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23
24 DENNIS JACOBS, Circuit Judge:

25
26 Curtis Taylor, Antonio Rosario, and Samuel Vasquez
27 appeal judgments of conviction entered in the United States
28 District Court for the Southern District of New York
29 (Marrero, J.) for conspiracy to commit Hobbs Act robbery and
30 brandishing a firearm during a crime of violence, among
31 other offenses related to the robbery of a pharmacy in
32 midtown Manhattan. Taylor, who claims to have attempted
33 suicide by pills as he was arrested, argues that he was
34 incapacitated when he incriminated himself post-arrest, and
35 that the court's decision to admit those statements into

1 evidence violated his rights under Miranda v. Arizona, 384
2 U.S. 436 (1966), and the Due Process Clause of the
3 Constitution. Rosario and Vasquez, who raise separate
4 issues, join Taylor's challenge to the extent that Taylor's
5 confession was used against them, and appeal the denial of
6 their motion to sever on the ground that Taylor's statements
7 caused prejudicial spillover and violated the confrontation
8 right protected under Bruton v. United States, 391 U.S. 123
9 (1968).

10 This is a close case. Even assuming that Taylor's
11 initial waiver of his Miranda rights was knowing and
12 voluntary, Taylor was largely stupefied when he made his
13 post-arrest statements, as confirmed by the testimony of the
14 law enforcement agents and the pretrial services officer who
15 interviewed him, and by the evaluations of staff
16 psychologists at the Metropolitan Correctional Center
17 ("MCC"). The agents and officer testified that Taylor fell
18 asleep repeatedly during questioning and was only
19 intermittently alert. Although their testimony also
20 suggests--and the district court found--that Taylor's
21 incriminating statements were made in relatively lucid
22 intervals, Taylor was impaired throughout, and his

1 interrogators took undue advantage of that impairment by
2 continuing to question him. We therefore conclude that
3 Taylor's post-arrest statements were not voluntary. We
4 further conclude that admitting those statements into
5 evidence was not harmless. His conviction is therefore
6 vacated and remanded for a new trial. And because the
7 admission of Taylor's statements, to the extent they could
8 be used against Rosario and Vasquez, was not harmless error
9 as to them, their convictions are also vacated and remanded
10 for a new trial.

11 **I**

12 On Christmas Eve 2008, Vasquez drove Taylor and Rosario
13 from the Bronx to midtown Manhattan to rob a pharmacy. With
14 them was Luana Miller, a drug addict from Mississippi with
15 an extensive criminal history.

16 En route, Miller called the pharmacy and asked them to
17 stay open for a few minutes past 5:00 PM, so that she could
18 pick up a prescription. At the pharmacy, Miller went in
19 first, posing as a customer. As she spoke with the
20 pharmacist, Rosario burst in the door brandishing a gun,
21 screaming that it was a robbery, and demanding OxyContin: a
22 powerful opioid for pain that is often resold illegally.

1 The two took more than \$12,000 of controlled substances, as
2 well as cash and subway cards, while Taylor stood lookout at
3 the front door and Vasquez waited in the getaway car. The
4 crew then drove back to the Bronx. Cell phone records for
5 Taylor, Rosario, and Vasquez show that they were in the
6 Bronx that afternoon, traveled to midtown Manhattan just
7 before 5:00 PM, stayed near the pharmacy until just after
8 the robbery, and then returned to the Bronx.

9 While executing a warrant at the home of Miller's
10 boyfriend in January 2009, police arrested her on
11 outstanding warrants. Fearing extradition to Mississippi,
12 she offered to cooperate with the government's investigation
13 of the pharmacy robbery, and led police to Taylor, Rosario,
14 and Vasquez.

15 Around 6:00 AM on April 9, 2009, over 25 NYPD and FBI
16 agents came to Taylor's apartment to effect his arrest.
17 Taylor claims that, amid the ensuing chaos, he attempted
18 suicide by taking a bottle-full of Xanax pills. Taylor's
19 daughter testified that her mother (who died before trial)
20 reported the overdose to an officer who dismissed her and
21 told her to "shut up." Still, the record is less than clear
22 as to whether Taylor actually took the pills, and as to
23 whether officers were told of his overdose.

1 Around 9:30 that morning, Taylor was interviewed at FBI
2 headquarters in downtown Manhattan by New York City Police
3 Department Detective Ralph Burch, a member of an FBI/New
4 York health care fraud task force. Taylor signed a form
5 waiving his Miranda rights, and went on to give a lengthy
6 statement confessing his involvement in the robbery.

