

34

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04 THE HUNGER OF THE DEAD BY WILLIAM K BURKE

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A person wearing a dark, herringbone-patterned suit jacket is shown from the chest up. Their right hand is raised, palm facing forward, towards a very bright, circular light source that dominates the upper right portion of the frame. The background is a blurred grid of light and dark squares, suggesting a window or a screen. The overall lighting is dramatic, with the person's face and suit appearing in deep shadow against the intense light.

**Ask me what I would give
to have my life back.**



He got too lucky and was beaten to death in the alley. Now he wanders the place. Looking for something, or somebody.

THE HUNGER OF THE DEAD
BY WILLIAM K BURKE

The hotel had an old-world extravagance of pillared and corniced windows two-storeys tall, and columns adorned with vine and leaf woodwork swarming with gargoyles and cherubs. Stern faces, boasting identical full beards, swooping mustaches, and grim brows watched over troops of half-clad nymphs running through the foliage.. Evidently the long-dead wood carver had been free to follow his fancies and dreams.

This lush world carved so long ago looked out on the plain-built main street of a sturdy farming city that served as the unofficial capital of Oregon's wine-growing region.

The woman waiting at the welcome desk wore a black linen dress cut high at the neck and long in the sleeves. She had the whitest hair I have ever seen. Cut in a bob, it glowed like silver in the light. Her bangs curled a bit. Her thin lips, pale complexion, and washed-out blue eyes reminded me of something, but I chased that thought away.

I know it is old school, but I feel it is important that service staff know they are there to wait upon my needs and my whims. I always establish quickly that a certain social order will be maintained in our relations.

"Appleton Kenworth, I have a reservation."

"You do. Welcome to the McCann Hotel."

"So is the restaurant worth the cost of its meals?" I asked.

06

“Tonight I would not eat anywhere else.”

“I appreciate your loyalty, but I feel entitled to your honesty.”

“I really think you should eat in our main dining room tonight.”

“So you said. But why?”

“Tonight is the hundred and first anniversary of the founding of this hotel. We are having a party.”

A group of young people headed down the main hall, giggling. A woman with long dark hair walked past with a red balloon tied to her wrist.

“Please join in. You’ll enjoy it. We have added items to the menu.”

“A special burger with extra onions? Something like that?”

She held her face unsmiling, her expression polished; a professional’s implicit worry for my well-being written in faint lines on her forehead and accented by the sympathetic curl of her tight lips. She let my rudeness hang between us while she held out a key card.

“I suppose that you are only telling me I have no choice. You should know that I don’t write online reviews. I talk to people. People who buy and sell properties such as this.”

Before I could pivot to stalk off in my most imperious manner thin fingers grasped my wrist.

“I’m so sorry, sir. I gave you the wrong key.”

“Wrong?”

“Yes. You are in Room 315, not 215. My error entirely. So sorry. And here’s our brochure. You should really learn about our history. And visit the garden. It’s only been here 50 years, but it has an effect.”

“Well then,” I managed.

My bag was on the heavy side and my expandable briefcase was full of bottles of wine, so I elected to take the elevator. Its door was painted with a reproduction in minute detail of the elevator’s interior except that in a corner was the trouser leg and shoe of a well-dressed man, as if he was stepping through the door just before it closed, and leaving you behind.

The third floor was quiet. Completely quiet. My footfalls seemed an intrusion, smothered in a thick carpet and heavy woodwork.

The room was simple, almost severe, and did not invite me to stay. The bed took up half the room. A television sat on the chest of drawers and an old-fashioned clock radio was on the table beside the bed.

After checking my phone, noting that my brother had still not responded to my happy birthday text, I went into the washroom and studied myself in the mirror. I brushed my hands down the lapels of my tweed blazer and pronounced myself ready for a hopefully better than mediocre meal.

Her eyes were charming and blue. “I take it you were not brought here by the buy one dinner get one free coupon.”

Blinking at the mirror my mind filled with images from the day, of the cows lined up waiting their turn to step into the killing pen where a bolt gun finished their time on this planet. One cow tried to climb out of the chute. She got her front legs over the steel bars and hung there, bellowing and kicking until one of the workers hit her with an electric rod. “Sometimes they smell the blood,” the foreman told me.

