

THRILLER MAGAZINE

VOLUME 2, ISSUE 1

Look inside for short
stories,
poetry,
artwork,
book reviews,
and much more!





Bringing you the best in established and new voices in the thriller genre!

Edited by Ammar Habib

**Thriller Magazine
Vol. 2, Issue 1**

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Note from the Editor

Welcome!

I am honored to share the 3rd issue of ***Thriller Magazine*** with you! This publication brings together a variety of phenomenal fiction, poetry, artwork, book reviews, and author interviews. In terms of short stories, this issue offers a wide range of tales, showcasing everything from fantasy thrillers, to brutal tales of murder, to political thrillers, and much more. The background of each featured author is very different as some are seasoned writers while others are new to the industry. However, what I really love about all the stories is that each one possesses its own distinct storytelling style, and the reader can feel the author's passion for their writings.

We are also proud to share three book reviews, one for ***A Moment Between*** by Gareth Frank, the second for ***The Guilt We Carry*** by Samuel W. Gailey, and the third for ***The Internet President: None of the Above*** by P.G. Sundling. These works are recent releases that have been well received by audiences. Each review also includes an interview with the novel's author where we got a chance to discuss their writing processes, techniques, and advice to aspiring writers.

The cover art featured in this issue was created by a new technique called “pyro-painting.” The artist, Michael Stewart, was kind enough to describe how he uses this technique to craft his paintings.

Working with all the authors and artists to put this issue together was a real pleasure. Each story and artwork presented in this issue offers something different and makes this issue whole. So sit back, take a deep breath, and let your mind get lost for a while in the breathtaking stories that are about to be told!

Sincerely,
Ammar Habib
Editor-In-Chief of ***Thriller Magazine***

A Civilized Man

ROBB T. WHITE

What is a civilized man? A friend of mine told me it's someone who steps out the shower to take a piss. Maybe that's all there is to it.

When I think of the polite "warfare" of chess, I think of my dead fiancé's words. They ring in my head like a smoke alarm going off in the middle of the night.

She won all the time except once when she had a headache. Our ritual before my inevitable checkmate was for her to pause and say, "I'll kill you for that move" or "You know I'm going to kill you now, right?" Or "I'm gonna kill you for that, babe."

Her spatial sense was a gift. I loved the game for her sake, watching her mentally focus, see the board in her head and then zero in on my weak attack or defense like an owl plunging from a limb onto a field mouse. Those expressions she polished me off with rarely varied and were never said with malice.

That last time we played, I tried the London opening for the first time. That was when she complained of the headache. But I might as well have opened with Fool's Mate because she clobbered me in six moves and then got up, saying she was going to run down to the pharmacy for some aspirin and would be back in "a few minutes."

Why didn't I go for her? Was I sulking because I thought I had half a chance since

she had a headache or because I studied some online gambits?

It wasn't that late. That pharmacy was a mile from my house close to a busy intersection we call Five Points in Northtown. Two males abducted her in the parking lot when she came out. CCTV cameras caught them in a blitz-attack before she could get into her car. The tape was grainy, and they wore bandannas over the faces with ballcaps pulled low. One black, one white according to Det. Sgt. Joe Hawley, the lead detective. Both young, twenties to early thirties, both slender despite the baggy clothing they wore to disguise themselves. Cops found the plastic, single-use bag with the aspirin and the receipt still inside around dawn. Everything, even the plastic bag, was dusted for prints but came up empty.

I had wasted an hour in the precinct talking to a desk sergeant on duty who told me to come back in the morning to file a "missing persons" report. He said my wife was an adult; adults in America are entitled to go missing if they so choose. The smirk told me he'd heard similar stories of missing spouses and girlfriends before—a wife skipping off to a late-night liaison with a lover.

"If she doesn't turn up in a couple hours," he said; "come back and we'll get right on it."

My stomach was so full of acid that I nearly heaved in the police station lot.

She did turn up—two weeks later. She was beaten, stabbed, and strangled to death.

Her killers had dumped her in some weeds near a jogging trail off Tannery Hill Road less than a mile from the pharmacy. At first, I tried to block the awful images from my head: me, a bewildered look on my face, wandering around under the lights of the pharmacy parking lot, feeling sick and hopeless, looking at streams of cars speeding past from the row of traffic lights.

Normal life, a calm evening in late spring. People living their normal lives. Just me left to wonder what happened—*where could María Victoria have gone that she would not come right home?*

The cops worked the case but had no leads. Any clues at “the crime scene” were obliterated by the heat and the thunderstorms since. Her body was in an advanced state of decomposition. Animals had been at her. The flesh of her face was chewed away. An opossum family had burrowed into the intestinal tract. Any DNA under her fingernails was too degenerated for testing. The skin was either “soapy” or blackened. Bone nicks on her scapula and ribs told me she had died fighting hard. I insisted on seeing the report despite the detective’s warning.