7 Taylor argues that he was falling asleep and was at
8 times unconscious during the interview. Detective Burch
9 said that it seemed like Taylor's body was "somewhat
10 shutting down" during the two- to three-hour interview.
11 Supplemental App. 51. On the other hand, Burch testified
12 that, though Taylor nodded off at times, he was "coherent"
13 and "fluid" when he was awake and speaking:

14 Mr. Taylor at times was nodding off during the
15 interview. When we asked Mr. Taylor to listen up,
16 that we were asking him questions, he would
17 respond that he knew what he was being asked and
18 he would repeat the questions back to us to show
19 that he was understanding what was being asked of
20 him and knew what was going on.

21
22 Id. at 45. Detective Burch clarified that Taylor did not
23 need to be awakened during the interview; he just had to be
24 "refocused." Id. at 46. "He seemed like he was dozing off,
25 and we had to stress did he understand what was going on.
26 . . . [I]t was my impression that he knew what was going on
27 then." Id.

1 Taylor was later taken to a hospital for medical
2 clearance before his transfer into the custody of the
3 Marshals Service. FBI Special Agent Ian Tomas, who was also
4 involved in the interrogation, explained that Taylor was
5 taken to the hospital because "[t]here was some talk about
6 him on some medication and possibly an injury he had
7 sustained previous at a construction site." Id. at 137.
8 Agent Tomas clarified that the hospital visit was necessary
9 because there was some question as to whether the Marshals
10 Service would take custody of someone who "might be off":
11 "We felt that his do[z]ing off might be a reason the
12 marshals wouldn't accept the custody of Mr. Taylor." Id. at
13 160. Taylor spent the rest of the day at the hospital
14 sleeping, but he did not receive medical attention. He was
15 transferred to the MCC later that evening.

16 The next morning, April 10, Taylor met with MCC staff
17 psychologists. The MCC's chief psychologist, Dr. Elissa
18 Miller, explained that they wanted to evaluate Taylor before
19 his arraignment because they knew of Taylor's earlier
20 schizophrenia diagnosis and several prior attempts at
21 suicide. According to Dr. Miller (who reported on findings
22 by staff psychologists), Taylor "presented with a thought
23 disorder," drooled, was vague, stared blankly, and "[h]is

1 thoughts lacked spontaneity." Id. at 110. Miller testified
2 that "if you asked him questions, he really couldn't
3 elaborate on them because his thought process was impaired."
4 Id. at 111.

5 Taylor also told one of the staff psychologists that
6 "the day he was arrested by the FBI, he took multiple Xanax
7 pills in an attempt to kill himself because he had promised
8 himself that he would never go back to jail." Id. at 113.
9 Miller recounted that, "[a]s a result of taking all those
10 Xanax pills, he said he wasn't waking up and he went to the
11 hospital." Id.

12 He was then taken to the courthouse for arraignment.
13 While awaiting arrival of a pretrial services officer,
14 Taylor told Agent Tomas that "he wanted to clear up some
15 issues about the charges that he was presented with." Id.
16 at 139. Agent Tomas took Taylor to an interview room and
17 again advised him of his Miranda rights; Taylor confessed to
18 the robbery again.

19 Around 12:30 PM that day, Taylor met with Dennis
20 Khilkevich, a pretrial services officer. Khilkevich
21 testified that when he arrived to interview Taylor, Taylor
22 "appeared sleepy and had to be awakened to be interviewed."
23 Id. at 319. "He was sitting in a chair and he appeared as

1 if he was asleep or he was taking a nap." Id. Khilkevich
2 stopped the interview because Taylor "repeatedly fell asleep
3 in the chair." Id. at 320. When the interview resumed,
4 Taylor "was initially responsive maybe for several minutes,"
5 but "[t]hen he continued to fall asleep." Id. "He had to
6 be woken up and he would be responsive for a few minutes and
7 then he would go to sleep again." Id. Khilkevich
8 eventually finished the interview, explaining that Taylor
9 was awake and coherent "[a]t times." Id. at 323.

