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# The Valhalla Exchange

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Published by HarperCollins

Extract

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# 1

On the Day of the Dead in Bolivia children take food and presents to the cemetery to leave on the graves of the departed. An interesting blend of the pagan and Christian traditions and highly appropriate the way things turned out. But even the most superstitious of Bolivian peasants would hardly expect the dead to get up and walk on such an occasion. I did.

La Huerta was a mining town of five or six thousand people, lost in the peaks of the high Andes. The back of beyond. There was no direct passenger flight from Peru, so I'd flown in from Lima in an old DC3 that was doing some kind of cargo run to an American mining company.

It was raining hard when I arrived, but by some dispensation or other there was a cab

standing outside the small terminal building. The driver was a cheerful Indian with a heavy moustache. He wore a yellow oilskin coat and a straw hat and seemed surprised and gratified at the sight of a customer.

'The hotel, señor?' he asked, as he seized my valise.

'The Excelsior,' I said.

'But that is the hotel, señor.' His teeth gleamed in the lamplight. 'The only one.'

The interior of the cab stank, the roof leaked, and as we started down the hill to the lights of the town I felt unaccountably depressed. Why in the hell was I here, doing the same thing I'd done so many times before? Chasing my tail for a story that probably didn't exist in the first place. And La Huerta itself didn't help as we turned into a maze of narrow streets, each one with the usual open sewer running down the centre, decaying, flat-roofed houses crowding in, poverty and squalor on every side.

We emerged into a central plaza a few minutes later. There was a large and rather interesting baroque fountain in the centre,

some relic of colonial days, water gushing forth from the mouths and nostrils of a score of nymphs and dryads. The fact that it was working at all seemed a small miracle. The hotel was on the far side. As I got out I noticed a number of people sheltering under a colonnade to my right. Some of them were in carnival costume and there was the smell of smoke on the damp air.

'What's all that?' I asked.

'All Saints' Day, señor. A time of festival.'

'They don't look as if they're enjoying themselves too much.'

'The rain.' He shrugged. 'It makes it difficult for the fireworks. But then this is a solemn occasion with us. Soon they will go in procession to the cemetery to greet their loved ones. The Day of the Dead, we call it. You have heard of this, señor?'

'They have the same thing in Mexico.'

I paid him off, went up the steps and entered the hotel. Like everything else in La Huerta, it had seen better days, but now its pink, stucco walls were peeling and there were damp patches in the ceiling. The desk

clerk put down his newspaper hurriedly, as amazed as the cab driver had been at the prospect of custom.

'I'd like a room.'

'But of course, señor. For how long?'

'One night. I'm flying back to Peru in the morning.'

I passed my papers across so that he could go through the usual rigmarole the government insists on where foreigners are concerned.

As he filled in the register he said, 'You have business here, señor? With the mining company, perhaps?'

I opened my wallet and extracted a ten-dollar American bill which I placed carefully on the counter beside the register. He stopped writing, the eyes dark, watchful.

'It was reported in one of the Lima newspapers that a man died here Monday. Dropped dead in the plaza, right outside your front door. It rated a mention because the police found 50,000 dollars in cash in his suitcase and passports in three different names.'

'Ah, yes, Señor Bauer. You are a friend of his, señor?'

'No, but I might know him if I see him.'

'He is with the local undertaker. In such cases they keep the body for a week while relatives are sought.'

'So I was informed.'

'Lieutenant Gómez is Chief of Police in charge of the affair and police headquarters are on the other side of the plaza.'

'I never find the police too helpful in these affairs.' I laid another ten-dollar bill beside the first. 'I'm a journalist. There could be a story in this for me. It's as simple as that.'

'Ah, I see now. A newspaperman.' His eyes lightened. 'How may I help you?'

'Bauer – what can you tell me about him?'

'Very little, señor. He arrived last week from Sucre. Said he expected a friend to join him.'

'And did anyone?'

'Not that I know of.'

'What did he look like? Describe him.'

'Sixty-five, maybe older. Yes, he could have

been older, but it's difficult to say. He was one of those men who give an impression of vitality at all times. A bull of a man.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Powerfully built. Not tall, you understand me, but with broad shoulders.' He stretched his arms. 'A thick, powerful neck.'

