

Dead man shopping



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for retail sales
in the lost
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Joe Bageant is the author of the newly-published book, **Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War** from Random House Crown.

A complete archive of his online work, along with the thoughts of many working class Americans on the subject of class may be found at ww.joebageant.com.

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JOE BAGEANT: DEAD MAN SHOPPING

Small businesses are the backbone of our economy and the engine of job creation.

- Ronald Reagan

I never met a small businessman yet who didn't have one finger up his ass and the other on the scales.

- Mad Dog Howard



Like many older married men, I'd rather have my fingernails pulled out with heated pliers than go with my wife to an allegedly cultural event, which in our still quite Southern town of Winchester, Virginia, usually means attending yet another local history or genealogy lecture. And I'd rather have the late Uday Hussein personally administer the

ball shockers to me than attend one of our town's many commercial events such as First Night, First Friday, or any "celebration of" (pick your own noun) such as Winchester's spring festival of the apple blossom, downtown days, historic main street or any of the other thinly masked events which I call "Chamber of Commerce coordinated purchasing opportunities."

But when my wife Barb pointed out, rather firmly I thought, that main street Winchester's "First Friday" celebration was tonight, and given that I have not been outside this house for most of the month since returning from my shack in Central America, I knew that I'd better show a bit of enthusiasm.

And so I find myself standing here holding one of those ubiquitous caterer's plastic wine goblets in the middle of a boutique whose theme or purpose, as near as I can tell, is cool looking weathered outdoor stuff brought indoors, then matched up with expensive new china and linens. Immediately, that high whine of hysteria in the back of my head starts its klaxton: **Get me the fuuuuuck outta heeeeeeeeere! Oooooooooooooooweeeeeeeeeee.... Get me the fuuuuuck outta**

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heeeeeeeere! I call it the “Dead Man Shopping” siren. Or “Rod Serling’s Lost Potpourri Zone.”

On the face of it, First Friday, which is “celebrated” in thousands of American downtowns on the first Friday in June each year, seems mainly an opportunity for merchants to give away wine and cheese and crab salad cracker spread in large amounts. Almost none of the attending crowd purchases. And when they do it seems to be one of those reflexive small token purchases one sees only in America: as in, “I am occupying space and breathing inside a retail establishment and the owner greeted me, so I must buy something. Especially since I ate a piece of his cheese.

If First Friday is purely a cheese giveaway, they might do well to emulate our first populist president, Andrew Jackson, who let a 1400 pound block of cheese age in the hallway of the white house for two years. Then in 1837 the President, on his way out of office, invited the public to come and eat it. It was gone in two hours. But the stench in the White House lasted well into the following presidency of Martin van Buren in much the same way our current president has crapped upon the carpet of American history for the next president to clean up. Jackson knew he had caused the oncoming economic crash through over-extension of what we would now call sub-prime credit, leaving Van Buren to campaign on a platform of “Everybody gets a helluva lot less from here on out, so get used to it.” Not an enviable campaign position, to be sure. But at least Van Buren stood against the idea of allowing Texas to become a state, which, if he had been successful, might have saved us all much subsequent political grief. *Earth to Bageant: Snap out of it! Someone is talking to you.*

And indeed someone is. A well dressed woman, one of our many Yankee transplants, stands nearby gabbing about why she chose a certain artificial condo development called “Creekside Village,” a development more or less embedded in a shopping center at the edge of town, as opposed to others as far as a mile from a mall. What more could a person ask for in life than to within walking distance of Jos. A. Bank, and Ann Taylor? (Banning the local atmospheric release of the 328,000 pounds of toxins annually by two local factories would be nice. But hell, you cannot have everything in this life)

Creekside *is* certainly the best looking of our developments and even has a few trees left standing. And it’s far from the crumbling old malls of the Seventies where immigrants and white trash shop. No Salvadorians or Guatemalans (who are rumored to keep chickens in wire cages under their kitchen sinks) out her way. Sure, it sits in the middle of a permanent traffic jam, but you can actually walk to the mall! Now to my Luddite mind the trick would be escaping FROM

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the mall, but these things are a matter of perspective.

I supposed there is still a creek at Creekside Village somewhere. One wandered along there when I was a kid, though I can see no sign today of what I would actually call a rippling creek in the dragonfly, tadpole and darting minnows sense of the word – although that open concrete storm drain alongside the pavement may well be it. Anyway, Mall Locked Village would have been too obviously accurate a name, so the pretense that a creek once filled with crawdads is still there was probably a better choice. I cannot help though, but remember the old wetland where the red winged blackbirds perched on the cattails and sumac branches, piercing the muggy stillness of summer, issuing their crystalline cry before lifting off to nudge the sky with their bold red shoulders.

