

DAVID OWAIN HUGHES

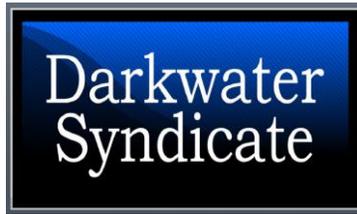


**SOUTH BY
SOUTHWEST
WALES**

"Part noir detective thriller, part insight into the dark world of alcoholism... Pure magic."
—Richard Ayre

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BY
SOUTHWEST WALES**

DAVID OWAIN HUGHES



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Postcards from the Void

CHAPTER 1

Samson was sat at the bar, hunched over his whisky on the rocks. Old Bush Mill was his favourite brand and the Jazz Hole was the only joint in town that served it, which just happened to be his kind of place in the ever-modernising 1940's Chicago.

He frequented the Hole most evenings, where he burned his pay and listened to the new talent. Hell, if he could afford to live at the small club then he would; but the only room for rent was the bottom of a whisky bottle, which he could barely afford anyway.

Samson was nursing his eighth whisky and was down to his last yard in beer tokens. With his bills paid, the rest of his *mazuma* was his to do with as he pleased.

Business was bad for washed-up private eyes like Samson. Work had all but dried up. For the last two years, he'd struggled to find jobs just to keep his business afloat.

"Back five years, things had been golden, punk," he slurred, turning to the young buck sitting next to him. Through glazed eyes, Samson took in the man's fancy attire: black slacks, crisp white Oxford shirt with rolled up sleeves and braces, two-tone black and white shoes.

"Excuse me?"

"I was cracking the huge cases and sending the big bad wolves to the caboose when I was your age, pal. Drug dealers, pushers, mules, pimps, rapists, muggers, carjackers, killers... You name the trader, and chances are ole' Samson here put 'em in the big house."

"Are you talking to me?" he asked Samson.

Samson shifted his gaze toward the mirror that hung behind the bar. "Best goddamn decade of my life..." he slurred, holding up his drink as though to toast to his reflection. "Here's to the best gumshoe this rat hole for a city has ever seen!"

"Drunken fool!" the younger man said, putting his money on the counter and getting up to leave.

Samson snorted, downed the fiery contents, and then placed his glass on the bar. After straightening his fedora and tie, he called the barman over.

"Steve, can I get another, please?"

Samson liked Steve. Sure, the man was a bit of a palooka, but he was a salt-of-the-Earth kind of guy.

He'd fit perfectly into a Raymond Chandler novel... Samson thought, eyeing the large, brutish-looking barman. Just over Steve's shoulder, Samson saw a skinny black male musician onstage assembling a saxophone. *I've not seen his mug around here before. The kid must be new. I hope he's as good as his ice-cool swagger holds him out to be.*

Steve shook his head. "Think maybe you've had enough, Valentine. How abouts you pack it in and go home for the evening?" When he said so, it held weight—Steve owned the place, after all.

Valentine, Samson groused. Always with the Valentine.

Not once could Samson recall the mustachioed barman referring to him by his first name.

"I just want to hear the kid play, Steve. You know how I like to listen to the new talent. Come on, give a guy a break."

Steve sighed as he stopped in front of Samson and put his hands on the bar. "Why do you keep coming in here, Valentine? You know you can't afford to plough through my whisky the way you do."

"How do you know I'm not close to cracking the big one, wise guy?"

"Sorry, I forgot I was talking to the *real* Sam Spade." Both men smiled, Steve laughed. "Next you'll be hauling me in for selling liquor during prohibition..."

"You know, sarcasm isn't your strongest suit, pal. I'd stick to the day job and can the humour altogether; you haven't got the face or charm for it. Besides, prohibition went out seven years ago."

"Ah, shut your *yap*, Valentine!" He turned to grab the Old Bush Mill off the shelf behind him and uncapped it. "Yap?" he said to himself. "Now you've got me talking like you, Valentine." After filling Samson's glass, he replaced the bottle. "This one's free."

"There—"

Steve waved his hand. "You're a good customer, Val. The odd one or two on the house ain't goin' to cripple me, but you really should consider leaving the socialising alone."

"Duly noted, Steve. Now, would you be so kind as to remove yourself from my sight? You're spoiling the view." Samson took a sip from his drink and indicated the musician with a stiff nod.

Steve smiled, whipped the towel off his shoulder and headed down to the other end of the bar where a pack of suits were waiting to be served.

Samson removed his tin of cigarillos and lighter from the pocket of his trench coat and lit one. As he blew the first thin trails of smoke from his mouth, the sax player started. The lights dimmed.

The soft, melancholic sounds danced inside Samson's head as he took another drag on his thin cigar. He reached for his whisky and downed a mouthful; all the while his gaze never leaving the young performer.

Such talent...

When the song came to an end, Samson pounded the rest of his drink and gave a standing ovation.

"Steve!" he shouted over the applause. "Another, please."

With his tumbler now full, Samson settled on his barstool to watch the rest of the performance, not caring that it was now almost three in the morning.

