

BULLETPROOF

By Ian T. Healy

My name is Harry Blaine, and I have a terrible secret. It's the sort of secret that could keep someone from having a real job, or a life, or a marriage. I've managed to keep it hidden for so many years and every day it eats away at me like a cancer. I am a paranormal, and I wish to God that I wasn't.

At puberty, my strength began increasing exponentially. The increasing density of my muscular tissues made my growing pains far beyond anything experienced by normal teens. I had to learn and relearn basic motor skills like walking and feeding myself for years because of my uncontrollable strength. Even

now, my strength increases by a factor of about three every year. Here I am, forty years old with a second mortgage, a fifteen-year-old daughter, and the ability to yank a skyscraper off its foundation. By the time my daughter Dannan was born I had more or less mastered control over my musculature, but it still terrifies me when I think of how easily I might have crushed her fragile bones in my overpowered hands. My super dense muscles have resulted in virtual invulnerability for me from physical damage. My skin can still be broken easily enough, and I could conceivably die from blood loss, asphyxiation, or any number of invasive agents, but I have yet to find anything that could penetrate the musculature under my skin.

You'd think that I would be a superhero, dressing up in brightly colored spandex and beating the heck out of this week's bad guy. Or maybe I would be some superhero's recurring villain, always popping up with some far-fetched plan to rule the world. Or maybe even a vigilante - leaving unconscious criminals at the doorsteps of local police departments or dead ones in back alleys. The fact is that I never wanted these powers. Like the song said, I wished I were just an average man with an average life, working from nine to five.

So I hid my powers. My parents knew about them, of course, but they agreed that telling anyone else was nobody's business

but mine. When they died in the car crash that I walked away from unhurt, my secret died with them as far as I was concerned. In my adolescence, I told everyone that I had mono, or chickenpox, or anything that would explain my extended absences from school. I eventually had to drop out and get a GED through the mail. By the time my rate of strength increase had slowed, I had settled upon a career choice, and worked my butt off to get it.

Maybe my powers had manipulated my subconscious desires, for I chose to be a cop. For twenty years I have worked for the same department: Bay City 7th Precinct. I have seen more young idealists come and go through the department than I can count. After ten years as a cop, I married a beautiful woman who then bore my daughter. My wife Alisa knows my secret, but Dannan does not. Every night I go to bed praying that she will never develop the curse of these powers.

I still have to manage my strength, and the only way to do that is to apply them to lifting weights. The question you may ask is how can I lift weights when the heaviest barbells would be like toothpicks? The answer is plainer than you might think. There is a special gymnasium here in Bay City called Powerman's. Membership is free but only to a select, exclusive clientele. Powerman's caters to those paranormals with strength like mine. Powerman retired from active crime fighting twenty years ago.

He entered into a partnership with two other retired heroes, Fusionne and the Architect. The Architect designed the facility that can handle the tremendous amounts of weight being moved around, and Fusionne created the super dense materials that form the weights. There are no fancy machines at Powerman's, nothing with the word "Flex" attached to them. Only free weights are available in differing denominations. The lightest one-handed barbells weigh in at an even ton, and they go up from there. Exactly how strong am I? It's not really important. I'm not the strongest person at Powerman's, not by a long shot, but there are plenty of others who can't even spot me. I am, though, one of the only people there who wears a mask.

They all call me "Hood", because of the full-face mask I always wear. They respect my privacy and only once has anyone had the temerity to try and take it off me. I broke his jaw for trying. I don't want to be known to these people; I don't want them to call on me. Let them go out and fly around and save the world. That's not what I want. I just want to make a difference in my little section of Bay City. And I want to make that difference the same way all my friends do: from behind a badge, not behind a mask.

It's a cliché to say so, but it really was "just another day" in Bay City. My partner, Fred Grimes, and I had just hit the Giant Burrito stand off Renfro Drive. Fred had been riding

with me for two years. He was ten years younger than me and hadn't yet got that cynical streak that most cops develop over time. He was a talker. He talked incessantly about anything and everything. He talked about his girlfriend; he talked about sports. He talked about last night's bust by the narcotics division and wondered when we might get some of that action. "Shut up and eat, rookie," I chided him, taking a careful bite and still managing to spill some habanero sauce down my front. I always called him "rookie" to get a rise out of him, because he only had five years on the force.

