

Spring, Pin, and Trigger
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Spring, Pin, and Trigger
or The Progress of a Super-Hero
or Mr. Magnum Discovers the Joy of Christmas
or IT'S A GUN-DERFUL LIFE

Sunday, October 5th

WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

These days the world can be a pretty confusing place. Anywhere I look, there is a video feed or a headline telling me what to believe and how to look at myself. Everything comes at me cream-filled, four-wheel drive, new-and-improved, glow-in-the-dark, digitally re-mastered. My head spins as I struggle to take it all in. And in the middle of that, there's one thing I know for certain: a bullet kills a man just as fast today as it did back in Nam circa 1970.

No, I'm not sure if they're ready for me, to hear about what I do and what I've been through. But won't somebody tell me why I should care? I became a fan of self-reflection some time ago, and my greatest conclusion was that I was doing the right thing, no matter what people around me said or how they chose to classify my actions. Hot lead and the smell of smoke are what affirm my existence.

Are you ready for Mister Magnum? Mister Magnum doesn't really care, but he asks just because he's a nice guy. A word to Wall Street: invest in kevlar and steel. I have a feeling there's going to be a scarcity in the near future.

Wednesday, October 8th

A DAY IN THE LIFE

My daily routine is something like this:

I eat a bowl of Special K every morning with milk and strawberries, just like on the front cover of the box. It seems indulgent and I do criticize that kind of consumption, but sometimes you just can't get away from it. I love strawberries. I'll even spend more money on them when they're out of season, just to add that extra bit of sweetness to my morning meal.

After that I get out my shop rags and oil. I get the bulky canisters you can find at the local hardware store--they're a lot cheaper than the stuff in the big chains and, in my opinion, much easier to work with once you establish a process. With my tools prepared, I check and clean my firepower. The lesson of experience is clear: scrupulous attention paid to preparation is over half the battle.

Next, I go out on patrol in the Magnum Machine. That's a pet name I thought up for my white 1989 Toyota Camry. The turning radius is awful, but it has enough acceleration at the low end to get me where I need to be. More importantly, it does so without threatening too many maintenance issues. Some guys in my line of work like the fast and fancy stuff, but I prefer to keep it simple. My trade is firearms and not vehicles, and I find that when you specialize, the plusses will outweigh the minuses.

You might be surprised how mundane this work sometimes seems. My mean time from initial encounter to final resolution of conflict is only two minutes. To put some perspective on that, it would take me around twenty-three minutes of continuous weapon fire without jams or other mechanical mishap just to expend the load of ammo that I carry in the trunk of the Magnum Machine. Of course, when you're first starting out with it, that two-minute span is plenty of time to exhaust yourself, shit your pants, and then come to realize that you might die a very arbitrary death, at any point in time, at any place, with any number of noble or sinister purposes in your head, and regardless of whatever responsibilities you might be leaving behind.

When I drive home the first thing on my mind is to re-examine my equipment. That not only includes the arsenal, but the utility gear, the Magnum Machine, and of course, my own person. After that, I usually need to treat myself to a big dinner. Getting shot at is bad, but my habit of skipping lunch has probably been worse over time. I think my body has adapted somewhat to my off-kilter lifestyle, and through conscientious exercise and meditation, I'm able to keep the stress away. To all of you junior crime fighters out there: don't shirk on the sleep. I'll admit everything seems funnier when you're only operating on a couple hours of sleep, but it gets less funny when you fade for a split second in the middle of a dangerous situation and then find a limb shorn off by ricochet.

With that said, I'd better get in my daily five. I will dream of beveled steel, friction, and sudden collisions. I know because I dream about that every night.

Thursday, October 23rd

THE HILLS ARE ALIVE

Sometimes when I'm driving extremely fast in the Magnum Machine chasing criminals, I like to turn the tape player up very loud and sing along. I even try to sing the harmony part sometimes. Although I'm no natural musician, I'd say I can hold a tune at least as well your average motorist.