The sax's ghostly sounds turned his blood cold—the hairs at the back of his neck stood on end.

This kid's good; he's going places, he thought, slugging back his whisky and calling for top-ups.

* * *

The music came to an end at four and Samson found he was one of a few customers left in the musty Jazz Hole, which wasn't uncommon. Usually, he was last out of the door.

On shaking legs that barely supported his large frame, Samson stood and exhaled loudly – the whisky had drowned his brain. His vision wavered, a fog rolled down over his eyes.

"Time, people!" Steve bellowed as he rang a bell mounted on the wall behind the bar. In the brass, the word *Titanic* had been inscribed. Steve liked to tell naïve barflies how the clanger had been retrieved from the infamous ship's wreck.

"He definitely needs to leave the joking there," Samson muttered, patting himself down to locate the key to his flat.

"That means you too, Valentine – my sofa's off limits these days. You know that."

"Yeah, so you keep saying," Samson said, and then let out a series of wild hiccups as he walked towards the door, fearing his pins would collapse beneath him all the while.

"Mind your step, Val. I'll see you tomorrow evening," Steve called.

"Not if I see you first, pilgrim!" Samson said, grabbing a hold of the brass door handle and pulling it towards him.

"I really do wish you'd knock it off with the Americanisms, not to mention the fedora and trench coat – this is *not* 1940's Chicago!"

"Uhhh-ugh!" Samson grumbled incoherently, walking out into the late summer night. A stiff breeze tousled his hair and flapped the lapels of his battleship grey coat.

The ugly sounds of the city engulfed him, playing out in a neon haze: loud, pounding disco music, drunken teens shouting and baiting each other into fights, distant sirens, the rush of traffic, backfires, thumps, bangs and screams.

He knew muggings, sex crimes and drug pushing were going on all around him in the city – they had always been there, but things were never so bad as they were now.

At one time, Samson had taken pride in helping to keep the streets clean. Once, he'd have been proud to call Cardiff his home, but not these days.

Cardiff? he thought. *No, Chicago!* He looked up at the modern skyscrapers that loomed over him like demonic idols. All of a sudden, the city didn't seem right. He was confused, disoriented; and turned back to look at the jazz club, with its 40's décor.

"What the...?" he mouthed, turning to walk down the street. A newspaper blew towards him, which he bent over to snag. His eyes sought out the date: "Tenth of the fifth, two-thousand-and-one." The name of the rag: *Cardiff Metro News*.

Too much to drink, boyo.

He shook his head and shuffled towards home.

Crime was rampant. The police were overrun and didn't have the time, energy or patience for the help of Samson and his lot. The private eyes had been squeezed out. Besides, most of the cops were on the gangsters' payroll.

Serpico never takes a bribe! he thought, and then belched. *Where does Steve get off on telling me to can the Americanisms and my dress sense?*

He swayed as he ambled along the street, and had to catch himself against the corner of a building to keep from falling over. The air was noxious here. It, along with his heavy intoxication, set his stomach whirling.

I could never give up the fedora and coat. It's who I am. It's my identity. When the bad guys see me coming, they run for their hideouts, but their getaway cars just ain't fast enough for good ole' boy Sam Valentine.

"Hey, freak—go back to *Casablanca!*" someone yelled.

Samson ignored the comment. He was far too drunk to fight or give a damn what people thought of him. At least, that was what he told himself. Drunk or not, the words stung a bit. He raised the lapels of his coat and lowered his hat over his face.

Samson was a relic. Worse—a dinosaur. At least people kept relics and cared for them in places like museums. Dinosaurs were dead. Nowadays, there was as much a need in Cardiff for private eyes as there was for dinosaurs, which was to say, there may once have been a purpose for their existence but when that became obsolete, so did they. Sure, dinosaurs were kept in museums too, but as oddities of the past, and not something most people looked back upon and wished still existed today.

A noise caught his attention as he approached the street corner. He stopped and snapped his head to the left—a couple were rutting like wild animals in the doorway of a pub that had closed its doors for the night.

Her skirt was bunched around her hips, her knickers at her ankles. One high-heeled shoe had come free and lay on its side close to the gutter.

"Fuck me harder!" she squealed between sharp intakes of breath.

Samson caught a flash of her bouncing breasts before looking at the man. The fella, a skinny runt who was half hidden by the shadows, whispered into her ear before yanking on her hair. Her head snatched back and she yelped with delight.

Whore.

Samson was about to say something to them, when he noticed a wino sleeping on the floor close by. A needle jutted from the vein in his filthy arm. An empty bottle of Mother's Ruin lay by his side, and the crotch of his khaki shorts was piss-soaked.

A hint of excrement clung to the air.

"Bloody hell!" Samson uttered, moving on. *Things used to be classy around here. Broads were elegant, especially city ones—they had real pride. The younger generation don't give a damn.*

Further down the street he turned a blind eye to a group of hoods dealing drugs, thinking he saw a roscoe being handed over. The thugs stared him down as he approached. They weren't going to take his shit, not that he was in any shape to start any. Sure, he was tough, but not enough to take on six bruisers, and certainly not while piss drunk.