Grimes took it in stride, like he did everything, and flapped his lips some more. "Whatever you say, old geezer." The two of us sat and ate. Except for his noisy chewing, Grimes had stopped talking for the time being, allowing me to hear the sounds of the city. I've always loved to sit and listen to the bustle of people going about their business every day. That's one of the reasons I became a cop - so I could be nearer to all those wonderful, lovely, normal people. It was kind of like when the nerd goes to all the popular parties in the eternal hope that he may eventually be popular as well.

The constant radio buzz was interrupted by the two-note attention signal used by BCPD. "All units stand by..." said the dispatcher. Grimes sat down his drink and I started the car. The attention signal was repeated. "All units in vicinity

respond to East Bay High School code three. We have multiple reports of shots being fired and at least three casualties. Switch to channel 8 for further information." East Bay High was less than a mile from our current location, and code three meant lights and sirens. I yanked the shifter into Drive and spun the tires as the car launched like a scared rabbit.

"Jesus!" shouted Grimes as I whipped through an intersection against the light. Behind me, tires squealed and a surprised horn blared. "Killing us won't get us there any faster, Harry!" He cursed as we hit a bump and the top of his soda came off, drenching his lap with cold Sprite. I didn't hear him. All I heard was the rushing in my ears. East Bay was Dannan's school.

Minutes passed, and then we were screeching to a stop in front of the school. Unlike most Bay City schools, East Bay didn't have a large acreage of open lawn surrounding it. Except for the parking lot on the North side, it sat right up against the street. Grimes grabbed the shotgun between us and we spilled out of the car. We could see kids huddled behind parked cars and in doorways across the street. In the distance we could hear other units approaching, sirens screaming. And below the sirens, a single popping sound that could only have been a gun discharging. Showing remarkable agility, Grimes dove over the hood of the car to put it between the school and us.

"How many of them are there?" I called out, hoping that somebody had seen something. I got a chorus of "I don't know" from most of the kids. One boy, dragging on a cigarette with shaking hands, said there were two of them, and they shot his friend Zach. "Okay, short answers, son. Were they carrying pistols? Rifles? What were they wearing?" I snapped the questions out with all the authority vested in me by being the father of a teenage daughter. The boy responded quickly, wide-eyed. They had rifles, they were wearing fatigues, and he thought they were sophomores. Two more pops sounded, from either the second or third floor. Some muffled screams echoed through the windows that had been opened to let in the pleasant spring air.

I looked at Grimes, who had bitten his lip and had a streak of blood on his cheek from it. "We can't wait, or this will turn into Columbine all over again." He nodded his head. "The door, on three. One...two...three!" We jumped from our cover and sprinted for the main door, guns drawn. It couldn't have been more than thirty feet, but it felt like it took hours to cover that distance. A startled exclamation followed by a hail of bullets came down upon us. Grimes cursed and flopped forward, blood leaking from under his shirt. I grabbed him and dragged him forward until we were under the canopy over the front doors. I heard maniacal laughing from above.

I took a minute to assess the damage to Grimes. The bullet, fired from high above us, had come down at a sharp angle and struck the top of his shoulder along the straps between the front and back pads of his vest. I didn't see an exit wound and his arm was hanging. His face was pale but he felt well enough to be furious. "He shot me, that little bastard!" He coughed and wheezed as some blood flecks came out of his mouth.

"Grimes, don't move. You'll be safe here until backup arrives." I could see the flashing lights approaching from both directions. "I'll go get them." I grabbed the shotgun from him. He made an attempt to get back to his feet but I gently pressed him back down.

He coughed again and wheezed with a sound like someone trying to suck the last bit of milkshake out of a cup with a straw. "Okay, geezer...Just hurry...you owe me...another soda." He smiled weakly. I smiled back, put a hand on his other shoulder, and then ran into the school.

Normally what I was doing would be considered extremely foolish. I had no backup, unknown perpetrators, and was likely outgunned. Ever since Columbine we've had dozens of people lead workshops in the best way to deal with school shootings. Nobody ever says the same thing, because there is no right way to do it, no sure-fire method of bringing a quick resolution to the situation. I figured that my method would be as good as

anybody's. I was going to come in loud and fast, and I hoped that they would shoot at me instead of at anyone else.

I glanced around the entry hall, looking for a stairway. I fumed at myself for never having had the time to come and visit the school that my own daughter was attending. That would change, I promised, even if it means leaving the Force. I found a stairwell with two gunshot victims at the bottom of it. One was clearly dead; the other was wounded but in shock. I gently lifted the head of a pretty young brunette my daughter's age and asked her if they were upstairs. She nodded, shivering. I told her that the next people behind me would help her. I yanked out the fat black permanent marker that I always keep with me and scribbled my badge number and initials above it. Then I drew a quick arrow pointing up and ran up the stairs.

