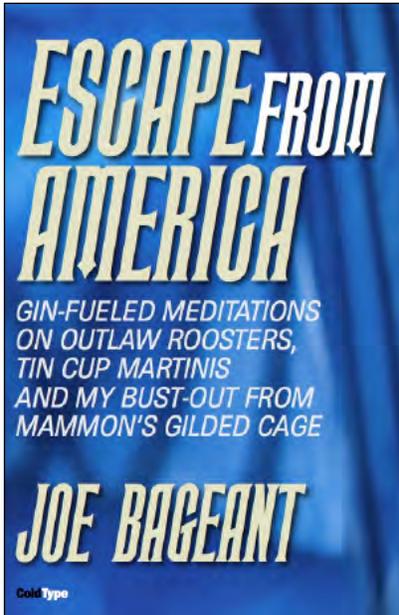


ESCAPE FROM AMERICA

GIN-FUELED MEDITATIONS
ON OUTLAW ROOSTERS,
TIN CUP MARTINIS
AND MY BUST-OUT FROM
MAMMON'S GILDED CAGE

JOE BAGEANT

ColdType



Joe Bageant is the author of the forthcoming book, **Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War** from Random House Crown on working class America, to be released on April 24, 2007.

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HOPKINS VILLAGE, BELIZE

IT IS

near midnight and the dogs sleeping in the sand under my cabana, Rex and Pluto, emit happy, gurgling growls, as if chasing imaginary rabbits in their dreams. I lie in bed just breathing in and breathing out and feeling so free that I've laughed out loud a couple of times tonight, something I have never done in my life. At least not while simply looking at the ceiling. Tomorrow I will not worry about losing my ass in the declining real estate market. I will not commute three nerve grinding hours a day, or nervously engorge myself in front of my laptop for hours on end. Nor will I or wake up with the crimes of the empire running like adding machine tape in my head, annotated with all the ways I contributed to those crimes by participating in the American lifestyle. After more than two years of effort, I'm outta the gilded gulag, by damned, and tell myself that I have at last quit being part of the problem – or at least as much as much as anyone can without living stark naked in a Himalayan cave and toasting insects over a dung fire.

When I arrived in Belize a few weeks ago I vowed never to write about this country, mainly because the Americans I write to are more interested in American politics, religion, class issues and the Iraq war. How the hell could anybody with more than an inch of forehead not be anxious over those things? But the contrast here is so stark it seems unavoidable to write about the view of America from Belize and Hopkins Village this one time. I must say that from down here the Empire does not look much different. No worse, no better. But the stress and stench of the empire is less in this Caribbean breeze and the mark of the beast is sharper from a distance.

The effect of moving was immediate. As one expat told me years ago what would happen, whole days go by when I do not think of America at all, much less rage against it, something I would previously have considered impossible. But when you do, you do so

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more calmly and lose no sleep over the criminals presently running the enterprise up there. Occasionally the thought occurs that a peaceful mind could kill my pitiful little career as a pissed off lefty writer. Then I look around Hopkins Village at these eminently sane, if poor, Garifuna, (a mixture of Carib Indian and African) people and think, “So what? Everything is a goddamned identity in America, writing included.” Identity is a racket in a nation of media controlled clones. And besides, who wants to be a one trick pony in the consumer zombie parade? In the end though, leaving was absolutely a matter of saving my sanity. It came down to either becoming one of those bugfuck crazies ranting on the faaaaar left end of the Internet, or busting out of America to find something resembling balance near the end of a life marked by anxious imbalance and contradiction. The personal freedom to do that clearly lay elsewhere, and after some scouting, I decided on Hopkins Village, Belize. It simply felt more free. More real.

A Libertarian Wet Dream with Beach

In places like Hopkins Village you can still send your kid to the store to bring back cigarettes. Now the politically correct set up there in the States may be blowing soy milk out their noses at the thought, but it represents a degree of freedom from government control. And besides, it is not American’s business how the black Garifuna people – whose ancestors escaped in the 16th from a wrecked slave ship in the 16th century – of Belize run their lives. In Belize it is not against the law to drink and drive and there are no speed limits. Here in Hopkins you can build your house without a permit or inspections, sell real estate without a license, drink liquor openly while you happily burn trash in your front yard. You can peddle homemade darasa – grated spiced banana wrapped and cooked in banana leaf wrappers – or barbeque pork to the neighbors from your front porch with no interference from health inspectors.

