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**SUNDAY  
IN A  
RED  
STATE**

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**SEND MY JOB TO  
INDYNEEZYA,  
BUT PARK MY ASS  
AT BURT'S BAR  
JOE BAGEANT**

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*If Jesus reappeared on earth tomorrow it would probably be at Daytona or a Cracker Barrel Restaurant. – Punk Wilson, local wiseass*

**INDEED,** Cracker Barrel has to be the most appropriately named restaurant chain in America. The last time I entered one with an out-of-town black friend, nearly all heads turned in unison toward us. My friend took one look at the wall-to-wall porky white faces and said, “Get me back to the fucking car. I can grab a happy meal on the way out of Deliverance.”

Nevertheless, I’d be the first to admit that the food at Cracker Barrel is damned good for a chain restaurant ... authentic white trash taters and beans. To be authentic, Southern food must also be inauthentic in a trashy sort of way, but still flavorful, if you know what I mean. It’s one of those things like serving store brand cola with a tomato and mayonnaise white bread sandwich in the summer – authentic. If Cracker Barrel ever perfects a catfish batter the fare will be legit honky soul food.

So I am at a Cracker Barrel on the Virginia/West Virginia line with my minister brother following his Sunday worship service this morning. Located not far from the church where Brother preaches, the place is always jammed on Sundays with pie-and-coffee Christian fundamentalists, plus a smattering of blue-collar Yankee tourists down from Pennsylvania to paw over the gift shop’s

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Taiwanese hillbilly crafts and rebel flag beach towels.

The customers, mostly beefy well-scrubbed locals, are shaking hands and slapping backs as if they don't see one another three times a week in church: "How ARE yall! My, my, my, you look SO GOOD Sister Clark!" As much as I love their familiar ways, I'm sorry to say that I do not like fundamentalist Christians much. Particularly in groups. They tend to pack up like wolves and become hypocritical, mouthy and intolerant. It reminds me too much of myself when I'm drunk.

Even after all these years I'm still a bit surprised my little brother is a preacher. He's not like that at all – mouthy and hypocritical, I mean. I shouldn't be surprised though. We have any number of "brush preachers" in our family tree, Pentecostals and Baptists mainly. And our parents did meet at a Billy Graham tent revival during the Second World War. In my generation of Bageants however, the Holy Spirit seems to swell through the decades like a fire shut up in the bones. At some point in all their lives it bursts into the flame of conversion. Except for me.

I escaped the Christian life almost 40 years ago to eat LSD, consider Buddhism and let a couple of marriages go to hell. Eventually, to my family's amazement and relief, I managed to come to rest with a far better woman than I deserve, two dogs and high enough blood pressure to keep me scared back a respectable distance from the scotch bottle.

**MY** brother's church is what is known as an "independent Baptist church." Independent enough of your world and mine that he says things like, "I helped cast out my first demon yesterday, Joey. I wish you could have been there." Actually, I do too. Independent fundamentalist churches are wild and woolly places theologically, whose characteristics and belief systems can accommodate just about anything "Preacher Bob" or "Pastor Donnie" or preacher whomever can come up with from misreading the Good Book. The "clergy" arise from within the church ranks and are usually poorly educated. (Hell they went to public school in America, didn't they?) This has always been true of American fundamentalism since the backwoods stump church days, and it continues to provide the nation with charismatic literalists whose reading and abstracting ability is minimal to zilch. Combine that with 30 years of Christian school growth, and you can begin to understand how we got in such deep shit today...why so many states find themselves revamping their educational sys-

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tems so that the fables of Adam and Eve may replace Darwin and we can all be reassured that David slew Goliath despite the complete lack of evidence of either's existence.

Yet, look across the congregations of these churches and you see these aren't bad people. They are neither a minority nor a cult in this nation, given their millions, and are simply what the ordinary Americans are today – working class people whose interior lives were clobbered by the Twentieth Century. Unaware of it as they are, theirs is part of a global revival of fundamentalism, which emerged when triumphant materialism arrived in the wake of the enlightenment. Poor dear enlightenment! So brief! Then smashed by two world wars, Verdun, Dresden, Auschwitz, the gulags, nuclear weapons, impending ecological disaster... Not that anyone in this church ever heard of the enlightenment. Two generations of them were raised in Christian schools amid the unyielding hostility and fear of the Cold War and declining real wages and education. Is it any wonder they are so attracted to the Apocalypse both materially and literally? From home as they know it in this world, you look out the window what you see is the approaching end of the fucking world.

In response, they long ago collected themselves in what amount to mental and theological compounds, built thousands of Christian institutions and schools and trained two generations for a theocratic state. Fundamentalist thinker Gary North announced decades ago, "We will train up a generation of people who know that there is no religious neutrality, no neutral law, no neutral education, and no neutral civil government. Then they will get busy in constructing a Bible-based social, political and religious order which finally denies the religious liberty of the enemies of God."

Well, they've done it.

**BUT** returning to the Cracker Barrel... Brother is attacking his meatloaf and pungent, heavily peppered green beans with heart-warming enthusiasm. Graying and handsome, his dark suit is stylish for a preacher in his type of church. It being hunting season, he has launched into deer-hunting story. Whenever he feels awkward with me he tells a hunting story. Brother uses the same guns our daddy used, hell, it's the same ones our grandpap used. Like them, Brother is a hunter who puts at least two bucks and a doe in the freezer every year and could probably bring home

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the same given only a bag of rocks to hunt with. If there is a hunting gene, he's got it. Ours is the kind of family where the first question asked after the death of a father is: "Who gets Daddys' guns?" Alien as that sounds to many of urban folks, millions of Americans will nod and smile at the familiarity of that observation from their own family experience.

