

One Tenth of One Tenth of a Second

By Bryan W. Alaspa

It is truly amazing how time can work within your mind depending on the situation. How long does it take for a bullet to fire from a gun and hit the other person when that other person is standing maybe twenty feet away? One tenth of one tenth of a second, maybe? And yet, even in that short amount of time, so much can happen.

My name is Peter Girden. I am known as just Petey by most people I associate with. Of course, that is a pretty normal nickname given the people I normally associate with. The folks I hang around with tend to have names like “The Knife” and “Joey Bats” or “Stoolie” or other flashy names. I was just known as Petey and that was fine with me.

I got into this line of work when I was young, as I suppose most people do. You steal a wallet here, break into a house for some extra cash here and before you know it, you and the guys you do this with are a crew and you are stealing things for a living. I learned to pick a lock by the time I was twelve. I was cracking safes at fifteen. I had been in juvenile hall three times by the time I finally became an adult and since then have done two stints in prison.

Mostly I was small time, but my reputation grew. I was loyal, didn't question and I got the job done. Most of the time, when I did a job, things went well, the crooks got paid and everyone went home happy. I never killed anyone, although I knew how to handle a gun and had sure threatened enough people. I surrounded myself with plenty of people willing to do the killing if it needed to be done, but I just liked to take things and see how much money I could make. As you can tell by the fact that I am not yet thirty and had not spent all of my life in jail, I had never been pinched for anything big I had done. Like I said, mostly I was lucky.

Of course, I dreamed of pulling bigger jobs. I think everyone who gets into this kind of work imagines stealing a Crown Jewel or a Hope Diamond or some priceless piece of art. I think we dream of it for the challenge. Sure as hell, you couldn't make any money trying to pawn off something that big.

So, that brings us up to about three months ago. I was sitting in my favorite spot - a local café just down the street from where I live. I live in a nice loft apartment overlooking the city from one side and the lake from the other. I spend most of my days there and people have come to learn that this is the place to find me. I generally make enough now that most of my days can be spent in that little dark place, eating, drinking and talking with the guy who owns it, the people who work there and all of my friends. Of course all of my friends are crooks too, but who am I to judge, right?

So, three months ago, it was around noon and I was sitting in the back talking with Harry, the guy who does the cooking during that time of the day. The place was pretty empty even though it was lunch. It was that kind of place, you know, the kind of place that services a certain clientele. From the outside, it sure didn't look like the place all of the fancy businessmen would want to come hang out before heading off to their board meetings and what-not. So the door opens and Harry and I look up and the noon sun comes streaming into the gloom and both me and Harry shade our eyes, blinking at the light. A figure stands in the doorway and I immediately notice that he is flanked by two other guys and each one of them is roughly the size of Mount Everest, if Mount Everest were inclined to wear expensive suits. The sun was so bright and I had been

sitting there for so long, I could only see a kind of shadow there for a while. Then, as the door closed behind him, my eyes had to re-adjust to the gloom, so I still couldn't see who it was.

"You Petey Girden?" A voice called out from the shadow standing in the middle. The voice was calm, talkative, friendly. I did not feel too threatened although I did rest my hand on the gun I had tucked into my pants just under the table.

"I could be," I said, still squinting and wishing my eyes would stop showing me strange-colored spots. "Who wants to know?"

There was a laugh and I heard footsteps and the figure began to move forward. "You won't need that gun, Petey. I just want to talk to you."

The figure approached and I saw it as a man of about forty. He was maybe five foot seven with dark hair that was just starting to turn grey around the temples. He was wearing a white suit with a black silk shirt and a red silk tie. The suit looked as if it had just come off the hanger that morning. He wore this white hat on his head, which he took off as he approached and then played with in his hands. His face was handsome, tanned, with your average nose - although it looked like his might have been broken once or twice. It was his eyes, though, that really caught me. They appeared to be totally black. It was as if there was the white part and then just pupil with no iris in those eyes. Something about this guy made me swallow hard and my heart start beating really fast.

"My name is Cain Furst, Petey," the man said and smiled at me.

