

JOSEPH BATES

## Bearing A Cross

Our town held elections in that year—not long after the terrorist attacks—in which Bible thumpers came out in support of a Bible thumper, elected him in a landslide, and voted to turn the town of Walhalla, SC, into a theocratic form of government. To our credit, I think we went into theocracy with the best of intentions. We were going to be a model for the rest of South Carolina and maybe the world. We would practice the Golden Rule, keep God's commandments, and most of all we'd be spiritually insulated from harm or terrorist attack.

Needless to say, the experiment ended poorly, with the town's churches marshaling their forces and small arms and then marching on Main Street. But hindsight's 20/20, as The Book says. Anyway, I don't mean that we intended to turn our town into the kind of crazy religion-state you see on National Geographic, with public executions, crushed dissent, military force, all that. We simply decided to give our town over to Jesus Christ, and to enforce Old Testament law.

I mention the terror attacks because I believe they played an important role in our deciding to become Jesus Town. How could they not? On that terrible morning everyone watched what happened on TV—we either went home from work or never left for work in the first place. And those things we saw shook us: the plume of black smoke over the city, spread out and crawling around like some kind of beast; and then people on the World Wide Web finding faces in the smoke, devil-faces, horned and laughing. Then in the days that followed to learn there was something called a jihad, a whole force of foreigners that followed Mohammed and who'd declared war on us, *all* of us. These things put the town of Walhalla on high alert and had her citizens in an Armageddon state of mind. So South Carolina had about a zero chance of being hit, sure, but that morning anything seemed possible; the enemy was everywhere. I called my sister down at the Piggly Wiggly and told her to go home for the day, she wasn't safe. That morning we were all New Yorkers—a miracle in itself—and you could smell the sulfur burning off her buildings from here.

Of course preachers did their part by preaching The End of the World at the Wednesday night service the next night. Really they'd been preaching it a lot longer than that, but we just paid more attention now. A couple of local ministers claimed to have found reference to the attack in the Bible, to a tower being smote. But all of our preachers made it clear: Our days were numbered. Our children would never make it to their proms. We'd never see a Gamecock winning season. Out front they changed the sign from The End Is Near to The End Is Here.

It's easy to see now how we were all overreacting, fortifying ourselves for the Final Battle Between Good and Evil, but what do you want? We were shaken. We lined up at the Food Mart for bottled water and canned goods. We stopped at the hardware store for some duct tape and

plastic. We went to the pawn shop and bought semi-automatic personal protection. And of course we hung our flags, dusted off our Lee Greenwood, located our Bibles, and we worried. But it was the trauma of the event, you understand.

I guess the only people in town who didn't rush right out for supplies were those who still had some left over, from the Y2K.

In the middle of all this apocalyptizing we voted for mayor.

For the twenty years before, our mayor had always been a guy named Buck, who'd managed to hold the office so long primarily because he always ran for reelection uncontested. In fact, because he ran uncontested you could hardly say he ran at all. He didn't break a sprint. He didn't print out any fliers or shake any hands. He didn't take a safe or controversial stance on an issue because there was never an issue to take a stance on. He was the only guy who ever wanted the job, so he got reelected. He spent most of his time sitting at the lunch counter, drinking coffee with the other old men and smoking cigarettes. His pants bagged around his butt and every move he made was at half-speed. Once a year he'd get up on stage at Walhalla's main event, the state's only completely dry Oktoberfest, and he'd sing half a verse of "Proud Mary," which left him winded until the next October. But that once-a-year was about the extent of his campaigning and his energy. It had always been enough to win reelection against nobody else.

But in the days that followed the attack, as our townspeople found ourselves in the unfamiliar territory of intro- and outerspection, one of the first things we had to reconsider was our old coot Buck. People started wondering: what would happen if something bad were to happen? *Really* bad? *Final-Days* bad? Would our mayor be capable of leading us into global or perhaps even cosmic conflict? We had to face the facts. He couldn't've fought an Arab if his life depended on it. In fact it was a miracle he'd fought off Joe Camel this long. The world had changed...didn't that mean we needed to change, too? To act decisively or even overreact? It seemed highly likely. But Buck, though a coot, was still our coot and had feelings, so even as our anxieties about the fate of Christian democracy and the inevitability of Arab attack began to rise, we kept them hidden, which made them rise, which we kept hidden, which made them rise, which we kept hidden. I don't mean we hid them from each other, of course. Only from Buck. But behind his back we had quite a chat going on. That's how things build momentum, get reckless, in a town like ours.

In the first week in October, 2001, our reckless and irresponsible disquiet found the volume when Wayne H. Butts entered the race.

All of us knew Wayne Butts, or thought we did, and none of us cared for him much, or didn't think we did. He ran a shop in town, vacuum cleaner sales and repair, dealing in barely-rebuilt old console models that couldn't suck dirt out of a sandbox. He went to church Sunday mornings but wasn't what you'd call a missionary. His wife was active in the community as a gossip. The two of them dressed in old polyester patterns that had been dizzying even when they

were new, and they rode around town in a beat-up Ford Falcon. He'd bought his wife a facelift for her fiftieth birthday that made her look on the verge of constant orgasm.

First light on the first Monday in October, Wayne and his wife steered their old Falcon down to the courthouse and filled out the necessary paperwork for a mayoral run—after the staff finally found some of the forms yellowing in the bottom of a closet. Then they drove down to our local unpowerful FM station, where Wayne announced himself a candidate for mayor during the ten to eleven-thirty installment of Tradeo.

