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# **Feast Day of Fools**

Written by James Lee Burke

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# Feast Day of Fools

JAMES LEE BURKE



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*The wild beasts will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches,  
for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give  
drink to my chosen people.*

—Isaiah 43:20

# CHAPTER ONE

SOME PEOPLE SAID Danny Boy Lorca's visions came from the mescal that had fried his brains, or the horse-quirt whippings he took around the ears when he served time on Sugar Land Farm, or the fact he'd been a middleweight club fighter through a string of dust-blown sinkholes where the locals were given a chance to beat up what was called a tomato can, a fighter who leaked blood every place he was hit, in this case a rumdum Indian who ate his pain and never flinched when his opponents broke their hands on his face.

Danny Boy's black hair was cut in bangs and fitted his head like a helmet. His physique was as square as a door, his clothes always smelling of smoke from the outdoor fires he cooked his food on, his complexion as dark and coarsened by the sun and wind as the skin on a shrunken head. In summer, he wore long-sleeve cotton work shirts buttoned at the throat and wrists to keep the heat out, and in winter, a canvas coat and an Australian flop hat tied down over his ears with a scarf. He fought his hangovers in a sweat lodge, bathed in ice water, planted by the moon, cast demons out of his body into sand paintings that he flung at the sky, prayed in a loincloth on a mesa in the midst of electric storms, and sometimes experienced either seizures or trances during which he spoke a language that was neither Apache nor Navajo, although he claimed it was both.

Sometimes he slept in the county jail. Other nights he slept behind the saloon or in the stucco house where he lived on the cusp of a wide alluvial floodplain bordered on the southern horizon by purple

mountains that in the late-afternoon warp of heat seemed to take on the ragged irregularity of sharks' teeth.

The sheriff who allowed Danny Boy to sleep at the jail was an elderly six-foot-five widower by the name of Hackberry Holland, whose bad back and chiseled profile and Stetson hat and thumb-buster .45 revolver and history as a drunk and a whoremonger were the sum total of his political cachet, if not his life. To most people in the area, Danny Boy was an object of pity and ridicule and contempt. His solipsistic behavior and his barroom harangues were certainly characteristic of a wet brain, they said. But Sheriff Holland, who had been a prisoner of war for almost three years in a place in North Korea called No Name Valley, wasn't so sure. The sheriff had arrived at an age when he no longer speculated on the validity of a madman's visions or, in general, the foibles of human behavior. Instead, Hackberry Holland's greatest fear was his fellow man's propensity to act collectively, in militaristic lockstep, under the banner of God and country. Mobs did not rush across town to do good deeds, and in Hackberry's view, there was no more odious taint on any social or political endeavor than universal approval. To Hackberry, Danny Boy's alcoholic madness was a respite from a far greater form of delusion.

It was late on a Wednesday night in April when Danny Boy walked out into the desert with an empty duffel bag and an army-surplus entrenching tool, the sky as black as soot, the southern horizon pulsing with electricity that resembled gold wires, the softness of the ground crumbling under his cowboy boots, as though he were treading across the baked shell of an enormous riparian environment that had been layered and beveled and smoothed with a sculptor's knife. At the base of a mesa, he folded the entrenching tool into the shape of a hoe and knelt down and began digging in the ground, scraping through the remains of fossilized leaves and fish and birds that others said were millions of years old. In the distance, an igneous flash spread silently through the clouds, flaring in great yellow pools, lighting the desert floor and the cactus and mesquite and the greenery that was trying to bloom along a riverbed that never held water except during the monsoon season. Just before the light died,

Danny Boy saw six men advancing across the plain toward him, like figures caught inside the chemical mix of a half-developed photograph, their torsos slung with rifles.

He scraped harder in the dirt, trenching a circle around what appeared to be two tapered soft-nosed rocks protruding from the incline below the mesa. Then his e-tool broke through an armadillo's burrow. He inverted the handle and stuck it down the hole and wedged the earth upward until the burrow split across the top and he could work his hand deep into the hole, up to the elbow, and feel the shapes of the clustered objects that were as pointed and hard as calcified dugs.

The night air was dense with an undefined feral odor, like cougar scat and a sun-bleached carcass and burnt animal hair and water that had gone stagnant in a sandy drainage traced with the crawl lines of reptiles. The wind blew between the hills in the south, and he felt its coolness and the dampness of the rain mist on his face. He saw the leaves on the mesquite ripple like green lace, the mesas and buttes shimmering whitely against the clouds, then disappearing into the darkness again. He smelled the piñon and juniper and the scent of delicate flowers that bloomed only at night and whose petals dropped off and clung to the rocks at sunrise like translucent pieces of colored rice paper. He stared at the southern horizon but saw no sign of the six men carrying rifles. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and went back to work, scooping out a big hole around the stonelike objects that were welded together as tightly as concrete.