10 As to the other defendants:

- 11 • Rosario was also arrested on April 9, 2009, and
12 waived his Miranda rights. He claimed at first
13 that he was in the hospital the day of the
14 robbery, but then said he had actually been at his
15 girlfriend's house in Queens. When told that a
16 surveillance video showed a suspect like him,
17 Rosario laughed and ambiguously said "yeah."
18 Trial Transcript ("Tr.") 571.
- 19 • Vasquez was arrested a day earlier, on April 8,
20 after surveillance linked him to the car believed
21 to have been used in the pharmacy robbery. When
22 arrested, he was carrying car keys, a cell phone,
23 and a piece of paper listing various milligram

1 doses of oxycodone and OxyContin, along with the
2 number of pills of each dose. Vasquez gave no
3 statement to police.

4 The indictment charged the three with (1) conspiracy to
5 commit Hobbs Act robbery, in violation of 18 U.S.C. §
6 1951(b)(1); (2) Hobbs Act robbery; and (3) use, possession,
7 and brandishing of a firearm during a crime of violence, in
8 violation of 18 U.S.C. § 924(c)(1)(A)(ii). Taylor was
9 additionally charged with (4) fraudulent acquisition of
10 controlled substances by passing forged prescriptions, in
11 violation of 21 U.S.C. § 843(a)(3).

12 Taylor moved to suppress his two post-arrest statements
13 on the ground that his Miranda waivers and his post-arrest
14 statements were neither knowing nor voluntary. The
15 testimony summarized above was given at the suppression
16 hearing (starting April 23, 2010, continuing May 4, 2010,
17 and concluding May 6, 2010). The district court denied
18 suppression of Taylor's post-arrest statements, finding that
19 the government sustained its burden of proving that Taylor's
20 Miranda waivers were "informed and voluntary." Supplemental
21 App. 385. The court found that the testimony of the law
22 enforcement agents was consistent, corroborated, and
23 truthful. Id. at 386-87.

1 The court rejected the argument that Taylor's
2 incapacitation rendered his post-arrest statements
3 involuntary:

4 [T]he defense does not allege that the government
5 failed to read Mr. Taylor [his] rights before
6 questioning began or any other coercion. Even
7 were the Court to assume that Mr. Taylor ingested
8 a large quantity of Xanax shortly before his
9 arrest, the Court credits the testimony from the
10 government's witnesses that Mr. Taylor was
11 sufficiently lucid during the questioning that his
12 waiver of Miranda rights was knowing and
13 voluntary.

14 The fact that there is evidence that Mr. Taylor
15 nodded off from time to time during the
16 questioning does not persuade the Court that
17 during those portions of the testimony when he was
18 awake and lucid he could not have voluntarily and
19 knowingly waived his Miranda rights.
20

21 Id. at 387-88. The district court went on to explain that
22 it did "not equate nodding off intermittently with total
23 psychotic episodes of hallucination and other extreme
24 circumstances that might throw greater doubt on the
25 defendant's ability to voluntarily and knowingly waive his
26 rights." Id. at 388.

27 Taylor's statements, which implicated Rosario and
28 Vasquez, were redacted at trial to remove their names. The
29 jury was instructed that Taylor's statements should be
30 considered only as to Taylor.

1 that all subsequent statements were voluntarily made." In
2 re Terrorist Bombings of U.S. Embassies in E. Afr., 552 F.3d
3 177, 211-12 (2d Cir. 2008); see also Dickerson v. United
4 States, 530 U.S. 428, 444 (2000) ("The requirement that
5 Miranda warnings be given does not, of course, dispense with
6 the voluntariness inquiry.").

7 We look at the totality of circumstances surrounding a
8 Miranda waiver and any subsequent statements to determine
9 knowledge and voluntariness. See Oregon v. Elstad, 470 U.S.
10 298, 309 (1985). In that context, "knowing" means with full
11 awareness of the nature of the right being abandoned and the
12 consequences of abandoning it, and "voluntary" means by
13 deliberate choice free from intimidation, coercion, or
14 deception. United States v. Plugh, 648 F.3d 118, 127 (2d
15 Cir. 2011), cert. denied, 132 S. Ct. 1610 (2012). The
16 government bears the burden of proof. Colorado v. Connelly,
17 479 U.S. 157, 168-69 (1986).

18
19 The analysis applicable to April 9 differs somewhat
20 from the analysis applicable to April 10.