Not even the thugs are like they used to be, he lamented. *At one time, they had a bit more respect for authority. The new, younger breed of gangster will stab you without thinking twice, let alone tell you to fuck off.*

For the next twenty minutes he swayed and staggered through the streets until he reached his home: Queen's Street Flats, a tower block comprised of ten apartments, a reception area and four lifts, three of which weren't working.

When he got to the main entrance, Samson noticed some men, a woman and a few youths seeking shelter in the doorway with their sleeping bags and cardboard boxes. The place stank of shit and weed.

"Disgusting!" he burped. "Come on, move along. Officer of the law coming through, people," he told them.

"Piss off, Valentine—you're a washed-up hack!" one of the homeless said from the shadows.

The others sniggered.

Three years ago he would have done something about them and their lip, but he felt too old, tired, out of shape and disheartened to bother. The city was a rotting cesspool, and he was just one man.

Instead, he charged by, heat coming to his cheeks. When he eventually passed inside, he walked over to the one working lift and called it. It didn't come.

"Jesus!" He slammed his fist against the aluminium doors. "Stuff this." He walked to the stairs and climbed to the third floor and his flat.

* * *

He wheezed and panted his way to his door and leaned against the wall until his racing heart settled. Black spots danced before his vision.

"I need to slow up with the drinking." He closed his eyes as tight as he could and pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger.

Samson took a couple of deep breaths and reopened his eyes.

Something caught his attention.

"Huh?"

He saw a white piece of paper protruding from his letterbox—an envelope, covered in bloody handprints.

He looked both ways to see if anyone else stood in the hallway, then slipped on a pair of leather gloves and snatched the letter from the box. His heart rate kicked up a few notches when he saw the writing among the blood spatters.

Comply or die, snitch!

CHAPTER 2

His key scraped against the door's lock. Sweat burst across his forehead.

"Come on, come on!" Samson muttered, desperately trying to fire the Yale home. Hearing a door slam closed somewhere in the building nearly sent him into a panic. He snatched a glance over his shoulder. A floorboard creaked.

A light above him winked out.

His key slipped into the lock.

Without hesitating, he turned it, disengaging the bolts. Samson pushed the door inwards with such force that the handle slipped from his grasp and it slammed against the inside wall.

"Shit!"

He dived through the door, slamming it closed behind him and engaging the locks and security chain. Samson looked down at the blood-stained envelope in his shaking paw. "I need a drink," he said, removing his gloves.

He placed the letter on his sideboard and walked through his box-sized flat, passing through the sparsely-furnished living room and into the equally bare kitchen. Even though he lived alone, he kept the place as clean and tidy as he could, and made a point of painting his pad every summer.

Damn place could do with a broad's touch, mind, he thought.

Samson reached for the bread bin. He flipped it open, revealing a half-guzzled bottle of Glenfiddich. He grabbed a tumbler out of the cupboard from above the breakfast bench and poured himself a double-double. The firewater came level with the glass's rim.

"Better!" He slammed the near empty tumbler down, his eyes drifting up as he stared into the living room. From where he stood, Samson could see the letter. "Got to be some kind of mistake; people can't go around threatening me – I'm Johnny law!"

His hands started to relax. The tremble in his legs subsided.

"Got to be a mistake, it's just got to be. People only come to me for the mundane jobs. Nothing serious. Okay, so the last one was pretty well-paid but, it was nothing heavy, and it certainly wouldn't have invoked such a threat... Maybe it's a lover I caught cheating? Nah, I wouldn't think so."

Samson picked up his glass and swallowed the dregs in one swift guzzle. Some of the whisky drizzled down the sides of his mouth and chin. He wiped it away with his free hand.

After thumping the tumbler back down on the table, he stood and glared at the bloody envelope. Then he pulled his eyes from it and looked at the almost dry bottle of whisky. He needed another. Badly.

"That stuff will put ya in your grave, Sam!" Angie, his late second wife prattled within his skull.

Oh, the irony! he thought. *She's the one who's six-feet under. Fancy losing two wives to cancer; just how unlucky can a guy be, right? I'm pretty sure I'm damned.* He smiled, but it was soon wiped away.

The envelope.

The *blood-spattered* envelope.

It gnawed at him.

Open it, damn it! You used to live for this shit, said one part of him.

Yeah, but I've lost my mettle, said the other.

"You can blame that on the drink, Samson!" his wife nagged. *"It's eroded your brain and turned you into a timid little dreamer. Where's that bad guy bashing bruiser I fell in love with gone?"*

Sorry, Angie. I've been nothing but a disappointment. What must you think of me? he thought, looking about his kitchen.

He straightened and curled his large paws into fists.

A fire swelled in his guts.

He thumped the table hard, sending the tumbler airborne. It rattled to a standstill.

"I ain't going to be a failure any longer. I'm taking my dignity back."

