an additional messenger, Benjamin got a telephone girl and a clerk, who soon informed him he was unable to cope on his own. Managing his people was taking vital time away from Benjamin's business, so he hired an assistant. And keeping books simply became too time-consuming, so he engaged an accountant. By the time his assistant got an assistant, Rask lost track of the new hires and no longer bothered to remember anyone's face or name.

The furniture that had remained untouched and under covers for years was now handled irreverently by secretaries and errand boys. A stock ticker had been installed on the walnut serving table; quote boards covered most of the gilt-embossed foliage wallpaper; piles of newspapers had stained the straw-yellow velvet of a settee; a typewriter had dented a satinwood bureau; black and red ink blotched the needlework upholstery of divans and sofas; cigarettes had burned the serpentine edges of a mahogany desk; hurried shoes had scuffed oak claw feet and soiled, forever, Persian runners. His parents' rooms were left intact. He slept on the top floor, which he had never even visited as a child.

It was not hard to find a buyer for his father's business. Benjamin encouraged a manufacturer from Virginia and a trading company from the United Kingdom to outbid each other. Wishing to distance himself from that part of his past, he was pleased to see the British prevail, thus sending the tobacco company whence it had come. But what truly gratified him was that with the profits from this sale he was able to work on a higher plane, manage a new level of risk, and finance long-term transactions he had been unable to consider in the past. Those around him were confused to see his possessions decrease in direct proportion to his wealth. He sold

all remaining family properties, including the brownstone on West 17th Street, and everything in them. His clothes and papers fit into two trunks, which were sent to the Wagstaff Hotel, where he took a suite of rooms.

He became fascinated by the contortions of money—how it could be made to bend back upon itself to be force-fed its own body. The isolated, self-sufficient nature of speculation spoke to his character and was a source of wonder and an end in itself, regardless of what his earnings represented or afforded him. Luxury was a vulgar burden. The access to new experiences was not something his sequestered spirit craved. Politics and the pursuit of power played no part in his unsocial mind. Games of strategy, like chess or bridge, had never interested him. If asked, Benjamin would probably have found it hard to explain what drew him to the world of finance. It was the complexity of it, yes, but also the fact that he viewed capital as an antiseptically living thing. It moves, eats, grows, breeds, falls ill, and may die. But it is clean. This became clearer to him in time. The larger the operation, the further removed he was from its concrete details. There was no need for him to touch a single banknote or engage with the things and people his transaction affected. All he had to do was think, speak, and, perhaps, write. And the living creature would be set in motion, drawing beautiful patterns on its way into realms of increasing abstraction, sometimes following appetites of its own that Benjamin never could have anticipated—and this gave him some additional pleasure, the creature trying to exercise its free will. He admired and understood it, even when it disappointed him.

Benjamin barely knew downtown Manhattan—just enough to dislike its canyons of office buildings and its filthy narrow streets filled with prancing businessmen, busy displaying how busy they were. Still, understanding the convenience of being in the Financial District, he moved his offices to Broad Street. Shortly thereafter, as his interests expanded, he got a seat on the New York Stock Exchange. His employees were quick to realize that he was as averse to dramatics as he was to outbursts of joy. Conversations, stripped down to the essentials, were conducted in whispers. If there was a lull in the typing, the creaking of a leather chair or the rustle of a silk sleeve on paper could be heard from the opposite end of the room. Yet soundless ripples disturbed the air at all times. It was clear

to everyone there that they were extensions of Rask's will and that it was their duty to satisfy and even anticipate his needs but never approach him with theirs. Unless they had vital information to impart to him, they waited to be spoken to. Working for Rask became the ambition of many young traders, but once they parted with him, believing they had absorbed everything that could be learned, none of them could quite replicate their former employer's success.

Much despite himself, his name started being uttered with reverent wonder in financial circles. Some of his father's old friends approached him with business propositions he sometimes accepted and with tips and suggestions he always ignored. He traded in gold and guano, in currencies and cotton, in bonds and beef. His interests were no longer confined to the United States. England, Europe, South America, and Asia became a unified territory to him. He surveyed the world from his office, in search of venturesome high-interest loans and negotiated government securities from a number of nations whose destinies became inextricably entwined because of his dealings. Sometimes he managed to take entire bond issuances to himself. His few defeats were followed by great triumphs. Everyone this side of his transactions prospered.

In what was becoming, increasingly and against his will, Benjamin's "world," there was nothing more conspicuous than anonymity. Even if gossip never reached him, Rask—with his fastidiously unremarkable appearance, his abstemious habits, and his monastic hotel life—knew he must be regarded as somewhat of a "character." Mortified at the mere thought of being considered an eccentric, he decided to conform to the expectations of a man of his position. He built a limestone *beaux arts* mansion on Fifth Avenue at 62nd Street and hired Ogden Codman to decorate it, certain that his ornamental achievements would be touted in all the social pages. After the house was completed, he tried but ultimately was unable to host a ball—he gave up once he understood, working on the guest list with a secretary, that social commitments multiply exponentially. He joined several clubs, boards, charities, and associations at which he was seldom seen. All this he did with displeasure. But it would have displeased him even more to be thought of as an "original." In the end, he became a

wealthy man playing the part of a wealthy man. That his circumstances coincided with his costume did not make him feel any better.



NEW YORK SWELLED with the loud optimism of those who believe they have outpaced the future. Rask, of course, benefited from this breakneck growth, but to him, it was strictly a numerical event. He did not feel compelled to ride on the recently inaugurated subway lines. On a few occasions, he had visited some of the many skyscrapers being erected all over town, but it never occurred to him to move his offices to one of them. He viewed automobiles as a nuisance, both on the streets and in conversation. (Cars had become a pervasive and, to his mind, endlessly tedious topic among employees and associates.) Whenever possible, he avoided crossing the new bridges that tied the city together, and he had nothing to do with the multitudes of immigrants who landed every day on Ellis Island. He experienced most of what happened in New York through the newspapers—and, above all, through the ciphers on the ticker tape. And still, despite his particular (some would have said narrow) view of the city, even he could see that although mergers and consolidations had resulted in the concentration of the wealth in a handful of corporations of unprecedented size, there was, ironically, a collective feeling of success. The sheer magnitude of these new monopolistic companies, a few of them worth more than the entire government budget, was proof of how unequally the bounty was distributed. Yet most people, no matter their circumstances, were certain they were part of the soaring economy—or would be, soon enough.

Then, in 1907, Charles Barney, president of the Knickerbocker Trust Co., became involved in a scheme to corner the copper market. The attempt failed, wrecking a mine, two brokerage houses, and a bank in its wake. Soon thereafter, it was announced that checks from the Knickerbocker would no longer be accepted. The National Bank of Commerce met the requests of the depositors for the next few days, until Barney saw no choice but to shut his doors and, about a month later, shoot himself in the chest. The failing of the Knickerbocker sent waves of panic through the markets. A widespread run caused general insolvency, the Stock Exchange plunged, loans were called in, brokerage houses filed for