

*W**et*

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This is an original short story and has
never appeared elsewhere.

Blazing! Adventures Magazine

Publishers
2008

New York

War is the continuation of policy by other means. The quote popped into Springer Wellman's head as he adjusted the knurled dials on the telescopic sight to compensate for distance and elevation. His target had yet to appear so he set the rifle next to the hotel room's windowsill and observed the façade of the West Beirut relief center through his Zeiss binoculars. Because Americans were squeamish about their sons and daughters coming home in body bags, policy's other means needed a force multiplier. Springer specialized in one that had been tested and found effective for thousands of years – ruthlessness.

A queue of Lebanon's poor, who waited for handouts of lentils and rice, snaked from the sidewalk up the steps to the front door. Springer had to admit that radical Islam had American beat in winning the peoples' hearts and minds in this part of the world. No one at Langley asked for his opinion, though. Springer noticed something happening. A bearded man in a skull cap cleared the crowd away from the front door. Escorted by two bodyguards the troublesome Hezbollah politician's mistress exited and descended the steps toward a waiting car. In a fluid motion Springer exchanged the binoculars for the rifle and nestled its wooden stock to his shoulder. He looked through the scope, centered the crosshairs on the woman's colorful headscarf, and squeezed the trigger. The high-velocity bullet left the silenced rifle with a whisper and followed a ballistic arc to its target. Springer watched long enough to see the mistress's head explode in a spray of brains and gore. Before the poor could scatter and the bodyguards could draw their pistols, Springer dropped the rifle and rushed down the stairwell toward the street where an escape car waited fourteen floors below.

He emerged from the metal fire door, transited the alley, and began walking up a narrow side street. Spray-painted Arabic graffiti and posters of Ayatollah Narrullah covered buildings' sandstone walls. The air smelled of sewage. The distant sound of klaxons grew louder and higher in pitch as police cars sped toward the scene of the shooting a few blocks away. Springer kept his cool The secret was not to hurry. He'd gotten out of countless difficult situations by merely appearing nonchalant. The lime-green BMW resembled a jellybean in front of a bullet-riddled building that had been a

clinic before the recent Israeli bombing. Springer slid behind the wheel and turned the key. The starter motor groaned. He pumped the gas pedal but the engine wouldn't catch. Son of a bitch! Springer slammed his fist on the steering wheel. The battery was dead.

He got out of the car as three men in jogging suits rushed around the corner. All wore the sparse beards of Muslim fundamentalists. Springer turned and began walking away. A bald man with a briefcase locked an office door and moved key-in-hand toward a white Mercedes. Springer picked up his pace until he was an arms length from the man.

“Donnez-moi vos clefs,” Springer ordered as he withdrew his Glock and pointed it at the man's chest.

The car owner began yelling in Arabic. Springer lowered the barrel, put a round in the man's knee, and scooped the keys from the pavement where the man lay screaming and clutching his leg. The three thugs drew their pistols and ran forward. Springer fired a few rounds to make them duck, started the Mercedes, and stomped the accelerator. Tires squealed as the car sped toward the gunmen. Their bullets made spider-web patterns on the windshield. Springer flinched each time one hit. Rather than steering away, he aimed the circular metal Mercedes symbol at the man in the center. The big engine roared and the three men scattered from the speeding car's path like crows fleeing an approaching semi. By the time they regrouped and fired wild shots at the Mercedes' rear window, Springer was out of range.

He abandoned the stolen car, keys still in the ignition, outside a teeming market and caught a crowded bus that stopped a few blocks from the safe house. When Springer unlocked the front door and entered the foyer, a dark-haired man jerked to his feet from the couch in front of the TV.

“Didn't you expect to see me, Hassan?”

“No, Springer. I mean yes. I didn't hear your car. That's all.”

“You gave me a car with a bad battery.”

“Nothing works in this country, my friend.” Hassan shook his head. **“The impor-**

tant thing is that you got away safely. Why don't you take a shower while I cook some lamb? The boat to Cyprus doesn't leave until midnight."