“We all *know* who's behind this,” Wayne said. “I mean, *don't* we?”

“It's the Moslems,” Shirley Butts said.

“That's right, it's the *Moslems*.” Wayne sounded indignant and incensed—you could almost see him sitting there in the studios, sputtering on, running a white handkerchief over his fat ham face for effect, the sensory power of FM radio. “This world has changed, and we all watched it happen. Now old-fashioned values don't look so old-fashioned anymore. Now our security can no longer be taken for granted. And our very way of life, our *Christian* way of life, wherein people have the right to worship in whatever Protestant way they choose, or no way at all, at your own risk, suddenly this inalienable right has been attacked. But it's not just the Moslems: It's our hedonism, our paganism, our humanism, and our lack of uncompromising fundamentalism. *They've* got the fundamentalism. What do *we* have? Shirley, hon? Do you have something to say?”

Shirley leaned in close to her microphone, making it squeal. “I think it's time for dynamic new leadership,” she said.

Tradeo went to the phone lines, white-hot with calls: Push mower, gas powered, needed some work, fifteen dollars or would trade for push mower, gas powered, worked all the time. Then a few calls from people who were surprised Wayne Butts was running for mayor against Buck, our old coot, but these same people all said they liked what Wayne had to say, that it was refreshing to hear a candidate who based his beliefs on what he believed rather than straight facts. A few more fearful and passionate callers added to Wayne's basic argument, saying that we had the attack coming to us, God had sent it, for the gays and the abortion and thong underwear, and they urged him to keep on telling the truth. Then four hand towels, incredibly used, Elmer Fudd print. Would trade for absolutely anything.

“Let me say, I've known our *former* mayor for many years,” Wayne Butts said. “And he's been a great mayor, in those times when we didn't really need a mayor. But now we've got *Moslems* coming. They're a religious army that's going to attack us because we are religious, and because God loves the United States. And we were *founded* on the principles of God. Now, I'm not proposing anything too drastic for our great town here. All I'm saying is that we shift our form of government to the far right, reform our public education, remove contraception from the Revco so the kids can't have sex, and then declare ourselves the first town in the country openly devoted to the teachings of Jesus Christ, as interpreted by us and by people like us. Now if that's crazy, call me a dangerous nutjob. Who's with me?”

By Election Day, the answer to that question was clear: We were *all* with him, every single one of us. Wayne took 3,725 votes to Buck's absolute zero, with one sole abstention, probably Buck taking the high road or else completely confused.

It was hard not to vote for him. His platform was one-pronged, and the prong was a good one: If we had any hopes of winning this new kind of war, a Holy War between the infidel and us, if we hoped to smite the Moslems, bomb them where they slept, kill them where they ate, if we wanted to bring Jesus Christ to the Middle East and then banish the souls of all those who'd heard and still did not believe to an everlasting suffering of blinding, blackened, fiery torment, the only way we were going to git er dun was to become better Christians. It wasn't enough to have God on *our* side, Wayne warned us—which we knew we already did—but *we* had to be on *God's* side.

Who in their right mind casts a ballot against God?

But in our defense let it be said that Wayne Butts had more going for him than just Divine Right (though anything you invoke after Divine Right is really just piling on). He also ran a campaign...an Honest-To-God campaign. He'd printed up buttons and he bought a bullhorn. He bracketed one of those loudspeakers shaped like an anus to the roof of his Falcon and he drove down Main Street booming the sound of his voice and his message, his driving and his fumbling with the radio, the crinkle-paper of the Hardee's breakfast biscuit wrapper, and the occasional five-star cushion rip.

He made the Sunday-morning rounds at the churches, sported his best awful suits, spoke from the pulpits, sat in with the choirs and sang off-key. Buck sat in church and held the hymnal upside down. Wayne went to all the restaurants in town, the Sunday buffets and the mid-afternoon workday lunches, he interrupted dinners and shook hands. Buck sat in the same spot he always did and drank his coffee with the same old men and didn't shake a single hand until Wayne came in one afternoon and worked his way around the room, finally reaching out for Buck's hand and asking for his vote.

Wayne went up to and invigorated children: "Well hello there, little boys and girls," he would say. "When you die, do you want to be with *Jesus*? Or burning in a lake of fire?"

"Jeeeee-sus!" the kids would yell. The simple faith of children.

"Do you love America or Mohammed?"

"A-meeeeeeeeee-ri-ca," they said.

"Do you want to support all our brave men and women in uniform? Or do you want to give aid to the enemy?"

"Su-pooooooooort our brave meeeeeeeeen and wehhhhhhhhhhhhhh-men in uni-form!"

"And who do you want for mayor come November 6?"

Silence.

Kids.

But the real political play of the season came on the last Saturday in October, at our all-dry Oktoberfest. The fairgrounds had been bringing in the crowds all weekend, from all over the area, men and women who wanted to forget the troubles of the world for a while, forget that our special forces had gone into Afghanistan a couple of weeks before and were finding God-Knew-What over there, men and women who wanted simply to breathe in that best fall air rich with chimney smoke, eat some smoked meats, and not drink. But on Saturday night the crowd was packed to the elbows, more than anyone could have imagined. Some were just people who wanted to have a good time, yes. But more were waiting to see what would happen when Buck got up that night to do his once-a-year half-a-verse butchering of his song. Maybe these people were undecided in their voting and wanted to see what Buck the candidate might accomplish as Buck the Entertainer, without all the mess that comes with an examination of the issues. Maybe it had nothing to do with politics but instead the enjoyment of grotesquerie, of watching someone or anyone make a fool of himself in a public forum. Maybe these two are the exact same thing. Regardless, the two-liter cokes flowed, the funnel cake hardened, the down-home bands took and then gave up the stage, until about 10 p.m., when the crowd started to get excited as the headliner, the Chatahoochee Boys From Dixie, neared the end of their set and had just one more announcement to make.

