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THE DEVIL DOES NOT LIVE IN THE AMERICAN
HEARTLAND, HE JUST SHITS HERE

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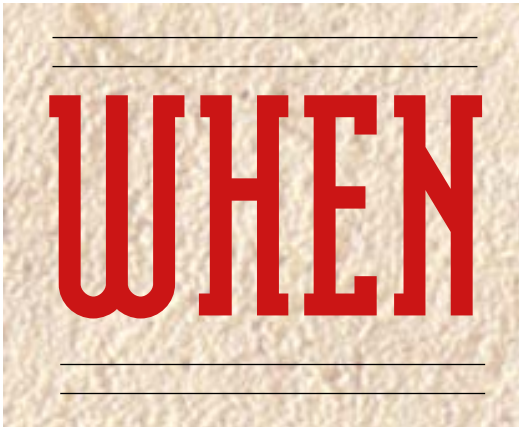
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my old friend Dickie Holme told me that the black maid, Vernie, who had raised him while his family was busy stealing half the county, still cooked Xmas dinner at his house every year, I nearly spit vodka tonic onto the front of his Yonex badminton shirt. “Jezits Christ Dickie, she’s 80-years-old and has a family of her own to celebrate

Christmas with. Slavery has been over in Virginia for 20 years now. Didn’t you get the memo?”

“Vernie ALWAYS cooks the Christmas oysters,” he said. “She wouldn’t want to see them prepared badly. We give her a ride both ways.”

Now Dickie is not a cruel guy. Far from it. He is so well mannered and polished most people, at first glance here in the land of cope snuff and jacked up trucks, figure he is queer. Which he is not, despite his bare ankles, tasseled loafers and fem looks. Many rich Southerners look queer. It’s just a style.

Both sides of his family are longtime movers and shakers, big time butter and egg men from way down South. The tribal loot originates in land theft during the depression when his great grandpappy slicked busted farmers out of acreage in the process of buying timber for his sawmill. Three subsequent generations on city council cutting backroom deals topped off their wealth and today they are the county’s biggest developers. Classic Southern stuff.

Anyway...so I am sitting here looking at a guy I’ve known for years, a person about whom I never figured to learn a single new thing, when it dawns on me: *This fucking guy will never get it!* He’ll never get it why Vernie just might not prefer to have spent the past 40 Christmases at his family’s home, the last ten without even being an employee. And when I remind him of the class and political implications, he says that Vernie “never had a political thought in her life.

Of course the main reason Vernie is hobbling around there on Christmas is Dicko’s wife. She is one of those Southern belle right wing psycho hose beasts who have never quite gotten over the notion of not owning slaves. Black domestic help is considered primo down here these days, given that few blacks care to or need to crawl around scrubbing Massa’s flowahs wif a rag. And if you find one who is willing it is

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going to cost you a bill a day, because there are plenty of jobs for blacks over in Washington D.C. So having Vernie around on Christmas shows that the hose beast does not have to settle for a \$45-a-day Mexican. No siree! All the big money families make a show of having black help, especially old black help that “have been with our family fo’evah.”

Dickie’s class, the business and owning class, is congenitally incapable of getting the fact that the masses are part of political history, too. These owning class people, are not mean, or at least not intentionally so, nor are they stupid. They merely live their lives based upon the way they have experienced their lives – as a class that owns the country and rents it back to the rest of us. And they see us as exactly that, a faceless swarm to be exploited and managed profitably. His class’s town bankers owned my daddy’s ass, and I don’t even want to think of the ways Dicko probably owns mine indirectly through local financial institutions.

The business/owning class has always been institutionalized as the state and the custodians of the entire American social and political process. History as we learn it in school is the owning class version as they see it. Despite what we were taught, America’s very constitution is mainly a property rights document, and those with the most property are naturally ascendant at all times in this country. Generation after generation of this was bound to lead to dangerous hubris such as Bush’s “ownership society,” in which everyone has their own mobile home, credit card debt and a Dell...not to mention the reestablishment of debtor’s prisons and poor houses through “bankruptcy reform” and “Social Security reform.” How could it not have?