Springer turned the faucet to hot and slid the shower curtain closed. It billowed as the water jetting from the nozzle filled the bathroom with steam. Rather than remove his clothes he waited with back pressed against the wall on the hinge side of the door. It didn't take long for Hassan to confirm Springer's suspicion. Within minutes the door handle turned and the long barrel of a silencer nosed through the gap in the door. A struggle leading to Springer disarming his betrayer with an elbow break would have provided some much-needed exercise and left Hassan alive for questioning, but it had been a long day. Springer slammed the bathroom door on Hassan's pistol hand, stepped back, and put two rounds through the thin wood. He heard the sick sound of bullets striking meat, a grunt, and a body collapsing to the floor.

Careful not to dirty his shoes in the pooling blood Springer opened the door, knelt over the body, and removed the pistol from Hassan's dead fingers. He took a moment to study the man's face – the mane of curly hair, five o' clock shadow, and formerly warm dark eyes now staring blankly at the ceiling. Such a pity! Hassan had been an excellent cook. Springer touched Hassan's neck to verify he had no pulse and then returned to the bathroom. After a long shower he changed clothes, selected a false passport, and took a taxi to the airport.

Back home in Greenbelt, Maryland Springer packed shorts, a towel, and a karate gi in a red canvas gym bag and zipped it closed. After spending two tense weeks in Beirut he was anxious to burn the cortisol out of his system with a good cardio workout. An hour or two lifting weights and running on the treadmill followed by some sparring at the dojo would hit the spot. A visit to the shooting range would have to wait for another day.

He entered the garage and paused to caress the smooth, cherry-red finish of his 1965 Mustang convertible before tossing the bag in the back seat and starting the

engine. At idle the motor vibrated the car's body like an off-center lump of clay on a potter's wheel. Springer stepped on the gas pedal and the engine purred. He'd have to check the timing later. This day was for tuning his body, but first he had to deposit a check from Prometheus Holdings, one of the dummy corporations Langley used to pay its NOC agents.

The Silver Spring office of Fidelity Bank was close to the gym, so Springer stopped there instead of at the local branch. He parallel parked on Georgia, fed a few quarters into the meter, and walked a few blocks to the four-story building. Inside a half dozen customers stood in line behind the hanging rope barriers. This seemed like a big crowd for 10:00 AM on a Tuesday. Springer thought of using a bank machine but he trusted the tellers sitting behind inch-thick glass with his five-figure check more than he did the computers.

He got in line behind a woman with a service dog. It was one of those golden retrievers with a goofy expression and a green vest that said, "Don't pet me. I'm working." Springer shook his head. The animal wouldn't last more than a few minutes in the wild. Its owner wore a baggy sweatshirt that draped over her barrel-shaped chest. Springer took a pack of chocolate-covered raisins from his jacket pocket, emptied the last few into his hand, and offered them to the animal.

"Please don't," the owner said. "Chocolate is bad for dogs."

"Sorry, buddy. Looks like you're out of luck." Springer patted the dog after popping the raisins in his mouth. The dog wagged its tailing involving its whole rump in the process.

"Her name is Birgita," the owner said. "Do you have a dog?"

"Naw, I travel too much."

"Jodie, stop your whining right now!" a woman yelled as she dragged her four-foot daughter through the door. Both had freckles, blindingly white teeth, and wore their blonde hair styled in identical shoulder-length cuts.

"But I'm hungry!" The girl stomped her foot. Her voice sounded like a loose power-steering belt.

“Sorry,” the mother said when she got in line behind Springer. “She gets like this when her blood sugar is low.

“Jodie, behave yourself and we’ll go to the Cake Factory just as soon as I get done.”

“Whatever!” The girl rolled her eyes and began kicking the barrier support with her running shoe.

The line still hadn’t moved. Springer looked around to find the problem. The black man in a denim shirt with a clerical collar seemed like he’d been standing in front of the teller window since Genesis.