“Those of y’all who are regulars know how we like to end Oktoberfest,” the goofy lead singer told the whispering, starting-to-stir crowd. “Buck, where are you, son? Let’s *do this*.”

The Chatahoochee Boys fired immediately into song, got the big wheel started and then kept on turnin’, and then Buck meandered onstage and reached a mike, started singing in the middle of a verse, bent his knees and bounced on them in a bad dance, kept time with his right hand in a karate chop full of arthritis, stopped singing when he felt like it and then shuffled off stage. The Chatahoochee Boys thanked everyone for coming out tonight, and when the song finally stopped—in that big last crescendo bands do, strumming real fast and the drummer drumming nuts—an eerie silence fell upon the alcohol-free Oktoberfest. Folks’ hands covered their own mouths. Others cried and hugged each other tight. Still others looked up to the sky or down at the ground and shook their heads why, why, why. It was an inspiring display of incompetence and ineptitude, but it was a thing of the past; our days when we could get away with being incompetent and inept were over.

But then suddenly, dramatically, the breakers were breaked, the stage went completely dark, and a brief pause later a single light shone down on a polyester silhouette. It was Wayne Butts, of course, strapped into a guitar.

“I hope y’all don’t mind,” he said. “But I’d like to sing y’all a little song, if you’d be so kind.”

Before he received an answer to the question he wasn’t asking, he started strumming—just him alone up there, his awful chording ability, his half-flat pitch, but delivered with great feeling—and he began to play this meaningful medley of patriotic songs, or were they gospel songs? He kept switching between the two every few words so you couldn’t tell which from which, but there were eagles flying and Christian Soldiers marching, people getting washed in

the blood the color of which doesn't run, and the whole thing worked its way back around to that Toby Keith song about fitting a boot up your butt.

It probably goes without saying: From there the election was a lock.

His inspired if unproficient performance touched our town to its core. His simple act of fumbling through key changes earned the unassuming hearts and minds of all of us present that night, even all of us who weren't but heard about it, and he'd done it in a classy and down-home manner that around here passes for masterful political theatre. He soon thereafter earned the support of our local organizations, from the Legion of Decency to the Unreformed and Unpenitent Elks to the Daughters of both the American Revolution and the Confederacy. He earned the support of our local paper, the *Razorback Rag*, which gave him a rating of four fat pigs. And of course he re-energized the base, meaning our ministers, who rose before their congregations the morning after the medley and told everyone there they had a moral obligation to vote in this election, that as preachers they couldn't legally get up here and tell you who to vote for, what with the First Amendment, but if you loved the Lord and loved the United States, didn't want your children learning Arabic, and didn't like the idea of Talibon in cheap foreign-made pickup trucks cluttering up Main Street Walhalla, you should probably vote for Brother Wayne.

Which is what we did, November 6th. We went out in force, voted theocratic, and we lived happily ever after. For about a month.

I guess we should have thought things through. But what did we know about theocracy? How could we have any idea what to expect? I suppose we thought it would bring a certain measure of perfection to our town, a measure of certainty, of calm. I suppose we expected things to become so clear, we'd no longer have to think about them. I think we thought it'd be like paradise, that folks would sup on milk and honey, begin dressing Amish, would bow at the waist when they met you on the street, holding their hands over their hearts in a sign of reverence and goodwill like on the Landroo episode of *Star Trek*.

But in the beginning, at least, the real shock of becoming a theocracy was that it was no real shock at all. No one dined on milk and honey, no one dressed Amish, the people who smiled at you on the street kept doing so and the buttocks stayed buttocks. In other words our theocratic town looked a lot like our old town. I think we were a little disappointed by that, and perhaps a bit lulled by it, too. At the very least we'd expected someone from the comedy channel to send a fake reporter down here to file a story on us that made us look like idiots. But no one seemed to notice what had happened to us, not even the towns down the road. Not that they ever paid attention to us before.

Brother Wayne himself was to blame for some of the relative ease with which we'd made the transition. In his Election Night victory speech he'd promised sweeping reforms that would be signed into law the very next day, which was not really his first day in office but which he'd

declared would be, a sweeping reform right there. And his first day in office he made good on this by issuing no fewer than a half-dozen proclamations, legally binding, intended to begin to form a public policy that promised to be batty with his love for the Lord. He printed these out and had them tacked to telephone poles, slid under windshield wipers; he guest-hosted a half-hour on Unpowerful FM and discussed their ecumenical implications. But these—and the few weeks' worth that followed—tended to be more philosophical, tackling some of the important issues, those matters which displease the Lord the most, such as sex. In fact his first proclamation was released at eight in the morning sharp—he must've had it ready—and dealt with the abortion and the gays. He outlawed them both outright and made strict punishments for both, which boiled down to beating the offender over the head with something, somewhere in public. But this legislation turned out to have no practical value whatsoever, as no one in town practiced either abortion or gayness. Likewise his proclamations on liberalism and moral relativism, disseminating the theory of evolution, having intimate relations with the lights turned on. None of us did any of that. Even his more practical proclamations had little practical value. He said we should construct a Town Square Christmas display that would be religious in theme and would take into account no other faith. He said we should love our neighbor as ourself, but to report to police anyone who spoke in a foreign accent. He suggested we discourage the intermingling of the races. Check.