'A fat man?'

'No, I don't remember him that way. More the power of the man, an impression of strength. He spoke good Spanish, with a German accent.'

'You can recognize it?'

'Oh, yes, señor. Many German engineers come here.'

'Can I see the entry in the register?'

He turned it round to show me. It was on the line above mine. There were the details from his passport entered by the clerk, and beside it Bauer's signature, a trifle spidery, but firm, and the date beside it, using a crossed seven, continental style.

I nodded and pushed the two bills across. 'Thank you.'

'Señor.' He snapped up the twenty dollars

and tucked them into his breast pocket. 'I'll show you your room.'

I glanced at my watch. It was just after eleven. 'Too late to visit the undertaker now.'

'Oh, no, señor, there is a porter on duty all night. It is the custom here for the dead to be in waiting for three days, during which time they are watched over both night and day in case . . .' Here, he hesitated.

'. . . of a mistake?' I suggested.

'Exactly, señor.' He smiled sadly. 'Death is a very final affair, so one wants to be sure. Take the first street on the left. You will find the undertaker's at the far end. You can't miss it. There's a blue light above the door. The watchman's name is Hugo. Tell him Rafael Mareno sent you.'

'My thanks,' I said formally.

'At your orders, señor. And if you would care to eat on your return, something could be managed. I am on duty all night.'

He picked up his newspaper and I retraced my steps across the hall and went outside. The procession had formed up and started across the square as I paused at the top of

the steps. It was much as I had seen in Mexico. There were a couple of characters in front, blazing torches in hand, dressed to represent the Lords of Death and Hell. Next came the children, clutching guttering candles, some already extinguished in the heavy rain, the adults following on behind with baskets of bread and fruit. Someone started to play a flute, low and plaintive, and a finger drum joined in. Otherwise, they moved in complete silence.

We seemed to be going the same way and I joined on at the tail of the procession, turning up the collar of my trenchcoat against the heavy rain. The undertaker's was plain enough, the blue light subdued above the door as Mareno had indicated. I paused, watching the procession continue, the sound of that flute and drum strangely haunting, and only when they had turned into another alley and moved out of sight did I pull the bell chain.

There was silence for quite some time, only the rain. I was about to reach for the chain again when I became aware of a movement

inside, dragging footsteps approaching. A grille opened at eye-level, a face peered out, pale in the darkness.

'Hugo?'

'What is it you want, señor?' The voice was the merest whisper.

'I would like to see the body of Señor Ricardo Bauer.'

'Perhaps in the morning, señor.'

'Rafael Mareno sent me.'

There was a pause, then the grille was closed. There was the sound of bolts being withdrawn, the door creaked open. He stood there, an oil lamp in one hand, very old, very frail, almost as if one of his own charges had decided to get up and walk. I slipped inside, he closed the door.

'You will follow me, please?'

He led the way along a short passage and opened an oaken door and I could smell death instantly, the cloying sweetness of it heavy on the cold air. I hesitated, then followed him through.

The room into which I entered was a place of shadows, a single oil lamp suspended from

a chain in the centre supplying the only light. It was a waiting mortuary of a type I had seen a couple of times before in Palermo and Vienna, although the Viennese version had been considerably more elaborate. There were perhaps a dozen coffins on the other side of the room, but first he led me up some steps to a small platform on which stood a desk and chair.

I gazed down into the shadows in fascination. Each coffin was open, a corpse clearly visible inside, the stiff fingers firmly entwined in one end of a string that went up over a pulley arrangement, across to the desk where the other end was fastened to an old-fashioned bell that hung from a wall bracket.

He put down his lamp. I said, 'Has anyone ever rung that thing?'

'The bell?' I saw now that he was very old, eighty at least, the face desiccated, the eyes moist. 'Once, señor, ten years ago. A young girl. But she died again three days later. Her father refused to acknowledge the fact. He kept her with him for a month. Finally the police had to intervene.'

'I can see how they would have to.'

He opened a ledger and dipped a pen in an inkwell. 'Your relationship to Señor Bauer, señor? I must enter it in the official record.'