I turned from the mirror and checked to see that my suits were hung, my personal items arranged the way I like them.

Floating balloons filled my view as I went into the hotel dining room. They were tied to each chair’s back in clusters. Children raced among the tables clutching batches of red, yellow, blue, and green orbs that jostled along behind them. Some of the balloons had slipped free and wafted along the ceiling in breezes created by broad-bladed old-time fans hanging from a ceiling of antique pressed and patterned tin. Shapes like leaves swirled and blended and lost themselves in each other until my eyes gave up and returned to the jumble of people, tables, balloons, and waiting staff. Such ceilings are treasured now, realtors try to use them to up the price of moldering storefront properties, but in their time they were a sign that the budget would not allow a real plasterer to create an original design.

I was told the wait for a table would be at least an hour, but since I was alone I could take a seat at the bar immediately. I nodded. This was not a situation worth a squabble. I almost regretted my compliance when I was shown to a bar stool next to the station where the wait staff received their drink orders. This was not going to be the quiet reflective dinner I had contemplated. Such is life. We must all make compromises.

I placed my meal order and started to work on what the bartender chose to pass off as a high-end Manhattan. It had a maraschino cherry that no doubt had spent the morning in an over-sized syrup-filled can with several hundred of its fellows.

I noticed a pretty woman sitting next to me. Beyond her an over-fed father spilling ham-hocks of flesh out of polyester shorts was plying his children with French fries. No relation there.

The woman wore an elegant loosely buttoned silk blouse in two shades of blue and a pair of tight black slacks. Her chipmunk-brown hair was cut sleek as a yacht's sail. I decided she would be worth speaking to. Nothing over the top. A simple question.

"Excuse me," I said, pausing for a sip to give her time to take in my appearance, "can you tell me what is going on here? Some sort of celebration?"

"Tonight is the hundred and first anniversary of the opening of the hotel."

"Really. That long." The West. Where a century means history. Really.

The background rumble of the crowd crested as a song broke out at a table in the center of the room. Revelers in paper crowns slapped the table in unison when they came to the chorus. I winced at the noise and my confidante smiled. Her eyes were charming and blue. "I take it you were not brought here by the buy one dinner get one free coupon."

"No. I was in town on business and I was told this was the only place to stay."

"That's us. Real charm. I'm Edna." She held out her hand and as I shook it I glimpsed both the curve of a breast and the white on black name tag of the hotel staff.

"Appleton Kenworth, but my friends call me John."

She giggled, then quick as a thought brought a hand to her face and wiped away her mirth with a gesture like she was grabbing a moth with a soft hand.

"It's my middle name," I said.

“Pleased to meet you John. I’m on my break. The other choice was second-hand smoke in an alley and an assistant cook who is convinced I am only pretending to resist his charms.”

“Well. That’s my luck.”

“So what brings you to town? Are you in the wine business?”

“After a fashion.” And so I began. I told my story, leaning back at intervals to let the overhead lamps splash gold on my hair and flatter the soft weave of my tweed jacket.

I had indeed come to town on business, I reported in dutiful tones. I had flown into Portland and driven down for the weekend or more. I was there to look over properties.

“Commercial mostly. I spent the morning in an abattoir. But one of my most lucrative lines is selling bits and pieces of the country to people who have too much money to spend their own time managing it. Someone must groom and expand the portfolios of wealth. But my clients are not authentic top of the predator chain magnates. They are next tier.

“They have scraped and schemed together a few tens of millions and have a driving need to imagine and appear as though they are in the same category as those who own islands and topple regimes.

“Like all those with wealth they hold to the gospel that their pile must keep growing, the numbers next to their names must be ever larger. They flaunt their worth by listing the almost famous works of art they have sequestered in warehouses or the notable but still within their price range country places that they visit once or twice a year. But country houses require upkeep and art is subject to fashion. My niche is to find expensive-sounding properties that can be bought on the cheap but will also produce income.”

I went on for a bit more, letting slip that I also run a small, but really elite is the word, international property management company that takes a worthy but not debilitating take from the streams of income generated by vineyards, organic farms, fishing villages, and yes, perhaps a slaughterhouse.

“Villages? Really?”