As I reached the top of the stairs another shot rang out, followed by several screams. A rough, adolescent voice commanded them to "shut up, or I'll do all of you." I flattened myself against the wall, holding the shotgun tightly across my chest. They were in the classroom right around the corner from the stairwell from the sound of it. My heart was pounding like I'd been doing an hour of twelve-ton curls. The roaring of blood in my ears was almost as loud as the sounds of children crying in the next room. I took a deep breath and counted silently down from five. I wasn't afraid that I would die, but

I didn't want any more kids to come to harm because of my actions. I lowered the shotgun and leaped out of the stairwell, taking the corner tight and low.

The door to the classroom was closed, but that wasn't a factor for someone like me. In the split second as I rounded the corner I saw an acne-ridden youth holding a hunting rifle at high point beyond the door. His body was turned toward me but he was watching something in the classroom. He started to turn just as I hit the door full on. The glass in the window of the door shattered as I knocked it from its hinges. It cart wheeled across the classroom, striking the skinny boy with the rifle and felling him like a bowling pin. I rushed in like a freight train without brakes, the shotgun tracking around, looking for the other gunman.

He was standing aghast across the room. His weapon, an assault rifle, drooped impotently as he realized his escapade was coming to an end. Several kids were huddled against the wall in a tight knot of fear. Two others and an older woman, probably a teacher, were sprawled in awkward positions on the floor and across desks, their lives leaking out onto the tile floor. The boy's jaw tightened and he raised the gun, firming up his resolve for his final stand. In spite of my years of training, I fumbled like a first-year rookie. My palms were

sweating and I gripped the shotgun so tightly that I heard the stock splinter.

Nobody should ever have to see a gun barrel pointing right at them. It feels like you are tied onto train tracks in front of a tunnel with an express approaching at high speed. In the movies, these things always happen in slow motion, with the camera lingering on every nuance of the action. In reality, they move so quickly you never even have a chance to react. I had been beaten to the trigger by this child, this *punk* with his Army Surplus fatigues and a military weapon from God-knows-where. I could only trust to my unnatural toughness to survive. Without warning, I heard a voice scream in denial and a body lurched from within the huddle of students in the corner - right into the path of the bullets. My heart actually stopped as I saw it was my own, beautiful daughter.

The boy had his weapon on full automatic and he emptied his clip into the both of us. The funny thing about being shot at close range is that you can't hear the shots with any kind of clarity. It sounds like thunder. I felt myself flung backwards into the wall from the force of the bullet impacts. There was no pain; each shot felt like I was being pulled backward instead of pushed. I hit the wall and fell with my daughter in my lap, her blood mingled with mine. The pain from my wounds hit all at once, like I'd been hit by a thousand ball-peen hammers. It

paled in comparison to the fear I felt for Dannan. The bullets had nearly ripped her blouse off and I could see crater-shaped wounds where they had struck her.

My shotgun was bent beyond use. No matter. I threw it away. My rage built to a feverish intensity and I went for the boy, not like a man but like a wild animal, scrabbling at the floor and the desks for purchase as I hurled myself at him. His eyes grew wide and I heard the click of an empty chamber. I hit him hard with my fist. He flew backward and hit the opposite wall so hard that it cracked and plaster rained down like snow. I stood over him, my head spinning, dizzy with blood loss. I wanted to crush him, to rend him into nothing. I grabbed the first thing that came into my hand - a desk, and raised it high to beat him into tiny pieces, when I froze at the sound of my daughter's voice.

"Daddy, don't!" I turned and saw Dannan shakily getting to her feet. "I'm...okay, I think." She took a small step toward me and I dropped the desk I was holding like a club. I could see a tiny black dot in the middle of each of her wounds - a bullet, flattened against the super-dense musculature that she must have inherited from me. Fifteen years, I thought wildly, and I never noticed. The thought struck me as incredibly funny, and I began to chuckle, then to laugh - whooping like a madman and gasping for breath as I took my beautiful, alive daughter in my arms.

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More people came into the room, storming around the two of us - collecting the guns, doctoring our wounds, taking out the victims. Dannan and I, we just held each other and laughed at the joy of being alive together.