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DRINK
TO
THE
SLOBBERING
CLASSES

A SORDID
TALE OF WORK
RELEASE, HYENAS
AND LIBERAL
WEAKNESS
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*Raise your glass to the hard working people
Let's drink to the uncounted heads
Let's think of the wavering millions
Who need leaders but get gamblers instead
– Salt of the Earth, Rolling Stones*



stopped into Larry's Gas 'n Grubs for my regular morning commuter coffee mug refill and – lo and be damned – there was my hirsute 300-pound friend Poot working at the counter. I said, “What the hell are you doing ringing up my coffee at this crap stand? You're supposed to be a welder, fat boy!”

It turns out that Poot, who'd lost his job with a metal fabricator, took on a little private contracting work. However, he couldn't afford to get his contractor's license and was busted for working without one. And got thrown in jail for it, too. Somehow I would have thought it was a lesser offense than that.

Now he is on jail work release working at Larry's Gas 'n Grubs, a six-location chain of local convenience stores that regularly hires work release labor at super-cheap rates. By court order, Poot must work there until August and pay the great state of Virginia a big chunk of his wages for the privilege. This represents nothing less than chattel slavery under the local judicial system, impressments of the same sort as have always practiced on blacks and poor whites here in the slave states. Throw them in jail, and then farm them out on work release to local industry and businesses who are in cahoots politically with law officials and courts.

In fact, in a new twist on the game, the masters of our little Virginia banana republic brought in a huge regional jail. It is now a provider of cheap local work release labor, even as the taxpayers foot the bill for housing and feeding the jailbirds, and the jailbirds seldom return to their hometowns up nawth, choosing instead to shack up with the fetching local wenches. You Yankees have no idea what Bush's election has kicked off in the American South. Our congenital penchant for punishment and press gang labor has ushered in a new era of prison building unseen since the days of Uncle Joe Stalin. Down

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here we know what to do with uncooperative folks like the hapless Pootie and the dope fiends our prison industry imports in from seven other states: Lock 'em the fuck up and make a profit on 'em. Rehabilitation, Republican style.

But getting back to Poot. When crap happens to working people, it's usually a domino line of crap. It is bad enough that Poot lost his apartment when landed in the hoosegow, and will have to find a new one in August, along with a new job, unless he decides to starve to death by remaining at Gas 'n Grubs. He also lost his truck along the way. I am almost willing to bet that his life will never recover from this setback. Meanwhile, something even worse has come of this run-in with American penology's gulag system of white trash labor: By court order Poot cannot set foot in Burt's Tavern until August. He may not survive such a blow.

That was a week ago. Now it's Friday and there's nothing stopping me from making the usual ass of myself at Burt's, with or without my fat hairy friend. Aaaaannd, of course, there he sits over in the corner of the bar! Stupid me. I should have known no court order could keep that 300-pounds of redneck sin out of a tavern. So there sits Poot explaining to Nance Kelly his talent for hooking up with the wrong woman. For the record, the wrong kind of woman is any woman: 1. whose name does not match the one on your marriage certificate, 2. who is middle aged and taking both progesterone AND thiorazine or 3. speaks in tongues at church. Whatever the case, Poot has a snowball's chance in the Sahara of ever hooking up with Nance. Poot's "Drink until you want me" approach is not going to work on her.

Nance is 32, hillbilly cute, and raising two kids with the help of her mom. She drives a "deep reach" machine, on the loading dock at the local Rubbermaid plant. For the benefit of you patricians out there, a deep reach is a kind of forklift that can reach 30 feet up and into stacks of pallets. They are usually driven by men, which makes Nance a "women's libber" by working class labor standards. Active in her fundamentalist church, she does not drink and seldom dates, yet strangely enough she comes in here occasionally and sips on cokes. (I don't even want to know the psychology underlying that little game.) Her coworkers call her "Termite" because of her stature, but we old farts in the back booth call her "Magnum Muff," and when she parks that tush of hers on a barstool well, we old geezers at Burt's are reduced to hum-

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ble wonder. Quite a few young ones too, I would suspect. But we are supposed to talk politics in these columns, aren't we? (sigh)

Politically, Nance is anti-union, anti-abortion and vaguely aware of N.O.W. (National Organization of Women), which registers in her mind as "A bunch of lesbians out on the West Coast." Nance is a Republican much as a fish is a creature of the ocean. Because of her caste in America, lower working class, Southern, high school educated, semi-fundamentalist Christian, she does not know a single registered Democrat. We've discussed it and neither of us could think of a Democrat she personally knew. "I know you," she offered. "That doesn't count," I replied, "because I am a godless commie." But the point is that for many working class Americans it is possible not to know a single person of liberal persuasion in daily life – which must seem inconceivable to urban and metropolitan Americans. A night in any tavern in this town shows why this is possible. Can you spell American C-L-A-S-S system?