Most of this non-interference is simply because it is not in the national character to control every aspect of society or try to protect every single citizen from every possible misfortune. And part of this non-interference is due to a lack of expensive regulatory infrastructure. Faced with choosing between running schools for children down in the wilds of the Toledo district, or busting Aunt Lula for peddling pig’s tails stewed in red beans on the street corner, the government gives Aunt Lula a pass. It’s a loose place, a Libertarian’s wet dream.

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In a hardscrabble, make-do country where everything is scarce, especially motor vehicles, looseness is a good thing. Hitchhiking (“riding thumb”) is considered a respectable way to get around the country, and folks will stop for you. Most people do not own cars, but there are taxis in the larger communities and busses to and from about anywhere. Otherwise, it’s you and your trusty bicycle. If you’ve never brought home a load of eight-by-four foot sheet metal roofing in a taxi, or a ten-foot two-by-four on a bicycle, you haven’t lived. In our village of 1,300 there are only about ten motor vehicles. There are days when I wish we had a tad more transportation infrastructure around here.

Yet, thanks to the dearth of material infrastructure, I fulfilled some ecological goals almost by accident. I use only three or four gallons of water per day, plus another five gallons on washday for a total of about 26 to 30 gallons a week. The average American household must use hundreds of gallons per person, when you figure in laundry, lawns, car washes, etc. But this is possible for me because sanitary maintenance of daily life is so much simpler. Two sets of shorts, one pair of khakis and a white shirt – which passes for dressed up around here – four tee shirts and my old fishing vest do not require much wash water. The cold water showers here (bear in mind that the water temperature is in the mid seventies most of the year, in the mid nineties if you have a water tank standing in the sun) run very lightly and use only a gallon or two on those occasions when we do not bathe in the sea after sunset. When it comes to petroleum, I’d guess that my transportation needs, a thirty-seven mile bus ride to Dangriga every week or so, do not even add up to a gallon, judging from the US\$2.50 bus fare in a country where petrol runs over six US dollars a gallon. Of course, no one would advocate that Americans adopt third world methods, but there is such a thing as too much transportation infrastructure – especially if it is unsustainable, high maintenance and mainly dedicated to buying fried chicken and bad tacos.

Howard Zinn and the Aljazeera Weather Babe

In the States I long ago quit watching television “news.” But down here in my scruffy little corner of the free world I watch Aljazeera every night after the evening toke and cup of the local bitters. I am here to tell you dear hearts that Aljazeera is what PBS ought to be. Especially its new documentary channel. Aljazeera, or AJ as they say, presents the world and the primary issues of class, the high and the powerful and the haves and the

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have nots, straight up, pretty much leaving you to form your own opinions. At the same time, when it comes to documentaries, AJ warns viewers that they will be seeing documentaries made with a point of view, documentaries that are not afraid of showing passion or compassion. I just about fell off the barstool when it ran a documentary about how the low salt diet scam plays into the hands of Big Pharma as a symbiotic rip-off, and why no other country in the world falls for it except the US and its lapdog, the UK. It's been so much fun I found myself craving a bag of Doritos and wishing I could order a pizza. Last night I watched a homemade Argentine documentary on the Canary Island boat people. But rather than presenting the misery porn so common in American documentaries ("Ain't them starving little black children pitiful, Henry? They got no legs. Something about land mines or whatever."), the amateur producer delved into the boat people's families back in Mali and the destruction of their small scale sugar industry by global corporatism. AJ's documentaries may vary in quality, but you've got to love a channel where producer Danny Schechter is a star and Howard Zinn is considered a wise elder. Tonight he is taking calls, most of them deeply intelligent, from all over the planet regarding America's current condition. He looks very worn and tired and speaks the truth in full context. And I won't even go into the, uh, attributes, of the Aljazeera's weather babe. PBS was never like this.

There are rumors that Aljazeera may yet come to American television. Hard to imagine, but let's hope so. It may not even be possible to hold the jack rabbit attention spans of most Americans with full context news, or full context anything for that matter. Yet I'd be willing to bet that if more of Americans were exposed to AJ's world coverage, especially the second and third worlds, people would respond. Not a majority of Americans, mind you, because most of us are too poorly read and uneducated to care. Even so, we're not completely heartless, just kept blind and ignorant through the media's relentless strip mining of our culture.