Cattle mutilations on Main Street



On our main street, Loudoun Street, there was once a J. C. Penney, Montgomery Ward, hardware stores and movie theaters. Its sidewalks were clogged with working class shoppers, especially on weekends when folks came into town from the outlying counties to buy shoes for the kids, groceries and perhaps a secret bottle at the liquor store. That was when J. J. Newberry's and Woolworth were considered massive because they had six aisles. But with America's main streets retailers now left desanguinated – rather like those strange cattle mutilations of New Mexico – by the big box stores and suburban malls, the buildings on Loudoun Street are broken down into small boutique spaces selling “handcrafted” whatnots, small “galleries” of every sort imaginable, antiquish shops, the obligatory Starbucks knockoff, pub-like drinking establishments with dark paneling, and a few high end (for Winchester anyway) restaurants with iron tables and chairs under umbrellas out front. But on any given day the street is nearly empty, as if there has been a permanent bomb threat announced for the downtown area. Boutique business owners sit waiting to pounce on out of towners, mostly summer tourists visiting the surrounding civil war battle fields. After Labor Day, they look for an advertising connection between Chinese made desk organizer and Thanksgiving, the day after which they put up Christmas signage and begin the long grim march toward holiday sales on a street where gross sales have been in decline for years.

The first in our state of Virginia, the Loudon Street pedestrian mall, and hence the First Friday event, centers around an 1840 high columned courthouse, complete with Confederate statue in front, gun in hand and bronze eyes eternally vigilant for the next attack from up north. Loudoun Street is named for John

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Campbell, 4th Earl of Loudoun, a Scottish nobleman and supposed military leader who managed to lose his entire regiment during the Jacobite Rising of 1745. As punishment, Loudoun was sent to the American colonies as Commander-in-Chief, where he could do less harm. However, he managed to do so, losing the frontier to the French and Indians, for which he was promoted and sent to Spain.

Shortly afterward, a local land speculator and small fry militia officer named George Washington – who quite understood the value of property protection – built the largest earthen fort of the French and Indian war, now reduced to a hill overlooking our First Friday celebration. In fact, the house from which I write this is located on what was once the fort's parade ground. If real estate values and American history had anything to do with one another, the For Sale sign would not still be sticking up in my front yard to these many months.

Strange as it may sound to some, there have been moments when our main street pedestrian mall has brought tears to my eyes. My childhood lives still somewhere between its dank old alleys and its refurbished colonial buildings, and haunts the shadowed side streets as that one of those ancestral ghosts old men are so hesitant to let go of. One of my direct ancestors opened a leather-smith's shop in 1781 on this three-block stretch that still constitutes most of our main street commercial activity. Having seen the letters and optimistic advertisements of John William Bageant, Revolutionary war veteran and former indentured apprentice turned saddle and glove maker, it saddens this crusty old heart to see that many, if not most businesses here, are struggling to stay open while others are just the expensive hobbies of developers and doctors' wives. And so walking Loudoun Street, with its numerous empty "commercial spaces" is a melancholy experience.

Two hundred and twenty five years of the ordinary history of hopeful toiling freedom loving craftsmen, men with fingers bloodied by the cordwainer's needle, the wheelwright and gunsmith's toil vanished into the ether. All that cumulative effort reduced to trinketry and much very bad art – small watercolors of flowers that looked like they were done by a six year, framed in gilt and on sale for \$350, most of which were painted by hobbyists wives and daughters of the already rich. Ten generations of craft, toil and small town merchantilism reduced to brass wind chimes with colonial motifs made in the Confucian capitalist gulags of the new industrial China. In the new globalized America, having deep roots in a place sooner or later comes to be painful. In all likelihood, the guy in Dongguan, China who made the wind chimes weeps at the memory of some remembered village street too.

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Gimme a sixer of Bud Light and a wedge of Pont-l'Evêque



Now that the artificial prosperity of the Clinton years is over, and the current administration has completed the looting of the national kitty, downtown boutiques find themselves unable to sell local Southern specialties, such as those \$550 framed Mort Kuntzler prints of that most cold blooded of Civil War killers, Stonewall Jackson, who sucked on lemons while condemning his men into unimaginable slaughter. In the most famous of these prints Stonewall Jackson on bended knee asks for "Divine Guidance" while his men look on reverently. This famous (to Southerners at least) print is based on no actual event, but is a simulacra - an image of an image of something that, in this case, never happened. It is derived from a fictional scene from the worst Civil War movie ever made, "Gods and Generals." Jackson's Civil War headquarters, now a museum restored with the help of all people, Mary Tyler Moore, is located maybe 50 yards from my back yard fence. In the past few years Stonewall Jackson has become the number one heroic figure of a fundamentalist movement called "Christian Manliness," there is an eerie reverence about the visitors pouring from the tour busses outside my window to visit this shrine with its Confederate flag and cannon out front, rather symbolically pointed at Winchester's black neighborhood.