So it’s no wonder that when faced by an honest-to-god resistance from parts of the world outside the self-serving scope of their own property-based system, whether it be Vietnam or the Middle East, or the global anti-Iraq War movement, they are non-plussed. Dickie and his elite set are absolutely goddamned baffled. They have not one scrap of experiential or intellectual wherewithal to grasp what is going on. (And to those who will surely say I am being an apologist for the rich, let me remind you that, as a bona fide inbred redneck, I am far more likely to shoot their feeble feckless asses than you are. It’s in my blood, though I manage to restrain myself.)

At any rate, the local and national elite was making money hand over fist, with no one doing an honest day’s work in generations ... then kabloom! 9/11. They look up from their cognac and Oh My God! Swarms of dusty sweat-soaked heathens are inside the perimeter! And the entire world is looking toward America with outrage

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and even the Europeans whose asses we saved in WW II are getting mouthy. Nothing to do but launch the armies, deploy across the face of the planet, set up more bases and prisons and intelligence networks and interrogate the hell out of everybody. Corporate money backed by the fist of the Marines has worked all their lives, all their parents' lives, and all the modern history of America. Why would it quit working now? "Lynndie, turn up the ball shocker on that Iraqi kid; maybe he can explain what's happening."

OK. So the truly rich may not get it. But the most dangerous weasels of all, the ones at the next level down from Dicko – those little ankle biters trying to get a bigger piece of the action – they get it all too well. Or at least to the extent they understand that the masses need to be roughed up from time to time. Kept in their place. Now I'm not talking about the barber or three-chair beauty shop or the deli owner up the street. I am talking about the realtors, lawyers and middlemen willing to cooperate in whatever it takes to destroy land use and zoning codes, bust unions and keep wages low, rents high, the liberals down and the cullids out. This group of second-tier conservative professionals and semi-pros are dead set on being real players someday. On their way up the ladder they will screw you blind and make you beg for your change.

America's small and medium sized towns are run entirely by their business class, those countless little sparkplugs of the American capitalist corporate machinery. They are where the institutionalized rip-off by the rich corporations finds its footing and support. Serving on every local governmental body, this mob of Kiwanis and Rotarians have connections, and collectively can get that 200 acres rezoned for Wal-Mart or a sewer line to that 2000-unit housing development at taxpayer expense. When it comes to getting things done locally for the big guys, these folks can heal the sick, raise the dead and give eyesight to the blind. They are God's gift to the big non-union companies and the chip plants looking for a fresh river to piss cadmium into – the Rotarian, Lions, Kiwanis Club can-do boys. What makes them especially dangerous is that they are politically active, and have a cumulative effect on the national *corps politique*.

Like the place I write from, Winchester, Virginia, many heartland towns are little feudal systems ruled by local networks of moneyed families. It is the part of our com-

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munity's life you cannot see from the road or your hotel room and certainly will not appear in the tourist brochure for historic Winchester. It is in the interest of these well-heeled conservative provincials to maintain a state with low taxes, few or no local regulations, no unions, a cheap school system and a Chamber of Commerce with the entire state senate on its speed dial. At the same time, they control local elected offices and municipal boards. After generations of shaving down the soap bars in the back room and soaking the pork chops in water for extra weight on the scales, these senseless little horse fuckers have truly taken over the political and economic debate (which are one and the same because in America politics is simply the system used by the rich to manage their money.) As in "Fuck the scenic creek and the historic old battlefield, city government says you're getting an Outback Steakhouse!" Despite how it seems, the devil does not live in Winchester, Virginia. He just shits here.

Beyond all this, it never ceases to amaze me how flat out damned ignorant these successful, well-heeled neocons at the local level can be. One business leader in my town, I'll call him Jim Dawkins, returned from a trip to Europe and, knowing that I am a double-bottomed cast iron leftie, brought me a copy of a socialist newspaper. He gave it to me as a joke, and said "Man! Can you believe they actually allow this stuff to be published over there? We got laws against such crap in this country." I reminded him that we have no such laws and that the socialist party is probably the largest political party on the planet. "Aw bullshit!" he said. "Then what the hell do you think is the largest party?" He answers, "The Republican Party. We're the only country with real parties." Now this is a guy who has an MBA, holds local office and has influence in public affairs around here. What in friggin heaven passes for education in this country? What kind of bubble are these American business people living in? Whatever the case, characters like Dicko and Jimmy Dawkins stand on the necks of millions of working poor.