Samson snatched the letter off the sideboard and steadied his breathing before ripping it open. Inside was a folded piece of paper, smeared with blood.

He plucked the paper out, not caring about getting his prints on it, and unfolded it—something hit the floor. Samson looked down and saw two severed fingers on the carpet; there was a gold wedding band on one of the stubby, hairy digits. He noticed the nails had been removed.

Torture.

The word bounced around inside his skull until it hit home.

Vomit raced up his throat, but he bit it back down.

"Jesus H. Christ!" He held his liquid meals together and read, hoping the message would offer answers.

If you're reading this, then you're well aware that your petty little friend is no more. I hope you like the gift I've included for you. If you don't want to end up the same way as that no good, lying piece of shit, then I suggest you get your arse to Cardiff Central station by 02:00 a.m. tomorrow morning – there's a package of mine coming in on the Carmarthenshire train.

Don't be late. Or I'll start cutting some of your bits off, and I won't begin with your fingers.

Kindest,

– XRay

"XRay?" Samson thought out loud. *"That nickname doesn't ring a bell."* He tapped his chin and rolled his eyes skyward. *"Package, what package? And what friend? I don't have any."*

He looked down at the severed fingers, and then bent to retrieve them. "I definitely need another drink now."

* * *

The bottle shook in his hand.

"Leave the whisky where it is, Samson!" Angie was back.

"I can't," he argued, scooping up the tumbler to fill it.

"What would Sam Spade think of you?" she jabbed.

"Get out of my head, Angie! You've been dead five years, for Christ's sake."

"I didn't stop loving you when you became a penniless drunk because you were a good man, Samson. Be him again."

"Easier said than done." He took a slug. "Who the hell is XRay?" Samson stalked back into the living room and saw a number nine written on the back of the envelope.

"Nine? I'm six." He opened his door and looked up at the plastic number affixed there. It showed nine. "Impossible." He reached out and touched it. A screw had slipped out, causing it to slide down, turning the six into a nine.

"Well, bloody hell," he huffed, a laugh escaping him as he slapped a hand to his knee. "What a fool I am." Samson was about to close the door when he heard a thump from above.

His living room light shook on its thick white cord.

Goose pimples climbed his arms and the blood froze in his veins. The little hairs at the back of his neck stood on end. His heart galloped.

Crap! It came from number nine. One way or another, I have to go up there. This doesn't belong to me, he thought, looking at the letter. He'd managed to stuff the fingers back into what was left of the envelope.

Samson grabbed his keys from the sideboard, left his flat, and closed the door behind him as quietly as he could.

The light on the landing was still out.

He released the breath he'd been holding.

"Get a grip on yourself, man," he told himself in the shadowy hallway. From below, he heard people coming and going – someone cursed about having to use the stairs, as the 'cunting lifts are out again'.

"Got any crack, man?" Samson heard a man ask as the main door to the building opened and then slammed shut. A gust of wind tore up the stairwell, sending a shiver through him.

"I wish someone would move those tramps along."

"Why don't you do it, stud?" Angie asked.

"Go away."

He proceeded towards the stairs leading to flat nine. By the time he reached the foot of the staircase, silence had fallen like a pall within the building.

Samson started climbing, wishing he'd picked up something hefty from inside his flat to defend himself.

The stairway was dark. He took the stairs slowly, moving up one step at a time. The lack of light didn't bother him so much as the thought that someone might be lurking in the shadows—such as the person who'd delivered him the unwanted mail. His ears pricked at the faintest sound.

There's nobody there, he told himself. Nine. Who lives there? The new guy, right? The one people call 'Vampire', because he's never seen in daylight. By keeping the cogs in his mind turning, Samson kept from spooking himself. *XRay, Vampire – what a crazy world we live in these days.*

When he reached the top step, he looked around the corner to his right, followed by a glance to the left. Nothing. The hallway was deserted. Moonlight, mixed with the neon blazing from the apartment block's sign, poured through the skylight and side windows, illuminating flats seven and eight in a milky-purple hue.

Flat nine was at the far end of the hall. The door was tucked into the corner, out of sight.

He stood for a moment, waiting, listening. A TV or a radio blared from behind one of the doors.

Here goes nothing.

Samson stepped onto the landing and walked past flat number eight. When he got to nine, he stood in front of it and raised his hand to knock. Instead, he froze and looked down at his feet. Light seeped out from beneath the door.

Someone was home.

I'm about to spoil this poor mug's evening! Samson gave the wood three hard thumps, and then stood back. *What if the stool-pigeon comes at me with a knife, possibly a roscoe?*

He pushed his fears aside and gave the door a few more welts.

It won't come to that.

When there was no answer, Samson stepped forward and put his ear to the wood. A cat meowed, a radio played soft blues by Muddy Waters.

What's this palooka's real name?

Samson looked down at the flat's buzzer. Underneath the button to activate the chime he saw the name Johnson etched on a thin piece of paper behind the Perspex that kept it in place.