When you are among the Garifuna, a people whose culture is relatively intact, the American marketplace's stripping of culture and its commoditization of human experience is glaring. Even more so for the fact that it goes unnoticed by our citizens. Try to rally Americans against corporations and all you get is a blank, flat response. Their entire lives have been spent watching smiley face media presentations of giant corporations. They constitute our entire cultural landscape and average Americans cannot imagine the

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corporations that provide them with goods, services and jobs as being bad in any way. With particular thanks to television and the capitalist state's ethos, corporations are now seamlessly interwoven into our deepest identities, both personal and national. Consequently, while I was watching Howard Zinn, back in the States the National Geographic channel was running television specials on the Harley Davidson factory and the Peterbilt truck plant, narrated in patriotic tones very much resembling the old Soviet Russian domestic propaganda and Chinese "people's films." In the U.S. television industry, these shows are categorized as "educational," though their purpose is the same as the Reich's 1930s productions – to attach the people's identity to the "ingenuity and raw power" of the American fatherland to create pride in the accomplishments of the corporate state, and ultimately, to perceive consumption as triumphal.

Pentecostals, Pipeliners and the Hopkins Tin Cup Martini

Having been down here several times over the decades, I've learned that after a while, no matter how fond you are of Belize and its people, you get the occasional urge to get smashed with one of your own American kind. And though I am naturally attracted to political refugees like myself, there really aren't that many here for political reasons. In fact, there aren't as many American expats in Belize as one would think, given the state of things up there. When you meet a "white fella," it's likely to be a Pentecostal or Jehovah's Witness sporting a long sleeved shirt and bad necktie, and sweating like a pig in rut. The largest concentration of expats – mostly grumble and fart know-it-all retirees and wry old drunks looking for the cheapest place to drink up their pensions, god bless them – seems to be up north in Corozal, where they can easily get to the Wal-Mart store just across the Mexican border.

But those expats you do meet in the less traveled parts of Belize, both from America and elsewhere are, often as not, humdingers. You get a retired California pot grower; old libertarian Alaskan "pipeliners"; IRS fugitives; German anarchist lesbian couples running jungle B&Bs; child support skippers; and senior citizens completely worn out from their tour of duty in the U.S. labor camp and no longer willing to fuck with the bureaucracy that was supposed to take care of them. In short, just about everybody America no longer wants these days.

Some got wise long ago, like Warren, a rawboned and grizzled ex-hippie who runs a

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small sawmill in the community of Silk Grass Village. He settled here in the early seventies, married a Mayan/Hispanic lady and commenced to build his mill. Before coming here to the Stann Creek District of Belize, he walked the entire coast of India. It took him years. What was walking the Indian coast like? “Weird,” he answers. This morning, after delivering a load of lumber, Warren sat on the car seat that passes for lawn furniture in our yard, and with the sun glistening on his unshaven jaw, told me about his plans to move deeper inland, back to his farmstead in the Maya Mountains, where he tends a few acres of orange trees on weekends. His eyes grew distant, then he said, “Time was when you could get a good start here on pure grit, settle in with a machete, an axe, a rifle, a tent, some garden seed and build a family and a life. A business even.” I have no doubt he’s done that, just as some Indians in the deep jungle southward still do. Warren continues, “The kids are grown and they run the sawmill. I just want to take my horses and go up where it’s quiet. No bustle.” Bustle? If Silk Grass has 500 dwellers beneath its thatched and tin rooftops out there in the savannah I’d be damned surprised. Anyway, it somehow seems doubtful America could produce such an iconic figure of self sufficiency these days.

Then there is Cosmo. Coz is a black Belizean born American citizen, a Creole raised in Oakland, California with dual citizenship. A former Xerox repairman, he moved back to Belize in 2000 at age 42, following the crooked election of George Bush. Now Coz is not an especially political animal. He’s pretty much just an animal. But he has a golden gut and instinct: “Bush has a mean streak ya know, and when you put guys like that like that in charge of the plantation, the first thing they do is whup on some niggers to limber up. Then they lock the door and go after everybody else. After the election I said to myself, ‘That’s enough! Black people seen this movie before.’ And I split. Besides, there are other things in life than motherfucking toner cartridges and a 401K.”