Maybe we'd been living in a theocracy all along and just didn't know it.

Meanwhile the mundane and necessary business of city government moved forward apparently unhindered by the transition: Our utilities continued to be utilized, our roads continued to be tarred, our trash pickup was unreliable as ever. Undoubtedly this was due to the fact that Wayne kept Buck's old City Hall staff and asked them to keep doing whatever it was they did, proving the staff's competence in maintaining the civil order regardless of who filled the mayor's office, case in point Buck, who after the election went back to his lunch counter and resumed sitting, possibly waiting his chance for another election, another Octoberfest, another cup of coffee, or I suppose it was possible he didn't know he'd lost.

For these reasons above all—our mayor's issuing of fatwahs so obvious as to be trivial and the fact that none of us had been put out by even so much a dip in our water pressure—our transition into Jesus Town seemed an unqualified success. And as November found its full chill, our spirits found surprising warmth in a springtime of uplifting good news, which we interpreted as a sign of God being pleased with us, including our US forces moving through Afghanistan Alhambra-sounding city by Alhambra-sounding city and Carolina beating Clemson, Hallelujah.

Our respectful nativity went up in Town Square, and the Plastic Baby Jesus had never seemed so holy nor American. And of course no one was as enthused and easily re-enthused by our success than our ministers, those Grass Roots, who read each one of Brother Wayne's new proclamations as if it had come straight from the Press Upstairs from the pulpit on Sunday mornings, pointing out for their congregations the scriptural basis for each new policy or tenet or, if they couldn't find one, making one up on the spot.

But the truth about theocracy—and this is what we hadn't really considered before—is that, once it moves beyond the abstract into the practical, it can get a bit intrusive. Brother Wayne had spent his first month in office crusading against deviates and degenerates, doubters and disbelievers, batterers, repulsives, defectives of all sort, which had been fine with all of us, since we had none of those types in our town to begin with. Then, after he'd stopped looking for degenerates and defectives, instead he turned his attention toward us.

He began by going back on Tradeo and denouncing our patriotism.

"We are in a *war*," he reminded the listening audience helpfully. "But do you know how many yellow ribbons I saw on the asses of cars on the way over here? Do you know? Twenty or so, twenty-five, maybe thirty tops. Maybe thirty-seven or forty. And do you know how many American flags I saw flying from homes or from mobile homes? About as many. What's *wrong* with you people? We are in a *war*. Am I to assume that those of you who don't have a yellow ribbon bumper sticker don't support the war, don't support our troops, and are in fact dangerous dissenters giving comfort to the enemy? Yes, I think that's fair. I want to see some *patriotism* here, people. I want to see some unity that borders on reckless. From this moment on, I decree that you must put a bumper sticker on your car, which you can purchase at City Hall for \$10.99. I assure you, proceeds from the sale—and it's just about all profit on these things—will go toward some legitimate thing for our town. I'll figure out what once I see the cash."

Brother Wayne had put some thought into the design: They were yellow ribbon stickers. They were stickers shaped like yellow ribbons. You know. Though he'd put a cross in the middle to make his point. Of course, those of us who hadn't stickered our bumpers hadn't not done it because we didn't support the troops or the war, but because we didn't like shit on our bumpers. It had merely been a matter of personal choice. Still, it was a decent looking sticker, and you could be fined for not having it, so we were happy to slap it on. The demand for these stickers grew so great—by law—that Brother Wayne designed an entire line of patriotic paraphernalia, from flag pins to keychains to leisurewear. He put out a Xeroxed catalog at taxpayer expense. He himself modeled the men's suit. It was the style of suit he always wore, except for dizzying plaid it was thirteen stripes, fifty blue stars, and a tie with one crazed-looking eagle. Sister Shirley modeled the women's wear, what looked to be three big flags stitched together in a boxy loose-fitting gown that stretched from shoulders to floor, with enough material left over to wrap around the head, covering everything but a slit for her eyes.

But his poor-selling items were not his dumbest idea.

His dumbest might've been to pick a fight with our high school mascot.

He'd stormed into Tradeo one morning claiming to have stayed up all night reading his Bible and praying for guidance when Leviticus struck him and made him suddenly realize the big problem with our football program, the state's losingest. "Do you know what God writes in the Bible about *pigs*?" he spat onto the microphone. "He calls them *swine*. He says they have a split hoof but do not chew the cud. I don't think it takes a scholar to see what I'm saying here.

Our mascot is the *Razorback*.” His voice was full of tin and fumbling, nervous as car keys. “It’s not bad enough a football is a pigskin, I guess, but we call our team the *Razorbacks*? Do you people wonder why our team is so completely assed-out? It’s the reason winning athletes being interviewed thank Jesus Christ for the victory. Because Jesus Christ *has been watching* and has used his supernatural powers *to affect the outcome of the game*. That’s why we produce the worst high school athletes in the state! It’s the *Razorback*. It’s not because our players are *smokers*.”

Tradeo went to the phone lines and people were unreceptive.

“What are you *talking* about?” the callers all said. “We’ve been the Razorbacks forever. *I’m* a Razorback,” they said.

“Then you’re an abomination to God,” Brother Wayne said.

“My daddy was a Razorback.” Or,

“I don’t see anything wrong with it. It’s for the *kids*.” And,

“You’re not a Back Booster. You’re a Back *Buster*.”

“How are these people getting through, Hicks?” Brother Wayne demanded of the host.