“You’d be surprised how pliable some governments have become. In certain areas of the world it is possible to buy entire villages. Not the inhabitants technically, but where are they going to go? A thousand years of their ancestors are buried under groves of vine-encrusted trees.

Nothing stops a martini on its way to a pair of well-tended lips like telling your conversant you have just purchased a village.

“Nothing stops a martini on its way to a pair of well-tended lips like telling your conversant you have just purchased a village. But mostly I just bring new ownership and capital to relics of the past that would otherwise be buried in commerce and concrete. Everyone is happy, except of course those who have to sell to me. The value I am seeking is best found when the heirs are fighting, the mortgage that a feckless father yoked to the family home is weighing too heavily, or the whole clan has just died off after successive generations of staring at each other in darkened kitchens and living rooms.”

Just leave us. You have what you want. Just leave us our lives. Justin’s last words to me. But he lost. Our sister Sarah came under my care. We had all thrived under my management. That was the last thing Justin held against me.

“So you prey on misery,” Edna said.

“You could put it that way. You would not be far off. Another way to say it is that I find situations where night has fallen and help them to a new dawn. Decrepit villas with farmable acres and charming but bargain hotels are mainstays. To be wealthy at a certain level you have to have at least one of each. But when flaunting wealth it is important not to sound too practical. And flaunting is important. When the numbers beside your name have seven or more zeros after them what pleasure is left but talking about yourself? Saying I own eight or is it nine? apartment buildings only conjures images of tedious phone conversations with managing directors of property management firms. Yachts are de rigueur. That means required.

You don't know? You are in one of the most haunted buildings in Oregon. One of the most famous anyway.

"And they are a bit crass. I tell my clients that for making the transition from utility wealth to prestige wealth the quickest route is to buy a winery. Slopes covered with sinuous rows of lush green vines thick with ripening grapes. Wood casks lined up in rustic barns, and over it all a sun that always shines like the last rays of an evening in June. To be properly wealthy you have to own a winery. And a jet."

"Or, as you so elegantly phrased it, an abattoir."

"Oh, that's probably for me. If my bank will give me the points. Those places are like platinum mines. Nobody likes to think about them and few of us can live without them."

"Of course. All that blood." She gave her shoulders a tiny shudder, sipped her coffee and placed her hands on top of each other on the counter. Something was being measured.

"I always keep a couple of wineries in my pocket. So one of the pleasant tasks that I allot myself is to spend a few weeks a year touring the grapes, talking with the staff, the local experts, of course I mean gossips, and waiting patiently for the opportunity to let slip the information that a private sale might be arranged, perhaps the family might even be allowed to stay on as managers."

"Any luck around here?" Edna granted me a bemused smile.

"Not today. Are you local?"

"Not originally. I'm in school for journalism. There's a pretty good small college in town. I thoroughly enjoyed your little deconstruction of the underbelly of late-stage capitalist grandeur."

"You're welcome."

"Well. I must get back to it. See you later."

“So is there anything going on in this town? I mean later?” Ham-handed I know. But beneath my sophisticated veneer I have long subscribed to the can’t blame a guy for trying school of the pursuit of women. No harm in asking but know when they say no. I am, after all, a gentleman by trade.

“Well ghost-hunting is pretty popular.”

“Really. Where is that done?”

“Right here. You don’t know? You are in one of the most haunted buildings in Oregon. One of the most famous anyway.”

“Where would I start?”

“Anywhere.” She bit her lip. It was quite attractive. Then she gave a barely audible sigh and went on with it. “You share a name. He’s called John. The best theory is he was a professional gambler back in the days when this hotel’s main purpose was to separate farm-workers and loggers from their wages. There is a card, a king of clubs, tucked into the woodwork above the downstairs bar. If you leave it on the bar it will be back there in the morning. At least that is what is said. Kitchen closers report that the stove will turn on by itself. A few years ago a guest reported that they saw John step into the elevator.”

“The painting.”

“Catches your eye. The worst is the third floor. We’ve had any number of guests check out. A guest came back to her room and there was the shape of someone sitting on her bed. She did not even stop to check out.”

“I’m on the third floor. The woman at the front desk insisted.”

“You’ve met Mina. She’s the expert. Ask her anything. She loves to talk about John.”