I felt as if all of the blood and heat within my body sank into my shoes. I seemed lost among the many teeth I could see smiling at me from between the very thin lips. The eyes bore no emotion, none of the mirth that seemed to be hiding behind the smile. Of course, I knew who Cain Furst was. Every petty thief and crook knew who he was.

Cain was a true child prodigy of criminal behavior. How much of his life is legend and how much of it is truth, nobody knows anymore. Even Cain himself probably isn't sure anymore. He is said to have murdered his own parents at the age of six. Another story says he was orchestrating bank robberies by the age of ten. Surely most of this was crap and most of it made up by Cain himself. Still, what I could surely bank on was that the man had been in the business for a long time, had become extremely wealthy doing it, had managed to stay out of prison, and was a notorious killer. Nobody crossed or messed with Cain Furst and hoped to live to tell about it. The man had done every kind of crime there was, robbery, murder, arson, counterfeiting (one of his favorites), extortion.

Needless to say, I was more than a little flattered that he wanted to talk to me.

"I apologize, Mr. Furst," I said, standing up. "I couldn't tell who you were standing in the light like that."

Cain laughed and he sat down at my table, crossing his legs and then placing his hat on his knee. His face was alive, smiling, talking. His eyes, never left my face and it seemed like they never blinked.

"No need to worry, Petey," Cain said. "Please, have a seat so we can discuss some business."

I sat down and there was that lump in my throat again and I found it hard to swallow.

"I have been hearing good things about you, Petey," Cain said. "I have been hearing them for quite some time now."

“You’ve heard things about me?” I asked, incredulous. “You’ve been keeping tabs on me?”

Cain nodded. “I keep tabs on a lot of people, especially up and coming talent like you, Petey. You have a knack. More importantly, you seem to have an incredible amount of luck and, as you know, in our business that can mean a hell of a lot more than talent.”

Cain paused to order himself a drink and a sandwich from Harry.

“I have a job that I would like you to be a part of, Petey,” he said, getting right to the point and sneaking a quick look at his watch. “It is a simple job. A gentleman has a certain amount of jewelry that I want. The man keeps this jewelry at his home. This man has a wife and two teenage daughters. He also has a very expensive security system and a safe. I want you to see if you can crack it, and if you can’t, then we are going to find a way to persuade the gentleman to open the safe.”

He paused, studying me with his strange dark eyes.

“It should be a very simple job,” he said, and then thanked Harry for the drink and sandwich. “However, this job will pay you a cool five mil. I will pay you five hundred thousand upon your acceptance of this job and the rest of the money comes after.”

He took a very large bite of his sandwich. The sound of the lettuce crunching between his teeth seemed absurdly loud. My brain was spinning. I could not believe that Cain Furst was sitting right in front of me. More over, I could not believe he was asking me to do a job with him. Beyond that, I was having a really hard time believing the numbers he was throwing at me. What else could I say?

“When do we start?”

That was three months ago. I woke up the next morning and found I had five hundred thousand more dollars in my bank account than I did the night before. This disturbed me as well as delighted me, as I had not given Cain my account information. Cain set about rounding up the rest of the team and I started casing the man we were going to rob.

This guy turned out to be some major league jewelry dealer. He had a very expensive store downtown and it was the kind you only went into when you had an appointment. Apparently, from time to time, he would watch over jewelry and jewels for people in his own personal safe for a rather substantial fee. His safe and his security system at home were rather well-respected.

I cased the house several times, watching the comings and goings of the servants and his family. His wife was beautiful and so were his daughters, one sixteen and the other fourteen, and all of them did wear an obscene amount of jewelry. I couldn’t quite find out what this guy was supposed to be holding in his safe the night Cain wanted to rob the place, but that didn’t really bother me, because Cain knew and that was all that mattered.

The house was enormous. It took a lot of bribing to find someone to tell me what the place looked like from the inside. It took a favor called in by Cain to get actual pictures of the inside. It took me about ten seconds to realize that the wall safe in this house was the most advanced and complicated I had ever seen. I confided this to Cain and he simply patted me on the back and told me he had every confidence in the world that I would be able to handle it.