“Don’t you have some sort of screening process?”

“This is *Tradeo*,” the old host said.

The mayor shuffled up his King James and his briefcase of notes and he left.

For the rest of the show the citizens of Walhalla called in to bash Brother Wayne over the head with his own thick dumbness. It was that forum of democratic debate and good-natured character assassination that is FM talk radio. Most people called up chuckling. A few called so mad they could piss. But the fact of the matter was there’d been no harm done. In fact it had been a useful exercise, to find out where the lines were.

The next morning we woke to the Seraphim. The Walhalla Seraphim. In fact every public Razorback in town had been replaced by a hideous dark scaled serpentine angel with six wings and four heads and a demonic grin. When the football coach got to school and saw the thing sticking off the front sign he stumped up and tried to pry it off with his can-o-bean fingers. But it appeared protected by an electric shock of some kind he couldn’t figure out. He tried for a while anyway. He kicked it. He cursed and swung at it like he’d come home to his wife drunk.

Then there was the time, a few days after, when Brother Wayne outlawed almost everything.

On the early morning of Monday, December 17th, Brother Wayne dashed off a quick, handwritten proclamation For Immediate Release—he’d learned his lesson about using democratic public forums for such things and would use undemocratic prose from this point on—in which he ordered the Walhalla Police Department, the entire force, both of them, to raid the local convenience store of its Busch Light, gentlemen’s magazines, and flashing boob lighters in the first battle in the War on Hedonism. They were further ordered to raid the local video store of everything you’d be embarrassed to watch in front of your mother, which turned out to be, in City Hall’s judgement, just about everything on the shelves. The police left only the family-friendly entertainment, the documentaries on sharks and the Civil War, the *Best of the*

*Best of Andy Griffith*, and the harmless animated children's programs on Noah's Ark, Jonah and the Whale, the Passion of the Christ.

Immediately the talk began around town, the telling and retelling of what happened, the constructed and reconstructed accounts of the handwritten proclamation that preceded the conflict—which looked like three long nervous squiggles—and even seemingly firsthand accounts of the raids themselves, though from people who had been nowhere present; hearsay is what a town like ours does best.

In the first case Herschel Mathers, the owner of the Super Convenience Mart, had been irate and tried to block the police, arguing with them the entire time he was plundered of his merchandise. He said he had a *right* to sell these items, he had a license to sell alcohol by authority of both the state of South Carolina and the Federal government, and he pointed to it, framed on the wall. He said ATF controls all that, and SLED. He kept saying, this is a Federal case, this is a Federal case, and he kept saying that even as the cops pulled away with two black-and-whites' worth of his hedonistic stuff. Across town, Big Homely Ed of Big Homely Ed's Video had taken it even worse, calling up people despondently, trying to tell them he'd been robbed, he'd been robbed, but he couldn't really further the story in any meaningful way because he was sobbing too hard to be fully understood.

Is this the point where things went too far? Is this the point where our town stood up to the strong-arm tactics of City Hall once and for all and reclaimed ourselves as a democracy? No. Because we were afraid to do so for fear of sounding unpatriotic, or maybe I mean unchristian. And the reason governments like that exist is because people keep quiet, and the reason people keep quiet is because governments like that exist. (We've since put that on a bumper sticker ourselves, \$10.99, looks sharp.) Even our paper, the *Razorback Rag*, refused to stand up to City Hall's overreaching. In fact they'd quickly changed their name in all the pig discussion to simply *RR*, like a humor magazine, or a pirate one, due to the ban, though they insisted they'd not changed their name at all but merely their logo. For the same reason no one wants to eat Kentucky Fried Rat.

Regardless, the town of West Union is three miles down the road, where you could buy beer and booby lighters and rent videos all at the Jumbo King, and eat a hamburger, too, if you wanted. The only people directly put out were Herschel and Big Homely Ed, both of whom we felt sorry for, sure, but their government-imposed imposition had been like a form of Eminent Domain, that old government standby. This line of thinking is called rationalization.

In church the following Sunday, Christmas Eve Eve, our ministers put their best faces on Brother Wayne's reforms. They claimed a War on Hedonism, the new catch-phrase, was a good thing, a sign of ethical progress for our town. And even if the measures used to fight the war might seem to some of us a bit extreme—say raiding sovereign businesses, for one—the results were likely pleasing to the Lord.

"They took all our beer," some in the congregation said.

"I think that's wonderful," the ministers said. "Banish the demon drink far away."

"They took all the movies."

“The filmcapades of Hollywood and Gomorrah,” the ministers said.

“They said they know who amongst us rented those *Bikini Women’s Prison* movies.”

“Um,” the ministers said. “Well.”

But the point is, we let it all happen. We accepted each new intrusion and thus invited the next, and when something truly hideous and in need of attention came walking up the street, we looked the other way, which is the polite, Christian thing to do.

On Christmas Eve, Brother Wayne issued a proclamation to further define his previous one.

It was posted on the World Wide Web, stapled to telephone poles; it blew with the wind down Main Street like tumbleweed. It read, in its entirety:

To: The Town of Walhalla  
From: Wayne H. Butts, Mayor  
Re: War On Hedon

Merry Christmas!

