

Jack Howland

Hoover's Dad

Pete knew how to do this trick where it looks like you catch a bullet in your teeth. It required two people, obviously—one to shoot and one to catch. He used to do it with his friend Hoover's dad, who had a farm six miles away from his own. Hoover's Dad had been a magician for a while in the seventies. A magician and a gun nut, which Pete – even from the day he met him – always thought was a wretched combination. Later he thought differently. He felt for magicians. It was a calling as much as anything was, he thought. And the fact that you could stick to it, even when it was really no better than being a birthday clown, meant something. Anyway the point is that Pete always thought of the gun trick before he practiced his trade, which was graft. You could get cold feet, if you had half a conscience. But when you remember you've pointed a gun at a man's head and pulled the trigger, it's remarkable how unimportant everything else suddenly seems.

Pete was talking to one Larry Fischer. Larry Fischer, Esq. They were negotiating terms. Larry was a lank, charming, fruitcake lawyer, tall for the trade. There were few tall lawyers, Pete had discovered. Larry wasn't a colleague or client, though. He was a sucker.

"I can only afford half that," Larry pleaded, sotto voce. He still had a tremor of shame in his voice, but mostly he glowed with relief of the guilty.

"Make the check out for as much as you can afford. I'll go back, look up a few things, and if there's a problem with what you're giving me, I'll get in touch with you."

Pete had sidled up to Larry as he got off the shuttle from La Guardia. They walked together for a moment while Pete showed Larry the pictures he'd taken. Larry'd tripped and nearly wiped out, stumbling a few feet with his briefcase in one hand, overnight bag in the other, holding them out like he was riding a motorcycle. Pete had grabbed a handful of Larry's suit coat, righted him, then steered him over to a WH Smith. They now stood very close together behind an armpit-high rack of mugs and refrigerator magnets.

"I want your watch, as well," Pete said.

"She gave me the watch."

"Did she?"

They exchanged a look. Pete didn't really have a range of expressions. Usually this meant that people just forgot about him. Unless of course he was looking right at you and wanting money. Pete knew that people

would read all kinds of things into his face then.

An instant, awkward smile fell across Larry's face. The muscles in his neck twitched like a bird.

"I guess I ... I think ..." Larry stammered.

Pete pulled a hardcover book from a shelf and handed it to Larry: "You can write the check on this. Does that sound good?"

"I need a pen. I mean, I've got a pen. It's ..."

Larry started to open his briefcase when his hands went wild. Pete was reminded of the leaves of an aspen pine. Then the briefcase threw up all over the place, and Larry scrambled to the floor.

Pete sighed and pulled him back up by the arm.

"C'mon, Larry. It's Larry? C'mon, pull yourself together, huh?"

Hoover's Dad had come home half in the bag one night. Pete and Hoover were playing around with a motorcycle in the barn, and they'd watched Hoover's Dad's car weave and bank down the long, two-rut road to the house.

Hoover said "Shit" as he pulled his gloves off.

Like Hoover, his Dad was lean and long. The both seemed to be peculiarly American in their ranginess. Like James Coburn, Pete always thought, or Gary Cooper.

Hoover's Dad smiled as he walked into the light the bulb in the barn threw across the yard.

"Got the bike out?" Hoover's Dad said. He pushed his Dekalb hat back. It was his one and only prop. Everyone knew he was an awful farmer.

"Yeah," Hoover said.

He looked at Hoover and Pete both.

"It's workin'?"

"Yeah," Hoover answered and furrowed his brow.

"So what are you doing to it?"

"Just cleaning the plugs. Pete repacked the bearings."

"Great."

"What the hell'd you do to it, Dad, ride it into a brick of shit?"

Hoover's Dad tucked the back of his shirt in and looked at his son for a long time. Eventually he said:

"John Jr., that's exactly what I did."

"That's what I thought."

"Remember that old brick of shit we had behind the house, Pete?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I just rode right into it."

Hoover's Dad walked up and swung a leg over the seat of the bike. He pulled the goggles off the floor with his long left arm.

"Damn foolish," he said.

"Dammit Dad we didn't do all this just so you could ride!"

Hoover's Dad hopped on the starter, then smiled his crazy smile through the goggles. He walked it back a few paces, sat back, then floored it out the back of the barn.