The time ticked away and I got to know the other people on this job. There was Lenny, Joe, Stevie, Mark and Don. I was not given any nicknames although I am certain that all of them had them. We knew each other only by our first names and it seemed to me that most of the other guys were simply there because they were big and scary looking and would make sure the family stayed put while I got into the safe. Cain also had some other people working behind the scenes, in a kind of technical capacity, but I was never privy to their names or even allowed to meet them.

The night came and Cain and his friends cut off the power to the entire block. Dressed as power company employees, we arrived at the mansion, having already intercepted the call the man had made to the power company and the police. Apparently Cain knew that this was standard procedure for this guy due to the sensitive nature of the things he was holding.

We knocked on the door and the maid answered. Lenny maced her then hit her over the head with this small lead pipe he had in his toolbox. We were inside in seconds and removing our guns from the toolboxes we were carrying. I had a pump shotgun with the stock sawed off and the rest of them had very large and mean looking automatics. I never cared much for guns. I preferred to just steal things, not shoot my way out of places. Basically, I couldn't tell you if you asked me exactly what kinds of guns we all had. I just knew I felt as if the gun I was carrying might just blow me backwards through the wall if I tried to shoot it.

We found the man and woman in bed. The man was reading while the woman was watching TV. There was a small bit of noise before the sight of the guns shut everyone up. In just a few minutes the man was duct taped to a chair and his wife duct taped to the bed. Both of them were gagged.

I set about finding the safe, hearing noises from the daughter's rooms. I barely registered the noises as I reached the safe. I turned on the light in the darkened office and took one look at the monstrosity before me and knew right then that my streak of luck had just run out.

I tried it anyway. I tried everything I knew as fast as I could do it. I do not know what planet this safe was made on but I don't think it was this one. After half an hour - twice as long as we were hoping - I emerged from the office, sweating and exhausted and had to tell Cain I could not get the safe opened.

"You what?" He said calmly, his gun still pointed at the head of the man of the house who was crying and whimpering. "You just go back and try it again, Petey."

"I can't," I said. "I've tried everything I know at least twice. This safe is like nothing I've ever seen."

The face that had looked at me so pleasantly for so long suddenly changed before my eyes. His eyes managed to turn colder and his mouth pulled back in a snarl. I swear I heard the man growl.

"Then try it a third time!" He yelled

He whirled on me and grabbed me by the collar.

"I hired you to do a job," he spat into my face. "Now you go do it before people start getting hurt here."

So, I went back to the office and tried everything again. I tried things in combination. I tried doing things backwards instead of the normal way. After another half an hour, I trudged back.

Cain was sweating now and his smile was long gone. I could see Lenny and Stevie shifting nervously in the room at the foot of the bed.

“Where are my diamonds, Petey?” Cain said. “It does not appear to me as if you have them.”

“This safe is not budging,” I said. “Not without a nuclear device. Maybe we can just get a combination out of this guy.”

Cain roared and turned on me again. I shrank back, as he appeared about to pistol-whip me to death. Then, he seemed to catch himself and turned on the man taped to his chair.

“How do we get into the safe?” Cain said.

The man shook his head, his eyes pleading.

“You don’t seem to understand something,” Cain said. “Either you tell us how to get into the safe or you are going to watch your family tortured and murdered right in front of you.”

The man’s eyes grew wider and he began to scream behind the tape around his mouth. Cain reached out and ripped the tape off the man’s mouth. I winced at the sound.

“I-I-I can’t!” The man pleaded. “Please!”

Cain sighed as if this was just the most wearisome thing that could have happened. He turned and looked at Lenny and Stevie.

“Guys,” he said. “You know what to do.”

The things they did to that man’s wife were enough to chill me to my very core. I had never seen human beings behave that way to another human being. The man in the chair screamed and cried and begged. Cain kept asking him for access to the safe. The man explained that he did not have the combination. He said that the security company that had installed the safe always dropped off the expensive stuff, locked it and came in the morning to unlock the safe and take the stuff away. He never used the combination and opened the safe. He said that half the time he never knew what was being stored in the safe.

“I don’t believe you!” Cain roared.