Last week I issued a statement regarding Hedonism and I declared open war on it in our town. So far I have seen signs of good progress. Or I thought that I had, by removing those things that corrupt the soul, such as alcohol and cinema. But then I got to thinking, I wasn’t really hitting the problem. Declaring a War on Hedonism is a good idea, but when it comes right down to it, it was a dumb idea, because I was missing the target. I’m fighting symptoms of a disease rather than the cause. Removing Busch Light doesn’t do anything for that. The cause of sin is the Devil and I fight the Devil every day. I’m fighting him even as I type this, hard. But I can’t kill the Devil so I have to look for Plan B. So the next obvious cause of disease is that crud in every one of your black hearts. Your secret sins. Your fun sins, your pet sins, all that human nature. How does one fight secret sin? If secret sin is the cause of external seeable sin? I have a plan. Operation Righteous Indignation is over, and now Operation Exposure to the Light of Day is begun. What this means, when you offend God in some way, you will be issued a ticket. But then I thought, a ticket isn’t good enough. You can throw that away. What really conquers sin, vanishes evil? What get to the root of it and snap it? The only one thing I know of, the blood of the Lamb. Also, public shame. So that’s where I’m going with this.

From now on, when you get caught doing something you will be issued a sign to wear. Open container, you will be given a sign to hang around your neck telling people you’re a damn drunk. Parking violation, that’s a sign, maybe Doesn’t Follow Directions. But

whatever you get caught with, we'll determine the sin and post it on you. I mean, let's be real, DUIs get a yellow tag and pervs get a yard sign, and that's *already*, in the whole country. It's a very American thing I'm talking about here, and it goes back to the righteousness of our forebears and pilgrims. It's a vision of America. I'm not calling you drunk-driving pervs, but your sin is going to hang around your neck, whatever it is. But then, I thought, or I'm thinking right now, that signs can be thrown away just as easy as a ticket, so how about something you're stuck with and can't lose or hide in your open shame?

So what say a big wooden cross? Not so big you can't carry it but big enough to be a complete annoyance. Cumbersome. I'll get right on that. And when you get a ticket in the next few days for your secret sins, take these tickets into City Hall and redeem them for your cross. And your cross, in turn, will redeem YOU. Those of you who think I'm kidding can go jump. If you think I'm crazy go jump again. You elected me and if I'm so crazy what does that say about you, smart guy?

I see nothing blasphemous about this idea.

In Love of the Lord,  
Wayne

Appended to the bottom of the letter, a picture of Wayne and Shirley, their Christmas card. It was the first real close look many of us had gotten of Wayne since the election. His hairline had sunken back in his forehead and his eyes looked full-on black, as if removed, rolled in oil, and repotted back into his head. Shirley stood beside him but at a distance, hoping to sneak her way sideways out of frame. Her frown was difficult to read, because of the facelift.

Our Christmas Days were contained, paranoid affairs, full of the fear of the Lord rather than His Grace, and with each new gift unwrapped we wondered what secret sin about us had just been revealed. Whether our wife's selfless gift-giving exposed our pride in the form of a monogrammed bowling ball, as well as revealing perhaps our sloth and drunkenness. Whether our gifts of silk pajamas to them revealed both our lust and our tendency to give gifts to our wives that eventually gave back to us. We worried about our children, second-guessing the fake costume jewelry, pink boa, and blood-red lipstick of the "How Old Am I Again?" playset, and we double-checked the rating on those X-Boxes to find they contained extreme gore and violence, adult language, adult situations, and plenty of malicious intent.

Across town our ministers spent their Christmases in the same state of apprehension, hunkered down in their own modest homes festering holiday ulcers that had nothing to do with gravy. In fact they'd not been able to eat a single sprinkled cookie, nor enjoy the thinnest cut of ham. Something was off.

Our dreams over the holiday were the worst of all, sugarplumless and strange, crucified and unseasonal, chalk-dust dreams of a barefooted Savior on a Holy Land road, dragging His own heavy death toward Golgotha.

On the morning of the 26th the first of our citizenry began bearing a cross. It was for noise violation, gross intoxication, and the discharging of firearms. Etched across the horizontal bar was a single word: Roughneck. Billy Giles had thrown the cross into the bed of his pickup and was driving it up and down Main Street, half-hanging out his window, thumbing back for people to take a look at it. I think he was proud.

Billy and his brothers spent every Christmas Night hanging out at their farmhouse getting pissed on OFC, and then once their judgement was fully impaired they broke out the shotguns and took turns in the back yard firing off shells at nothing in particular. From what we'd heard, they'd spent the beginning of *this* Christmas Night like the rest of us, in quiet and worried contemplation over current events, except they decided to break out the OFC anyway. Then, after a few straight drinks, they wondered what would really happen to them if they *did* get ticketed. After all, if they didn't get fall-down drunk and fire off a few rounds, hadn't the terrorists already won? So they stopped thinking and started drinking, and just after midnight duck-for-your-lives season was open. Where the three other Giles boys were that morning, and thus the three other crosses, we didn't know. Maybe they were still sleeping it off. Either that, in jail, or at the ER getting a finger sewed back on. But Billy didn't seem too worried. It was the first time he'd been first in just about anything.

But then by mid-morning there were a few more—simple infractions, a speeding ticket, a library fine, that kind of thing—and then, a few more. In the holiday post-bustle, it was something interesting to watch. It was even, perhaps, mildly funny. Had we been scared of *this*? Harmless public humiliation? The steps of City Hall became a runway for disbelieving perp walks, otherwise upstanding men and women who'd been cited for something and who shuffled into the building with their heads hung low, muttering to themselves. It was almost like a guilty pleasure, and a few people started standing outside City Hall and rubbernecking. Then, even better, someone from City Hall came out and issued them a ticket for rubbernecking, and then these people did *their* perp walks inside. Their crosses said, Judge Not.