As he did so, Hoover shouted to Pete, sort of proud and sort of pissed off: "My Dad's a fucking lunatic!"

Hoover's Dad barreled through a few other times. He'd circle around the barn, then come back through in some trick riding position – his stomach on the seat, his feet on the handlebars, facing the wrong way, but with the goggles on the back of his head. It was impressive, especially knowing the guy was half in the bag. The roar of the bike brace would fill the entire barn, then disappear, followed by a scythe cut of exhaust, burning oil and grit.

Hoover never wanted to learn any of his Dad's tricks. He nevertheless learned a few, but the two of them seemed to tacitly agree that it wasn't a good idea. There was only room from one deadbeat in the family, Hoover claimed his Mom once said. Pete's Dad had been killed in car accident when Pete was two. Pete's Mom even encouraged him to spend time with the Hoovers, if only to get him out of the house. So there was a kind of inevitability to Pete being apprenticed to Hoover's Dad.

It started with the motorcycle. A few wheelies, a few jumps, and pretty soon Pete was off and running.

The three of them – Hoover, his Dad, and Pete – would barnstorm county fairs, state fairs, high school football games, anything. Evil Knievel was still fresh on people's minds then, so you could draw a crowd with a decent stunt or two.

Hoover's Dad started teaching Pete card and coin tricks. Hoover would sit there with them, at the kitchen table. Hoover's Mom would watch TV in the family room. Pete always remembered her watching Dallas, for some reason. He remembered hearing the theme song. Maybe their meetings back then were a regularly scheduled thing.

Pete could recall every detail of the spring afternoon when he first fired the Colt pistol. It was raining. The three of them were in the barn again. Pete was sitting on the bike, not really paying attention to anything, when Hoover's Dad walked up to him and said "Look at this." Pete had to look around for a couple seconds to determine exactly what he was talking about. Then he saw the gun. Hoover's Dad held it just above waist level, in a scuffed up white handkerchief. He held it in three fingers, showing Pete its profile, like a pitcher showing you his grip.

"Is it loaded?" Pete asked. It was the first thing that came to his mind.

"Yeah, it is," Hoover's Dad said, putting it and the handkerchief in Pete's hand. "Every gun is loaded."

"Where'd that come from?" Hoover said.

"War trophy," Hoover's Dad answered.

Hoover stood up.

"What war'd you fight in?"

"Catch a Bullet," as they called it, is a pretty old trick. You need a gun, obviously, a couple rounds of blanks, a couple bullets, and a sheet of Plexiglas. You shoot a blank, a little charge bores a hole in the glass, and your partner produces the bullet in his teeth. That's the essence of it. What makes it work, however, what makes any trick work, is how you sell it.

Pete could still see the sites of the gun, the dazed and shiny Plexiglas, Hoover's Dad behind it a few yards, standing like he was ready to absorb some of the force of the bullet with his legs. He got into this stance a few times, to build up the suspense, but then he'd turn to the audience just one last time to highlight some technicality. It was supposed to be comic as well, Hoover's Dad seeming increasingly afraid, while Pete started looking more and more nervous. The cue was when Hoover's Dad turned back to him and said, "Now remember Petey, don't shoot until I say 'bang,'" [BANG] Pete pulled the trigger, the glass splintered, Hoover's Dad hit the stage like a load of bricks dropped from fifty feet up (Pete had never seen anyone do a fall like him). He just laid there for as long as he could, waiting for some kind of panic, feeling

the energy change in the crowd. Pete's part was to stay in character for a while, then walk, then run over to him saying, "Bill? Bill! Oh God somebody get a doctor!" Just before Pete got to him Hoover's Dad would pretend like he came to, lift his head off the stage and blink. Then he'd slowly stand up. Pete would take a step back. Hoover's Dad would shake his head, maybe he would stagger around a bit, depending on the crowd. Then eventually he would start working his mouth around, part his lips, slowly he'd create his ear-to-ear smile, the silver heel of the bullet gleaming in his beautiful teeth.

Hoover's Dad said this about tricks like Catch a Bullet: "I think you can pull off almost anything. You can make anything seem like it happened, even though your audience may know perfectly well that it didn't. But that's where it gets dangerous, because people will believe almost anything if you make them feel the right way about it."