The first shot was a tiny *pop*, like a wet firecracker exploding. He stared into the fine mist swirling through the hills. Then the lightning flared again, and he saw the armed men stenciled against the horizon and the silhouettes of two other figures who had broken from cover and were running toward the north, toward Danny Boy, toward a place that should have been safe from the criminality and violence that he believed was threading its way out of Mexico into his life.

He lifted the nest of stony egg-shaped artifacts from the earth and slid them into the duffel bag and pulled the cord tight through the brass eyelets at the top. He headed back toward his house, staying close to the bottom of the mesa, avoiding the tracks he had made

earlier, which he knew the armed men would eventually see and follow. Then a bolt of lightning exploded on top of the mesa, lighting the floodplain and the willows along the dry streambed and the arroyos and crevices and caves in the hillsides as brightly as the sun.

He plunged down a ravine, holding the duffel bag and e-tool at his sides for balance. He crouched behind a rock, hunching against it, his face turned toward the ground so it would not reflect light. He heard someone running past him in the darkness, someone whose breath was not only labored but desperate and used up and driven by fear rather than a need for oxygen.

When he thought that perhaps his wait was over, that the pursuers of the fleeing man had given up and gone away, allowing him to return to his house with the treasure he had dug out of the desert floor, he heard a sound he knew only too well. It was the pleading lament of someone who had no hope, not unlike that of an animal caught in a steel trap or a new inmate, a fish, just off the bus at Sugar Land Pen, going into his first night of lockdown with four or five mainline cons waiting for him in the shower room.

The pursuers had dragged the second fleeing man from behind a tangle of deadwood and tumbleweed that had wedged in a collapsed corral that dog-food contractors had once used to pen mustangs. The fugitive was barefoot and blood-streaked and terrified, his shirt hanging in rags on the pencil lines that were his ribs, a manacle on one wrist, a brief length of cable swinging loosely from it.

“¿Dónde está?” a voice said.

“No sé.”

“What you mean you don’t know? *Tú sabes.*”

“No, *hombre. No sé nada.*”

“¿Para dónde se fue?”

“He didn’t tell me where he went.”

“¿Es la verdad?”

“Claro que sí.”

“You don’t know if you speak Spanish or English, you’ve sold out to so many people. You are a very bad policeman.”

“No, *señor.*”

“*Estás mintiendo, chico. Pobrecito.*”



*“Tengo familia, señor. Por favor. Soy un obrero, como usted. I’m just like you, a worker. I got to take care of my family. Hear me, man. I know people who can make you rich.”*

For the next fifteen minutes, Danny Boy Lorca tried to shut out the sounds that came from the mouth of the man who wore the manacle and length of severed cable on one wrist. He tried to shrink himself inside his own skin, to squeeze all light and sensation and awareness from his mind, to become a black dot that could drift away on the wind and re-form later as a shadow that would eventually become flesh and blood again. Maybe one day he would forget the fear that caused him to stop being who he was; maybe he would meet the man he chose not to help and be forgiven by him and hence become capable of forgiving himself. When all those things happened, he might even forget what his fellow human beings were capable of doing.

When the screams of the tormented man finally softened and died and were swallowed by the wind, Danny Boy raised his head above a rock and gazed down the incline where the tangle of tumbleweed and deadwood partially obscured the handiwork of the armed men. The wind was laced with grit and rain that looked like splinters of glass. When lightning rippled across the sky, Danny Boy saw the armed men in detail.

Five of them could have been pulled at random from any jail across the border. But it was the leader who made a cold vapor wrap itself around Danny Boy’s heart. He was taller than the others and stood out for many reasons; in fact, the incongruities in his appearance only added to the darkness of his persona. His body was not stitched with scars or chained with Gothic-letter and swastika and death’s-head tats. Nor was his head shaved into a bullet or his mouth surrounded by a circle of carefully trimmed beard. Nor did he wear lizard-skin boots that were plated on the heels and tips. His running shoes looked fresh out of the box; his navy blue sweatpants had a red stripe down each leg, similar to a design a nineteenth-century Mexican cavalry officer might wear. His skin was clean, his chest flat, the nipples no bigger than dimes, his shoulders wide, his arms like pipe stems, his pubic hair showing just above the white

cord that held up his pants. An inverted M16 was cross-strapped across his bare back; a canteen hung at his side from a web belt, and a hatchet and a long thin knife of the kind that was used to dress wild game. The man leaned over and speared something with the tip of the knife and lifted it in the air, examining it against the lights flashing in the clouds. He cinched the object with a lanyard and tied it to his belt, letting it drip down his leg.