And that's all while I'm shooting the tires off of compacts 50 yards ahead of me. I don't like to brag, but it's important to remind yourself every so often about your own positive traits--the things that you're proud of and that make you feel good about yourself. After all, you might get shot in the heart by small arms fire the very next second! You never do know.

Tuesday, November 11th

THE RIGHT TOOLS FOR THE RIGHT JOB

I prepare all of my trousers with easy-to-use zippers for quick egress; even if you're a superhero, you're still human and have all of the excretory responsibilities of a normal person. Today I had the chance to appreciate the finer points of this wisdom. This afternoon while staking out a nearby Wells Fargo, I felt nature's call and was compelled to take a short break in the men's room. With a complete set of combat gear, such a simple trip to the urinal could very well have turned into a lengthy procedure of unlatching, removing, and careful reattaching. Thanks to my special modifications, though, it was an uncomplicated, pedestrian affair. I quietly congratulated myself for the cleanliness and efficiency of the entire process.

As I finished up, I heard the telltale screams of a bank robbery in progress. I kicked the bathroom door open and executed a combat tumble. In a smooth motion off the roll, I fired a single .44 round at the perpetrator. The bullet left his back--actually it was a her--at one-third of its original speed, out of a hole three and a half inches in diameter. I guess it was slightly off-target and a little sloppy. But, with a job well-done, it's probably not healthy to be too self-critical.

Friday, December 5th

PROCUREMENTS

Oh hell, I have to go Christmas shopping. I know, I too wonder what kind of idiot with such responsibilities and so few regular acquaintances would take special pains to spend money on frivolous gifts for a frivolous holiday. But even I have to keep up appearances from time to time. To me, it's simply a matter of social economics.

My first gift is for HardJack, the technical guy most of us go to when we need special tools and machines. HardJack is a depressing bastard and can be pretty oversensitive at times. He's wheelchair-bound and doesn't see much direct conflict, so he's always afraid that his contributions to The Cause go unreported and thus underappreciated.

It gets more complicated between me and him. Last time he was feeling bold enough for some real action, he decided to use his still-experimental, not-quite-functional-yet bionic suit. Its servo-control processors overheated at the worst possible moment, and the resulting system failure nearly got him shot in half. By *me*. In the few months since then, he's been suggesting that our friendship has been "lacking participation" on my part. I guess he is technically right, but to be honest, I hadn't been investing more than minimal participation even before our little snafu out in the field. I probably should've known something like that was going to happen and refused to let him come with me that time. Now I've got to be extra-careful with HardJack, or my next order of bulletproof shirts might come with live grenades with the pins pulled.

As an immediate result of these concerns, I found myself at a Hallmark this afternoon sifting through a rack of plush miniature reindeer wearing Santa vests, wondering to myself why I should give a damn. The in-store stereo was piping in old Christmas favorites in a frantic Latin style; upon hearing a sped-up "Deck the Halls" for the third time, I reflexively reached into my pocket for my piece. I had not finished deciding whether blasting the speaker out would be worth the potential legal ramifications when I realized I hadn't brought any guns with me.

They must have had the worst-stocked card shelf in the history of commerce. All that was left were some discounted Hanukkah cards. Anyhow, I did my best, so I'm not going to beat myself up about it. This holiday season, HardJack gets a bean-filled reindeer and a smartly-designed greeting card with a picture of dreidles on it. I sure hope he's Jewish.

That was enough shopping for me, at least for the week. There are actually two people on my Christmas list, but I haven't seen the other in years. I have this old habit of leaving gifts anyways, but maybe the lack of contact is her way of telling me to get lost. I'm starting to feel like the holiday season is just one more excuse for old haunts to sneak up on me again.

Tuesday, December 16th

I ALMOST GOT KILLED YESTERDAY NIGHT

I was five blocks from getting home last night when a fancy 2-door import ran a red light and missed the front of the Magnum Machine by what I'd estimate to be less than three feet. There were sirens in pursuit.

I pulled over at the other side of the intersection and debated whether I ought to get involved. I was tired and hungry and my knees were on fire. It wasn't a good day, nor had it been a particularly good week, and I'm ashamed to admit that for a moment I was just ready to go home.