There are the regular Lynndie England types here, plus lots of mullet males, some about to join the army to get away from a dead end job and town. One look around Burt's makes it obvious why the hard working life in America does not create liberals. Most people here are not sure of the difference between the House and the Senate, which does not bother them at all, because as they understand democracy, everyone's opinion is of equal weight, informed or not. They have never been exposed to a union, never taken a college class, and do not expect too much out of life. Liberals, on the other hand, expect far too damned much, in their opinion. Life is tough. Suck it in. Don't take chances. Be conservative and stick with what you know. Like most working people, they were born working class, never had college aspirations, and accept their lives. Such people do not have "careers." They have jobs to pay the bills.

Meanwhile, the world outside Burt's or Winchester, Virginia doesn't exist. Not really. If you spend your days at a soul-numbing repetitious job with a brain simmering in anti-depressants, a belly stuffed with high fat, supercarb comfort food, and evenings half drunk or recovering on the couch from work, when the heck are you supposed to find time or mind to grasp the implications of global warming even as you contemplate being one payday ahead of homelessness? A while back I watched this bar full of people stare at a game

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of Afghani dead goat polo in silent, rapt attention. If that isn't brain dead I don't know what is. The relentless autocratic, blue collar American workplace has ground my people down, smashed 'em right into the couch. There they are force-fed the huckster's hologram of "personal freedom" in advertisements for off road vehicles. Getting a lousy public education, then being played against your fellow workers in Darwinian fashion by the free market economy does not make for optimism or open mindedness. It makes for a kind of bleak meanness nobody is openly talking about in the American political dialogue today.



seem to remember a time when we weren't so mean, back when most people in Burt's believed in the American dream. A few still do, or at least pay lip service to it, though now they have been reduced to being grateful for having a job, any job. When you're easily replaced and are devalued you no longer pretend to have a choice. To feed your family you work harder and for less and without benefits. You eat shit and you ask for seconds. Eating shit eventually makes you bitter and resentful of anyone who does not appear to be eating their share of shit. So you feel that anyone else who gets a break, especially a government-assisted leg up is cheating you. From resentment it is only a short skip to hatred and the illogical behavior that comes with hatred. Like voting Republican against your own best interests.

American liberals have been wailing and moaning like a bunch of dying cats in a hailstorm. HOW COULD THEY BE THAT STUPID? Well dammit, we've always been that stupid. So get over it. But from time to time at least we were lucky enough to have real leadership, people like Franklin Roosevelt who, understood that politics is and always will be about class struggle. Rich as he was, he had enough character to stand up for social and economic justice. Hell, even Nixon wanted universal health care. It took a truly godless pack of jackals from Texas to finally bring down and savage the Roosevelt legacy.

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The problem with the post-modern middle class and left is that they've forgotten about the class issue. Especially now that they are educated middle class citizens, urban dwellers, Jews and Germans and Italians and Irishmen, Asians and Poles, all far better off than their ancestors. They've come far from their Ellis Island roots and are now what is known as the "two shithouse Irish," in redneck parlance.

Besides that, it's not easy for educated people with orderly lives to be on the side of overweight, under-educated, deeply indebted, and bitterly frustrated and prejudiced people, folks who have finally given up after being kicked in the ass one too many times. The system is so rigged against them that even those who strive seldom get out, which is in itself a lesson to others. These people, the people of debt counselors, joint custody, repossessed vehicles and mobile homes, have been lied to, cheated, and robbed, mocked on television, and now once again spat upon by their supposed betters, this time the angry liberals. Show me the party that represents them. Who could they have voted for that would have improved their situations? Let's face it, under the Democrats they would be getting screwed somewhat less (maybe), but they would not be getting ahead. In real wages they have lost ground under Dems as well as the GOP since 1973.

The neo-conservatives have been much aided by middle class liberals who find it easier to confront racism and homophobia than to face down their own latent class prejudices. Liberal issue and identity politics are the best things that ever happened to the Republican Party. It is often much easier for liberals to empathize with poor blacks with whose experience they share relatively little than the poor working class whites, who are just a little too close to home. Then too, once a family makes it into the true middle class and is sending all of its kids to university, it is easy to become convinced that class struggle is a thing of the past. Hell, I even managed to convince myself of that for a few years before they kicked me out of the middle class. Again. Of course the same pack of capitalist hyenas that have always waited in the bushes by the civilization's roadside never went away. Now they are slinking out to pick off the weakest among us. The sick, the uneducated, people of color. So far though, most middle class liberals seem content to blink and stand back while they watch the hyenas feast upon the workingman. No way they are

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gonna get into the thick of it, no way are they going to drink Budweiser.