21 **April 9.** In general, a suspect who reads,
22 acknowledges, and signs an "advice of rights" form before

1 making a statement has knowingly and voluntarily waived
2 Miranda rights. See Plugh, 648 F.3d at 127-28. Before
3 making his statement on April 9, Taylor was read Miranda
4 rights using an "advice of rights" form. He was read every
5 right, voiced his understanding, and signed the form. At
6 the time, according to Detective Burch, Taylor had a "fluid"
7 demeanor, "knew what was going on," and "understood what was
8 happening." Supplemental App. 15. This evidence, credited
9 by the district court, supports the conclusion that Taylor
10 knowingly and voluntarily waived his Miranda rights before
11 speaking with law enforcement on April 9.

12 But even accepting that Taylor's April 9 Miranda waiver
13 was knowing and voluntary, we must nonetheless determine
14 whether the inculpatory statements themselves were
15 voluntary. Dickerson, 530 U.S. at 444. "A confession is
16 not voluntary when obtained under circumstances that
17 overbear the defendant's will at the time it is given."
18 United States v. Anderson, 929 F.2d 96, 99 (2d Cir. 1991).
19 The voluntariness inquiry should examine "the totality of
20 all the surrounding circumstances, including the accused's
21 characteristics, the conditions of interrogation, and the
22 conduct of law enforcement officials." Id. An individual's

1 mental state should be considered in the voluntariness
2 inquiry to the extent it allowed law enforcement to coerce
3 the individual. Connelly, 479 U.S. at 164-65; see also
4 United States v. Salameh, 152 F.3d 88, 117 (2d Cir. 1998)
5 (per curiam).

6 The record indicates that Taylor's statement of April 9
7 was made when he was unable to summon the will to make a
8 knowing and voluntary decision; his will was overborne.

9 It is difficult to determine whether a confession is
10 voluntary; case law "yield[s] no talismanic definition" for
11 the term. Schneckloth v. Bustamonte, 412 U.S. 218, 224
12 (1973). It is clear, however, that when "a person is
13 unconscious or drugged or otherwise lacks capacity for
14 conscious choice," a confession cannot be voluntary. Id.
15 (internal quotation marks omitted); see also United States
16 ex rel. Burns v. LaVallee, 436 F.2d 1352, 1355-56 (2d Cir.
17 1970) (holding a written confession to be involuntary when
18 given "after over eighteen hours of uninterrupted custodial
19 interrogation, after he had been without sleep, and almost
20 without food, for thirty hours").

21 Taylor claims he was mentally incapacitated during the
22 April 9 interview because of the quantity of Xanax pills he

1 ingested immediately before his arrest. That claim finds
2 support in the record. Detective Burch testified that
3 Taylor's body "was somewhat shutting down," and that "at
4 that time that he was answering questions . . . his body was
5 giving up on him." Supplemental App. 51. The district
6 court credited this testimony. Granted, Burch also
7 testified that, when Taylor was speaking, he was "coherent"
8 and understood what was going on when he was not nodding
9 off. Id. But it nonetheless appears that Taylor fell
10 asleep at least two or three times during the interview, and
11 the officers repeatedly had to awaken him, or (to use the
12 nicer term) "refocus" him--at one point coaxing him, "Mr.
13 Taylor, you have to answer our questions and focus with us."
14 Id. at 47. Agent Tomas corroborated that Taylor was "a
15 little bit out of it" and dozing off. Id. at 158-61.

16 In Mincey v. Arizona, 437 U.S. 385 (1978), statements
17 by a defendant who was hospitalized were ruled involuntary.
18 The Court observed that the defendant was in intensive care
19 for a serious wound and was "evidently confused and unable
20 to think clearly about either the events of that afternoon
21 or the circumstances of his interrogation." Id. at 398.
22 The statements were "the result of virtually continuous

1 questioning of a seriously and painfully wounded man on the
2 edge of consciousness." Id. at 401; see also id. ("But
3 despite [the accused's] entreaties to be let alone, [the
4 police officer] ceased the interrogation only during
5 intervals when [the accused] lost consciousness or received
6 medical treatment, and after each such interruption returned
7 relentlessly to his task.").

8 On the other hand, in Salameh, we rejected a claim that
9 a statement was involuntary, even though the accused claimed
10 that prior to being taken into U.S. custody, he had been
11 incarcerated in Egypt and tortured for ten days. 152 F.3d
12 at 117. Despite the accused's weakened mental state, his
13 statements were voluntary because he did "not contend that
14 federal agents either mentally or physically coerced his
15 remarks during that interrogation." Id.; see also Plugh,
16 648 F.3d at 128 (statements voluntary because defendant "was
17 never threatened physically or psychologically abused in any
18 manner, or made any type of promises such that his will was
19 overborne") (internal quotation marks omitted).