Vampire Johnson? He almost laughed at that one, which scared him. *Jesus, I thought my sense of humour was returning.*

"Johnson? Are you in there?" Samson gave the door more knocks. It creaked open on its hinges— whoever was here had left it ajar. *He left it off the latch? If that's the case, he can't have gone too far.*

A musty smell emanated from inside, causing Samson's nose to wrinkle.

"Johnson? This is Samson Valentine. I live in flat six. I have mail for you."

Nothing, besides the cat and Muddy.

"It was delivered to me by accident. I'm coming in."

At times like this, Samson wished he owned a gun.

Then I could pump some lead if things got hairy.

Often, he would imagine himself in a shootout on a mist-covered shipping dock, or caught in a gunfight down a smog-filled alley.

Yeah, I used to live for this madness.

"Johnson?" He feared his yelling would bring someone running.

As he walked past the radio, he switched it off and a new sound met his ears.

A faint creak.

"Who's there?" Samson shouted. "Answer me, goddamn it, or I'll start spraying lead!"

Nothing. Just a persistent groan from the distance and the cat's cries.

Samson walked into the kitchen, immediately colliding with the corpse that dangled from the ceiling. Johnson's neck was stretched by the crude hangman's noose fashioned from knotted tea towels.

His tongue lolled from between purple lips. His face had lost its colour, leaving behind an ashen tone. He was fully clothed, but shoeless. Tucked between the buttons of his shirt was a crumpled piece of paper.

With a trembling hand, Samson stepped forward and plucked the note from its home. Opening it, he read aloud.

To whoever finds this, I'm sorry. I couldn't go on. The underworld knows I'm a dirty fucking grass – they know I live in the pockets of the police. If I didn't do myself in, then they would have done it for me. One thing I will ask of you is that you warn my family. Get them out of town. When XRay and his backers come for me, they'll also go for my family. I know I wasn't a good man and that I'm a coward, but my loved ones don't deserve to die. Please, help!

– Vampire.

A wave of nausea washed over him.

The ole' guts ain't what they used to be. Not that I'm used to seeing such sights, he thought. After steadying himself, a smile flicked across his mouth, but died instantly. He reached for his cigarillos and lighter from his pocket, lit one and stared up at the bloated face of the low-level foot soldier.

"I can't believe this son of a gun actually went by the nickname Vampire."

Now, I can either turn this over to the boys in blue, or I can get out there to the apple and start sniffing around, he thought, looking out the kitchen window at the neon jungle before him. Maybe I can find out what type of business this here Vampire got himself mixed up in. Perhaps pinch Mr. XRay while I'm at it.

"A return to glory, Sam..." Angie nagged.

As he turned to leave, he noticed the pro skirt dead on Vampire's sofa.

He knew her face well. Too well, in fact. The hooker had been a steady singer at the Hole a few years back, until she fell from grace and got mixed up with the wrong crowd.

Samson had tried to help her. He had given her his bed on many an occasion – not for her to practice her secondary career, but only because it was the gentlemanly thing to do. The right thing to do. She was so young she could have passed for his daughter.

“Stevie!” he cried, shaking his head. Her thin, almost bony corpse was covered in dried blood. Her blonde hair was a red mess; a thatch of horror. Her make-up was smeared. Her lips covered in foam and vomit, suggesting an overdose.

Why the blood?

“What the hell did he do to her, Vampire?”

And then he noticed her delicate throat. It had been sliced open.

Samson stood, scrunched up the suicide note and stalked towards the door, his mind made up.

“Some hop-head’s going to pay for this, and the local body collector may want to start organising Chicago overcoats,” he said, rubbing the day-old stubble that mottled his chin.

Did he have it in him? He didn’t know, but he had to try.

He slammed the door as he went, leaving the dead to their big sleep.

CHAPTER 3

Angie wouldn't shut up.

She hadn't been this active in a long time. He blamed it on sobriety, and planned to change that between now and having to go to the train station tomorrow morning.

I should have kept drinking when I got back from the Hole, he thought as he sat in his worn out easy chair. He had a fresh glass of whisky in one hand, a cigarillo in the other, an ashtray sat on his crotch. A new bottle of Glenfiddich, which he'd dug out from its hiding place in the bedroom cupboard, stood by the side of his chair.

Soft jazz played on his gramophone.

He sat in the dark, curtains closed to a sliver. The early morning sunrise shone into his flat.

Samson tipped his head back, expelling smoke into the air above him. Between the two vices and the soothing sound of Nina Simone, he felt detached from his body.

His eyes locked onto the ceiling. He could see Stevie's young, pretty face up there, beyond the boards and carpet. "The dark terrified her," he muttered, taking a solid gulp of whisky, followed by a hearty drag on his cigar. "Should have kept drinking, Samson; this ugly, violent world just ain't fit for your kind to walk any longer – only the young and strong can move about in this hell."

Nina was replaced by Miles Davis.

Samson reread the suicide note, along with the letter he'd received with the detached fingers.

"How could they make the mistake of delivering to the wrong door? Okay, so the whole number thing threw them, but still! Surely XRay's hatchet-men know where one of their own lives?" he wondered aloud. "Doesn't make sense."