Nevermind what some of the other guys in the business say about their unwavering dedication to the defense of truth and justice--self-doubt is something we all have to deal with. I'm sure every master poet or genius composer probably thought about giving up at least once in his or her life. Without question, that also applies to those of you out there who can fly or shoot cosmic rays out of your eyes, or who drive around at night beating up thugs because you once watched your parents bleed to death on a sidewalk.

Wait, I'm getting ahead of myself. I haven't thought seriously about quitting for almost three years now. It's just that last night, I wanted to go home and drink coffee and not think about crime. I took a moment to consider my situation, pulled over next to the McDonald's on Valencia and Bouquet, sitting in a Camry with three hundred pounds of ammunition in the back seat. My seat was pulled up too closely to the dashboard. I had a black eye and my undergarments were soaked with sweat. What the hell was I doing? Does anyone comprehend the absurdity of it? How and why did I get where I was?

I didn't have an answer I could put into words. Just sitting there, listening to the car idle, I felt itchy. I had to move. I had to do something with my hands. I kicked the Magnum Machine into reverse and made a sharp 90-degree turn.

The sports car that almost hit me had a hundred-yard head start on the two patrol cars chasing it, and the patrol cars had four or five times that on me. The Magnum Machine wouldn't be able to catch up, but I rode the accelerator for two minutes straight, until I couldn't hear the sirens over the whine of the engine.

I ended up arriving at home much later than usual. I was driving around looking for that white sports car. I had news radio on, hoping they'd say something about the chase, but instead they talked about the stock market and how the war was going, and about the flu that was spreading around. The stories repeated themselves over and over and I finally went home when I couldn't take it anymore. I never found the car that almost hit me.

I'm going to need a faster ride.

Thursday, December 18th

ASSHOLES

I've been following the Coletta syndicate for months! Then some asshole comes and fucks it all up.

You should see the stack of notes I've got on these guys. The family connections. The business ties. Which cops they have on the take. Where Joey Coletta and his friends in business suits eat lunch. I can't tell you how many false leads and dead-end informants I've chased down to get all that together. And today, I finally received my opportunity for closure.

Word got around that the syndicate was looking for a big score in the financial district, and it was definitely happening today. I had enough data on them to know exactly where they would hit, and I was sure I could be there to catch them in the act. And so, I was

up at 6:00AM in workman's clothes, sitting on the windy lower roof deck of the United Securities tower and not especially enjoying the view. I clutched a 20-pound sniper rifle while my knuckles screamed from the cold as if I had arthritis. I'd mistimed my ambush by something like eight hours and had to pass the intervening time suffering through all kinds of mundane physical discomfort. Once I shivered continuously for ten minutes. My leg fell asleep a couple of times. I was often bored and hungry. At least this time I'd brought some lunch with me, or else I would've started to feel shaky and weak. Unfortunately, I had a couple of bananas in the bag and they made everything taste like over-ripened fruit, including the big ham sandwich I made the night before. I hate it when that happens.

Just as I was about to nod off from early afternoon fatigue, I saw a van and a 4-door peel up onto the sidewalk in front of an office building a block away. Coletta's men were all wearing fake ninja hoods. Seven or eight of them jogged into the lobby, and almost immediately an alarm went off from inside the building. That was probably a lot earlier than they'd expected. I laughed out loud at the stupidity of their tactics and then caught myself. My plan was to wait until they panicked and tried to escape, and I needed to be ready. I heard coughs of gunfire and saw a couple of baffled crooks struggling to get through a revolving door all at the same time. My heart pounded with excitement as I sprang up out from my hiding place. Then I saw something extremely disheartening: Titanium Man touching down on the scene, twirling in like a shiny roach on my dinner plate.

I hate that invincible flying dickwad. He's always acting like a total idiot. One time, he caused brownouts across half of Southside when he was trying to catch a 20-foot mutant ant that had escaped from a government lab. In taking out the ant with his gamma-ray eye beams (which they wanted back *alive*, fuck you very much) he blew out a few of the city's power hubs, neatly depriving the whole neighborhood of electricity for several days. Of course, the papers loved it.