I took out my wallet and produced another of those ten-dollar bills. 'Nothing so formal, my friend. I'm just a newspaperman, passing through. I heard the story and thought I might recognize him.'

He hesitated, then laid down the pen. 'As you say, señor.' He picked up the lamp. 'This way.'

It was the end coffin on the back row and I received something of a shock as the old man raised his lamp to reveal red lips, a gleam of teeth, full, rounded cheeks. And then I realized, of course, that the undertaker had been going to work on him. It was as if a wax tailor's dummy had been laid out for my inspection, a totally unreal face heavy with make-up, resembling no photo that I had ever seen. But how could he hope to, thirty years on? A big, big difference between forty-five and seventy-five.

When the bell jangled, I almost jumped

out of my skin and then realized it had sounded from outside. Hugo said, 'You will excuse me, señor. There is someone at the door.'

He shuffled off, leaving me there beside Bauer's coffin. If there had been rings, they'd taken them off, and the powerful fingers were intertwined on his chest, the string between them. They'd dressed him in a neat blue suit, white collar, dark tie. It really was rather remarkable.

I became aware of the voices outside in the corridor, one unmistakably American. 'You speak English? No?'

Then the same voice continuing in bad Spanish, 'I must see the body of the man Bauer. I've come a long way and my time is limited.'

Hugo tried to protest. 'Señor – it is late,' but he was obviously brushed aside.

'Where is the body? In here?'

For some reason, some sixth sense operating if you like, I moved back into the darkness of the corner. A moment later I was glad that I had.

He stepped into the room and paused, white hair gleaming in the lamplight, rain glistening on his military raincoat, shoulders firm, the figure still militarily erect, only the whiteness of the hair and the clipped moustache hinting at his seventy-five years.

I don't think I've ever been so totally astonished, for I was looking at a legend in his own time, General Hamilton Canning, Congressional Medal of Honour, DSC, Silver Star, Médaille Militaire, the Philippines, D-Day, Korea, even Vietnam in the early days. A piece of walking history, one of the most respected of living Americans.

He had a harsh distinctive voice, not unpleasant, but it carried with it the authority of a man who'd been used to getting his own way for most of his life.

'Which one?'

Hugo limped past him, lamp held high, and I crouched back in the corner. 'Here, señor.'

Canning's face seemed calm enough, but it was in the eyes that I saw the turbulence, a blazing intensity, but also a kind of hope

as he stood at the end of the coffin and looked down at the waxen face. And then hope died, the light went out in the eyes – something. The shoulders sagged and for the first time he looked his age.

He turned wearily and nodded to Hugo. 'I won't trouble you any further.'

'This was not the person you were seeking, señor?'

Canning shook his head. 'No, my friend, I don't think so. Good night to you.'

He seemed to take a deep breath, all the old vigour returning, and strode from the room. I came out of the shadows quickly.

'Señor.' Hugo started to speak.

I motioned him to silence and moved to the entrance.

As Canning opened the door, I saw the cab from the airstrip outside, the driver waiting in the rain.

The general said, 'You can take me to the hotel now,' and closed the door behind him.

Hugo tugged at my sleeve. 'Señor, what passes here?'

'Exactly what I was wondering, Hugo,' I

said softly, and I went along the passage quickly and let myself out.

The cab was parked outside the hotel. As I approached, a man in a leather flying jacket and peaked cap hurried down the steps and got in. The cab drove away through the rain. I watched it go for a moment, unable to see if Canning was inside.

Rafael wasn't behind the desk, but as I paused, shaking the rain from my coat, a door on my left opened and he emerged.

He smiled. 'Were you successful, señor?'

'Not really,' I said. 'Did I see the cab driving away just now?'

'Ah, yes, that was the pilot of Mr Smith, an American gentleman who has just booked in. He was on his way to La Paz in his private aeroplane, but they had to put down here because of the weather.'

'I see. Mr Smith, you say?'

'That is correct, señor. I've just given him a drink in the bar. Could I perhaps get you something?'

'Well, now,' I said. 'A large brandy might be a sensible idea, considering the state I'm in.'

