

# AMERICAN SERFS

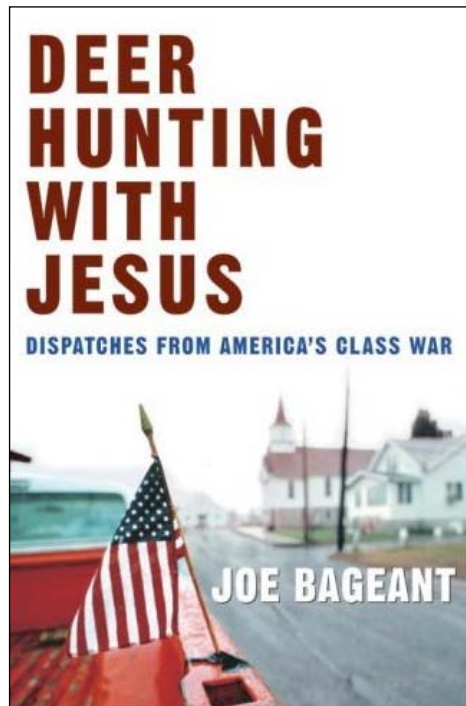
INSIDE THE WHITE GHETTO OF THE WORKING POOR

## JOE BAGEANT

AN EXCERPT FROM HIS NEW BOOK

**DEER HUNTING WITH JESUS**

DISPATCHES FROM AMERICA'S CLASS WAR



Excerpted from Chapter 1 of  
**Deer Hunting with Jesus:  
Dispatches From America's Class War**  
by Joe Bageant

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## JOE BAGEANT: AMERICAN SERFS

*"73 virgins in arab heaven and not a dam one in this bar!"*

*—Men's room wall, Burt's Tavern*



ACED with working-class life in towns such as Winchester, see only one solution: beer. So I sit here at Burt's Tavern watching fat Pootie in a T-shirt that reads: one million battered women in this country and i've been eating mine plain! That this is not considered especially offensive says all you need to know about cultural and gender sensitivity around here. And the fact that Pootie votes, owns guns, and is allowed to purchase hard liquor is something we should all probably be afraid to contemplate. Thankfully, even cheap American beer is a palliative for anxious thought tonight.

Then too, beer is educational and stimulates contemplation. I call it my "learning through drinking" program. Here are some things I have learned at Burt's Tavern:

1. Never shack up with a divorced woman who is two house payments behind and swears you are the best sex she ever had.
2. Never eat cocktail weenies out of the urinal, no matter how big the bet gets.

As you can see, learning through drinking is never dull. But when karaoke came to American bars, my hopsy approach to social studies got downright entertaining, especially here where some participants get gussied up for their three weekly minutes of stardom.

Take Dink Lamp over there in the corner, presently dressed like a stubble-faced Waylon Jennings. At age fifty-six, Dink's undying claim to fame in this town is not his Waylon imitation, however, which sucks (as do his Keith Whitley and his Travis Tritt). It is that he beat up the boxing chimpanzee at the carnival in 1963. This is a damned hard thing to do because chimpanzees are several times stronger than humans and capable of enough rage that the pugilistic pri-

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mate wore a steel muzzle. Every good old boy in this place swears Dink pounded that chimpanzee so hard it climbed up the cage bars and refused to come back down and that Dink won a hundred dollars. I don't know. I wasn't there to see it because my good Christian family did not approve of attending such spectacles. One thing is for sure, though: Dink is tough enough to have done it. (To readers who wonder whether people really have names such as Dink and Pootie: Hell, yes! Not only do we have a Dink and a Pootie in Winchester, the town that stars in this book, we also have folks named Gator, Fido, Snooky, and Tumbug – whom we simply call Bug.)