I hate his butt chin and his curly hair. He doesn't even have a proper uniform and somehow thinks he can get away with doing this stuff without obscuring his identity in even the slightest way. Oh yeah. His name is Norman, by the way. I found him by searching on the Internet the day after that little ant incident.

After reducing both getaway vehicles into liquefied steel with his heat rays, Titanium Man--excuse me--*Norman Muckle* proceeded to incapacitate the syndicate crooks using psychic lightning bolts. Unbelievable, that pyrotechnic showoff! By the time I'd gotten down to the bottom floor and made my way across the street, he had long since finished his business and was already conversing chummily with a security guard.

There is almost nothing that compares to the sensation of despondence you get when you feel you've wasted your time. I could barely contain my rage when I ran up to confront Titanium Man. I screamed profanities at him and asked him if he enjoyed ruining this case, if he had the slightest idea of how fucking long I'd been waiting for this opportunity. I told him about the painstakingly-gathered notes on my desk, the corrupt business deals, all of those details, all of that effort.

Norman Muckle shrugged and asked me what the big problem was. What's the matter, Mister Magnum? The outcome was the same, wasn't it? Innocent lives have been saved, right?

The security guard nodded and looked over at me as if I were from a different planet, as if *I* were the one that just flew down from the sky, vaporized two cars with eye beams, and shot electricity from my fingertips. He squinted suddenly and pointed in my direction, at my face.

"You know, you've got a little bit of mustard on your lip there, buddy."

I almost blew the security guard away right then and there. But when I reached for my gun, the joints in my fingers hurt so much it startled me.

Friday, December 19th

1:18 am: EVERYTHING PUT TOGETHER SOONER OR LATER FALLS APART

I can't sleep. It's already past midnight. I've been in a funk, so I came home early on purpose to get some extra rest. But the neighbor kids won't shut their horrible music off. I can feel the floor vibrating. It's been one of those weeks where people who haven't committed any obvious crimes have tempted my destructive impulses even more than those who actually have. I have the feeling I am starting to take it all a bit too personally.

So I put on a record of my own, one that she gave me a month before we stopped talking. That reminds me, I still haven't bought that gift.

7:49 am:

Don't go to work today. Lock your doors.

I don't have time for breakfast this morning. It's a good thing I got the extra sleep last night. *Gasmask is back*. HardJack had better have the new requisition ready for me or you might be reading about my ignominious end in tomorrow's morning edition.

Monday, December 22nd

11:24 pm: EMPTY-HANDED

I hadn't heard any news about Gasmask for a year. He'd last been seen somewhere in the Caribbean attempting to reach some old contacts. A few days later those same individuals were found horizontal, killed in Gasmask's trademark style: the corpses were toasted so badly you have to rely on dental records to identify them. Their houses were also burnt to the ground.

About four days ago he arrived back in the city, prepared for revenge. I'd always assumed that Gasmask would go after old enemies when he finally decided to resurface; I just didn't know specifically who until these past few days, when I drove by the smoldering remains of their homes and offices. Gasmask had made some curious picks. I'm sort of offended he didn't come after me first. After all, I'm the one who shot off his kneecaps with an assault rifle.

I probably should have shot more off of him last time, but the cops had arrived too soon and I was feeling ethical. So much for that. This time around I found out about Gasmask's return in exactly the wrong way, through the image of a burning movie theater on TV news. Lucky for the rest of you, it was three in the morning and only a dozen or so people got it this time. For the next fifty hours I followed a trail of charcoal leading through three counties. He kept disappearing for several hours, and when I went to where I thought he'd be, he'd reappear on the other side of town and blow up a gas station or an office building. He must have known I was following him. The only thing that kept me awake was news of another death, another devastated building, the sound of sirens heading exactly where I wasn't. While I was leaving the charred wreckage of one building Gasmask had hit, the landlord told me the Magnum Machine was a piece of shit, and that I'd never catch Gasmask with that kind of equipment. I was starting to agree, but I knew the car had nothing to do with it.