20 One difference between Mincey and Salameh is the
21 presence in Mincey of police overreaching, see Connelly, 479
22 U.S. at 157 (stressing the "crucial element of police

1 overreaching" in assessing voluntariness), and that is no
2 doubt a difficult issue here. Continued questioning of a
3 sleep-deprived suspect can be coercive, depending on the
4 circumstances, see, e.g., Mincey, 437 U.S. at 401; LaVallee,
5 436 F.2d at 1355-56; but the decisive issue is whether the
6 will was "overborne" by the police, so that the defendant is
7 not using such faculties as he has. The conditions in which
8 Taylor was questioned do not appear to have been abusive;¹
9 but there is little difference in effect between sleep
10 deprivation as a technique and the relentless questioning of
11 a person who is obviously unable to focus or stay awake for
12 some other reason.

13 The district court credited testimony that Taylor was
14 coherent *at times*. One such interval is when Taylor signed
15 the "advice of rights" form on April 9, a finding that we do
16 not disturb. But as that interview progressed, it became
17 clear to the officers (as their testimony confirms) that
18 Taylor was in and out of consciousness while giving his
19 statement, and in a trance or a stupor most of the time when
20 not actually asleep. Thus, the officers' persistent

¹ The law enforcement agents, though persistent in interrogating Taylor and summoning him to alertness as he continued to fall asleep, do not appear to have acted maliciously or abusively during the interrogation.

1 questioning took undue advantage of Taylor's diminished
2 mental state, and ultimately overbore his will.
3 Accordingly, we conclude that Taylor's statement on April 9
4 was not voluntary and should have been suppressed.

5
6 **April 10.** On the morning of April 10, Taylor himself
7 initiated contact with law enforcement by notifying Agent
8 Tomas that "he wanted to clear up some issues about the
9 charges that he was presented with." Supplemental App. 139.
10 He was then orally re-advised of his rights, orally waived
11 them, and gave an additional statement, altering some
12 aspects of his April 9 account. Although Taylor continued
13 to slip in and out of consciousness that day, Agent Tomas
14 testified that, when speaking to the agents mid-morning,
15 Taylor was "much more alert" than he had been the day
16 before.² Id. at 139-42. But because Taylor's first
17 confession on April 9 was the product of coercion, we must
18 determine whether his second waiver and confession, fewer
19 than twenty-four hours later, were rendered involuntary
20 based, at least in part, on the "taint clinging to the first
21 confession." Anderson, 929 F.2d at 102.

² As discussed further below, the question is not free of doubt.

1 "[T]he use of coercive and improper tactics in
2 obtaining an initial confession may warrant a presumption of
3 compulsion as to a second one, even if the latter was
4 obtained after properly administered Miranda warnings."
5 Tankleff v. Senkowski, 135 F.3d 235, 245 (2d Cir. 1998)
6 (internal quotation marks omitted). That is so because,
7 "after an accused has once let the cat out of the bag by
8 confessing, no matter what the inducement, he is never
9 thereafter free of the psychological and practical
10 disadvantages of having confessed." United States v. Bayer,
11 331 U.S. 532, 540 (1947).

12 "In deciding whether a second confession has been
13 tainted by the prior coerced statement, 'the time that
14 passes between confessions, the change in place of
15 interrogations, and the change in identity of interrogators
16 all bear on whether that coercion has carried over into the
17 second confession.'" Anderson, 929 F.2d at 102 (quoting
18 Elstad, 470 U.S. at 310). Less than a day passed between
19 Taylor's first and second confessions, and in that interval,
20 Taylor was hospitalized or unconscious most of the time.
21 Although the venue of the interrogations differed, Agent
22 Tomas was present at both--and it was to Agent Tomas that

1 Taylor addressed his request to "clear up some issues." The
2 taint of the prior involuntary confession carried over to
3 Taylor's second waiver and statement, burdening both with a
4 "presumption of compulsion." Tankleff, 135 F.3d at 245.