The shows they did were brief, usually in low rent venues like VFW halls or even the occasional fraternity. They had a working relationship with a network of regional, sole proprietorship strippers all across the Great Lakes states. If the room was big enough, one girl couldn't hold everyone's attention. So, Pete got up between acts, pointed a gun at Hoover's Dad's head from 15 ft away, and fired. That was their finale. They took a small percentage at the door, they drank free and they saw the show. Pete felt like he was living fifty years behind the times, and he loved it. He wasn't sure if he felt more like John Dillinger or Harry Houdini.

One week in July, probably '84 or '85, they were scheduled for two shows: one in Rock Island and another in Champaign-Urbana. Southern Illinois in the summer was flat and vile. Hoover's Dad liked to describe it as "hotter than a Florida shithouse."

They did the Rock Island show Saturday night, staying in St. Louis. Hoover's Dad didn't hit the town that night though. He just stayed in a room across the hall. They had breakfast the next morning at the hotel. Just the two of them. For some reason Hoover stayed home. They got the car, crossed the river and started heading northwest on I-55. Pete was aware that there was definitely something different going on.

At about quarter to nine, they took an off ramp into a town called Mount Olive, a distant, Illinois-side suburb of St. Louis.

"We're looking for Drayton Avenue," Hoover's Dad said, looking up under the windshield.

Pete looked around, trying to be helpful.

"Here it is," Hoover's Dad said after a while, signaling left and waiting to turn. Pete leaned out to see the street sign.

They turned, and Pete started to get curious. Pete didn't ask that many questions. He didn't get nervous either. He was a gunman. He took a pull of his Dr. Pepper and let it drop back in his lap.

"Here it is," Mr. Hoover said again. They pulled into the driveway of big, white, two-story brick house.

He shut off the car.

"Put this on," Hoover's Dad said. He handed a name plate pin to Pete. It read: "Williamson." Hoover's Dad pinned one to his own shirtfront. It read: "Cyczwycki." He pulled a clipboard out from behind his seat.

Pete was still looking at his name tag, when Mr. Hoover got out of the car, bent back in and said: "Why don't you come with?"

Pete unbuckled his seatbelt and got out of the car. He took the Dr. Pepper with him. Hoover's Dad pressed the doorbell, then turned and smiled to Pete. He rocked on his heels.

They heard someone coming down a set of stairs. The door opened. A short guy in a tie said: "Morning. Can I help you?"

Hoover's Dad said: "Hello. Mr. Hayes?"

"Yes?"

"I'm Bill Cyczwycki. This is Williamson. We're from the gas company. I'm afraid there's a problem."

Pete was staring at Hoover's Dad.

Hayes said: "What kind of problem?"

"Have you used your range top in the past week?"

Now Pete looked at Hayes. He had a little weigh on him. For some reason Pete was struck with the idea that Hayes looked like he played useless sports like racquetball. He looked like the kind of guy who was just dying to wear a headband.

"The range top?"

"Is it a Maytag?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know," Hoover's Dad gave Pete a look. Pete gave Hayes a look. "Is anyone in the kitchen now?"

"No."

"Okay keep everyone out of the kitchen."

"No one's in the kitchen."

"Please," Hoover's Dad held up his hand. "Please, Mr. Hayes."

"No one's home," Hayes added.

"Thank God."

"What is it?"

Mr. Hoover pulled a pen from the clipboard and clicked it importantly, then looked Hayes with absolute frankness: "Can you show us to your stovetop range please?"

They followed Hayes down a hall. Pete took in a few of the rooms. He saw a fold out projection TV, a white piano on a white carpet, a fireplace with blue marble.

They rounded a corner into the kitchen. Hoover's Dad place a hand gently on Pete's shoulder, stopping him in the middle of the room.

Mr. Hayes said, turning around, "Here's the range."

Hoover's Dad said: "We're not from the electric company."

"I thought you said gas company."

"Mr. Hayes, that's not important right now," Hoover's Dad's chin fell to his chest. "We spoke last week on the phone."

"Last week."

"I'm the photographer, Mr. Hayes."