Anyway, except for a few business owners who've owned their downtown buildings for a long time, things are slowly and inexorably drifting down the crapper. The fact that we have a Dollar General store plunked down amid this his mélange of historical buildings and boutique businesses speaks volumes about our downtown economy. One very honest boutique merchant says, "After tonight I am closing down. I'm just plain tired of sitting around waiting for nothing." Watching the public pretense of doing business in an economy rotting from the inside out is almost Kafkaesque in its interior grimness and exterior smiling and polishing of goods. Another downtowner tells me he/she hasn't made a sale over \$15 in two weeks, mostly art bookmarks, stationary and similar doodads.

It just could have to with the fact that this walking mall is surround on three sides by low wage semi-slum dwellers who, after coming home on a Friday dead tired from the loading docks out there at the pasta plant, would prefer to spend eight bucks on a 12-pack and chill out, rather than come down here to figure out what to do with a heated brie knife or taste a South African cab from a thimble sided plastic cup. In the pedestrian mall's 35-year existence, it has yet to occur to the town's owning class leadership that, walking distance or not, it might be nice if the walkers were prosperous enough to actually buy something,

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and that it might also be nice if that something were actually useful.

In the end however, it's about class distinctions that have to do with some imagined sense of taste - Care Bears and Doritos casseroles vs. the \$500 latte/espresso maker and Chateau Larrivet-Haut-Brion. It's about the tasteful and the unwashed, which here in the South somehow manage to pass one another at the juncture of kitschy Stonewall Jackson worship. Yet class distinctions have little to do with money and how much of it you make, whether it be 20-K a year or 200-K. The owning classes, and business and corporate classes will always accept your money, whether you willingly spend it at some mall, or have to be hypnotized into doing so through television, or they have to beat it out of your ass when push comes to shove. And it matters not one frittler the color of your skin or whether you are a Mexican laborer getting a usurious payday loan, or the bimbo wife of a doctor shopping at Saks. Class is about power over others, both perceived and real. You can be whiter than the inside of one of Grandma's biscuits and still be a caste untouchable and cultural nigger. For example....

Are these wind chimes Biblically correct ma'm?



Sitting on a wicker bench outside a gallery I watch a 50-ish guy with a whitewall haircut, who probably drifted downtown from the lower working class neighborhood three blocks over. He is a fundamentalist Christian and is discussing whether First Friday is a "Biblically sanctioned Christian holiday" to an uncomfortable lady with a beautiful Virginia Tidewater accent, a tight-for-fifty butt well presented by expensive trendy Capri pants; clearly she is the victim of too much exercise, healthy food and full medical coverage. Now Whitewall is not preaching to anyone, just doing what would pass for making conversation in his lower working class white Christian Virginian caste. He is probably not a hard core Christian fundamentalist because if he were, he would not be down here where they are not only drinking alcohol, but giving the damned stuff away for free. Capri Pants is uncomfortable as hell just being near Mr. Whitewall and he can feel it and he can feel that there is a class wall between them four hundred feet high and made of kryptonite. One of them is a piece of shit and it ain't her.

If Capri Pants had simply taken the man seriously as a human being, and maybe opened the discussion toward the difference between Religious and secular celebrations, they might have actually had a conversation. One in which Mr. Whitewall - who I'd bet a bottle of good gin never graduated from high school

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– would have learned something he didn't know and wouldn't have minded learning it at all. Obviously he wasn't there to argue with anyone, but just to see what this First Friday stuff was all about. So he remains in a white cultural ghetto three blocks away bounded by religion and ignorance. And she remains in a white cultural ghetto circumscribed by recreational boutique shopping, the severe capitalist indoctrination certified by her college degree, and the Oprah Book Club. You can be very damned white and middle class in this country and be living in a ghetto.