5 That presumption is reinforced by uncontradicted
6 testimony regarding Taylor's lingering mental incapacity on
7 April 10. Taylor continued to doze off that morning and was
8 alert only "at times." Supplemental App. 162. Just before
9 the April 10 interview, FBI Special Agent Steven Jensen saw
10 Taylor "slouched in his chair, and he appeared to be
11 sleeping." Id. at 247. When asked for how long Taylor was
12 sleeping, Agent Jensen explained that it was "in excess of
13 minutes." Id.

14 Although the record does not suggest that Taylor fell
15 asleep during the April 10 interview, there is evidence
16 that, throughout the day on April 10, Taylor remained in a
17 fog. Dr. Miller reported that Taylor was mentally impaired
18 on the morning of April 10 and could not adequately respond
19 to questions:

20 When he was seen, he presented with a thought
21 disorder. He was noted to be picking at his
22 nails. He was drooling. He was vague in his
23 responses to questioning. He presented with what
24 we call a flat affect . . . just kind of flat and
25 blank-face stare.

1
2 He could not elaborate on questions asked. His
3 thoughts lacked spontaneity. His speech was
4 vague. When we would ask him certain questions
5 about whether he was hearing voices, he couldn't
6 really elaborate on his responses.
7

8 Id. at 110. Dr. Miller also reported the observation made
9 by psychologists in her division: "[I]f you asked him
10 questions, he really couldn't elaborate on them because his
11 thought process was impaired." Id. at 111.

12 Dennis Khilkevich, a pretrial services officer who
13 interviewed Taylor at around 12:30 PM on April 10, found
14 Taylor drowsy and in need of rousing. See id. at 319 ("He
15 was sitting in a chair and he appeared as if he was asleep
16 or taking a nap."). When Khilkevich tired of waking him up,
17 he suspended the interview; and when he resumed, Taylor
18 continued to fall asleep between short intervals of
19 consciousness, so Khilkevich ended the questioning.

20 The district court did not discredit the testimony of
21 Dr. Miller or Khilkevich.

22 Evidence of Taylor's continued incapacity on April 10,
23 coupled with the taint of his prior confession, renders his
24 second waiver and statement involuntary. Considering the
25 totality of circumstances, we conclude that Taylor's

1 inculpatory statement on April 10 should have been
2 suppressed.³

3
4 **III**

5 Next we consider whether the error in admitting those
6 statements was harmless. Arizona v. Fulminante, 499 U.S.
7 279, 310-11 (1991) (Rehnquist, C.J., writing for a majority
8 as to harmless error analysis); see also Zappulla v. New
9 York, 391 F.3d 462, 466 (2d Cir. 2004). "When reviewing the
10 erroneous admission of an involuntary confession, the
11 appellate court, as it does with the admission of other
12 forms of improperly admitted evidence, simply reviews the
13 remainder of the evidence against the defendant to determine
14 whether the admission of the confession was harmless *beyond*
15 *a reasonable doubt*." Fulminante, 499 U.S. at 310 (emphasis
16 added).

17 "Is it clear beyond a reasonable doubt that a rational
18 jury would have found the defendant guilty absent the
19 error?" Neder v. United States, 527 U.S. 1, 18 (1999).

³ When it appears that a defendant is malingering, the voluntariness calculus should be vastly different. Here, all the witnesses support the account that Taylor was actually slipping in and out of consciousness during the April 9 interview, and immediately before and after the April 10 interview.

1 "[T]he court conducting a harmless-error inquiry must
2 appreciate the indelible impact a full confession may have
3 on the trier of fact," Fulminante, 499 U.S. at 313 (Kennedy,
4 J., concurring); indeed, "it may be devastating to a
5 defendant," Id. at 312 (Rehnquist, C.J., writing for a
6 majority as to harmless error analysis). We consider the
7 following (nonexclusive) factors in determining whether the
8 erroneous admission of a confession was harmless: "(1) the
9 overall strength of the prosecution's case; (2) the
10 prosecutor's conduct with respect to the improperly admitted
11 evidence; (3) the importance of the wrongly admitted
12 testimony; and (4) whether such evidence was cumulative of
13 other properly admitted evidence." Zappulla, 391 F.3d at
14 468.