"The pho ..." Mid-word you could see it register in his face. A moment seemed to drop out of time, like a skipped heartbeat, it felt like a buckle in a handsaw.

Pete and Mr. Hayes exchanged a blank look. Mr. Hayes looked at Pete's Dr. Pepper.

Hayes said, "I thought I was going to mail you a check?"

"I was in the neighborhood."

"Oh."

"I brought some of the pictures with me. I'll send the rest. And the negatives."

"Oh."

"Can you write a check now?"

"Yes."

"Write it for \$4,000."

"I thought you said ..."

"I'm giving you a discount."

Mr. Hoover pulled one of several manila envelopes from the clipboard. He held it up, then he dropped it on the table. There was a picture stapled to the outside of it.

Hoover's Dad said: "Can we go get your checkbook?"

"Okay."

They disappeared together. Pete stood perfectly still for what seemed like five minutes.

They came back into the room. Pete saw a check on the clipboard. Hoover's Dad said, "Why don't you take a look at the pictures."

Hayes pulled the envelope off the table and opened it.

Hoover spoke to Pete: "Go out to the car. There's some rope in the trunk ..."

"Rope?" Hayes said.

"It's a technicality, Roger, I'm sorry. You'll have to trust me on this."

To Pete he continued: "Don't touch anything in the house."

"I don't think you need to tie me up, Bill. Really."

As Pete raced back out to the car he heard: "I'm a professional criminal, Roger, I've got to dot my I's and cross my T's. You of all people should understand that."

Pete found the rope in the trunk. He came back in.

Hayes was saying, "Is that me?"

"Yep," Hoover's Dad answered over his shoulder as he took the rope from Pete.

"I'm heavier than I thought."

"That's just the camera. Trust me. I'm gonna tie you to this radiator, Roger, and then I'm going to tie your hands behind your back."

"Shit."

"It won't hurt, and you'll figure out how to undo the knot in about an hour or so."

"Really this isn't necessary."

"Consider it a favor to me, then. I have to do it."

"Fine."

"Pete, run this end ..."

Hayes: "Dammit!"

"Pete, run this around the base of the radiator. Good, now I'm going to show you how to tie a knot called a Portuguese Bowline. It's a sailor's knot ..."

"They aren't all that easy," Hoover's Dad began, peering into his left-hand blind spot as he merged back into I-55 northbound traffic.

"There are a few tried and tested weaknesses that most people will fall for, especially if they hear it from strangers. Call a hundred people in the phone book, say 'I know,' and hang up. Do it a few more times, and ten of them or so will send you any reasonable amount of money you ask for. Don't ask me where I got the idea to do this because I don't know."

Like steppes, the flatlands stretched off in every direction, fields the color of wet sand under a formless Midwestern sky. He brought a hand off the steering wheel.

"So I started getting more particular. Started working Bible Belt towns. I'd call up and say 'Mr. Johnson? I'm a member of your congregation. I know you've strayed.' Half the people just got confused, but the other half ... it worked so well it made me nervous. You know I'm not a nervous man."

He looked over at Pete. Pete looked back at him.

"Some of these people'd even ask if they can send me money in the future, whenever they strayed again, you understand. And this is without any kind of provocation. These are like the Jim Bakker types. Honest to god wack jobs. They actually suggest a PO Box, like they're trying to be constructive.

"Then I started zeroing in on wealthier suburbs ..."

A while passed and neither of them said anything.

"Just goes to show," Hoover's Dad coughed. "It's a world a sinners."

They hit another house outside of Springfield. Two days later, they were in Homewood, a suburb just southwest of Chicago. Later that afternoon, in Lake Forest, they pulled up in front of the biggest house Pete had ever seen. He couldn't even see all of it. It disappeared in the trees. Lake Michigan rose up on its shoulders. Hoover's Dad ran up to the front door – it was so tiny – and somebody just handed him an envelope.

On Sunday they were on I-80 before dawn, heading home. When the sun did come up, it seemed to rise from the hood of the car, threads of light, straight as anything, seared the metal. Pete was eating an Egg McMuffin. Hoover's Dad was blowing on his coffee. All in all, they'd hit six places that trip.

Pete had questions now. After a while, he asked them:

"Who are the pictures of?"