"They're going to mistake you for Vampire!" Angie said.

"I know, muffin. I know." Tears formed in his eyes. "Why did you have to leave me, babe?" He swallowed the rest of his whisky and poured another. "Knock it off!" He slapped his face. "She's dead. Keep chasing ghosts, and you'll wind up in the nuthouse."

"Keep pounding whisky and you'll end up in the boneyard!"

He ignored her and looked at the letters, which lay in a pile on the arm of his chair.

"Not much can be gleaned from them. The only thing I can do is go to the train station, get the package, and go from there."

With the next whisky spent, he decided against another.

Best get my head down. I need to be up in a few hours, and I think I'll mosey on over to the docks and see if I can find out about Stevie's involvement with Vampire.

He rose from his chair, headed to the bedroom. He turned the gramophone off as he went. *I always did wonder where Stevie disappeared to. We were so close.*

"The daughter we could never have, Sam."

Samson stripped out of his suit and placed his fedora on the hat stand. He flopped onto his bed, his head spinning.

First Angie, now Stevie.

"Don't forget Claire."

Claire, wife number one.

His mind drifted and his eyes closed, but sleep didn't come easy: his dreams were a swirling mess.

* * *

The blare of mid-afternoon work traffic stirred him and Samson awoke with a start. He sat bolt upright.

"What, where?!" he gasped in the darkness of his room—a blackout roller blind covered his window, shutting out the sun. Sweat rolled down his face and out-of-shape body. "Nightmares," he muttered, running a hand through his shaggy hair, followed by a rub of his unkempt chin.

He pushed himself off the bed and made his way into the living room for a whisky, and took it to the bathroom with him.

"Ugh, you look like something the cat dragged in, Val." Samson ripped his gaze away from the bathroom mirror and took a piss. It came out in a hot, angry stream. All he could smell was whisky. Once finished, he washed his hands and downed the firewater in one gulp.

He poured another.

Samson drank as he dressed and then headed out the door with both letters stuffed into the breast pocket of his coat. As he made his way down the staircase, he donned his fedora and tie.

"Best I call in that mess upstairs—I don't want the good ole' boys thinking I'm withholding too much information."

When he stepped outside, the glaring sun hurt his eyes and made his brain ache, but it didn't stop him. He walked into the middle of the street and tried to flag a taxi.

A clattering sound from above caused him to look up. Samson saw trains moving in opposite directions. "That's the best piece of engineering the great city of Chicago could have brought in." Smoke engulfed him, causing him to cough and fan his face with his hat.

"Taxi!" a man yelled next to him.

Samson noticed the chap was well-dressed, with a copy of that day's *Chicago Defender* tucked under his arm. Samson didn't care much for that newspaper—he preferred the *South Town Star*, which had a better quality of journalism, as far as he was concerned.

A Yellow Cab Company taxi screeched to a halt in front of them. Samson had to jump back or else risk losing his toes to the cab's tyres. The cab was off again once the businessman had clambered inside.

"Don't mind the rest of us, palooka!" Samson raised his fist and shook it.

"Get in, chap," someone said.

"Huh?" Samson looked over his shoulder and saw a Checker Taxi parked beside him.

"I said get in – meter's running. I ain't got all day."

Sam did as he was instructed. Before he could speak, the cabby cut in.

"Huh, of all the taxis in all the towns in all the world, you step into mine."

Samson gave the driver a hard stare. "Docks," he said, dryly.

"Jesus, pal – did a whisky-head crawl up your arse and die? You reek."

"Step on it!" Samson snapped. "I ain't paying you to gab, palooka."

The cabby didn't answer, just laughed and shook his head. As the taxi pulled from the curb, Samson noticed a gang of youths loitering outside his apartment block.

"Bloody wasters," he muttered.

He turned in his seat and looked at them through the back window. They were unloading bottles of cheap cider out of shopping bags. Before the taxi disappeared around a corner, Samson had enough time to see them pass a bag of drugs and a few bottles of pills between themselves.

"In broad daylight, too! They have no shame."

The boys in blue won't do a damn thing about it, either. They won't even move them along. Nobody cares – I'm the last of the good guys. A lone ranger among a land full of Injuns, he thought.

* * *

The cabby didn't speak much, and brushed off Samson's conversation about the great cab wars that broke out in the city a few years back. The man didn't seem to know what he was talking about.

Some professional, he'd thought, and kept his mouth shut from that point on. He'd spent the rest of the journey looking out of the windows at people queuing at the big department stores – the Marshall Field and Co., and the Carson Pirie Scott's. He'd marvelled at the refined, sophisticated ladies in their pretty late afternoon dresses, furs and big hats.

Ten minutes later, the taxi pulled up at the docks. Samson paid the driver and got out.

"Thanks," Samson muttered, his lips around a cigarillo as he flicked his lighter.

The sun was starting to set behind the docked ships, casting them in a red-orange hue. Waves could be heard crashing against the port's walls, along with dock workers laughing and talking, as they hauled cargo up, down and off the ships.