One of those other things is reefer, and Cosmo burns down his share, evidently, not having inherited the overall Belizean habit of moderation, when it comes to the herb. But weed is cheap enough in Belize and he manages to live on about \$700 a month in a tiny unpainted beach cabana much like my own. Coz may stay stoned, but he has nevertheless managed to make a major contribution to imbibing culture down here – the Hopkins Tin Cup Martini. There are certain things necessary to any attempt at civilized life in a tropical clime and the martini is one of them.

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Hopkins Tin Cup Martini

– Using a large mouth-wash bottle cap which holds one liquid ounce, pour three shots each of Travelers Vodka and Mayfair Dandy Dry Gin (Belizean brands) into an ice filled fruit jar.

– Add one third teaspoon of bitters (a local herbal drink extracted from the conitibo vine by soaking it in 200 proof rum). Stir lightly.

– Pour into a porcelain coated tin cup (the metal cups leave a bad aftertaste), preferably a cup that has been kept in the freezer of your four cubic foot Korean made plastic refrigerator.

– Skewer two olives from your jealously guarded supply onto a six inch straw plucked from a broom and drop into cup.

Serves two generously.

Oh, would that Belize were all Tin Cup Martinis and Toucans. It is easy to let things like jaguars, Mayan pyramids and lyrical Creole chatter under moonlit palms fool you into thinking you have escaped America. First of all, you are probably making your money from some American source (in my case, writing) so you will have to return periodically, whether you want to or not. At some point though, unless you are a trust fund maggot chewing your way through daddy's wad, one of America's elite coercive syndicates will bring you to your knees, drag you back and, once again, wring every dollar out of you it can before it takes out the pliers for your gold teeth as you run screaming toward the border. For expats, it is usually America's medical extortion syndicate. Big Med gets everybody in the end, except the rich who have escaped with their booty to places like nearby Placencia or San Pedro out there on Belize's coral reefs, where they suck down rum punch and tear up the reefs with their twin Chrysler engine boats.

Big Med got Shirley Marvel. A sixty year old American who's been in Belize twenty years, Shirley is one of those likable fuddy duddies, the sort of Magoo figure America turns into bag ladies. After working twenty-one years and paying taxes in the U.S., she saw the writing on the wall. She now runs a tribal arts and crafts shop, which in a place like Hopkins Village is equivalent to share cropping in the Gobi Desert. But if you are frugal, as in Carmelite nun frugal, you can subsist on what's left after you pay your U.S. income taxes in a funky, approximate bliss. Until Big Med steps in. When a Belizean doc-

tor suspected Shirley might have a subcutaneous lymphoma on her back and recommended she see a cancer specialist, Shirley panicked, as most people do. After getting a second opinion, which came up with the same, “Maybe it’s cancer, maybe it’s not – You need a specialist” diagnosis, she packed her duds and flew to Houston, where many American expats go for major health treatment, particularly surgery.

Shirley stepped off the plane in Houston and straight into the remorseless maw of medicine American style. They CAT scanned her every which way to hell, ran every conceivable test and a few inconceivable ones (Since when is there a link between “The Big C” and Lyme’s Disease?) Then came the parade of quick buck consulting doctors that American hospitals foist upon patients to extract as much money out of insurance companies as possible. “Patient D-7228, Marvel, Shirley D., negative for subcutaneous lymphoma,” pronounced Big Med. Shirley was at the hospital for six hours. The bill was \$12,000. Problem was, she didn’t have insurance. And she certainly did not have twelve thousand bucks in some coffee can buried in the sand back in Belize. So she was left to beg, borrow and scrape her way along an even more penurious path than before, one she still walks today.

Because of reflex and acculturation (the only good doctors are in America, right? She could have been treated for free in Cuba by some of the best doctors in the world) for most Americans there is no complete escape from America short of death, and even then, it’s bound to be expensive, unless you, like the Garifuna, refuse to make a fetish of the act of dying. By their lights, when it’s your time, it’s your time. You let the docs have a reasonable shot at it, then move on. If you die, there will be a wake, then nine days later a big all-night party known as Beluvia thrown in your honor, after which, if you are a practitioner of the local African Dugu religion, your spirit will be consulted as a respected advisor for the ages to come. For your advice from the afterworld, relatives and community pay you in the form of ritual dancing, drumming and food offerings.