15 The admission of Taylor's involuntary confessions was
16 not harmless error beyond a reasonable doubt. (1) Taylor's
17 confessions were a critical part of the prosecution's case.
18 The case against Taylor otherwise rested on the testimony of
19 Luana Miller and cell-site records. Miller's testimony was
20 subject to attack, as Taylor claims, because of her criminal
21 past and because she had much to gain from cooperating with
22 the government. Further, while the cell-site records

1 corroborate Miller's account of their movements, no other
2 witness or physical evidence links Taylor to the crime. (2)
3 The prosecution emphasized Taylor's confessions throughout
4 trial, including at opening and closing, and had both
5 statements read to the jury in full. (3) & (4) Taylor's
6 confessions were important to the case, corroborating
7 Miller's critical testimony. Further, a confession is
8 recognized to have greater impact than the same testimony
9 given by another witness. See, e.g., Fulminante, 499 U.S.
10 at 312-13. Given the weight that a jury may accord a
11 confession, as well as the other relevant factors, the
12 admission of Taylor's post-arrest statements was not
13 harmless.

14 In sum, Taylor confessed while in a stupor, his will
15 was overborne, his statements were not voluntarily made, and
16 they should have been suppressed. Considering the other
17 evidence against Taylor and the important role that his
18 confessions played at trial, this was not harmless error.
19 We therefore vacate Taylor's conviction and remand for a new
20 trial.⁴

⁴ Aside from Counts One, Two, and Three of the indictment, which stemmed from the pharmacy robbery (of which all three defendants were convicted), Taylor was also convicted of making a misrepresentation to obtain OxyContin

1 IV

2 To the extent that Taylor's confessions were used
3 against them, Rosario and Vasquez join Taylor's challenge
4 based on the voluntariness of Taylor's confessions.⁵ The
5 question is whether the admission of those statements was
6 harmless as to Rosario and Vasquez. We conclude that it was
7 not.

8 It matters that the district court gave limiting
9 instructions. The court instructed that "[s]ome evidence is
10 admitted for a limited purpose only," and pointed
11 specifically to "certain statements that law enforcement
12 agents testified were made to them by Mr. Taylor and Mr.
13 Rosario and that were admitted only as to the particular

(Count Four). The government relied heavily on Taylor's confession in proving this offense. Accordingly, we vacate all of Taylor's counts of conviction, under the same harmless error analysis.

⁵ Vasquez explicitly joins Taylor's arguments. While Rosario failed to explicitly join, we exercise our discretion and construe Rosario's appeal to include those arguments made by Taylor that may be applicable to Rosario. See Fed. R. App. P. 2 ("On its own or a party's motion, a court of appeals may--to expedite its decision or for other good cause--suspend any provision of these rules in a particular case"); United States v. Babwah, 972 F.2d 30, 35 (2d Cir. 1992) ("Fed. R. App. P. 2 gives a Court of Appeals the discretion to overlook [a failure to raise an argument on appeal] if manifest injustice otherwise would result.").

1 defendant who made the statement." Vasquez App. 220. The
2 court later reinforced that instruction:

3 As I instructed you previously, evidence of
4 statements that law enforcement agents testified
5 were made by a particular defendant was admitted
6 with respect to that particular defendant alone,
7 and if you find that the statements were made, may
8 not be considered or discussed by you in any way
9 with respect to any other defendant when you begin
10 your deliberations.

11
12 Id. at 227; see also id. at 177 ("The evidence of alleged
13 statements made by Curtis Taylor to law enforcement is
14 admitted with respect to Curtis Taylor alone and may not be
15 considered or discussed by you in any way with respect to
16 either of the other defendants").

17 We normally assume that jurors follow limiting
18 instructions. See, e.g., United States v. Jass, 569 F.3d
19 47, 55 (2d Cir. 2009). But a confession by one co-defendant
20 in a joint trial poses substantial risk for the other co-
21 defendants notwithstanding such an instruction. See Bruton
22 v. United States, 391 U.S. 123, 135-36 (1968). In Bruton,
23 the Supreme Court recognized the risks posed by "powerfully
24 incriminating extrajudicial statements of a co-defendant,
25 who stands accused side-by-side with the defendant," which
26 are then "deliberately spread before the jury in a joint
27 trial." Id. Such limiting instructions call for "a mental

1 gymnastic which is beyond, not only [the jury's] powers, but
2 anybody's else." Nash v. United States, 54 F.2d 1006, 1007
3 (2d Cir. 1932) (L. Hand, J.). The risk is heightened when
4 the circumstances deprive a defendant of the constitutional
5 right to confront the witnesses against him, which may
6 result in Bruton error. See Gray v. Maryland, 523 U.S. 185,
7 196 (1998).