Anyway, with this older crowd of karaoksters from America's busted-up laboring lumpen, you can count on at least one version of "Good-Hearted Woman" or a rendition of "Coal Miner's Daughter," performed with little skill but a lot of beery heart and feeling. And when it comes to heart and feeling, the best in town is a woman named Dottie. Dot is fifty-nine years old, weighs almost three hundred pounds, and sings Patsy Cline nearly as well as Patsy sang Patsy. Dot can sing "Crazy" and any other Patsy song ever recorded and a few that went unrecorded. She knows Patsy's unrecorded songs because she knew Patsy personally, as did many other people still living here in Winchester, where Patsy Cline grew up. We know things such as the way she was treated by the town's establishment, was called a drunken whore and worse, was snubbed and reviled during her life at every opportunity, and is still sniffed at by the town's business and political classes. But Patsy, who took shit from no one and knew cuss words that would make a Comanche blush and, well, she was one of us. Tough and profane. (Cussing is a form of punctuation to us.) Patsy grew up on our side of the tracks and suffered all the insults life still inflicts on working people here. Hers was a hard life.

Dot's life has been every bit as hard as Patsy's. Harder really, because Dot has lived twice as long as Patsy Cline managed to, and she looks it. By the time my people hit sixty we look like a bunch of hypertensive red-faced toads in a phlegm-coughing contest. Fact is, we are even unhealthier than we look. Doctors tell us that we have blood in our cholesterol, and the cops tell us there is alcohol in that blood. True to our class, Dottie is disabled by heart trouble, diabetes, and several other diseases. Her blood pressure is so high the doctor thought the pressure device was broken. And she is slowly going blind to boot.

Trouble is, insurance costs her as much as rent. Her old man makes \$8 an hour washing cars at a dealership, and if everything goes just right they have about \$55 a week left for groceries, gas, and everything else. But if an extra expense as small as \$30 comes in, they compensate by not filling one of Dot's prescrip-

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tions—or two or three of them--in which case she gets sicker and sicker until they can afford the co-pay to refill the prescriptions again. At fifty-nine, these repeated lapses into vessel-popping high blood pressure and diabetic surges pretty much guarantee that she won't collect Social Security for long after she reaches sixty-three, if she reaches sixty-three. One of these days it will truly be over when the fat lady sings.

Dot started working at thirteen. Married at fifteen. Which is no big deal. Throw in "learned to pick a guitar at age six" and you would be describing half the southerners in my generation and social class. She has cleaned houses and waited tables and paid into Social Security all her life. But for the last three years Dottie has been unable to work because of her health. Dot's congestive heart problems are such that she will barely get through two songs tonight before nearly passing out.

Yet the local Social Security administrators, cold Calvinist hard asses who treat federal dollars as if they were entirely their own in the name of being responsible with the taxpayers' money, have said repeatedly that Dot is capable of full-time work. To which Dot once replied, "Work? Lady, I cain't walk nor half see. I cain't even get enough breath to sing a song. What the hell kinda work you think I can do? Be a tire stop in a parkin' lot?" Not one to be moved by mere human misery, the administrator had Dot bawling her eyes out before she left that office. In fact, Dottie cries all the time now. Even so, she will sing one, maybe two songs tonight. Then she will get down off the stage with the aid of her cane, be helped into a car, and be driven home.

Although it might seem that my people use the voting booth as an instrument of self-flagellation, the truth is that Dottie would vote for any candidate—black, white, crippled, blind, or crazy—who she thought would actually help her. I know because I have asked her if she would vote for a candidate who wanted a national health care program. "Vote for him? I'd go down on him!" Voter approval does not get much stronger than that.

But no candidate, Republican or Democrat, is going to offer national health care, not the genuine article, although I suspect the Democrats will bandy some phony version next election. If Dot is lucky, a pollster might call her, take her political temperature over the phone to be fed into some computer. But that is about as much contact as our system is willing to have with a three-hundred-pound diabetic woman with a small bird and a husband too depressed to get out of his TV chair other than to piss or stumble off to his car-washing job.

Americans are supposed to be so disgustingly healthy, educated, rich, and happy. But I have seen half-naked Indians in Latin America eating grubs and

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scrubbing their codpieces on river rocks who were a whole lot happier, and in some cases more cared for by their governments. Once, in Sonora, Mexico, I got very sick among the Sari Indians and needed a doctor. Every Sari Indian had national health care, but the American crapping his guts out behind their shacks, a man who made fifty times their annual income, could not even afford health insurance in his own country because I was a young freelance writer without the protections of a salaried staff position with a newspaper or magazine. Anyway, I wish I could say the Saris also had a native cure for dysentery, but they did not.