The idea of this makes me a little nauseous: I finally caught up with Gasmask by following the cops. They had him holed up in a public library. I drove around for two whole minutes looking for parking until I found an open spot on the wrong end of the lot. From there, I had to drag the sonic bazooka HardJack had given me for over a hundred yards. I was walking too slowly and I couldn't see straight, which should have been indication enough to me that it was just time to go home, but I felt like I was too close to stop then.

I was thinking about nothing much at all, gazing into the distance, when Gasmask blew an enormous hole in the north wall of the library. Flaming pages of books scattered everywhere. It took me ten hazy seconds to react, and when I finally staggered to my feet it was chaos all around me. Gasmask had a force field around him that made him impervious to conventional firearms, and consequently he was having his way with the hapless police and their vehicles.

Meanwhile, I was drunk with exhaustion. I had this drowsy, comfortable feeling, and everything seemed to be moving in slow motion. After taking my time to settle into a nice position, I raised the sonic bazooka. I drew in a breath, squinted, focused, and pulled the trigger.

The shot went wide twenty feet at the intended contact range and tore three police cruisers in half. HardJack had gotten the power right, alright, but either I slipped, or the sight wasn't calibrated correctly--something I should've checked before I even left home. Either way, it was completely my fault, and either way, I now had cops firing at me. They must have been so goddamn confused. It didn't help that I looked pretty similar to the same guy we'd been chasing for the last couple of days. Masks. Body armor. Large and bizarre weaponry. "Who could blame them?" I thought. I felt an overwhelming desire to slip away into the ground.

I ditched the bazooka (HardJack is going to *kill* me for that, or at least he will make the attempt before I accidentally take him out in self-defense) and made straight for a nearby alley. The Magnum Machine was too far away. The cops then gave me one of those rare good chases, through fire escapes and over the roofs of apartment buildings and such. If it weren't for Gasmask tearing through their ranks from the other angle, I'm sure they would have caught me. I finally lost them in an unfamiliar part of town and collapsed into a dumpster.

When I woke up it was dark and I had no idea where I was. I heard Christmas music playing through a buzzy television somewhere off in the distance. It was cold. I walked home.

When I got back, I checked the latest online news updates. Since the encounter at the library, there's been no sign of Gasmask. I know I should be tired, but to be honest, I can only feel two things right now. I feel like quitting. And then I feel ashamed of myself for thinking that. The rest is numb. There's a slight pounding sound and I swear it couldn't stop soon enough.

11:45 pm: TWENTY-ONE MINUTES LATER

I just killed Gasmask.

The pounding sound wasn't in my head; it was Gasmask letting himself into my house. He'd found me somehow, but I didn't stop to ask him what his methods were. It was abrupt and unceremonious. I stared at him, standing there on my ratty kitchen rug, in his dark green suit, napalm torch ready, and I imagined his beady eyes staring back at me from behind his visor. I noticed that my radio clock was still on from the alarm I'd set but wasn't home to shut off this morning. It was tuned to the classical station.

Then, left-handed, I shot Gasmask in the throat with a .32 that was sitting there on the counter. I could tell he was about to say something, but all I heard was a short gurgle, and then he was dead. I called up HardJack and told him to let himself in and clean up the mess. I am going to sleep.

Wednesday, December 24th

2:34 am: SILENT NIGHT

The date says the 24th but to me it's still the 23rd. I didn't leave bed at all today.

10:54 pm: THE MAGNUM LINE

I had no idea whether it was morning, afternoon, or evening, since the shades were drawn and the clock was on the other side of the room. I didn't much care regardless. The night before, I'd dreamt about a giant man who lived in the clouds. Every day, he would leap off of his bed, which was actually a giant cloud, and land on the ground far below with a great noise. Then he would kick at the earth, sending entire hills of soil into the air, and everyone would watch him in total horror. Of course he was so big and they didn't seem to speak his language, nor he theirs, so he thought they were just having a good time. This all continued until the giant man realized that his bed was not a cloud but just a tiny wooden bed with splinters in the frame, that he lived not among the clouds but among filth, and that he was not giant at all but in fact a normal-sized man--a normal-sized man living in a world populated by terrifying giants who lived in the clouds, and so on and so forth!

