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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

CONTRABAND DEPT.

MAGNUM P.I.S

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West Nile fever and bedbugs behind us, the city was rife last week, after the back-to-back murders of the policemen Dillon Stewart and Daniel Enchautegui, with talk of another plague: illegal guns. Twenty thousand uniformed officers showed up for each funeral, Mayor Bloomberg challenged legislators to “stand up and start doing something about this terrible scourge,” and the *Post* introduced a special logo featuring a compact pistol and the words “The Gun Menace.”

Amid this burst of activity, Jim Mintz, a private investigator, was working quietly behind the steel doors of his Tribeca office. Mintz is the principal of the James Mintz Group, a firm whose employees include former officials from the F.B.I., the N.Y.P.D., and Scotland Yard, and which has helped such institutions as Reebok, Morgan Stanley, the Beatles, and Ivana Trump unearth, as Mintz once wrote, “dirty little secrets.” About a year ago, Mintz was hired by the city to assist with its anti-gun lawsuit, which seeks to hold gun manufacturers and distributors responsible for turning a blind eye to the illegal gun trade. Mintz’s task is to trace the flow of firearms into New York City.

“It’s I-95, on down,” Mintz said, sitting at a conference table. “You drive to North Carolina or Georgia and find a person who has a driver’s license—you can buy ten or fifteen guns at once.” (Ninety-two per cent of the illegal guns recovered in New York City between 1998 and 2003 were from out of state.) For the past few years, investigators have been gathering information on the gun shops that sell weapons to New York traffickers. Eric Proshansky, a lawyer for the city who is working on the suit, chimed in: “They’re often mom-and-pop stores out in the woods.”

Mintz got up and walked over to a giant chalkboard. “Here’s what happens,” he said, and began to draw a flowchart. “You have the manufacturer, who trucks the boxes over to the distributor, who delivers the guns to the dealer, a store, or a pawnshop. In walks the straw man.” He explained that a straw man is a person to whom a criminal pays twenty-five or fifty dollars to buy a gun on his behalf—a more sinister version of the underage drinker’s “Hey, Mister” procurement scheme. The straw man is often a woman. “It could be an attractive woman, or a woman on welfare who needs the money badly,” Proshansky said. “Often, the trafficker is standing right next to her, doing all the shopping, handling the guns, asking the prices,” Mintz said. “The dealer can see the trafficker counting out the money right there.”

Inexpensive pistols are a mainstay of the black market. “The old term is Saturday-night special,” Proshansky said. “Now you’ve got Hi-Point, which makes a small, easily concealable handgun that turns up in a lot of crimes,” he said. (In a voluminous online discussion of “What kind of man buys a Hi-Point?” one respondent compared the guns to “cheap pisswater beer.” The company’s marketing aims low, too. “Don’t Be Discouraged by the ‘Gun Snobs,’” a brochure reads.) Proshansky continued, “Taurus, a Brazilian company, also makes cheap guns.” Jay-Z refers to the brand in his song “Don’t You Know” (“Shit, I carry two Taurus”); the company is

included, along with makers such as Beretta, Smith & Wesson, Glock, and Ruger, in the city's lawsuit, which also names individual distributors such as Chattanooga Shooting Supplies, Dixie Shooters Supply, and Glenn Zanders Fur and Sporting Goods, of Baldwin, Illinois.

New York's gun trade, according to Mintz, is carried out on a piecemeal basis, mostly by small-time criminals. Retailing for as little as seventy-nine dollars, a weapon can be had on the street for a couple of hundred. "These guys take orders and drive down and fill them," Proshansky said. "They talk on their cell phones coming back into the city: 'We'll be there in a couple of hours!'"

Like collectibles on eBay, the most desired products come with intact packaging. "They're more valuable if they're what's called 'fresh in the box,'" Mintz said. "Wrapped up in newspapers isn't as good." (A used gun may come with previous crimes attached.)

On December 2nd, a federal judge in Brooklyn ruled that, despite Congress's recent passage of a law that protects gun dealers from litigation, the city's lawsuit will be allowed to continue. One part of its case will be the testimony of illicit gun dealers and straw men, dozens of whom Mintz and his team have tracked down. How does he get them to talk? "They're in jail," Proshansky said. "They don't have anything else to do."