Bony fingers around my wrist, a chill up my spine. The new key shoved into my hand. “She gave me a brochure.”

Edna smiled. “I’d forgotten about the brochure. She has a few left. Cool.”

“It sounds like I am in for an adventure.”

“Could be. I must go.” And she did. No spark there. Just as well. Complications tend to ensue. That is what I always tell myself when I hold out the offer of fleeting joy and receive emptiness in return.

The meal was surprisingly good. I ordered spaghetti tossed with olive oil, garlic, tomatoes and ground hazelnuts. I finished my drink and my next drink and set aside the drink after that for slow sipping.

A blue balloon floated past me at eye level. The string hung straight. It really seemed as if someone invisible was dragging it.

The day had been a bit of a bust. Nothing but that slaughterhouse and a couple cheerfully decked out wineries full of staff busy pouring samples and loading trucks. None with that air of decrepitude that prickles the hairs on my neck and sets my calculations going. I need an almost empty parking lot, paint peeling at the eaves of the main building, the eager smile at the arrival of an actual customer. No dice. I had several more days. It was not a thing to worry about. Does the wolf pack fret when they see a healthy herd? They settle down and scan for pregnant does and bucks with broken antlers. I could wait. Something would come along. This very hotel might be in financial trouble.

“So do you know any good ghost stories about this place?” I asked a waiter, a young man with a shock of hair too black to be natural.

“What?” His tone was incredulous, but the pupils of his eyes flared.

“Do you have any good stories about John?”

“I don’t pay attention to that stuff.”

So it went. I made a game of it and asked every staff member who passed by what they knew about the ghost. One young man claimed he saw someone at the window, a woman dressed in an old-fashioned dress who shimmered and vanished when he tried to look closer at her. But his tone of voice seemed fake, like he did not want to be left out so he had concocted a story to elicit tips from ghost-hungry patrons.

Edna was skillfully avoiding me without seeming to. My half smile of expectation fell into a void every time she swept past me. She knew better than to encourage a solitary male patron drinking with steady purpose.

I truly wanted to know more about this reputed ghost, if only to get a win out of the first day of my trip. I considered going back to talk to Mina at the check-in desk, but when it came time to order a fourth drink or leave I knew the time had come to wrap up a bust of a day.

What happened next was strange. Completely and utterly strange. A helium-filled blue balloon floated past me at eye level. The string hung straight. It really seemed as if someone invisible was dragging the balloon.

“If that is John show yourself.” I actually said that. I was not completely drunk, but certainly somewhat elevated at this point.

The balloon halted. It took a sharp turn and came to hang in front of me, the string dangling in my empty plate.

“And that is exactly what happened,” I said to Mina. “The staff told me you were the one who knew the most about this stuff.”

Her face opened into a mischievous grin. She was looking past my shoulder. The balloon was there. Correction. One must rely on logic when explaining the unexplainable. A blue balloon hovered at my shoulder. It might be the same balloon. .

“Looks like someone has something to say to you,” Mina said.

Without thinking I tied the balloon string around my wrist. It bobbed about like a normal balloon now. No more supernatural nonsense. “Will you tell me?”

“They think he was a gambler. This place used to be the fancy house and gambling parlor for all of McCann County. Men who worked the valley farms or coast range forests came here on Saturday nights and squandered their wages. They say John got too lucky and was beaten to death in the alley. Now he wanders the place. Looking for something, or somebody.”

“Why the third floor?”

“That’s where they kept the girls. They were pretty much slaves. Once in a while one would try to run off to Portland. They tended to vanish if they tried that. The third floor may have nothing to do with John. My favorite version of the story is that he loved someone, a girl with bright eyes who spent all her days in her little prison dreaming of a childhood on a long-failed farm. Do you want me to move you? I can squeeze you in on two.”

“No. I’ll stay. I’m intrigued. Are there other places in the building of special interest?”

You should have let us live our way, my brother had said. I took my sister's hand and led her out of the courtroom.

“The main place is the basement bar. Never been remodeled. Some people get a bad feeling there. The card does stay there above the bar, but there is no magic to it. The bartender keeps a pack. She puts a new card up whenever someone steals it, which is about once a week. She says she likes how it feels when the card is there.”