“Everybody on the ground!”

Springer bit the deck when he saw two men with assault rifles near the door. Both wore ski masks, black fatigues, and bulletproof vests. The golden retriever began growling and whining. An AK-47 fired and silenced the animal. The dog’s owner went into convulsions. Even though the twitching and drooling woman lay within arm’s reach, Springer did nothing to help for fear of incurring the gunmen’s wrath.

They were professionals. That was for sure. They didn’t harass the customers and thus encourage resistance. Nor did they negotiate with the tellers to open the door that led behind the bulletproof glass. Springer heard a blast and smelled the pungent aroma of the plastic explosives, probably Semtex, that blew the door.

“Put the money in the bag!” a gunman ordered.

“Do as you’re told and nobody will get hurt,” the other said.

Springer stayed face down on the carpet. He never carried a handgun in America. Even if he had, he didn’t relish the idea of pitting himself against two assault rifles. No, it was best to stay put. He didn’t have a dog in this fight.

“Let’s go!” a gunman said.

Springer got to his knees a few seconds after he heard the front door slam. Other than being covered in her dead animal’s blood, the dog owner seemed to have recovered from her seizure. She had stopped shaking and was sleeping peacefully. Customers began to get up. The mother held her crying daughter’s head to her shoulder.

Gunfire erupted outside. Springer recognized the reports of 9mm pistols, a sawed-off shotgun, and the robbers' Kalashnikovs. They must have run into some police, a half dozen from the sounds of it. Moments later a robber dragged his wounded comrade through the door and into the bank. The wounded man gripped his upper thigh, blood trickling between his fingers.

"What are you looking at?" the other screamed. "Get down on the ground!"

"Damn! Why did we have to run into a bunch of cops?" the wounded man said.

"We're too exposed with all these windows," His partner pointed to the door they'd blown open. "Everybody, behind the bulletproof glass!"

The customers, now hostages, gaped until the gunman yelled, "Move it!"

Women gasped. The hostages took reluctant steps toward the door. Hoping she'd eventually escape, Springer left the unconscious woman behind and followed the others.

"Her too." The uninjured gunman pointed at the woman on the floor and the minister dragged her through.

AK-47 cradled across his lap the wounded gunman sat on the floor behind the tellers' cages with his back against the wall, while his comrade scouted for a way out.

"I have to go to the bathroom," the girl said.

"Wait until my partner gets back."

"Son." The preacher spoke in his most earnest tone. "You have to stop this now, before things get out of control."

"Shut up." The gunman fingered the trigger guard. "Just sit down and be quiet."

Springer looked at the man's blood-soaked pant leg. The wounded man would pass out, unless something was done. Should Springer offer to help? Making himself useful to his captors would improve his chances of survival and maybe get him close enough to take one of their weapons.

"You need to stop that bleeding," he said.

"You a doctor?" the gunman asked.

"No." Revealing his background would identify Springer as a threat. "I had a year of med school."

“Why’d you leave?”

“Wasn’t my choice.” Springer looked away from the man’s eyes. “Drug problem.”

“All right, but don’t try anything funny.”

“You got any dressings or meds in your bag?” Springer’s pulse pounded like a conga drum. What an opportunity! The wounded man was vulnerable and alone. If Springer could get within arm’s length before the partner returned!

“No, nothing.”

“Any of you ladies have a sanitary napkin? I need it to make a bandage.” Only a few steps closer and Springer could overpower the wounded man.

“We’re out of luck. Cops have the exits covered and there’s no basement.” The other gunman came through the door and pointed his rifle at Springer. “What are you doing?”

“He’s going to fix my leg,” the wounded gunman said.

The phone rang, and the uninjured gunman jumped.

“Must be the hostage negotiator.” Quickly putting on a façade off cool, he picked up the phone. “What do you want? No, we’re not all right. My partner’s been shot.” The uninjured gunman cupped his hand over the mouthpiece and turned to Springer.