I awoke feeling a severe strain in my neck and several days' worth of stubble grinding into my face. I was in the wrong position but I didn't move for fear of breaking out of the state of half-sleep I was in.

Then the phone rang. It was the Magnum Line. I decided to let it ring. There's not as much technical sophistication to it as you'd think. It's really all just hooked up to a phone with a built-in answering machine, the ancient kind that has a pair of microcassette tapes to record messages. I listened to my greeting click on, with tinny, synthesized orchestral horns in the background and me blabbering about Magnum this or that. The sound echoed down the hallway towards the bathroom. I cringed and pulled the pillow over my head.

Then I heard her voice for the first time since...well, I can't even remember the last time. Her voice was flat and unimpressed, as usual.

"I saw you on the news, and I don't think you're ever going to change," her message started. She let out a faint snort, barely audible. It wasn't harsh or critical, like I expected from her. More of a friendly elbow to the ribs. I started to feel guilty.

"Anyways, they found Gasmask."

A pause.

"Look, if you're in there just listening to me talk, hiding like a little kid, like you did every other time when something went wrong with your silly plans..."

She trailed off. Another pause. I pulled the pillow off of my head slowly.

"I got your gift."

At first, I thought about giving her the gift of firepower. So I'm not the most romantic guy in the world, okay? What the hell else did you think I was going to think of first? Besides, she might have appreciated it. She's a lawyer.

That idea stalled, and I considered giving her a flower in the barrel of a gun. Somewhere in one of the thousands of books she has cooped up in her apartment, she has a picture of a protest in Washington during the 1960s. A famous one of a student putting a flower into the barrel of a soldier's rifle. I think I understood the message of that photograph well enough, despite the fact that I drive around every day of my life and shoot at people who I think deserve to be shot at.

I finally decided to give her just the flower. I didn't grow it myself, nor did I buy it from a friendly florist who had been saving up his best and rarest for me because he lives down the street and I say hello to him every morning while I whistle my way to work. I bought it from Vons when they were nearly cleaned out of everything else.

"I didn't know these were in season."

A long pause this time. The answering machine was about to cut her off. The tone in her voice had remained steady the whole way through.

"I hope you're doing well." The machine clicked off.

I'd given her a sunflower. The gun, on the other hand, I bought and elected to keep myself, and I ended up using it to shoot Gasmask. There is something funny to me about that. If I had actually given her the gun, I would have done so without realizing it was fully-loaded. Whoops. I wouldn't have scored too many points if she accidentally shot herself while trying to get rid of it.

There was a group of Christmas carolers moving from door to door on the street outside. I made a cup of instant coffee and stepped out into the cold in t-shirt and jeans to listen. It was the best coffee I'd ever tasted.

Well, tomorrow is Christmas I guess. I'm going to go out and get myself a gift--the gift, I'm now reminded, that I really want. Tomorrow I'm going to go kick some ass.

Thursday, January 1st

POP THE CORK

I'm going to make my New Year's resolution right now. This is a tradition I've always liked, in spite of my distaste for most other inane holiday rituals. I was going to resolve to reduce urban crime by at least 15% for the year, but I stopped to think about it and changed my mind. First of all, my methods won't change at all, regardless of whether or not I make that kind of promise. I would kick ass with exactly the same force and in exactly the same quantities.

Second, I got into another self-analytical boggle of the existentialist sort. Is it not a conflict of interest for me to swear to reduce crime when in fact it is crime itself that defines my very existence? Whose ass would I kick were it not for thugs, hoods, punks, arch-villains, terrorists, masterminds, and white-collar corporate thieves? So given that, I decided not to

adopt any phrasing in my resolution that might seem contradictory to either myself or the observant critic.

Instead, my resolution is to upgrade the Magnum Machine with GPS and buy myself a new laser sight. Happy New Year's, everyone, and woe to those of you who cross me when my new toys are in line. Woe!

Friday, February 27th

HAPPINESS IS A WARM GUN

I put an air freshener in the Magnum Machine today. I tell you crime fighting never smelled better.

THE END