"Nobody in particular. I got them from a private eye friend. They're all unclear enough that people can't really be certain whether it's them or not. Then they just presume it's them."

"Is this a Robin Hood thing, Mr. Hoover? Are you robbing from the rich and giving to the poor?"

"Well, I'm definitely robbing from the rich ..." He said, and sort of tailed off.

Later he resumed: "But I'm not sure you could say I'm giving," at the word 'giving' his neck did this kind of chicken head dip, for emphasis, "I'm not *giving* to the poor. I tell these guys I'm doing that, but I'm not turning around and giving the poor any money. No. Maybe I should. Should we do that?"

"I'd feel better about it."

"Would you?"

"I think so. My Dad was a minister. I'm not sure if he'd approve of us keeping everything."

"But you do see how we're basically doing right."

"Yes sir I do."

"Good."

And they started doing just that. They started mailing checks to the United Way and a few other outfits. Pete would grow to feel over the years that they gave away more than enough money.

Pete never knew how any of this was explained to his mother. He presumed that Hoover's Dad had convinced her that he was an actual, professional performer. Which wasn't entirely untrue. They kept doing gigs, in Flint, Ft. Wayne, Louisville, Belleville, every two bit town between Dubuque and Buffalo. It was essential, actually. Both as an alibi and for tax purposes. They just made a lot of stops in between. And Pete always came home flush, delivering half the money to his mother, another of Hoover's Dad's

demands. The plan was that someday Pete would take over all of the "accounts." Hoover's Dad would run the back office and strategize.

They were doing a show in New Jersey, of all places. It was way off the beaten trail for them, but Hoover's Dad had a lead on a show that needed a substitute act right away. They'd driven all night.

The show was going just fine, and the girls were beautiful. Between acts, Hoover's Dad had rolled his eyes and said, "Jesus, we gotta spend some more time in New Jersey."

They went out for their last act, the gun bit. They went through every beat as if they were asleep. It felt right. They had the crowd. It wasn't the best show they'd ever done but it was far from their worst.

Pete saw him in his sites. He seemed to dance at the end of the barrel, like a marionette. Light moved oddly over the Plexiglas between them. Pete heard his cue and pulled the trigger.

There was a kind of metallic clang to every shot, like rapping a hammer in a steel drum or banging two trash can lids together. It always felt like a slap in the face, at the least the immediate aftermath did. The Plexiglas was a white spider web with a hole the size of a quarter at its center.

Now Pete noticed the small crowd clapping delightfully. They hadn't quite yet started to worry about Mr. Hoover being down. Most crowds took a moment or two to get to that point. Pete was still pointing the gun at him, like he might have to shoot him again, when Hoover's Dad started to twitch. His knee jumped around like it was being jerked by a wire.

Pete didn't move. He seemed to hear multiple things at once, all with perfect clarity. He seemed to feel them all too, behind and below his ears, like the gentle touch of his mother's fingers. He looked at the gun again, at the end of his outstretched hand, just as the last blue sheet of steam disappeared on the air.

Before he knew it, Pete was walking over to Hoover's Dad, then he was right above him. Hoover's Dad's eyes trembled. His face looked like it had split in two under his skin, like it had cracked down the middle, from the top of his skull to his chin. The right side seemed to want to slide away, and his lips worked as if they were trying to hold it all in place. He looked from the ceiling to Pete. The left side of his face tried to smile. His hips were shaking now, as well.

Pete couldn't remember the rest. For about four hours, despite any evidence, Pete was held by the police. Eventually the medical examiner issued his preliminary opinion, which was subsequently confirmed. Hoover's Dad died of a more or less simultaneous stroke and heart attack. Pete overheard the doctor tell the state trooper: "There was enough plaque in this guy's arteries to clog a sink."

So when Pete grew up, this is what he did one night in April every year, a little short con graft in an airport or a train station or something. He'd usually call his wife and tell her he was working late, then he'd clip a few suckers. Afterwards he'd go someplace grand, buy himself an expensive dinner and remember.

He'd long ago retired Hoover's Dad's accounts. Ultimately, that all was still short con, however you wanted to look at it. Driving all over the place. Cold calls. Shit weather. Pete had had enough of that.

No, Pete was in insurance. He was big in insurance, actually.

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