I paid my respects to Mina and headed out with my balloon on a quest of discovery. To be thorough, and perhaps because I was a bit nervous, I climbed the stairs to the rooftop bar.

Chattering voices rose towards the summer stars. Happy people with drinks in their hands and balloons tied to their wrists clustered around the tables or gathered in groups to view the valley spread out below. Just a party.

On the way down at the first floor I paused to look into the courtyard garden. Exotic plants spread leaves wide as serving platters. Guttering candles and primal looking torches cast flashes of light into the deep dark under the leaves. Shapes that had to be partiers moved among the shadows.

Still trailing the balloon I found my way to the basement bar. I purchased a shot of whiskey and took a seat in a booth tucked against the stairwell. I was alone and out of sight.

I got one sip into my drink and a cold squeamish feeling of dread spread through me like nausea. The world did not care about me and would not notice me other than to inflict some random and fierce cruelty. Whatever bore this malice was ready to consume me and would hardly notice when I was absorbed into its infinite nothing. I had to get out of there.

I had in mind to seek out Mina and find out where the local Motel 6 spread its conventional and loving arms, but I took a wrong turn and stepped through a swinging door into the garden. A few shapes moved on cinder paths between the towering overgrown beds. The torches cast their timid flashes of light under thick clouds of oily-smelling smoke. Down the central path something loomed, probably a statue. Hopefully a statue.

Edna was there, sitting on a concrete bench smoking a cigarette. She looked up at me and smiled. "Still here?"

"I think I met John."

"I saw the balloon follow you out of the dining room."

"Does that happen often?"

"Only time we've had balloons here. You should go see her."

"Her?"

She nodded toward the garden path where the uncertain shape waited.

"Why? Is there more?"

"You'll see. If you are open you can have the experience of a lifetime."

"You sound like an ad."

"If you are open."

Leaves brushed my shoulders and fell back into the dark on either side of me. The cinders crunched under my boots. Slivers of light worming through the leaves only highlighted the darkness. The shape ahead was clearly now a person, the curves of a woman's body.

Four kings. The hand of a lifetime at just the right moment. All the chips heaped in the center of the table. The long night had led to this moment. I laid the cards down. This would be enough?

"You should have let us live our way," my brother had said. I took my sister's hand and led her out of the courtroom. She would be sent to our aunt in Fresno. My brother could visit her whenever he got to the west coast on his farm laborer's salary. He had made his choices. I would send him his share of the farm money as soon as I could get it out of escrow. Minus fees and costs. Keep it, he said. Keep your bloody money. So dramatic. Capital was capital. All I had needed was a seed. He should have understood. I could have brought him with me.

She lay languid on a concrete couch. A robe or loose dress pulled back to expose one breast, thigh, calf and ankle to all the eyes of time. The sculptor had loved his model. Her mouth almost smiled and her eyelids drooped as she looked down at me. No sorrow could touch her.

People fear that emptiness and will pay good money for the illusion that they matter. I help them make the payments.

I stood looking up at her. I had let myself get over-excited, broken my first rule. Falling into emotions is the frailty I prey upon. Stay patient, act only when calculation dictates is my method. I took a breath and closed my eyes. A soft hand caressed my cheek. I saw a woman, sitting on the edge of her bed. Waiting. Waiting to be free. Waiting to vanish in the long pull of years. I saw the locked door through her eyes. Heard her thoughts. Had someone loved her? Yes. I am waiting for him to win a stake big enough to buy my freedom.

I saw the smile, the first smile, the smile of the mother of mothers. Had these women imprisoned for the use of men learned some great truth as they waited helpless for beatings, disease, and an early death? Of course not. They knew everything there was to know about this world the first time the door to their room shut behind them.

They felt only sorrow. Sorrow sustained them. They grew strong bearing it. Strong enough to smile upon those of us who sinned against them. But it was a smile that damned us, that forced us to stare head-on at what we had become.

I saw the slant of my brother's mouth and the look on my sister's face that day in court, the eyes of that cow who saw what was coming for her. Hauntings. Picking wildflowers with my sister when she was barely old enough to run. The last time I saw my brother. His empty eyes and disappointed mouth. The inevitable reality that nothing matters except the numbers beside your name.