According to the US census, we've got 789 black people and 4000 Hispanics living within walking distance of this Friday night purchasing opportunity. Not a one of them seems to be here this evening. (Although three large, out of town black men wearing Washington DC sports team gear huddle by an iron post supporting the mall's antique clock, observing the scene from behind sunglasses. I'd kill to know what they are smiling and chuckling about). Yet the whiteness of First Friday is not – contrary to what an outside liberal observer might think – a racial thing. Race has been ever used and very effectively in America to hide class issues. And besides, the good merchants get mighty tolerant when a debit card or cash is exposed. Case in point: A couple of weeks ago I walked down to the pedestrian mall wearing wrinkled flannel pajama bottoms, house slippers and a beat up, sweat stained fishing vest and sporting a week's growth of beard – my basic ensemble when I am holed up writing. Old Southern men can be ornery for the sheer fuck of it, so I just got up from the keyboard and walked downtown to get a few things. As long as I was filling my shopping bag all I got were smiles (to my face at least.) If you are spending money in such an outfit, even smelling mildly of bourbon and B.O., you are merely eccentric. Had I been dressed the same and pushing a shopping cart full of aluminum cans, I'd have been told by the cops to move on, or maybe arrested for theft of and deadly possession of a shopping cart.

The party that just won't die



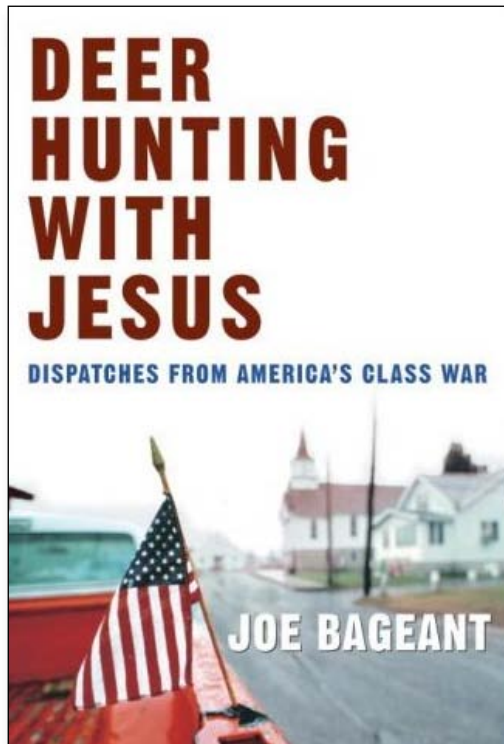
Times may be thin for small retailers, but it was a good week for the grim reaper and the stock market (Why do they always seem to be holding hands in the financial news?). At least 123 Americans and fuck only knows how many Iraqis were killed this month defending the edges of the empire and the flow of oil and goods. And of course Darfur continues to sow the earth with skulls. Today a US warship started bombarding Somalia. Yet more skulls predicted there too. Also today the US, in a friendly act

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of cooperation with the Laotian government, busted ten men in California, “terrorist” members of Laos’ hmong mountain tribe whose male members are being executed and whose women are systematically being transported from military base to military base and gang raped, as punishment for cooperating with American forces in the Vietnam War 35 years ago. President Bush says we may be fighting in the Middle East for the next 50 years. And Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke assured the public that the US economy will rebound in time for the Christmas shopping season.

Meanwhile, here within the inner bastion of the free wheeling market capitalist economy, the party never ends. Every day we get something for nothing, by god! If it isn’t free cheese or free airline miles, or timeshare trial offers, then it’s a free service or free special event. I see in the Winchester Star that tomorrow offers yet another special event and service balled up into one: a “Privacy Day” sponsored by American Background Services. “Powerful in “data resource exchange” according to its corporate self-description, ABS is owned by the Control Risk Group or CRG., a global company that provides criminal histories, personal credit and driving records, and something called “U.S. Treasury enforcement” to anyone willing to pay. And tomorrow – oh joy of joys! – American Background is offering free shredding and destruction of personal or business information to anyone who delivers their own private records into the hands of CRG at a drop off point.

Something about that smells stronger than the most pungent cheese being spread on the retail communion wafers of First Friday. But after watching people pretending to do business with people pretending to be shopping, well, delivering your most private matters into the hands of people who are paid to spy on your personal life doesn’t surprise me one bit.



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DEER HUNTING WITH JESUS **Dispatches From America's Class War**

"Many friends and readers will notice that the title has changed to *Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches From America's Class War*. The original title was *Drink, Pray, Fight, Fuck: Dispatches From America's Class War*. Contrary to what one might suspect, the name change had not as much to do with the word "fuck" as it did the fact that a book was recently released with a very similar title. Then too, when I started putting the title "Drink, Pray, Fight, Fuck" on the web, it kicked off some merchandising by small scale entrepreneurs of ball caps, tee-shirts, etc. bearing the four words. Which is no problem with me – I like to see the little guy printing tee-shirts make a buck" – JOE BAGEANT

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