“What kind of supplies to you need?”

“Plasma, dressings, broad-spectrum antibiotic, and morphine.” Springer tied the sanitary napkin to the wound with a strip of cloth torn from the wounded man’s pants.

“I ain’t taking no morphine,” the wounded gunman said to no one in particular.

“And make sure they send some needles and an IV line,” Springer added.

The uninjured gunman relayed the request and hung up.

“You need to get to a hospital,” Springer told the wounded man.

“Nobody’s going anywhere for a while.” The uninjured gunman paced like a leopard in a cage. With his ski mask and AK-47 the scene resembled the 1972 Munich Olympics..

“I have to go to the bathroom!”

“You mind if I take her?” The mother stood up with her daughter.

The wounded gunman motioned toward the bathroom door with his rifle barrel. “So how are we going to get out of here?” he asked his partner.

“Exchange the hostages for a car. We’ll take those two with us.” The uninjured gunman pointed at Springer and the preacher. “Once we’re sure the cops aren’t following, we kick them loose, abandon the car, and steal another.”

Springer looked around the room. The gunmen had thirteen hostages to bargain with. Five were bank employees. The three tellers sat in their chairs behind their rifled cash boxes. Except for the unconscious woman, the other hostages sat on the carpet or stood leaning on the wall. The toilet flushed. Mother and daughter emerged from the bathroom.

“I’m hungry,” the girl whispered to her mother.

“Honey, be quiet.”

“But I’m hungry!” The girl raised her voice, so both gunmen turned their sinister, masked faces.

“Would you like some cookies?” A teller stood to distract the robbers’ wrath. She had olive skin, short dark hair, and a scimitar-shaped nose. “They’re in back. I bought them to celebrate Shelly’s engagement.”

“Good idea, Monica,” said the manager, whose flabby neck made his head resemble a teardrop. “Why don’t you go get them?” He turned to the uninjured gunman. “If it’s okay with you, that is.”

“Which one’s Shelly?” the uninjured gunman asked.

A woman in a matching, red jacket and skirt raised a tentative hand to shoulder height. Tiny, painted flowers decorated her fingernails.

“Congratulations, Shelly. When’s the wedding?”

“Uh, June.”

“Why don’t you go get them cookies, Monica?” The uninjured gunman changed position so he could watch both the teller and the other hostages.

Monica returned with a blue tin of Danish, butter cookies and handed it to the girl, who stuffed them into her mouth like a concentration camp survivor. The phone

rang and the uninjured gunman picked it up.

“Yeah, okay. Five minutes.” He hung up. “They’re delivering the medical supplies along with some food and water. You!” He pointed at the mother. “Wait by the front door and bring them back. I’ll watch your girl for you.”

The girl clung to her mother and prevented the woman from standing.

“There, there, Honey.” The minister peeled the girl away and held her on his lap. “Your momma will be back in a few minutes.”

While the others concentrated on the supplies, Springer studied the wounded man. Although his bleeding had stopped, the gunman appeared lightheaded, periodically leaning his head against the wall and closing his eyes. The wounded man needed to lie down under a warm blanket, but Springer wouldn’t mention it. If he went into shock, there would be one less opponent to neutralize.

The mother returned with the supplies. While the others clustered around the boxes of pizza, Springer attended the wounded man. It took a couple of tries and a few, “Ouch damn its,” for Springer to find a vein in the wounded gunman’s wrist and set up the IV. Springer adjusted the valve on the hanging bag of plasma to keep the drip slow. No sense letting the gunman get too alert.

In the background the minister was saying grace. “Oh Lord, thank You for Your bounty in this time of need...”

“This is an antibiotic.” Springer held up a syringe. “Are you allergic?”

“No, man.”

Springer injected the drug into the IV line. “I’d suggest morphine too, or else that leg’s gonna hurt like hell.”

The wounded man’s eyes narrowed.

