

Years 9 & 10

2nd Place: Pacey van Burgel

Year 10, John Calvin Christian College

Jackpot

It was all too easy. I grinned to myself as I slipped the two 100-pound notes into my pocket. The unsuspecting stranger was a man in his mid-thirties, of a slim build and wearing a smart business suit. He seemed to be on his way to his office, although I was far too concentrated on my work to try gather more information about him. I suppose I should feel sympathy for the guy, but I needed to earn a living and I'm sure he wouldn't make too much of a fuss over a couple hundred pounds. You see, I'm a fingersmith. Or, in the language of those who don't appreciate true skill and precision, a pickpocket.

I've trained and developed my skill for the last 20 years, so nearly my whole life. The obsession began in primary school, although I cannot pinpoint an exact time. I was always fascinated with magic tricks, especially sleight of hand. My grandfather, who lived in the days of legendary magician Harry Houdini, lent me a cassette player and old tapes showing highlight reels of magicians. I would play these tapes in slow motion, studying how they did it and practicing the tricks myself. Suffice to say, I was hooked. My interest in magic was fuelled even more when I met Ben, probably the only kid in the world who shared my level of interest in the topic of magic and, surprisingly, sleight of hand. Our chance meeting occurred in the local library, when I was browsing through magic books. He stood beside me, engrossed in a book detailing the history of magic.

"You like magic, do you?" I inquired, seeking to break the ice more than anything. His head shot up from the book he was reading, confused as to whether the question was meant for him or not. When he had looked around and realised I was talking to him, he answered somewhat nervously.

"Yeah I do, but I ain't too good at it yet!"

He spoke with a strong North American accent and wore thick framed glasses that projected his eyes to the size of ping pong balls. The thick book he now carried under his arm suited his image, if I was to be honest.

"Same, but I'm getting pretty good. I'm Donovan." I grinned as I stuck out my hand.

"Benjamin, but everyone calls me Ben," he said, smiling and shaking my hand.

We bonded instantly over our love of magic. It turned out that he only lived a couple of blocks down from me, so we met up most afternoons after school, practicing and learning tricks. Those many afternoons spent with each other not only developed our friendship, but also helped hone the skills we would later use as fingersmiths. Yes, he also became a fingersmith when he grew up. We practiced our sleight of hand skills on each other often, our skill getting to the point where we were confident enough to go out in the streets and begin what would become our profession.

It is an art. A famous artist can wave his brush across his canvas and produce a stunning work of art which distinguished collectors would ooh and aah at for hours.

In the same way, Ben and I could now, after years of practice, walk into the street and slip our hand into a pocket or a bag, then pull out something of value with ease. It is a fine skill requiring quick fingers and the concentration of a fighter pilot. It is how we earn a living, Ben and I. Dare I say it, we are the most skilled in our trade in the known universe. That is why we are called fingersmiths. Like a goldsmith and a silversmith, we have risen to the top of our trade. That is what separates us from pickpockets. You've heard of pickpockets, because they get caught. You don't hear about fingersmiths, however, because we are much too clever and skilled to be found out.

We were doing quite nicely in our trade. But I never could have imagined June 2010. The fair was coming to town. Advertisements were plastered across every general store window and every power pole in town. The levels of excitement rose drastically as the event drew closer. Benny and I were excited. Let me tell you though, our excitement wasn't centred around the stalls or the carnival rides, but for the arrival of the crowds of people. You see, the county fair only came to town once every decade, so the town was buzzing with anticipation. Tens of thousands flocked to the fair over the weekend it stayed in town. Every towns person was expected to show up, most with a fair sum of money stashed in their pockets. This was the bit Benny and I were enthusiastic about. The shoulder-to-shoulder, jam-packed crowds of people at the fair would make it a whole lot easier to grab things.

At long last, the hugely anticipated weekend rolled around. After a week full of practice, we both felt as if we were ready to rake in the haul of a lifetime. We drove to the city centre where the town was situated in separate cars. He owned a 1999 model Ford Cortina with a blue exterior, whereas I had an old RAM truck with rusted doors and wind-down windows. Our trade was one we could hang our hats on financially, but never match it with the upper-class people of USA. That didn't worry us though. We were doing what we loved, unlike a lot of others. We parked along a kerb a couple of streets down from the fairgrounds and, bursting with excitement, we walked the short distance to the fair.

We were like kids in a candy store. Opportunities literally paraded themselves in front of us. But we were done with the small fry. We were addicted to the adrenaline that surged through our veins whenever we snatched something of value.