8 With this risk in mind, we turn to examine whether the
9 erroneous admission of Taylor's statements was harmless as
10 to Rosario and Vasquez--that is, whether it is clear beyond
11 a reasonable doubt that a rational jury would have found
12 Rosario and Vasquez guilty absent the error. Again we
13 consider, among other things: (1) the strength of the
14 prosecution's case, (2) the prosecutor's conduct with
15 respect to the statements, (3) the importance of the
16 statements, and (4) whether the statements were cumulative
17 of other evidence. Zappulla, 391 F.3d at 468.

18 As to Rosario, the prosecution's case was relatively
19 strong, but relied chiefly on the testimony of Miller, which
20 was subject to credibility attack, and on the cell-site
21 records. The government also relied on surveillance video
22 footage from inside the pharmacy and the testimony of the

1 pharmacist working during the robbery. However, the record
2 suggests that the face on the videotape was partially
3 covered; the pharmacist was unable to identify Rosario as
4 the assailant; and Rosario's post-arrest statement mostly
5 denied involvement in the robbery.⁶ Taylor's confession was
6 critical to the prosecution because it corroborated Miller's
7 account and definitively placed Rosario at the scene of the
8 crime, in possession of a firearm. We cannot conclude
9 beyond a reasonable doubt that a rational jury would have
10 convicted Rosario absent Taylor's statements.⁷

11 As to Vasquez, the government's case was somewhat
12 weaker, again relied heavily on the cell-site records, and
13 drew its strength from Taylor's statements. The
14 government's other evidence was a piece of paper found on
15 Vasquez's person when he was arrested, with oxycodone and

⁶ After at first claiming he was elsewhere, Rosario laughed and said "yeah" when law enforcement told him that surveillance video showed a suspect that looked like him in the pharmacy.

⁷ Although Rosario's conviction is vacated on this ground, it may matter on remand that his challenge to the admissibility of Miller's testimony under Rule 404(b) is without merit. Miller's testimony about plans to commit a pharmacy robbery related to the crime at issue in this case, and the district court did not abuse its discretion by admitting the evidence as relevant background. See United States v. Greer, 631 F.3d 608, 614 (2d Cir. 2011).

1 OxyContin listed and annotated with numbers; and the
2 testimony of an officer who saw Taylor, Rosario, and Vasquez
3 together in Vasquez's car, which was allegedly used during
4 the robbery. The piece of paper is likely a drug ledger,
5 but no evidence tied it to the pharmacy robbery, and the
6 only evidence putting Vasquez's car at the scene of the
7 crime was testimony by Miller and the statements of Taylor.
8 For the same reasons reviewed above, we cannot conclude
9 beyond a reasonable doubt that a rational jury would have
10 convicted Vasquez had Taylor's statements been properly
11 excluded.⁸

12 We therefore hold that the admission of Taylor's
13 involuntary confessions was not harmless error as to Rosario
14 and Vasquez, and vacate their convictions and remand for a
15 new trial.⁹

⁸ Vasquez raises two other arguments on appeal that may have some bearing on the proceedings upon remand. First, Vasquez argues that the district court erred by limiting his cross-examination of Miller on the circumstances surrounding Rosario's possession of a gun. Second, Vasquez argues that the district court delivered an unbalanced jury instruction on the significance of the ledger found in his pocket after his arrest. We see no abuse of discretion on either score.

⁹ The Supreme Court recently decided that any fact that increases the mandatory minimum sentence--including whether a defendant "brandished" a firearm in connection with a crime of violence--is an element of the offense that must be found by a jury beyond a reasonable doubt. Alleyne

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2 Rosario and Vasquez also argue that the admission of
3 Taylor's post-arrest statements violated their rights under
4 the Confrontation Clause because they had no opportunity to
5 cross-examine Taylor and because his statements adverted to
6 them. See Bruton v. United States, 391 U.S. 123 (1968).
7 Because we have vacated the convictions of Rosario and
8 Vasquez on separate grounds, we need not reach their claim
9 of Bruton error.

11 CONCLUSION

12 For the foregoing reasons, we vacate the convictions
13 and remand for a new trial.

v. United States, 133 S. Ct. 2151 (June 17, 2013). After briefing and oral argument were complete, Taylor and Vasquez sought to raise this issue on appeal, but because we are vacating their convictions on other grounds, we need not reach it. In any event, the jury did find brandishing beyond a reasonable doubt. See, e.g., Verdict Form 5; Tr. 1194.