My life had become a quest to please people who had forgotten how to feel much of anything beyond being bored and fashionably greedy.

For all of us, no matter who we crush or how much we grab, the numbers move on and our name vanishes in the incredible immensity of time. People fear that emptiness and will pay good money for the illusion that they matter. I help them make the payments. From emptiness to emptiness is how all things flow. I had learned the secret of riding that tide. I would not apologize.

“Just because I’m a winner does not mean I can’t understand feelings. I know how to rise above them.” The statue seemed unimpressed with my declaration. She smiled on into the night. I untied the balloon from my wrist.

“Go on. I have nothing for you.” Yes I spoke to a balloon. Again. Maybe it hung there a moment. Certainly it floated up into the sky. Just a blue balloon.

I made my way to my room. The hallway was just as quiet as I recalled, but I was heartened to note I was not the only person on the third floor, at least I thought I saw a door swing shut, a foot lingering at the edge of my vision for just a moment.

My card clicked the door open. Inside the room all the lights were on, the television blasted a movie into the empty room. Voices shouted, music blared from the clock radio.

I would tell two versions of this story. In one I would share the time I had an unexplainable connection to forces that lie outside what we can expect, hungering to show us the paths we have abandoned and the ways we could have been and still might be.

In the other I would show how a few coincidences and tricks of light can be construed by weak and lazy minds as proof there is another world waiting. Knowing your audience is a great truth of life.

As I hung up my jacket I felt the brochure in a pocket. I slipped it out and looked it over quickly. It was just a tourist brochure, pictures of the hotel’s rooms angled to make narrow old rooms look wide and sunlit. The public relations prose brimmed with words like charming and historical.

Then I saw it. At the end of one paragraph, a total non-sequitur followed the names of the governors and second-tier actors hosted over the years. “The dead here hunger for acceptance, for sympathy, for release.”

Mina must have laughed behind her professional mask when she handed those out. A printer’s error. So sorry. No idea how it happened.

That cow had bellowed for the chance for one more breath, let her feel her life. Did she see the field she yearned for when she leapt onto the side of the killing chute? Did the women who sat in this room, waiting, hoping that the next time the door opened it would not bring them pain, did they see the farms they had left behind? The parents dead of smallpox or typhoid or drink?

“Go away!” I shouted and closed my eyes. None of this was real. None of it really mattered.

When I opened my eyes he stood at the foot of the bed. He wore a suit and a bowler hat and had a handkerchief tucked into his pocket. He did not seem to see me. He took the bowler off and held it before him like he was paying homage to someone.

“John?”

If you read a lot of ghost encounters this is the part where the person freaks out, seeing the echo of the image of someone who has gone before. Then the ghost fades and they are left wondering what happened.

John smiled at me and his skull flashed and flickered beneath his skin as if every time I blinked I was catching a glimpse of that which ought not to be seen. “My friends call me Jack,” he said.

“She’s gone.”

“I know. You can’t think I don’t know.”

“So why do you stay?”

“I have to.”

He faded then. Still there, still waiting at the foot of my bed, but I could see right through him.

“Tell me.”

“What?” I heard him. It was not words. Not a voice. But I heard him. Like you hear something in a dream and know the words really come from inside you.

“Is it worth it? Is life worth the effort?”

“Why don’t you ask me what I would give to have mine back?”

I blinked and he was gone, if he had ever been there. All those girls had waited and died there. Now all that was left was a cold feeling in a downstairs bar. We go on smiling and laughing and living lives that those shades could never had imagined.

Mina was in her small office reading a hard-backed book she had spread open before her. I watched her turn a page and take the time to finish a long paragraph before she looked up. Her steel blue eyes welcomed me home.

“Forgive me,” I said. She let herself smile while she thought about what to say next.



WILLIAM K BURKE

As an investigative journalist I exposed corruption in the management of the National Toxics Campaign, and in another story showed how Terminix was poisoning their own employees. I wrote for various publications about Bill Wolverton, a NASA scientist, on how plants clean up pollution. I studied Renaissance Epic Poetry at Haverford College. Now that my daughters are adults I've gone back to my younger self's love of reading and writing stories.

21