Actually, I can think of one politician who stands up for people like Dot and programs like national health care. But he is busy right now being president of Venezuela. Show me a political party willing to train and put real working-class people on these streets door-to-door, which is what it will take to mobilize the votes of the working screwed, and I will show you one that can begin to kick a hole in that wall between Capitol Hill and the people it is supposed to be serving. But we all know that is not about to happen. Parties do not lead revolutions. They follow them. And then only when forced to. The Democrats began to support the civil rights movement only after the bombings and lynchings and fire hoses and marchers caused enough public outrage to indicate there were probably some votes to be wrung out of the whole sorry spectacle playing out on American TV screens. That was back when a good old-fashioned Watts-type city burn-down could still get Washington's attention. I suspect nowadays it would be one of those national emergencies that Homeland Security would handle.

But Dink and Pootie and Dot are the least likely Americans to ever rise up in revolt. Dissent does not seep deeply enough into America to reach places like Winchester, Virginia. Never has. Yet, unlikely candidates that they are for revolution, they have nonetheless helped fuel a right-wing revolution with their votes – the same right-wing revolution said to be rooted in the culture wars of which neither of them has ever heard.

In the old days class warfare was between the rich and the poor, and that's the kind of class war I can sink my teeth into. These days it is clearly between the educated and the uneducated, which of course does make it a culture war, if that's the way you choose to describe it. But the truth is that nobody is going to reach Dink and Dot or anyone else on this side of town with some elitist jabber about culture wars. It is hard enough reaching them with the plain old fact that the Republicans are the party of the dumb and callous rich. As far as they are concerned, dumb people in our social class have been known to become very rich. Take Bobby Fulk, the realtor we all grew up with. He's dumber than owl shit but now worth several millions. And he still drinks Bud Light and comes

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into Burt's once in a while. Besides, any one of us here could very well hit the Powerball lottery and become rich like Bobby Fulk.

It's going to be a tough fight for progressives. We are going to have to pick up this piece of roadkill with our bare hands. We are going to have to explain everything about progressivism to the people at Burt's because their working-poor lives have always been successfully contained in cultural ghettos such as Winchester by a combination of God rhetoric, money, cronyism, and the corporate state. It will take a huge effort, because they understand being approximately poor and definitely uneducated and in many respects accept it as their lot. Right down to being sneered at by the Social Security lady. Malcolm X had it straight when he said the first step in revolution is massive education of the people. Without education nothing can change. What my people really need is for someone to say out loud: "Now lookee here, dammit! We are dumber than a sack of hair and should'a got an education so we would have half a notion of what's going on in the world." Someone once told me that and, along with the advice never to mix Mad Dog 20/20 with whiskey, it is the best advice I ever received. But no one in America is about to say such a thing out loud because it sounds elitist. It sounds un-American and undemocratic. It also might get your nose broken in certain venues. In an ersatz democracy maintaining the popular national fiction that everyone is equal, it is impermissible to say that, although we may all have equal constitutional rights, we are not actually equal. It takes genuine education and at least some effort toward self-improvement just to get to the starting line of socioeconomic equality.

Why are my people so impervious to information? Despite how it appears, our mamas did not drop us on our heads. Hell, thanks to our kids, most of us even have the Internet. Still, my faith in the Internet's information democracy wilted when I once suggested to a friend facing eviction that we Google "renter's rights" to learn his options, and watched him type in "renters kicked out." (Then too, when we bumped into the banner on a site reading jennifer licks the huge man's sword, we both got sidetracked.) Yet two weeks later he had found the neoconservative website NewsMax.com and learned how to bookmark it. Sometimes I think the GOP emits a special pheromone that attracts fools and money.