Then Danny Boy saw the leader freeze, as though he had just smelled an invasive odor on the wind. He turned toward Danny Boy's hiding place and stared up the incline. "*¿Quién está en la oscuridad?*" he said.

Danny Boy shrank down onto the ground, the rocks cutting into his knees and the heels of his hands.

"You see something up there?" one of the other men said.

But the leader did not speak, in either Spanish or English.

"It's just the wind. There's nothing out here. The wind plays tricks," the first man said.

"*¿Ahora para dónde vamos?*" another man said.

The leader waited a long time to answer. "*¿Dónde vive La Magdalena?*" he asked.

"Don't fuck with that woman, Krill. Bad luck, man."

But the leader, whose nickname was Krill, did not reply. A moment that could have been a thousand years passed; then Danny Boy heard the six men begin walking back down through the riverbed toward the distant mountains from which they had come, their tracks cracking the clay and braiding together in long serpentine lines. After they were out of sight, Danny Boy stood up and looked down at their bloody handiwork, scattered across the ground in pieces, glimmering in the rain.

PAM TIBBS WAS Hackberry's chief deputy. Her mahogany-colored hair was sunburned white at the tips, and it hung on her cheeks in the indifferent way it might have on a teenage girl. She wore wide-ass jeans and half-topped boots and a polished gun belt and a khaki shirt with an American flag sewn on one sleeve. Her moods

were mercurial, her words often confrontational. Her potential for violence seldom registered on her adversaries until things happened that should not have happened. When she was angry, she sucked in her cheeks, accentuating a mole by her mouth, turning her lips into a button. Men often thought she was trying to be cute. They were mistaken.

At noon she was drinking a cup of coffee at her office window when she saw Danny Boy Lorca stumbling down the street toward the department, bent at the torso as though waging war against invisible forces, a piece of newspaper matting against his chest before it flapped loose and scudded across the intersection. When Danny Boy tripped on the curb and fell hard on one knee, then fell again when he tried to pick himself up, Pam Tibbs set down her coffee cup and went outside, the wind blowing lines in her hair. She bent down, her breasts hanging heavy against her shirt, and lifted him to his feet and walked him inside.

“I messed myself. I got to get in the shower,” he said.

“You know where it is,” she said.

“They killed a man.”

She didn’t seem to hear what he had said. She glanced at the cast-iron spiral of steps that led upstairs to the jail. “Can you make it by yourself?”

“I ain’t drunk. I was this morning, but I ain’t now. The guy in charge, I remember his name.” Danny Boy closed his eyes and opened them again. “I think I do.”

“I’ll be upstairs in a minute and open the cell.”

“I hid all the time they was doing it.”

“Say again.”

“I hid behind a big rock. Maybe for fifteen minutes. He was screaming all the while.”

She nodded, her expression neutral. Danny Boy’s eyes were scorched with hangover, his mouth white at the corners with dried mucus, his breath dense and sedimentary, like a load of fruit that had been dumped down a stone well. He waited, although she didn’t know for what. Was it absolution? “Don’t slip on the steps,” she said.

She tapped on Hackberry's door but opened it without waiting for him to answer. He was on the phone, his eyes drifting to hers. "Thanks for the alert, Ethan. We'll get back to you if we hear anything," he said into the receiver. He hung up and seemed to think about the conversation he'd just had, his gaze not actually taking her in. "What's up?" he said.

"Danny Boy Lorca just came in drunk. He says he saw a man killed."

"Where?"

"I didn't get that far. He's in the shower."

Hackberry scratched at his cheek. Outside, the American flag was snapping on its pole against a gray sky, the fabric washed so thin that the light showed through the threads. "That was Ethan Riser at the FBI. They're looking for a federal employee who might have been grabbed by some Mexican drug mules and taken to a prison across the border. An informant said the federal employee could have gotten loose and headed for home."

"I've heard Danny Boy has been digging up dinosaur eggs south of his property."

"I didn't know there were any around here," Hackberry said.

"If they're out there, he'd be the guy to find them."

"How's that?" he said, although he wasn't really listening.

"A guy who believes he can see the navel of the world from his back window? He says all power comes out of this hole in the ground. Down inside the hole is another world. That's where the rain and the corn gods live. Compared to a belief system like that, hunting for dinosaur eggs seems like bland stuff."

"That's interesting."

She waited, as though examining his words. "Try this: He says the killing took fifteen minutes to transpire. He says he heard it all. You think this might be the guy the feds are looking for?"