The case went cold. Nine months passed. My messages to the homicide bureau were passed on to Det. Hawley, but his return calls grew less frequent over time. He told me to wait for the “anniversary” of her murder and call the crime-beat reporter at the *North Coast Tribune* to do a story.

“It might generate some leads,” he said.

I had a better idea.

I depleted my savings and checking accounts. I sold the second car, a vacation camper along with most of my camping and hunting gear. In two weeks, I had \$60,000 to spread around.

The fact that the males were a mixed race gave me hope.

We have three areas in Northtown that could politely be described as “disadvantaged.” Most residents would call them something less kind or politically correct. I laid out a grid for all three and determined how I would approach them. The first thing I did was purchase billboard space at east-west ends of the Five Points junction with a blow-up of an engagement photo of María Victoria and the \$30,000 reward for finding her killer or killers right under it across the bottom.

I systematically canvassed three streets in the harbor that had been on the decline for a generation. I let it be known that an “arrest and conviction” would be “ideal,” but I would be satisfied with two names and “reasonable proof of guilt.” I spoke to welfare mothers, idle males, teenagers with earbuds and cell phones, crackheads, and grandmothers left to raise small children when their mothers and fathers went off to prison. A young woman with a nose ring and purple hair stood in the doorway of her porch from which a sour effluvia of smells wafted out. She asked me if I’d be interested in buying some “tango,” which she explained as carfentanyl, the drug of choice at the time.

My next grid search took me to a blighted area downtown off Main Street near the low-income high rises where men and women of all ages were housed with the terrified elderly. These were citizens no

employer would ever hire. That yielded several names, but nothing panned out. Everywhere I went, I paid for information, even when I suspected I was being scammed.

The final section was situated at the west end of Northtown and was by far the worst of the three. All these streets bore the names of presidents. More weeks of knocking on doors, sleeping in my car, alert for a black and white male duo. I learned where the party and dope houses were among those desolate streets where abandoned houses were planked over from drug raids and the graffiti of taggers declared gang allegiance, war on cops, whites, dissed one another's masculinity, mocked girls' names as "hoes" or advocated some kind of witless rebellion against life.

Around three a.m. on a Saturday night, a dented Toyota Avalon with a loud exhaust and missing hubcaps drove down Monroe, the worst street in a neighborhood where rapes, child murder, and domestic violence were common. The driver parked opposite me. I slunk low in the seat to avoid being seen. Two males—a light-skinned African-American and a bearded white male with a shaved head—got out and headed up the steps of a house where loud rap music was blaring through the walls. I had been to that house, too. At that time, I spoke to a tall black male with tattoos and a shaved head. He frowned when I handed him one of the cards I'd made up with my name cell phone number and the \$30,000 figure on it.

With flashlight in hand, I walked across the street, avoiding the cone of light from the lone streetlight at this end that still worked. I headed for their vehicle. Most of the houses were dark except for the one the two men entered and one next door. The sedan wasn't locked. I slipped into the back seat and flashed the beam low all around. I

don't know what I was searching for or what I expected to find. Common sense said to note the car's tags, give it along with a description of the males and the address of the house to Det. Hawley.

The back was littered with fast-food wrappers and empty cans of beer and plastic water bottles. It smelt bad: a reek of sweat and cologne, other odors like spoiled onions or unwashed clothing. My light's beam bounced off it at once where it lay under the driver's seat. My eyes flooded with tears as soon as I held it in my hand. Her engagement ring. We'd met in college. She was studying physics, and I'd given it to her in the Philippines on the day I asked her parents for their daughter's hand in marriage. She'd managed to remove it in the struggle and either shove it or kick under the seat before being subdued. I placed the ring in my pocket and got out, crouching behind the rear wheel, trying to decide my next move.

A door slammed. I peered through the windshield to see them coming out at a trot. They must have been told inside about my visit—or maybe they'd seen the card I'd left with the reward and decided they'd better become scarce. Money goes far in the ghetto despite all those "Bless you, young man" and "good luck" farewells from the devout grandmothers. My reward money talked louder.

My titanium flashlight was purchased in a specialty outfitter store for mountaineers and hikers in Melbourne. It's also a club. The black male hopped in the front passenger seat. As soon as the white male went around to the driver's side, I moved up from the curbside behind the fender and swung at his head just as his hand reached for the door latch.