Samson looked around as he drew on his cigar. He wasn't sure who he was searching for, or where he or she might be found. The place had changed dramatically in the past twelve months. It wasn't an area he frequented, but he knew the pro skirts hung around here.

"Maybe I'm too early," he said, looking at his watch. It was a lick after seven.

He made his way along the dockyard and stopped to speak with a worker. "Hey, excuse me, friend."

The large, chequered-shirt wearing man turned and stared at Samson. "Who are you? You can't be here!" he said, shoving his clipboard into Samson's chest.

"Relax, pal. I'm with the law."

The man looked bewildered. "The law?"

"Yeah, and I'm down here investigating a murder. Mind telling me where I can find the skirts?"

"Skirts? Law? You're talking in riddles, mate."

"The skirts, the pros – you know. *Whores*, man. The whores."

"Not here, matey! They've not worked the dockyards in almost two years." He turned and pointed behind him. "They hang around over there these days. Call it the Magic Roundabout, they do."

Samson looked over the man's shoulder. There was no roundabout. The man had pointed toward a stretch of road that led into the city. His head spun. The place didn't look the same. Disorientation crashed down onto Samson's addled mind.

"Did you hear me, lawman?" the worker sniggered.

Samson saw the words *Cardiff Shipping* stencilled on the crates and ships around him.

"Where – where am I?" he mumbled.

"Hey man, are you feeling okay?"

Samson shook his head. "I mean, what time?"

The guy looked at his watch. "Usually around nine, I'd say. Most of us have gone home by then, and that's when the weirdos come out to play. Until then, they hide and whisper in the shadows. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to get these crates unloaded." He indicated a stack of large boxes on the back of a wagon.

Samson nodded, dragged on his cigar and walked towards the road the man had pointed to. As he sauntered on, he noticed the graffiti splashed across most of the walls, buildings, bins, cargo containers, and everything else the street gangs saw fit to tag. A word that kept appearing amongst the brightly drawn gang stamps was XRay.

"Who the hell is this person, a Messiah? The second coming? Bloody flunkies and their codenames!"

* * *

It was a shade past seven-thirty when Samson reached his destination. Already there was a lone lady on the street corner. Samson eyed her for a second, just to make sure she was what he thought she appeared to be. She wore a short skirt that almost revealed her knickers, thigh-high boots, a glossy blouse and a petite fur jacket. Her pink bra was visible through her top's flimsy fabric.

He walked in her direction.

A car pulled to the curb in front of her. She bent over and talked to the driver through the open passenger window.

Best step on it, Valentine. We can't lose her and risk being stuck around here for another hour or so.

"Miss?" he called, seeing her grab the car's door handle. "Miss!" Samson raised his voice, finally getting her attention.

She looked over her shoulder; confusion plain on her face.

"Can I have a quick word, please?"

"Who are you?" She looked him up and down.

"Valentine. Samson Valentine—I'm a private investigator working out of Chi—Cardiff. I have a few questions I'd like to ask."

"Can't you see I'm working here?" she huffed.

"Are you coming?" the driver asked, thumping the steering wheel.

"Hang on," she told him. "What's this about?"

"If we could go somewhere—"

"I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what's going on. Also, I want to see some ID."

Smart girl, he thought. I like her moxie.

"Fuck this!" The driver put his car into drive and sped off.

"Great. You've just cost me a job, dickhead!" She jabbed a finger at Samson's face.

He ignored her and handed over his ID. "I'm investigating the death of Stevie Oaks. I believe she worked these docks?"

"Why are you poking your nose into her death? Shouldn't the real police be handling it?"

"So you knew she'd been killed? How?"

"News travels fast around these parts."

"You don't seem too upset about it. I was a close friend of Stevie's, before she wound up getting murdered by some lowlife. Now, you can either tell me what you know, or I'll pinch you for street walking."

"Huh, I know a bit about police work. You can't just arrest me, asshole! You don't have the power—"

"Maybe," he cut her off, "but I sure as hell can take you in, missy—I can make a citizen's arrest, see."

The colour slowly drained from her face. "Look, I don't know much, okay? I have a daughter at home who needs her mother. I need to hook."

"I'm not interested in you. I'm interested in the string-puller, the person in charge. Do you know who killed her?"

The skirt shuffled her feet. Her eyes made rapid, twitchy movements. Sweat beaded her brow. "I can't say too much," she whispered. "He has people everywhere."

"Who has people everywhere?" He grabbed her by the shoulders. "XRay?"

She gave a slight nod of her head.

"He works you gals?"

"No. That'd be Magic Mike. He can be found at the Railroad Café. It's just down the road. He might be willing to tell you more, if you can lean on him. Please, don't tell him

we spoke, or I'm likely to end up like our mutual friend," she said, pushing past him to walk off.

There were more questions he wanted to ask, but didn't want to push too much, just in case it did get her nailed. "Miss?"

"What?" she turned on him, stomping her foot.

"Your name?"

"Roxie, why?"