But the ascendant middle class, that second deck of professions, the landlord, the banker, the doctor, lawyer that represent middle class social and economic advancement, also represent, from the laborer's point of view, the predatory class. Predatory for the simple reason that the poor and working classes need their vital services, yet a single hour of those services equals at least a full day of a worker's paycheck. And one never gets off with a single hour of services. Right? The very things that fatten the middle class keep a working man "dick down in the dirt," as they say around here.

Reaching my people will mean that we lefties will have to let up on some of our pet issues, at least around them. Issues like Wal-Mart. Good old boy's don't hate Wal-Mart. All their lives they have been price gouged by the local small businesses. Then alluva sudden Wal-Mart comes to town and they can buy things cheap. Who could be against that? Sure, Wal-Mart is the global equivalent of the company store, but so what? As for Wal-Mart's low wages, they are no worse than what people have been getting for the last 25 years around here, so what's the big deal anyway? Many working class folks are caught up in the materialism game. Much money wasted on fast cars, rental furniture, fast food, and video games. We need to educate kids about financial realities so that people can build futures rather than grasp at the cheap junk offered them by capitalist crap mongers.

But most of all working folks need an organized labor movement to represent them. Not the disorganized one we have that seems so determined to pull out a pistol and blow its own tit off. Get this: According to the AFL-CIO's International Labor Communications Association, the future of organized labor depends upon, "championing the fight against racism, sexism, heterosexism, xenophobia, religious bias, and other forms of intolerance." Uh, guys, the lesbians, the Unitarians, and the Wiccans are going to love it, but you've just alienated most of blue collar America. True, the working class is riddled with all those problems. But are you a church, or a workers' union fighting for tangible things in workers' lives? Are you too chickenshit to go after decent wages and health care? Whose side are these "labor communicators" on? The enemy is the rich capitalist class, not the dumb damned mook on the gut line at Tysons who bitches about Mexicans on the plucking belt.

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Beyond that, the modern American laborer has never even learned to identify his own economic interests (remember, that takes education) so they never see the screw jobs coming. In a so-called free market economy where he is supposedly able to bargain for his wage, he's never really learned to identify his own economic self-interest. That's why you can go into any small town bar and see some poor guy who's just gotten stomped and doesn't know what hit him or whom to blame. He barely knows it's about politics. That's why he can be sold on one scam after another. Deregulate electricity? Sure! Privatize Social Security? Why not? The bell rings, the bloodied mook returns to his corner where his "liberal" coach upbraids him for not recycling. We're still on The Road to Wigan Pier all these years later.



One of the best times to exit a bar is just before a fight breaks out. Pootie is now haranguing David Kave, a nearly transparent skinned ridge-runner from Albin, Virginia, a shabby village over toward the West Virginia line. He is a militia member and sports a white power tattoo, one known as the revolving resurrection cross, on his forearm. Like many rednecks his age, Dave swears he was a sniper in Vietnam. If every drunk who claimed to be a sniper in Nam had actually been one they could start their own country. He also smokes pot, goes to a strange 15-member church that meets in a doublewide and says he hears the voice of God. Poot belches back: "I wish ta hell the pot dealers would stay out of Albin, because every time you get stoned you think you are a badass!" (I might add that when the buzz wears off he returns to thinking he is Dale Earnhardt.) "Hey, do you know where your pit bulls are tonight?" Pootie taunts. "Tearing up the ratty assed furniture in your doublewide out there in Albin-goddam-Virginia. That's where!"

After the appropriate insults will come the challenge to fight. So I'd better start getting Poot out of here for the night. I give him the five open fingers sig-

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nal, meaning time to leave in five minutes.

Minutes later Poot stands in the doorway with that “Lenny, tell me about the rabbits” look in his broad clueless jackolantern face, and I can’t help but smile. “It’s a good thing you waved, he says, “or “Dead Eye Dick over there woulda been in deep shit tonight.”

“So what the hell are you doing here sucking down that Budweiser calf slobber? You’re supposed to steer clear of this place.”

“Well after I saw you at the Gas ‘n Grubs I got robbed at gunpoint on the nightshift. So the prosecutor needed me to identify the guy they arrested. I told him: ‘The robbery was traw-matic. Yessir, it has done shattered my memory, sir. But if my jail time was cut short I’ll bet that little wetback’s face would come back to me clear as day.’ Well, he hummed and he hawed a while, then he said he could prob’bly have me back on the street in 48 hours. ‘How’s your memory now?’ the prosecutor says. ‘Purty good’ I tell him. I can see that little bastard’s face like he was settin’ right there in your lap.’”

And that’s the way it always is for a workingman, isn’t it? Even when lady luck comes his way, even when she grants unexpected liberty, she does it at gunpoint at a convenience store. And I look across the smoky tavern at Dave’s tattoo and shudder to think what a crackshot hearing god’s own voice in his head might one day do in the name of his notion of liberty.

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