I followed him, unbuttoning my trench-coat. It was a pleasant enough room, rough stone walls, a well-stocked bar at one side. Canning was seated in an armchair in front of a blazing log fire, a glass in one hand. He looked up sharply.

'Company, señor,' Rafael said cheerfully. 'A fellow guest. Señor O'Hagan – Señor Smith. I'll just get your brandy now,' he added and moved away.

'Not a night for even an old tomcat to be out,' I said, throwing my coat over a chair. 'As my old grannie used to say.'

He smiled up at me, the famous Canning charm well in evidence, and stuck out his hand. 'English, Mr O'Hagan?'

'By way of Ulster,' I said. 'But we won't go into that, General.'

The smile stayed firmly in place, only the eyes changed, cold, hard, and the hand tightened on mine with a grip of surprising strength considering his age.

It was Rafael who broke the spell, arriving with my brandy on a tray. 'Can I get you another one, señor?' he asked.

Canning smiled, all charm again. 'Later, my friend. Later.'

'Señores.'

Rafael departed. Canning leaned back, watching me, then swallowed a little Scotch. He didn't waste time trying to tell me how mistaken I was, but said simply, 'We've met before, presumably?'

'About fifteen minutes ago up the street at the mortuary,' I said. 'I was standing in the shadows, I should explain, so I had you at something of a disadvantage. Oh, I've seen you before at press conferences over the years, that sort of thing, but then one couldn't really specialize in writing about politics and military affairs without knowing Hamilton Canning.'

'O'Hagan,' he said. 'The one who writes for *The Times*?'

'I'm afraid so, General.'

'You've a good mind, son, but remind me to put you straight on China. You've been way out of line in that area lately.'

'You're the expert.' I took out a cigarette. 'What about Bauer, General?'

'What about him?' He leaned back, legs sprawled, all negligent ease.

I laughed. 'All right, let's try it another way. You ask *me* why a reasonably well-known correspondent for the London *Times* takes the trouble to haul himself all the way from Lima to a pesthole like this, just to look at the body of a man called Ricardo Bauer who dropped dead in the street here on Monday.'

'All right, son,' he said lazily. 'You tell me. I'm all ears.'

'Ricardo Bauer,' I said, 'as more than one expert will tell you, is one of the aliases used by Martin Bormann in Brazil, the Argentine, Chile and Paraguay on many occasions during the past thirty years.'

'Martin Bormann?' he said.

'Oh, come off it, General. Reichsleiter Martin Bormann, Head of the Nazi Party Chancellory and Secretary to the Führer. The one member of Hitler's top table unaccounted for since the war.'

'Bormann's dead,' he said softly. 'He was killed attempting to break out of Berlin. Blown up crossing the Weidendammer Bridge on the night of May 1st, 1945.'

'Early hours of May 2nd, General,' I said. 'Let's get it right. Bormann left the bunker at 1.30 a.m. It was Erich Kempka, Hitler's chauffeur, who saw him come under artillery fire on that bridge. Unfortunately for that story, the Hitler Youth Leader, Artur Axmann, crossed the Spree River on a railway bridge, as part of a group led by Bormann, and that was considerably later.'

He nodded. 'But Axmann asserted also that he'd seen Bormann and Hitler's doctor, Stumpfegger, lying dead near Lehrter Station.'

'And no one else to confirm the story,' I said. 'Very convenient,'

He put down his glass, took out a pipe and started to fill it from a leather pouch. 'So, you believe he's alive. Wouldn't you say that's kind of crazy?'

'It would certainly put me in pretty mixed company,' I said. 'Starting with Stalin and lesser mortals like Jacob Glas, Bormann's

chauffeur, who saw him in Munich after the war. Then there was Eichmann – when the Israelis picked him up in 1960 he told them Bormann was alive. Now why would he do that if it wasn't true?'

'A neat point. Go on.'

'Simon Wiesenthal, the Nazi hunter, always insisted he was alive, maintained he had regular reports on him. Ladislas Farago said he actually interviewed him. Since 1964 the West German authorities have had 100,000 marks on his head and he was found guilty of war crimes at Nuremberg and sentenced to death in his absence.' I leaned forward. 'What more do you want, General? Would you like to hear the one about the Spaniard who maintains he travelled to Argentine from Spain with Bormann in a U-boat in 1945?'

