

‘Machine Man’ excerpt¹

As a boy, I wanted to be a train. I didn’t realize this was unusual— that other kids played *with* trains, not as them. They liked to build tracks and have trains not fall
5 off them. Watch them go through tunnels. I didn’t understand that. What I liked was pretending my body was two hundred tons of unstoppable steel. Imagining I was pistons and valves and hydraulic compressors.

“You mean robots,” said my best friend, Jeremy. “You want to play robots.” I had
10 never thought of it like that. Robots had square eyes and jerky limbs and usually wanted to destroy the Earth. Instead of doing one thing right, they did everything badly. They were general purpose. I was not a fan of robots. They were bad machines.

(...)

WE PERFORMED a live trial of the nerve interface. Beta’s legs were half the
15 weight and contoured silver steel: of all the models, they most resembled real legs. Except for the feet, which were hooves. Hooves were working for us. I finished fitting the needles and two assistants slid me into the Beta legs and tilted me upright. At this point nothing was powered on. The assistants cleared the lab and began to fill the Glass Room, crowding against the green glass. I felt a twinge of nerves. It
20 wasn’t so much the fact that I was about to see what happened when you plugged your brain directly into a pair of self-powered mechanical legs but that so many people were watching. I found the power button with my thumb and put my other hand on the emergency shutdown. I looked up at the Glass Room again and saw Jason’s thumbs-up. If there was a problem with both the power button and the
25 emergency shutdown, Jason would trip a remote kill switch. None of this should be necessary because we were feeding the legs a tenth of regular power. And we had exhaustively tested in software. Everything that happened today should be unsurprising.

I pressed for power. I heard a high-pitched whine, barely detectable. I tried to ignore
30 this. As clearly as I could, I imagined myself lifting my right leg and taking a single step.

¹ *Machine Man*, M. Barry, pp. 1, 90-2, 153-4.

Nothing happened. I opened my eyes, disappointed. Then I looked down and my right leg was in front of the other. I mean the Beta leg. It had done exactly as I asked, so perfectly I hadn't noticed. When I looked at the Glass Room, behind the three-inch translucent green plastic my lab assistants were jumping up and down, Z-specs bouncing, cheering in silence.

THE MORE I tinkered with Gamma's hand, the more I liked it. It was funny how as soon as you knew there was something better, what you had seemed unbearable. Every time I had to dig around for my ID tag, I thought: *I wouldn't have to do this if it were embedded in my finger.* When I was working on a lathe or a circuit board and I reached for a tool, whenever my fingers slipped or my hands shook,

I felt exasperated, like why was I still dealing with this. It was the same with the glasses: the Z-specs were heavy and hurt my nose but when I took them off I missed them. The hand was not so advanced I could honestly say it was on balance superior to its biological equivalent. But still, there was something about it I couldn't keep away from.

(...)

Nature dealt you a hand, you tossed it back. You said, 'I'll decide who I am. I'll choose the limit of my capabilities. I will be not what I was made, but what I make.' "

I blinked. "Yes. That's it exactly." I wondered why Cassandra Cautery had been so concerned about letting me talk to the Manager. He was fantastic. He was just like me.

"I could not be prouder to count myself as one of your supporters." He smiled. I smiled back. "Now. Let's talk supersoldiers."

I struggled to rearrange his last sentence so that it made sense. I thought: *Did he mean super solder?*

"The equipment carried by the average modern-day soldier weighs a hundred fifty pounds." He turned and spread his palms.

The light flooding in behind him made this vaguely messianic. "That's a standard, what-do-you-call-them, grunt. The specialists lug half that again. The primary limitation of today's soldier is simply that he can't carry everything. War has become a load-bearing exercise. A logistics puzzle. Imagine weight wasn't an issue. We'd have soldiers who run at fifty miles per hour, leap twenty

65 feet into the air, re fifty- millimeter chain guns, shrug off enemy fire like it's rain. We'd have Better Soldiers. And let me tell you, Dr. Neumann, as tickled as I am by the consumer-level products your people are producing, the Better Eyes and Better Skin and so forth, they're nothing compared to what we can do with the military."

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