Hackberry bounced his knuckles lightly up and down on the desk blotter and stood up, straightening his back, trying to hide the pain that crept into his face, his outline massive against the window. "Bring your recorder and a pot of coffee, will you?" he said.

• • •

THE REPORT DANNY Boy gave of the murder he had witnessed was not one that lent itself to credulity. “You were drinking before you went digging for dinosaur eggs?” Hackberry said.

“No, sir, I hadn’t had a drop in two days.”

“Two days?” Hackberry said.

“Yes, sir, every bit of it. I got eighty-sixed. I didn’t have no more money, anyway.”

“Well, you must have seen what you saw,” Hackberry said. “Want to take a ride?”

Danny Boy didn’t answer. He was sitting on the iron bunk of his cell, wearing lace-up boots without socks and clean jailhouse jeans and a denim shirt, his hair wet from his shower and his skin as dark as smoke. His hands were folded in his lap, his shoulders slumped.

“What’s the problem?” Hackberry said.

“I’m ashamed of what I done.”

“Not helping this guy out?”

“Yes, sir. They was talking about La Magdalena.”

“Who?”

“A holy woman.”

“Don’t feel so down about this, partner. They would have killed you, too. If they had, you wouldn’t be helping us in the investigation, would you?” Hackberry said.

Danny Boy’s eyes were focused on a spot ten inches in front of him. “You didn’t see it.”

“No, I didn’t,” Hackberry replied. He started to say something about his own experience in No Name Valley many years ago but thought better of it. “Let’s get this behind us, partner.”

Pam Tibbs drove the three of them down the main street of the town in the department’s Jeep Cherokee, the traffic light over the intersection bouncing on its cable in the wind. The newer buildings on the street were constructed of cinder blocks; some of the older ones were built out of fieldstones that had been cemented together and sheathed with plaster or stucco that had fallen off in chunks, leaving

patterns that resembled a contagious skin disease. Pam followed a winding two-lane state highway southward through hills that looked like big brown ant piles or a sepia-tinted photograph taken on the surface of Mars. Then she drove across Danny Boy's property, past his stucco house and his barn that was plated from the bottom to the eaves with hubcaps, onto the geological fault that bled into Old Mexico and a strip of terrain that always seemed to ring with distant bugles echoing off the hills. For Hackberry Holland, these were not the horns blowing along the road to Roncevaux.

Pam shifted down and kept the Jeep on the high ground above the riverbed that Danny had walked the previous night, the hard-packed gravel vibrating through the frame. "There," Danny said, pointing.

"Under the buzzards?" Hackberry said.

"Yes, sir."

"Where are your dinosaur eggs?"

"At the house."

"You sure those aren't rocks?" Hackberry said, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

But his attempt to relieve Danny Boy of depression and fear was to no avail. The guilt and sorrow Danny Boy had taken with him from the previous night would probably come aborning in his dreams for many years, and all the beer in all the beer joints in Texas would not make one dent in it, Hackberry thought. "Get upwind from it," he said to Pam.

She crossed a slough chained with red pools and layered with clusters of black butterflies sucking moisture from the sand, their wings shuddering as though they were ingesting toxin. She parked on the incline, above the collapsed rails of the corral that had been used by a one-eyed man who killed and sold mustangs for dog food. When Hackberry stepped out on the passenger side, his eyes roved over the tangles of tumbleweed and bleached wood and the remains of the man whose death may have been the most merciful moment in his life. "You ever see anything like this?" Pam said, her words clotting in her throat.

"Not exactly. Maybe close, but not exactly," Hackberry replied.

"What are we dealing with?" she said.

“Call the coroner’s office, then get Felix and R.C. down here. I want photos of this from every angle. String as much tape as you can around the crime scene. Make sure nobody disturbs those tracks going south.”

She went to the Jeep and made the calls, then walked back down the incline, pulling on a pair of latex gloves, her upper arms ridging with muscle. Danny Boy remained in the vehicle, his head lowered. “What did he say the leader’s name was? Krill?” she said to Hackberry.

“I think that was it.”

“I’ve heard that before. It’s Spanish?”

“It’s a shrimplike creature that whales eat.”

“Funny name for a killer with an M16 strapped on his back.” When he didn’t answer, she looked at him. “You okay, boss?”

He nodded at the slope above where the victim had died.

“Jesus Christ,” she said.

“He was scalped, too.”

Then the wind changed, and a sickening gray odor blew into their faces. It was like fish roe that had dried on warm stone and the putrescence of offal and the liquid wastes poured from a bucket into a ditch behind a brothel on a Saturday night, and it made Pam Tibbs hold her wrist to her mouth and walk back up the incline, fighting to hold back the bilious surge in her stomach.