He smiled, leaning over to put another log on the fire. 'Yes, I interviewed him soon after he came out with that story. But if Bormann's been alive all these years, what's he been doing?'

'The Kameradenwerk,' I said. 'Action for

comrades. The organization they set up to take care of the movement after the war, with hundreds of millions of gold salted away to pay for it.'

'Possible.' He nodded, staring into the fire. 'Possible.'

'One thing *is* sure,' I said. 'That isn't him lying up there at the mortuary. At least, you don't think so.'

He glanced up at me. 'Why do you say that?'

'I saw your face.'

He nodded. 'No, it wasn't Bormann.'

'How did you know about him? Bauer, I mean. Events in La Huerta hardly make front-page news in the *New York Times*.'

'I employ an agent in Brazil who has a list of certain names. Any mention of any of them anywhere in South America and he informs me. I flew straight down.'

'Now that I find truly remarkable.'

'What do you want to know, son? What he looked like? Will that do? Five foot six inches, bull neck, prominent cheekbones, broad, rather brutal face. You could lose him

in any crowd because he looked so damned ordinary. Just another working stiff off the waterfront or whatever. He was virtually unknown to the German public and press. Honours, medals meant nothing to him. Power was all.' It was as if he was talking to himself as he sat there, staring into the fire. 'He was the most powerful man in Germany and nobody appreciated it until after the war.'

'A butcher,' I said, 'who condoned the final solution and the deaths of millions of Jews.'

'Who also sent war orphans to his wife in Bavaria to look after,' Canning said. 'You know what Göring said at Nuremberg when they asked him if he knew where Bormann was? He said, "I hope he's frying in hell, but I don't know."'

He heaved himself out of the chair, went behind the bar and reached for a bottle of Scotch. 'Can I get you another?'

'Why not?' I got up and sat on one of the bar stools. 'Brandy.'

As he poured some into my glass he said,

'I was once a prisoner-of-war, did you know that?'

'That's a reasonably well-known fact, General,' I said. 'You were captured in Korea. The Chinese had you for two years in Manchuria. Isn't that why Nixon hauled you out of retirement the other year to go to Peking with him?'

'No, I mean way, way back. I was a prisoner once before. Towards the end of the Second World War, the Germans had me. At Schloss Arlberg in Bavaria. A special set-up for prominent prisoners.'

And I genuinely hadn't known, although it was so far back it was hardly surprising, and then his real, enduring fame had been gained in Korea, after all.

I said. 'I didn't know that, General.'

He dropped ice into his glass and a very large measure of whisky. 'Yes, I was there right to the bitter end. In the area erroneously known as the Alpine Fortress. One of Dr Goebbels's smarter pieces of propaganda. He actually had the Allies believing there was such a place. It meant the troops were very

cautious about probing into that area at first, which made it a safe resting place for big Nazis on the run from Berlin in those last few days.'

'Hitler could have gone, but didn't.'

'That's right.'

'And Bormann?'

'What do you mean?'

'The one thing that's never made any sense to me,' I said. 'He was a brilliant man. Too clever by half to leave his chances of survival to a mad scramble at the final end of things. If he'd really wanted to escape he'd have gone to Berchtesgaden when he had the chance instead of staying in the bunker till the end. He'd have had a plan.'

'Oh, but he did, son.' Canning nodded slowly. 'You can bet your sweet life on that.'

'And how would you know, General?' I asked softly.

And at that he exploded, came apart at the seams.

'Because I saw him, damn you,' he cried harshly. 'Because I stood as close to him as I am to you, traded shots with him, had my

hands on his throat, do you understand?' He paused, hands held out, looking at them in a kind of wonder. 'And lost him,' he whispered.

He leaned on the bar, head down. There was a long, long moment in which I couldn't think of a thing to say, but waited, my stomach hollow with excitement. When he finally raised his head, he was calm again.

'You know what's so strange, O'Hagan? So bloody incredible? I kept it to myself all these years. Never mentioned it to a soul until now.'