The point is that if you plan an escape to a third world society (and let’s face it, all those Americans who plan to run to immigrant proof New Zealand have not checked the facts), it’s probably better to adopt third world philosophy and ways, rather than trying to hang onto soulless and illusory first world security in a Caribbean culture where even chickens, despite the fact that they are heartily eaten, are considered to have souls.

Speaking of chickens, Cosmo tells me that “The rich Americans have outlawed roost-

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ers down in Placencia,” a small Garifuna village to the south. That is the word passing from person to person up through the Belizean coastal villages of Barranco, Punta Gorda and Seine Bight and here to Hopkins Village. Seems the roosters crowed too early for the Americans who’ve built the expensive seaside homes or those staying in the swank new hotel there. “No more chicken on da plate fa Placencia,” he adds in mock dialect – meaning that without fertilized eggs the villagers, or what’s left of them in Placencia anyway, cannot breed future chickens for meat and eggs. Now they will have to buy Belizean Mennonite-raised chicken at the same expensive grocery store as the whites, where, like everywhere in Belize, most food prices are about the same as in the States because nearly everything is imported from the States. And to do that they will have to work for the Americans for the paltry US\$1.50 an hour Belizean minimum wage, or perhaps \$2.00 if they hold their tongues and play the good shuffling Caribbean darkie.

The Americans feel quite benevolent about it all. “It creates jobs for Belizeans,” they crow. Maybe so. But I can remember Placencia thirty years ago, before the hotels and the white people came, when having a fulltime job was not the end and all of life down there. In fact, almost no one in the village had a real job except the fishermen and the handful of Brit soldiers who once frequented Her Majesty’s tiny army R&R compound in Placencia (as an alternative to the British built and sanctioned whorehouse in Belize City, still legally operating as Raul’s Rose Room). There was not a single vehicle in the village and no true passable road through the mangrove to the mainland. The Garifuna had to travel in and out by small boat or on the ferry, and sure nobody had a flush toilet. There were even a few pigs that ran loose. But Placencia’s Garifuna got by well enough without wiping the white Americans’ toilet bowls and carrying out his liquor bottles. It’s pretty much the same as in the States, where the big dogs have moved to the seventeenth floor and are pissing down on the rest of us. The white man has been convinced that it is only raining, but the truth is that we are all Garifuna now.

The founder of Belizean democracy was a not particularly inspired, but nevertheless astute man named George Price, who was extremely wary of tourism and wanted to keep it out. His successors have not been so fortunate, being caught in the vice of global capitalism. Little third world countries don’t get such choices. They have to suck it in and live in the spotlight in front of their constituencies on failed promises made by great

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powers, and invariably kick them out of office in the yeasty Belizean political environment. Generally, they grab up some of the public dough while they are juggling promises they can never fulfill. A helluva lot of what strikes us as tin pot theft in third world governments stems from desperation. Unlike in the US, where congressmen and senators come out of office set for life with connections, consulting jobs and fat pensions, when a mid-level Belizean politician fails to get reelected, he or she often returns to the scant livelihood of his village or the “bak a town” in Belize City or Dangriga. In other words, political graft and thievery in the U.S. Congress are institutionalized, and in Belize it is socialized. In the US the geet is in the financial establishment. In Belize it is in tourism. In any case, if there is a scam to be run or a buck to be stolen, you’ll need to buy a politician or two to do your bidding, someone in the legislature who can make it legal. It doesn’t matter which party, either in Belize or America.