“Look, man! You want to suffer, it’s no skin off my ass.”

“Will it put me out?”

“No, it’ll just take the edge off.”

“Give it to him, but you’d best be right about him not passing out.” The uninjured gunman’s voice carried the menace of a 7.62mm bullet.

Springer was guessing. He filled the syringe with a third of an ampoule and injected it into the IV line. If he had the dose right, the wounded man would be awake but woozy.

“That’s about all I can do for now.” Springer wasn’t about to change the dressings. Why bother?

Springer washed up and took the last slice of pizza. Pepperoni! He hated pepperoni, but it was all he was likely to get for several hours. He took a napkin and bottle of water and sat on the floor while resting his back against the wall. Unfortunately, the only free space was next to the mother and her brat.

“You have kids?” the woman asked.

“No, I don’t want the responsibility.”

“But having children is the most rewarding experience in life.”

Springer nodded and took a bite of pizza. His heartburn fired up even before he swallowed. Of course, the cops hadn’t included any Roloids with their delivery.

“Mommy, I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Excuse me.” Springer went to the wounded gunman. “Let’s change that dressing on your leg.”

The unconscious woman stirred.

“Where am I?” She sat up. “Where’s Birgita? Why am I covered in blood?” When she saw the gunmen, the woman began choking and gasping.

All eyes turned to Springer. He looked from the robbers to the tellers and finally to the minister. Jesus! Why did he have to do all the hard stuff? He was an assassin not a grief counselor. He carried the bag of medical supplies to the woman.

“Shh! You had a seizure and cut yourself.” He filled a syringe with morphine. “This is an antibiotic. It’ll keep your cut from getting infected.”

The sharp smell of alcohol bit the air as he swabbed her arm and injected the narcotic. The woman slumped against the wall and was quiet. The phone rang.

“Thanks for the food and the meds,” the uninjured gunman told the negotiator. “Now, here’s what’s going to happen. In one hour you’ll park a car outside the front

door and leave the engine running. Me, my partner, and a few hostages will get in and drive away. If the car breaks down or you follow us, the hostages die. If you don't deliver the car in one hour, a hostage dies." He looked at his watch. "It's 12:37. The car better be parked out front by 1:37." He hung up. "Don't worry, all y'all. It's just a bluff."

The hostages didn't believe him. They stared at the wall clock as the red, second hand swept slow circles. Each wondered who would be first to die.

"You don't think he'd do it. Do you?" the bank manager whispered to Springer.

Springer looked in the man's terrified, blue eyes before dropping his gaze. Of course, he'd do it. Springer would if he were in the gunman's place. You never make a threat unless you're willing to carry it out. He could have told the bank manager a comforting lie but Springer had other things to think about. He turned away.

If Springer were one of the gunmen and the car didn't materialize, how would he escape? The problem seemed insurmountable. The police had them surrounded and they couldn't shoot their way out. His mind chewed on the problem while he studied the hostages' faces. Then a solution came to him. It required more willpower than even he could summon, but he marveled at its audacity.

The phone rang at 1:30.

"Yeah." The gunman listened and hung up.

He pointed his AK-47 at the ceiling and fired. Hostages flinched. The manager shrieked. Plaster dust fell to the carpet under the tile the bullet had penetrated.

"You!" The gunman pointed at Springer. "Drag the unconscious lady out by the front door to where they can see her."

Springer did as he was told. Friction with the carpet tugged the woman's pants down her hips as he pulled her by the arms. He could see her beige, nylon panties but Springer didn't pull her pants up. He wouldn't do that to a corpse. Fortunately, the woman was too doped up to move. Her body, soaked in dog's blood, would buy them an hour.

Back behind the bulletproof glass the phone rang.

“You have one hour,” the uninjured gunman told the negotiator.

None of the hostages dared to speak. Springer sat apart from the others, where he could keep an eye on the wounded man. Try as he might, Springer couldn’t get the sickly sweet taste of stomach acid out of his mouth. He pictured microscopic workmen swinging pickaxes at his esophagus.