His companion didn't hear anything because he was too busy fiddling with the

radio. Moving low, I raced around to his side and waited for him to get out. Time stretched absurdly. I had tunnel vision. I was a Neanderthal with a club waiting for my prey to move from its hiding place. Fragments of guttural rap poured out of the vehicle and into the calm night air; the words *fuck*, *bitch*, and *kill* crescendoing around me.

His head out the window. “Yo, Jess ... Jess! Where da fuck you at, man? C’mom, motherfucker, let’s go!”

The door opened, and he got out. Before he straightened up to his full height, I pounced and swung my flashlight. His reflexes deflected the blow. Instead of cracking him across the temple where I aimed, my swing hit him in the face. He howled, fell back inside the car, his nose a spouting geyser of blood. He tried to scramble backward to the driver’s side, but I slammed the flashlight on his kneecap. By then, adrenalin was surging through both of us. He grunted, growled animal sounds from his throat and tried to evade my next swing, his head well out of range.

Instinctively, I grabbed the fabric of his pants at the crotch and squeezed my hand into a fist. I jerked him out of the car, and he flopped on his back on the lawn. He raised his arms to ward off my swings. I clubbed at his hands and forearms, battering my way clear to a head shot. He ignored the pain. I missed and kept missing while he twisted away from my blows. Finally, I clipped him on the chin with enough force to knock him out cold.

Lights were coming on in the party house and the one next door. I heard a door opening. Shouts, unintelligible words coming from both directions. I concentrated on one thing: sprinting to my car, swinging parallel to theirs, hauling the dead weight of two unconscious males into my trunk, all the while

panting and wheezing. As I used my shoulder to pile one body on top of the other, a bullet sizzled the air next to my right ear. Another thunked into the fender. I never heard the shots.

With the lid flipped open, I hopped in and gunned it up the street, stopping only for a few seconds at the intersection of Monroe and Main to get out to shove in a leg of one and an arm of another to close the trunk—a clownish spectacle, if anyone had witnessed. I was conscious of myself but thoughtless at the same time, my brain on autopilot.

I drove down to the gulf near the jogging path where my beloved was brutally assaulted and murdered. In the dark, I had to guess where the spot was. The crime-scene tape was long gone. I parked in a dense thicket of stunted weeds and tall grasses oblivious to the likelihood of being stuck.

Groaning from the trunk. With my “club” raised, I opened it.

Grabbing the black male first under the shoulders, I lifted him out and laid him on the grass. I heaved and pulled at the white male, whose body seemed to be part-concrete, part-elastic. I was afraid I might have killed him with that one vicious blow.

Wiping the flashlight free of blood and sweat, I positioned myself above each man’s head. I struck down with a measured blow. Then again. Before I knew it, I rained blows on each man’s head, spouting a rant of insane gibberish, vile obscenities discharged like mucous from my mouth, filthy expressions I had never used in my life, putrid and ugly words that spewed out. I clubbed and kept swinging, the thwack of the blows created a hideous rhythm of its own. Obscenities interspersed with the sound of human heads being destroyed until nothing

was left but pulp. My arm ached, but I kept swinging. I pounded teeth out of jaws and split mandibles apart. No one, not their mothers, or whatever women they fornicated with could recognize them. A shotgun in their mouths would have done less damage.

Exhausted, sobbing, I fell down into the grass, my sodden flashlight still gripped in my hand despite the bits of bone and flesh adhering to it.

The three-corner turn must have been done with that lower part of the human brain, the one beneath the neocortex because I don't remember getting in, starting the car, or driving home other than blurred images of streets and familiar buildings I passed.

My bruised hands and sore fingers peeled off the clothes as I walked up the steps of my house to shower off the blood. I crawled into bed and fell asleep for two days.

I was vacuuming the carpets, looking for blood stains, when Detective Hawley called to tell me two bodies were found in the gulf near María Victoria's crime scene.

He wanted me to come down to the precinct. I told him to go fuck himself. I'd never said that to anyone in my life—at least not without holding a weaponized flashlight in my hand.

The cops know I did it. They're building a case. It's been weeks. The crime-beat reporter for the *Tribune* called for an interview. He wouldn't say how he got my name or why he wanted to talk to me about the two "unsolved crimes in the gulf." He got the same message as Det. Hawley.

My passport hasn't been blocked, although I'm noted as "a person of interest." Maybe I'll stay and see it through. María

Victoria would want me to. It's odd that I feel no guilt or shame.

Quite the opposite. I feel ... *pleased*, if that's the right word.

Would I still consider myself a civilized man? That depends on your definition of "civilized," doesn't it?

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Thank you for reading the sample for our 3rd issue! If you'd like to read the full issue, you can find it [HERE](#)

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