Benny was almost licking his chops in anticipation, but I had a sudden brainwave and held him back before he went to work.

"What if . . ." I began quietly, making his ears perk up. "What if we had a bet?"

"I'm listening."

"See who can rake in the most valuable haul in a day's work," I suggested.

"And the stakes?"

"What do you think?"

"Bragging rights. This will decide who really is the best at our trade."

"Done," I said. "You go left, I'll go right, and we'll meet up here at 5:30."

"Best of luck mate."

"You too."

So, we both set off in opposite directions, eyes peeled for opportunities to get ahead in the competition. Well, I didn't have to wait long. All I had to do was blend in among the bustling crowds, and the rest was easy. Years of practice were now coming to the fore as I casually pulled another few hundred pounds out of a passer-by's pocket. It was lunchtime and I still hadn't pulled off something to really get me ahead in the game. I was getting a lot of cash, and even managed to grab an old, rare penny out of a lady's purse. I knew it was rare as I saw her shelling out 200 pounds for the thing at a nearby stall. I paid for a hot dog to settle both my stomach and my conscience (I always made sure I paid for at least one thing on a decent workday) and set off again in pursuit of something that would win me the bet.

After a couple more hours, things were looking bleak. It seemed all the practice I had been doing over the past week, in fact the past years, counted for nothing. This was supposed to be the day I hit the jackpot, but with an hour to go in the competition it all seemed hopeless. With 30 minutes left and time against me, something special caught my eye.

The organiser of the fair's biggest attraction, the big dipper, was locking up the ticket booth and packing up after a day's work. His actions were not the centre of my attention, instead it was what he was wearing on his wrist. If I was not mistaken, that was a Rolex Cosmograph Daytona, a watch worth over 100,000 pounds and constructed with 24 carats of gold. I was amazed that running fair rides could earn a man so much! It was beautiful. I just had to have it.

I discreetly followed a few steps behind him as he made his way to the carpark. I couldn't try snitch it when it was just us two, so I had to try get it in a crowd. My luck turned the corner then and there, literally. A crowd of around 30 teenagers were coming our way. As we slowly made our way through the people, I quickly and efficiently undid the band and slipped his watch off. Despite it being second nature after so many years of experience, my palms were sweaty due to the value in what I was grabbing. I quickly shoved the watch in my pocket and slowed my pace, leaving a now significant gap between the ride operator and myself. I pulled my phone out to check the time and saw that I had just 2 minutes to go in the competition. I quickened my pace again and headed for the fair entrance.

Both Benny and I arrived at the agreed spot bang on 5:30. The smiles spread across our faces gave away that we were both confident. Little did he know what I had stored in my pocket.

"Alright, show me what you've got," I said.

"I don't think you want me to, unless you want to lose the bet!" he grinned, eyebrows bobbing up and down.

"We'll see about that," I returned, smiling back at him.

Benny began slowly rummaging through his pockets, pulling things out but clenching them inside his fist so I couldn't see.

"I've got 480 pounds in cash, tickets to the concert on Saturday, a diamond encrusted bracelet, a solid gold anklet and, the cherry on top, a stunning, diamond encrusted platinum ring I managed to sneak off a very important looking woman."

"Wow mate, you have set the bar very high! That's your best haul ever I'd say!"

"It sure is, and there is no way you're beating that!" Benny bullishly crowed.

“Well then let me show you what I collected today,” I smirked.

“Go on then!”

“I have 530 pounds in cash, a very rare penny, a gold bracelet and this!” I stuck out my hand, displaying in full majesty the greatest prize of my career.

Benny almost fell over in shock when he saw it. He did a double take, just to check if his eyes were betraying him. When he was sure what he was seeing was indeed what he thought it was, he shook his head in amazement.

“Unbelievable mate, unbelievable,” he mumbled.

“Well, seeing as I won, there’s no point hanging around here any longer,” I gloated triumphantly.

I almost floated through the exit of the fair, whereas Benny couldn’t have looked more despondent as he trudged along behind me.

“You go ahead mate; I’m just going to light up a ciggy.” I wasn’t a regular smoker, but I felt like I had earned one today.

When I was finished, I stubbed the cigarette into the gravel and set off in the direction of my car. As I went along, my phone dinged. I pulled my phone out of my back pocket and read the latest message. It was from Benny.

‘I win’ was all it read. I scrunched up my face in confusion, before deciding just not to answer back. As I shoved my phone away, Benny’s blue Ford Cortina drove past. I gave him a friendly wave as an acknowledgement of a game well played. He waved back, the setting sun reflecting off the Rolex Daytona wrapped around his wrist.