Hackberry stepped back from the site and repositioned himself so he was upwind again. But that did not change the nature of the scene or its significance. Often he wondered, as an anthropologist might, what the historical environment of the human race actually was. It wasn’t a subdivision of sprinkled lawns and three-bedroom houses inside of which the television set had become the cool fire of modern man. Could it be a vast sunbaked plain broken by mesas and parched riverbeds where the simian and the mud-slathered and the unredeemed hunted one another with sharpened sticks, where the only mercy meted out was the kind that came as a result of satiation and exhaustion?

The compulsion to kill was in the gene pool, he thought. Those who denied it were the same ones who killed through proxy. Every

professional executioner, every professional soldier, knew that one of his chief duties was to protect those he served from knowledge about themselves. Or at least those were the perceptions that governed Hackberry's judgments about societal behavior, even though he shared them with no one.

He looked to the south. Dust or rain had smudged out the mountains, and the plain seemed to stretch endlessly into the distance, the way a snowfield could extend itself into the bottom of a blue winter sky, dipping over the edge of the earth into nothingness. Hackberry found himself swallowing, a nameless fear clutching at his viscera.

The coroner was Darl Wingate, an enigmatic single man who had been a forensic pathologist with the United States Army and CID before he retired back to the place of his birth. He was laconic, with sunken cheeks and a pencil mustache, and he often had liquor on his breath by ten A.M. He also had degrees from Johns Hopkins and Stanford. No one had ever been quite sure why he chose to spend his twilight years in a desolate place on the edge of the Great American Desert. It was certainly not because he was filled with compassion for the poor and the oppressed, although he was not a callous man. Hackberry believed that Darl Wingate was simply a pragmatist who saw no separation or difference between the various categories of the human family. In Darl's mind, they all belonged to one long daisy chain: They were creatures who came out of the womb's darkness and briefly saw light before their mouths were stopped with dust and their eyes sealed six feet down. As a consequence of his beliefs, he remained a witness and not a participant.

Darl placed a breath mint on his tongue and put on latex gloves and a surgeon's mask before he approached the remains of the dead man. The day had grown warmer, the sky more gray, like the color of greasewood smoke, and gnats were rising from the sand.

"What do you think?" Hackberry asked.

"About what?" Darl said.

"What you're looking at," Hackberry replied, trying to repress his impatience.

"The fingers scattered up on the slope went one at a time. The



toes were next. My guess is he died from shock. He was probably dead when he was scalped and taken apart, but I can't say for sure."

"You ever work one like this?"

"On a couple of backstreets in Bangkok. The guy who did it was a church missionary."

"So the human race is rotten?"

"Say again?" Darl said.

"You're not giving me a lot of help."

"What else can I provide you with?"

"Anything of specific value. I don't need the history of man's inhumanity to man."

"From the appearance of the victim—his nails, his emaciated condition, the infection on his manacled wrist, the scabs on his knees, and the lice eggs in the remnant of his hair—I'd say he was held prisoner in primitive and abusive conditions for at least several weeks. The scarring on his face and neck suggests smallpox, which tells me he's probably Mexican, not American. What doesn't fit is his dental care."

"I don't follow you."

"It's first-rate."

"How would you explain the discrepancy?"

"My guess is he came from humble origins but did something good with his life," Darl said.

"Successful criminals don't see dentists?"

"Only when the pain makes it imperative. The rest of the time they're getting laid or huffing flake up their nose. I think this guy took care of himself. So far, I see no tattoos, no signs of intravenous use, no scars on his hands. I think we might be looking at the remains of a cop."

"Not bad."

"What happened here says more about the killer than the victim," Darl said.

"Pardon?"

"Whatever information he had, he shouted it to the heavens early on. But his tormentor took it to the finish line anyway. You got any idea what he wanted?"

“You ever hear of somebody called La Magdalena?” Hackberry asked.

Darl nodded. “Superstitious wets call her that.”

“Darl, would you please just spit it out?”

The coroner screwed a cigarette into his cigarette holder and put it between his teeth. “Sometimes they call her *la china*. Her real name is Anton Ling. She’s Indo-Chinese or French-Chinese. She looks like an actress in a Graham Greene film. Ring any bells?”

Hackberry blinked.

“Yeah, that one,” Darl said. He lit his cigarette and breathed a stream of smoke into the air. “I remember something you once said. It was ‘Wars of enormous importance are fought in places nobody cares about.’”

“Meaning?”

“Deal me out of this one,” Darl said. “It stinks from the jump. I think you’re going to be splashing through pig flop up to your ankles.”