Tiny Belize is run by two parties – the liberal PUP and the conservative UDP – which together constitute the same kind of elite political class we have in the U.S. Everyone is in bed together, but in a much smaller bed with shorter sheets. Belizeans in general are not fooled by either party, or the politicians’ “sweet mouths,” and regularly throw out entire parties at election time. But like Americans, they have no real choices in the two party shell game. The difference between this little country and America is that the ordinary working Belizeans understand that the choice is an illusion. Right now the UDP is busy looting the nation’s treasury, outraging everyone except the conservative business class and the American, Taiwanese and British interests with which they are aligned. Meanwhile, liberal PUP builds up a head of steam for a takeover in the next elections, with no real plan, just a ride on public outrage at the lawlessness of the conservative reign. Sound familiar? As in the U.S., the pendulum swings, but not very far from the financial interests of the elites. To be fair though, PUP, like the Democrats in America, does a little more for the people when it is in power. As little as it can get by with. Or, again like the Democrats, manages to pump up the impression that they do.

The political elites come and go from office – though mostly they just swap seats, the same as in America. But for folks in Hopkins Village, life remains about the same things, mostly about waiting. Waiting along dusty roads for the busses, waiting for the water or electricity to come back on, waiting for the rains to stop, waiting for the rains to start, waiting for the next opportunity in life that may never appear. Frustrating as it can be, people

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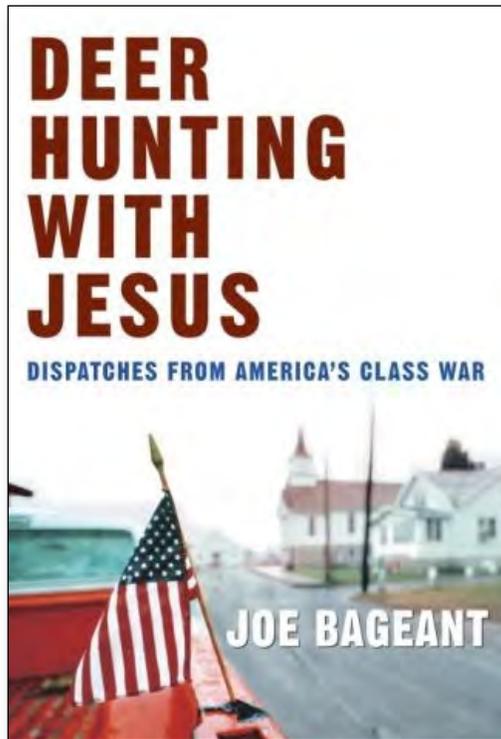
understand and accept that they cannot push time or most of the events in their lives. Waiting gives much time for reflection and contemplation. For instance, you can actually feel a Sunday in Hopkins. Most daily activities come to a complete stop and it is considered a time for conversation and quiet thought, the scarcest things of all for Americans, for whom such mental space is crammed with cookie cutter diversions neatly packaged and sold to them by the corporate state. Any chance for reflection and consequently, inner growth, is filled with cheap media spectacle or synthetic recreational activities.

In fact, as I write this, a handful of Americanized locals and American and Canadian advance men for US resort developers are over at the beachside Internet cafe/bar, gathered on this particular Sunday to watch America's biggest cheap media spectacle of all – the Super Bowl. A big screen projector has been set up under the open air thatched roof cafe for the occasion. At first I was tempted to join them, because, much as I hate football, the company of fellow Americans can be pleasing. Then a big red faced white guy comes reeling drunkenly toward me and shakes my hand in the best Dale Carnegie fashion. "Hello, I'm Ryan," he booms, and starts rattling off something about nearby beachfront acreage. I think about how developers have illegally bulldozed and seized half of the Hopkins Village Cemetery with complete impunity. As Cosmo says, "When you put guys like that in charge of the plantation, the first thing they're gonna do is whup on some niggers to limber up." Apparently even dead ones will do. So it was a "no thanks" to Ryan Red Face, and I walked the beach homeward toward my cabana.

There really is no place to escape from America, and more than likely it will have been already established at your destination before you even arrive. For the most part, temporary mediating respite is about all you can expect. But in the big picture, given peak oil, ecological collapse, and an empire hell bent on wreaking its own destruction, even temporary respite looks pretty damned good from the high front porch of this jack leg cobbled together Garifuna shack in the first light of tonight's moon. Down below the neighbors have washed the dinner dishes, the kids fresh from their baths sit on their parents' laps smelling of soap listening to the elders talk as they sip their bitters beneath the spreading blue mango tree, whose leaves now appear purple in this balmy semi-darkness. I've had it worse. We all have.

Stay strong.

JOE BAGEANT: MADMEN AND SEDATIVES



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