"I might be back,"

Arms crossed, she rolled her eyes. "Great, can't wait."

With that, Roxie wiggled her fine arse into the dying light, leaving Samson to stand alone beneath a streetlamp that drenched him in an orange glow.

"Magic Mike?" he muttered, rubbing his chin. He lit a fresh cigarillo and made his way towards the Railroad Café.

* * *

The joint was a real piece of work, he mused, which was to say, it wasn't a real café at all.

Sure, the exterior had all the hallmarks of a greasy spoon: menu boards clung to the walls on either side of the front door, which had *Railroad Café* stencilled across the glass and windows. Someone had even taken the time to place quaint tables and chairs outside, complete with tiny flower pots and chequered tablecloths.

Who the hell are they kiddin'? Samson thought, approaching the front door. *From a mile off, anyone can tell it was a whorehouse, even a drunken, washed up bozo like me.* He looked up at the top windows and saw some girls displaying their goods.

Before he could enter, a huge black man walked out to greet him. He was draped in gold: rings, chains, watches...

"Who's you, blood?" the bouncer snarled.

Samson stood back. He'd always considered himself a big bloke, but the beast who stood before him cast a shadow over Samson.

"Magic Mike?" Samson asked.

"Who's asking, fool? Speak up."

Samson reached for his wallet, provoking Magic Mike to produce a flick-knife from his oversized jacket. "Slowly, player," Mike said, shoving the blade under Samson's nose.

"I was just going for my wallet, friend. No need to be so hot-headed. Here," he said, handing Mike his ID.

"You a pig?"

"Not quite, but I do work in the field of law. I'm here to ask —"

"Says you a private investigator."

"Did you know Stevie Oaks?"

"Yo man, get the fuck outta here, before I set the dogs on your arse!" Mike said, brandishing his knife at Samson.

"Did you?" Samson shouted

"Dat whore got wha' she deserved!"

Samson narrowed his eyes. "Thanks." He clenched his teeth. A flash of electricity sparked through his guts, and a chunk of his former self clicked back into place.

"Wha' for?"

"For the information. It was all I needed to know."

"Do it!" Angie yelled.

In a swift, precise movement, Samson knocked the flick knife to one side with one hand, whilst hopping into the air to give the side of Mike's bull-like neck a chop with his other.

"Ugh!" the bigger man groaned, bending over.

Samson powered upward with a knee, catching Mike square in the jaw. He heard Magic's back crack as he was forced upright. With all his strength, Samson shoved his opponent in the chest, hurling him backward and through the front window of the café.

The glass rained down in sliver droplets, reminding him of spent shells.

Mike's whores scattered like rabbits out of a hutch.

Not stopping to see if the man was injured or not, Samson headed out onto the main street.

"I think he's dead!" he heard a girl screech.

Stopping to light another cigarillo, a grin pulled across Samson's face.

Talk about a dead end! Hopefully I'll have more luck tonight at the train station as I work my way up this greasy pole.

END OF SAMPLE

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The places in this book are shunned, abandoned and forgotten. They do not exist, and yet here you will find the stories of people who have gone and survived to tell their tales, complete with photographs. These are the postcards from the void, frightful evidence of places that should not be, and yet exist in our nightmares. Should you dare to venture into these blighted places, remember: don't talk to strangers; don't stray far from home; and never, ever go in alone.

Slasher Sam

By: Simon Petersen

Slasher Sam writes a killer blog. When Sam isn't gutting victims, the serial killer/blogger is posting it to the Internet for the world to see, putting readers so close to the action that they're practically in the splash zone when the blood and guts go flying.

Holy

By: Abbie Krupnick

Gus Stevens has the worst of both worlds. By night, he resides in the Dream World, a place steeped in magic and chock full of exotic dangers, with hardly a way to defend himself. By day, a giant snow-lizard, the ravenous personification of Winter, stalks him in the Real World, looking to make Gus its next meal. Author Abbie Krupnick blends the magical and the mundane in this avant-garde dark fantasy where nothing is as it seems.

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By: R. Perez de Pereda

A briefcase full of money lies on the floor. Would you take it? What if the money belonged to a crime lord, and taking it set you running for your life? Still sound good? It did to Ryan, who had nothing to lose.

Born a child of the streets, Ryan Cantril learned early on to fight for his keep, and sometimes just to keep what he earned. Now in his thirties, the self-proclaimed king of the sucker punch fights to keep the cash he rightfully stole from a powerful crime syndicate – and if he's lucky, his life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Owain Hughes is a horror freak! He grew up on ninja, pirate and horror movies from the age of five, which helped rapidly install in him a vivid imagination. When he grows up, he wishes to be a serial killer with a part-time job in women's lingerie...

He's had several short stories published in various online magazines and anthologies, along with articles, reviews and interviews. He's written for *This Is Horror*, *Blood Magazine* and *Horror Geeks Magazine*. He's the author of the popular novels *Walled In* and *Wind-Up Toy*, along with his short story collections, *White Walls and Straitjackets* and *Choice Cuts*.

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