By nightfall City Hall had formed a line. It moved an inch at a time and reached a block back. It shuffled straight ahead without conversation, like a line you'd see in Warsaw, in black-and-white film reels, rather than Walhalla. Many of the same men and women standing there, sunken-faced, had been mildly entertained by the whole business earlier in the day, when it had been someone's else's sin. Behind City Hall one could hear the sound of incessant hammering, nailing, sawing, two or three or more carpenters back there, unseen, churning out crosses the way carpenters in old Westerns churn out coffins. Brother Wayne's office light, facing east toward

the road, burned on into the small hours. Every now and then you could see him, a fat dark shape moving quickly past the pane.

Obviously we had a problem. But we didn't know just how big a problem until the next morning, the 27th, when sunrise revealed a town absolutely clumsy with crosses. They were leaned on buildings, abandoned on streets, planted into the lawn-space around City Hall, for temporary measures, we guessed, but the image reminded us of some things we'd rather have forgotten. Municipal Square looked to be a loading-zone for shame. Crosses were strapped to the hoods of cars or stuck halfway out of barely-closed trunks. It looked like a Holy Land gift shop had exploded over our town. And most distressing, the line standing in front of City Hall had become twice as long and twice as slow as before, seemingly overnight.

Then we discovered, as people began talking and spreading whatever rumors they had, that there'd been nothing "seemingly" about "overnight." Brother Wayne had ordered his police force on twilight, door-to-door, room-to-room campaigns, conducting raids without warrants or due process on private property and on sleepy-eyed, confused citizens—young and old alike, men and women, Baptists and non-Baptists—rummaging through closets and chester drawers for signs of some ticketable secret sin. But that didn't make any sense, we pressed the rumorers. Our town had two count-em two cops, and if you put them both together you'd still get only about half a cop. How could they have the time, the energy to go door-to-door issuing this many tickets? It made no logistical sense. But then the rumorers said it was because Brother Wayne had brought in some fresh blood from somewhere else. Brand new members of the Walhalla PD. These brand new members dressed all in black, no badge, no insignia, not even a gun belt that anyone saw. Eyewitnesses recalled them bone-thin and tall, maybe seven feet, thin men all seeming to be from some other part of the world—not that they looked Asian or Norwegian but that they had some trait that was hard to identify. They had hollow sockets and starved cheeks, as if they'd all been held upside down and drained of their blood. They spoke in a dialect like outer space music. There were either four of them who worked their way miraculously across town, one minute on the far side, the next on the near, or there were multiple groups of the same four. One of the four always asked the lady of the house for coffee, meaning the can full of grounds that he could eat with a spoon.

And there'd apparently been some confusion as to the whereabouts that night of our own Brother Wayne. His office light stayed on until morning, a single glowing eye facing the street and overlooking the fenced-in rear of the courthouse, where stand-up lights had been brought back for the carpenters we couldn't see, casting a red, rolling fog so that they could keep on making racket, though they were all likely half-dead from exertion. And it was clear that Brother Wayne had been in his office all night—he'd occasionally drift past the window and cast his foul shadow. But then several townspeople claimed to have spotted Brother Wayne in different parts of the town overnight, and more or less at the same time. Some claimed to have seen him north toward the mountain, walking along the dark road which led to our spooky State-Park forest, rumored to be home to devil worshippers, confederate ghosts, certainly a Deliverance-level cracker or two. One such person seeing him was Beulah Leigh, who leaned out her window and

called to him prithee—I think she said, Hey Mayor whatcha doin walkin’ without reflective gear?—and whose prithee went unreturned. Over by Dairy Queen someone claimed to have seen Brother Wayne around midnight walking the train tracks, accompanied by a much larger and much-harder-to-see individual who looked like a cross between a linebacker and a hunchbacker and who walked hobbled up, sort of like a goat. Again the spotter called out to Brother Wayne, which the mayor left unrecognized and unreturned. Maybe Brother Wayne had been consorting with God knows what kind of corruption and sleaze...he was, after all, a vacuum cleaner salesman. Maybe he had a twin brother, one of them good, the other of them evil and mustachioed, and our town was being torn apart in their yin-yang struggle. Maybe Brother Wayne had figured out teleportation. Maybe so.

But to be honest this rumormongering—while answering some of our questions, and besides that being moderately entertaining—really didn’t do that much for us. For the men and women of our town being called upon to take up our cross, who stood in line, or had done so already, or would be doing so soon, what mattered was not where Brother Wayne had spent his night or to which agency or entity he’d sold his soul but figuring out what could be done to derail the runaway train of inadequacy, brute force, and moral authority that had become our local government.

By the 28th some in our town had taken up that question with full force. A few began standing outside City Hall—across the street, where there was still room—and holding up signs protesting Operation Exposure to the Light of Day. Some began publicly questioning Brother Wayne’s tactics and theology, even his qualifications for being mayor, much less being a mouthpiece for Jehovah. And a few among us—the most high-falutin’ and humanistic—began preaching a gospel of peaceful and mindful resistance, claiming that corrupt governments are sanctioned by public apathy, by acquiescence, and that the simple act of refusing to participate could change the system. Of course City Hall tried to discredit these broadminded radicals as quickly as possible—all of them schoolteachers, librarians, people who could read—by issuing more crosses. Those who publicly criticized City Hall’s tactics would be issued a cross that read, Agitator. Those who flat refused, Traitor. Failure to pick up your cross would result in its going back to the woodshed, where carved beneath your original sin it would now also read, Failure to Pick Up Cross.