Cain had turned into something inhuman. His eyes blazed from within their dark core. He was screaming, his face red. His entire body seemed to quiver. He pistol-whipped the man, then, as the man lay bleeding into his lap, turned and shot the man’s wife. It was so sudden that I nearly felt my bladder let go.

“Get the youngest daughter,” Cain said.

“NO!” The man screamed. “Please! I can’t open it!”

I heard the girl screaming from down the hall. My heart was pounding. I felt as if the tips of my hair were sweating. I was slick with sweat. I had never killed anyone before, but I felt the sudden urge to kill Cain. Getting your hands on some diamonds was one thing but killing kids was something else.

“Cain,” I said. “We need to get out of here. The power’s going to be back on soon and –“

Cain whirled on me, pointing the gun at my head. “You shut up! This is all because of you!”

The girl was lead into the room. She was wearing her night gown and was barefoot. Her mouth was taped and her hands bound behind her. Her eyes were wide and frightened beyond words. The thing about it was that she looked so very young. As

Mark and Joe threw her down into the middle of the room I felt something inside me change.

I became mad. Furious. This was not how things should be done. This had gone too far and the longer we stayed the higher the risk of being caught. I reached down and grabbed my shotgun.

“Now,” Cain said, turning to the man again. “We are going to start over with your daughter here. Tell me how to get into the safe and I can make all of this go away.”

I moved slowly to the center of the room, walking towards Joe who was standing on one side of the girl.

“I don’t know,” the man said through broken teeth and swollen lips. “I swear to you, I don’t know. Please, don’t hurt her.”

“You don’t know the meaning of hurt yet,” Cain whispered.

I slid a shell into the chamber of my gun.

CHIK-CHAK

The sound was very loud.

Cain turned. “What?” He said.

I lifted the gun, seeming to move into slow motion, and fired nearly point blank into the side of Joe’s head. Joe never had a chance to turn around. I moved quickly, sliding another shell into place. Mark was reacting slowly because he was looking at Cain. Mark was still turning to look at the sound of my gun. Joe’s body was still falling. I fired into Mark’s chest, noting the look of surprise on his face as he stumbled backwards, tripped over his own feet and started the fall. I heard Joe’s body hit the floor as I whirled to face Stevie who had entered the room behind me. Mark’s body was still falling as I sent Stevie spinning with a shot to his shoulder. I heard Mark’s body hit the floor and Stevie screaming as I turned and whirled on Cain. It was then that I remembered that my luck had run out.

Cain’s gun was already out and he was looking at me with those snake-like eyes.

“I’m so disappointed in you, Petey,” he said and pulled the trigger.

I figure it takes one tenth of one tenth of a second for a bullet to cross the space between the man firing the gun and the man about to take the bullet in the face. It does not seem like a lot of time. Maybe enough time to take a breath. Maybe it is enough time to try and duck and hope the bullet just grazes instead of blowing the part of what makes you think out the back of your head.

Maybe it’s enough time to have your entire life flash right before you eyes, so fast you can barely see it or distinguish one moment from the next. Maybe it’s just enough time to remember how your whole life has lead up to this moment and just how you managed to get into this situation. Maybe-

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Cain watched Petey’s body fall to the floor, the red circle of the bullet hole in the middle of his forehead staring at him like a third eye. He felt rage the likes of which he had never felt before. He heard Stevie screaming as he slid down the wall, leaving bloody smears everywhere. Cain raised his gun again and shut off that noise as well. He turned to see Lenny enter the room, his gun drawn.

“What the hell happened?” Lenny breathed.

“This whole thing is shot to hell,” Cain said. “We better just mop this up and get the hell out of here.”

Lenny nodded and turned away. Cain could hear his feet running back down the hall. Cain heard the gun fire not long after.

Cain sighed, twisting his neck, hearing it crack. Sometimes it just didn't pay to get up in the morning.

Cain set back to work cleaning up.

Bryan W. Alaspa is a writer living in the Chicago area. He has self-published four novels, all available online. He hopes one day to write the definitive book about Chicago and is currently writing a non-fiction book about a supposedly haunted mansion in St. Louis.