The lives and intellectual cultures of these, the hardest-working people, are not just stunted by the smallness of the society into which they were born. They are purposefully held in bondage by a local network of moneyed families, bankers, developers, lawyers, and businesspeople in whose interests it is to have a cheap, unquestioning, and compliant labor force paying high rents and big

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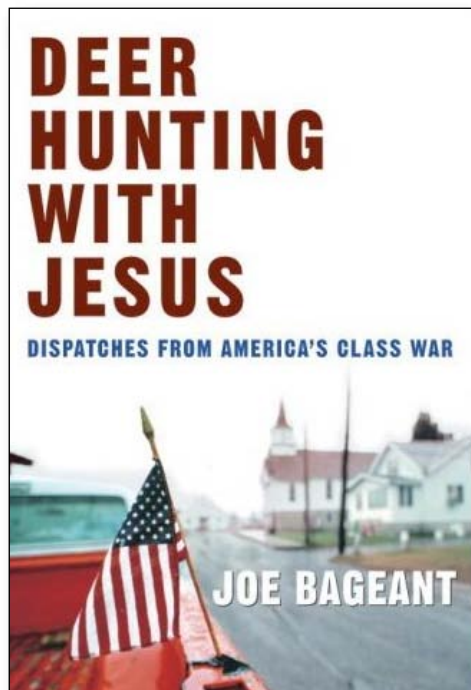
medical bills. They invest in developing such a labor force by not investing (how's that for making money out of thin air!) in the education and quality of life for anyone but their own. Places such as Winchester are, as they say, "investment paradise." That means low taxes, few or no local regulations, no unions, and a chamber of commerce tricked out like a gaggle of hookers, welcoming the new nonunion, air-poisoning factory. "To hell with pollution! We gonna sell some propity, we gonna move some real 'state today, fellas!" Big contractors, realtors, lawyers, everybody gets a slice, except the poorly educated nonunion mooks who will be employed at the local plant at discount rates.

At the same time, and more important, this business cartel controls most elected offices and municipal boards.

But you cannot see City Hall or any of the town's hotwires or movers and shakers from here at Burt's tonight. Just Dottie up there onstage singing through the cigarette smoke and the laughter and the beer. And it feels familiar and good, this palpable chain of common labor and blood stretching back over two centuries. Sometimes it seems to be the last superbly functioning human thing in this town. And Dottie's voice melts and flows through through it all: *I'm crazeeeeeeeeeee, crazy for feeling so lonely, crazy, crazy for feelin so bluuuuuuuuue...* And those last notes just slide away like a silk scarf dropped onto some stairway in the heart. It is so utterly human how all of us get what we need from each other in that moment round midnight when we share the common ghosts of this old town

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Order Joe Bageant's book

## **DEER HUNTING WITH JESUS**

### **Dispatches From America's Class War**

"Joe Bageant is a brilliant writer. He evokes working class America like no one else. The account of his revisit to his Virginia roots is sobering, poignant, and instructive."— HOWARD ZINN, author of *A People's History of the United States*

"This book is righteous, self-righteous, exhilarating, and aggravating. By God, it's a raging, hilarious, and profane love song to the great American redneck. As a blue state man with a red state childhood, I have been waiting for this book for years. We ignore its message at our peril." — SHERMAN ALEXIE, author of *Reservation Blues*

"This fine book sheds a devastating light on Bush & Co.'s notorious 'base,' i.e. America's white working class, whose members have been ravaged by the very party that purports to take their side. Meanwhile, the left has largely turned them out, or even laughed at their predicament. Of their degraded state -- and, therefore, ours -- Joe Bageant writes like an avenging angel." — MARK CRISPIN MILLER, author of *Fooled Again: The Real Case for Election Reform*

"Joe Bageant is the Sartre of Appalachia. His white-hot bourbon-fuelled prose shreds through the lies of our times like a weed-whacker in overdrive. *Deer Hunting with Jesus* is a deliciously vicious and wickedly funny chronicle of a thinking man's life in God's own backwoods." — JEFFREY ST. CLAIR, author of *Grand Theft Pentagon* and co-editor of *CounterPunch*

"This recounting of lost lives -- of white have-nots in one of our most have-not states -- has the power of an old-time Scottish Border ballad. It is maddening and provocative that the true believers in 'American exceptionalism' and ersatz machismo side with those stepping all over them. Bageant's writing is as lyrical as Nelson Algren's, and if there's a semblance of hope, it's that he catches on with new readers thanks to the alternative media." — STUDS TERKEL

"*Deer Hunting with Jesus* is one of those rare books that is colorful, depressing, hilarious, and biting all at the same time. Joe Bageant has given us a glimpse into the vicious class war that is too often ignored or hidden by those happily perpetrating this war." — DAVID SIROTA, author of *Hostile Takeover*

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