My father died with some of those heel-marks on his neck. For much of his life he ran a gas station/garage for a small businessman. He was proud of his craft, and good at it. Worked six 12-hour days a week laying on wheelies under cars, mucking out grease pits, living on sandwiches. He never drank – he could never afford to start – and feared a fundamentalist god. He'd give your tail a whuppin if you swiped stuff, and take you all-night fishing on the Shenandoah River. Pop believed Jimmy Hoffa was proof that all unions are crooked, and loved to eat ice cream straight out of the

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carton late at night when he got off work. I used to slip downstairs in my jamas, snuggle up with him, and watch Gunsmoke. He had his first heart attack in his late 30s, lived in debt to doctors and hospitals ever after. He never had health insurance until he finally went on social security. The small owners he worked for became quite well off because of his ceaseless efforts to gain friends and customers and do perfect work – for \$55 a week. In 1963. Yet he trusted the system and accepted all his troubles as personal failure. He had one hell of a huge funeral though, the biggest one ever in his church. Which I guess counts for something. Hope so. Because he sure as hell got nothing else for his troubles in this life.

How on god's green earth did we Americans ever come up with the notion that a bunch of downtown pickle vendors, gasoline retailers and real estate jerk-offs – people who know the price of everything and the value of nothing – were the bedrock of our democracy? That they are an indicator of what is right for America? Well, we didn't of course. The pickle vendors and the politicians and the corporations that own Congress did. Once it was discovered what a wonderful generator of low wage, non-union, disposable, part time, non-insured, jobs these small time sweatshops were, and that any job counts statistically (even a 20-hour-a-week job sawing bloated dead sows out of hog farrowing crates for minimum wage, which I actually held once) their owners were deemed mighty engines of employment growth! The beating heart of our economic engine! So Wall Street soars giddily at the news of thousands being laid off and, "Hi ho, hi ho! It's off to work we go" at the local Tyson's processing franchise to stab turkeys merrily for minimum wage alongside the El Salvadorian who keeps glancing over his shoulder for the INS which will never come because the fix is in with the owner. When is anybody going to figure out what a nest of self-serving sleazeballs the so-called small business establishment is in this country? When is anybody going to call these bastards on it?

Interestingly, at this writing, the Bush administration has again cut funds to the Small Business Administration, the reason being that the real players are not so small at all, even at the local and regional cartel level. The administration takes care of these campaign contributors; the neocon junta is smart enough to "dance with them what brung 'em." No need to waste money on a woman named Raynetta, who successfully raised six kids of her own and is trying to start a daycare center over in

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our cullid neighborhood. Or make a loan to Bobby Copenhaver out there on the edge of town in redneck modular home hell who believes he could operate a pretty damned good body shop if he only had startup cash – they are not players. So the neocon business class politicians tell Raynetta the liberals are going to make all her grandchildren wear condoms to school and tell Bobby an urban coalition (“Urban” being the code word for African-American) is going to take his daddy’s heirloom gun away from him. Works every time. Just like the “all unions are crooked” and the “liberals will take away your guns” line worked on my dad.

One recent winter day, after the long dark commute back from the D.C. metro area, I stepped into my living room, where for a split-second I saw my daddy sitting on the couch by the flicker of the television eating ice cream straight from the carton, just like he did when I was a kid. Even a spilt second with an apparition is a long time, an eternity which defies our very notion of time. After the electric waves of shock quit going through my body, I sat down on the couch and reminded myself why I am a socialist: If I can do my bit, however small that may be, to prevent good men like my dad from working their guts out to line a lesser man’s pocket, or restore dignity to labor in even the smallest way, then I will do it. And if I can use the only damned gift I ever had – the one he never understood – in testimony, then I will do that too.

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