When the wounded gunman felt the urge to go to the bathroom, Springer helped him. The two made slow progress with the gunman’s arm over Springer’s shoulder and the CIA agent rolling the IV stand. It would have been a perfect time to kill the robber with a finger jab to the throat, but gunman had left his rifle behind with his partner. Once behind the bathroom door the wounded man dropped his pants and sat on the toilet.

“We need to talk,” Springer said.

“What makes you think I want to hear anything you have to say?”

“Because your partner’s going to kill all of us, including you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Think about it.” Springer leaned on the counter. “The only way for him to escape is to pretend to be one of the hostages. No one’s seen his face, but to pull it off the rest of us have to be dead.”

“That’s bullshit, man. The cops are going to deliver a car in less than an hour and then we’ll ride out of here.” The wounded man’s wide eyes betrayed his doubt in what he said.

“You really think the cops are going to let your punk asses go? More importantly, does your partner think so?” Springer reached for the doorknob. “Just remember, if he wants to change clothes with anybody, you’d better shoot first. Give a yell when you’re finished.” He stepped outside.

The uninjured gunman put his plan into effect soon after Springer and the wounded man returned.

“You!” He pointed to the minister. “Get undressed.”

“What the hell are you doing?” the wounded man asked.

“The two of us are going to change clothes in case the cops have a sniper waiting when they bring the car.” The uninjured gunman tugged at the Velcro straps on his bulletproof vest.

“What about me? You going to send me out there as a target?”

“Can’t be helped. They know you’re wounded.”

“I don’t think so.” The wounded man leveled his rifle at his partner.

“What the hell’s gotten into you, man?”

“You’re going to kill all of us and walk out of here in that guy’s clothes.” The wounded man raised the rifle stock to his shoulder and peered down the sight at his comrade.

“Are you crazy? Put that thing down!” The uninjured gunman lowered his hands so the rifle pointed to his side. “In a few minutes we’re going to ride out of here with two hundred thousand dollars, so just keep it together.”

The unconscious woman by the door moaned, and the wounded gunman turned to look. This gave his partner time to raise his rifle and fire two rounds into the wounded man’s head. Blood splattered the wall. Women screamed. The phone started ringing. Springer dashed forward and got both hands on the remaining gunman’s rifle, slicing his right palm on the front sight. Blood made the metal slick, but Springer held on. The two men tugged at the weapon, neither gaining the advantage. The muscles in Springer’s arms burned. He tried to kick the gunman’s knee, but the blade edge of his foot slid down the man’s leg seemingly with no effect. They struggled until Springer clamped the barrel to his hip and stepped back, wrenching the stock out of his opponent’s grasp. He fired the upside-down rifle at the gunman. The first bullet hit the man’s hip. The second lodged in the Kevlar vest.

“Jeez!” The gunman reached for his pistol.

Springer stepped forward and brought the rifle stock down on his opponent’s skull. There was a moist thud and the gunman collapsed. Not one to take chances, Springer righted the rifle and fired a shot through the man’s forehead. The rest of the hostages backed away as Springer picked up the ringing telephone with his bloody

hand.

“Both robbers are down. We’re coming out.”

A thank you would have been nice, but the former hostages averted their eyes and hurried past as if Springer were a snarling Rottweiler straining against a chain. He went to the door and watched them dash off to their lunches, psychiatrist appointments, and computer games. Why did he risk his life to protect such people? After the police made a phone call to an office in Langley, they kicked him loose with a promise to keep his name out of their report.

Springer strolled down Georgia. The spectators disbursed to pack the nearby sushi bars and coffee shops. Springer looked at his plastic watch. By the time he got stitches in his palm it would be too late for the gym. He reached into his right pocket with his uninjured left hand for his keys as he approached his Mustang. A yellow parking ticket under the windshield wiper flapped like a butterfly in the breeze.

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