Deer hunting is the second religion of many red states and especially here in the Blue Ridge. The echoing crack of a distant deer rifle or the wild chilly smell of a deer hanging under a porch light bulb on a snowy night still bewitches me with the same mountain folk animism it did when I was a boy. But I have not hunted in twenty-five years and never expect to again. So my mind drifts as he talks of hunting. Through the window are bleak gray-brown ridges full of hunters. Brother's stalking of souls for Jesus is much like a deer hunt. Lots of quiet waiting for the exact moment of truth.

**WHEN** I look at my brother, a kind man, an essentially brave and hard-working one, exemplary of all those things an American is supposed to be, I see that one of the biggest and most overlooked political events in America is how millions of people such as him and his flock were moved out of the apolitical camp into Christian activism. And how, despite all their claims of independence, these churches were so deeply shaped by modern zealots of the past thirty years. Yet the churches are unaware that the original source of their theological ideas is the dark, strange coterie of reconstructionist Christians, who want to stone homosexuals, kill disobedient children and build a theocratic state through the establishment of "Biblical Law" in America. (Go to [www.theocracywatch.org](http://www.theocracywatch.org) or read anything by scholar of American fundamentalism Frederick Clarkson.) Via Presbyterian oriented educators, the Baptist school headmasters and pastors, and the charismatic telecommunications system, the radicals have managed to shape hundreds of thousands of Pentecostals and charismatic Christians, as well as many fundamentalist Baptists, not merely as voters, but as ideological activists for a reconstructed "Biblical world view" in government, law, education, the arts and foreign policy. As Fred Clarkson puts it: "Whether it is Operation Rescue activists called to anti-abortion work because of Francis Schaeffer's books, or Pentecostals who responded to the politicizing ministry and electoral ambitions of Pat Robertson during the 1970s and 1980s, this

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radical radicalization of Protestants is one of the major stories of modern American politics.” Watching Brother mop up the last of his bean juice with his biscuit here at the Cracker Barrel, you would never guess he is at the center of such a storm. Yet he understands that he and his kind are at a pivotal point, thought they would put it in terms of the last days instead of politics.

**LUNCH** over, we head for the door and Brother says, “Joe, you know there is something we’re got to talk about – your salvation.” Nothing makes me more anxious than when he wants to talk about getting me saved. And he wants to talk about it every damned time we get together, which for that very reason is not very often.

“Joe, I don’t wanna be up there in heaven with daddy and God without you,” he says with a pleading look. “Will you be saved?”

“There is time enough for that,” I hedge.

“None knoweth the hour,” he replies. After thirty years of being jolted by this question you’d think I’d have come up with a better answer by now. But only one answer will ever satisfy him. We walk outside into that kind of cold that makes your face hurt. Brother stops in front of his blue Toyota truck. Again that pleading look comes to his brown eyes. “I never did finish my deer-hunting story,” he says. (It’s too damned cold out here to be spinning yarns, as far as I’m concerned but, then, I’ve told you about the politeness thing...)

“Wellsir, that ole’ buck come into view and this time I know I’ve got him...”

A shudder moves through me. My legs feel limp.

“That buck looked right at me for the longest time. Square and straight on. I could see the sky like heaven in his eyes.” Brother’s voice is rising now.

The icy brown hills undulate around us...a leaden sky presses down and down, closer, closer, only to shatter revealing a piercing silver canopy. A roar fills my head.

“I raised up Pap’s old ’94...”

His hand comes to rest on my shoulder, heavy, yet weightless. An uncontrollable shaking grips me. The barren leafless ridges now ripple like stubbled backs of great beasts and a sharp rising wind groans long forgotten passages...I lift mine eyes unto the hills...from whence cometh my strength...

Brother’s face is flooded with a beautiful and terrible awe as he stalks on.

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“The sights settled right in on his heart...”

I know that right about here you are thinking I got saved. I didn't. Instead, I recovered myself rather like a man falling from great heights who manages to grab onto that awning on the way down. It happens every time. It is being on the edge of the most exalted release, then pulling back because it also means the death of self as you know it. Would not life be a hell of a lot easier with our past sins, all the terrible things that make us wince at their recollection, placed solidly on the everlasting shoulders of Jesus? A clean start?

So does the man who caught the awning on the way down feel even one smidgen of relief? Hell no. he just stands there in the parking lot uncomfortable as the proverbial whore in church, looking at his brother who is choking back his disappointment – no, not disappointment, outright inconsolable sorrow. He is near tears. I grasp at the air, trying to lighten things up and, blame it on stupidity, I even try to broach the subject lightly.

“One thing for sure little brother,” I say. “These near misses got to stop. My ole heart ain't what it used to be.”

“Oh, I didn't miss that buck,” he says, a rigid grin now locked onto his face. “I nailed him at about two hundred yards.” As I said, we are people who know the subtext but never comment on it. Sometimes it can jump right up and thump us upside the head and we still ignore it.

The snow flurries thicken as we say our goodbyes to another distant pop of a deer rifle. One more time I, the prodigal brother, have been snatched from proffered grace by pride's certain hand. Like the hand that pulls the trigger, bringing down the unsuspecting twelve-point buck, the hand of pride pulls me back into its own dominion, back across the waters of Babylon, a river so deep and wide even blood and brotherhood cannot breach it. Who am I to say that hand is not best called Satan's?

*Joe Bageant is a writer and editor living in Winchester, Virginia.*

*For Joe's “Git down and pound the floor cause it tastes so good” catfish batter recipe, email [bageantjb@netscape.net](mailto:bageantjb@netscape.net). (It's all in the cornmeal, folks!)*

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