But our broadminded radicals would not be denied. They formed a picket line five or six strong, they trained each other in how to bear a serious blow to the head. They broke out their posterboard and their sharpies and their wooden sticks and their acoustic guitars, and for good measure they brought out thick logging chains, in case they had to chain themselves to something. They sang We Shall Overcome, though they knew only those three of the words and hummed the rest, and despite the fact that, versus the sound of the carpentry behind City Hall, those three repeated words of the Negro spiritual could really only be mouthed for justice.

Yet here’s the surprising thing: it almost worked. Even these small acts of civil disobedience began to have what they call a rippling effect. Because our government couldn’t keep up with the demand and redemand for crosses.

Every time someone new refused to participate in the system, the system slowed down that much more to accommodate the refusal. Every time someone from City Hall would walk across the street and tell our radicals, “Your cross is ready,” and every time our radicals would say back “Shove it up your ass, pig,” their crosses were dragged back behind City Hall for more work. Thus it was gridlock. It was cross-lock. It was subtle and patriotic sabotage. Believe me, no one was more surprised by this than our broadminded radicals, whose honorable proposals had been intended more or less as a meaningless, bloodless, abstract gesture, which is how broadminded radicals like to fight. But this time, we couldn’t believe it, their passive Ghandi hand-wringing had shown some real-world results. It was like germs accidentally killing the aliens in *War of the Worlds*.

Brother Wayne tried his best to remain on-message even as the hammering and nailing slowed and stopped. He tried his best to ignore reality and stick stubbornly to his plan. He grabbed his old campaign bullhorn and leaned out his office window and bellowed for our hippies to come get their damn crosses. But by this time it was no use. By that point we’d tasted freedom, democracy had taken root, and besides we were running out of carpenters, as one of them had to be airlifted to Oconee Memorial that Saturday the 29th with chest pains. The line in front of City Hall broke rank, ripped up their violations, and returned home. Our sanitation department looked at the mess on Main Street and shook their sorry heads.

And just like that it was over, or at any rate it should have been. Broadminded radicalism and peaceful nonviolent protest had won out over well-intentioned tyranny. It was a red-letter day for the few blue-stated people in our red-stated town.

But Brother Wayne had always been—or at least since he’d been elected—a man with blinders on. His right eye didn’t know what his left eye was doing. His view of reality extended about two feet in front of his face. He should have taken Shirley and skipped town, sneaked into exile further south, maybe somewhere near Columbia, where nobody would ever care to look. Instead Brother Wayne sent out his four policemen—who despite being thin and French were strong as ox—to drag everyone who’d refused to pick up their cross into Town Square. To be nailed to their cross.

Sunrise of the 30th broke in clouds of cotton-soaked blood. To the sounds of screaming, and of spikes driven deep into bone. Our eighty-six-year-old dissenting librarian Mary Hatch, who had no one to come get her after being abducted in the middle of the night and crucified, had tried to walk home herself. She’d made it a fumbling, osteoporosis mile, trailing blood across the sidewalks and pavement like an abstract painting.

We tried to wrestle her into the back of one of our pickups, to get a shawl over her bare shoulders—the shawl, of course, would not reach around the cross—tried to get her safely back home so we could use some pliers to free her before she bled out, and as we stood there trying this Brother Wayne’s City Hall flunkies came around tacking fliers to telephone poles, one final

proclamation marked For Immediate Release. In it, he said the War on Human Nature was going well. That exposing secret sin had made us stronger. He said that heretofore City Hall would get rid of all unclaimed crosses by nailing them straight to their rightful owners. And he said that, effective immediately, in order to Keep Walhalla Green, he'd discontinued the manufacture of new crosses. From now on when you received a ticket, you could bring it on down to City Hall to have your sin tattooed on you:

One on the forehead, one on the forearm, and one on the palm of your hand.

Our ministers read this proclamation at church later that morning—of course packed wall to wall with fright, the same kinds of crowds we'd seen right after 9/11—and they finally admitted their mistake.

“We thought a theocratic town would be a good idea,” they said. “And more important, we thought Brother Wayne was the kind of man who could make it work. But now we have come to a different conclusion altogether about Brother Wayne. We have come to believe that he is really the Anti-Christ.

“He'll *never* give up his power, brothers and sisters. He'll say that we got what we deserved for voting for him. But tattooing on the forehead is a sure-fire sign of demonism. He's in league with the Devil. Which means, of course, there's only one thing we can do, brothers and sisters of our town:

“Go get your weapons! Brandish your firearms! Go get the armaments you purchased to fight the Arabs! And bring them here, to our churches! We will fortify and march on Main Street! We will rescue this town from the goat-claw clutches of Satan! This is a Holy War! Between Good and Evil! And our very *souls* are at stake.”

It was a relief to hear a public official make so much sense.

So we drove home from church, took off our Sunday best, and dug out our fatigues.

We armed ourselves and then piled into our respective church vans—the whole town's worth—and we charged toward Main Street at speeds upwards of thirty-five miles an hour. The rattle of automatic rifles chattered all that day and into the night. Our young men in town took up arms with us, some of them as young as twelve, though all had fired automatic weapons before. We told them what they did was for God, for our town, but not to get hurt or their mothers would kill us. We let them smoke cigarettes and tie dirty bandannas around their heads.

In this manner we reclaimed Walhalla block by block, fighting off Brother Wayne's groups of four out-of-town policemen all the way. It really wasn't so hard to get past them. Once you finally killed one of the four, the other three ran around in circles, bumping into each other, like defective toys. Then you could just move past them if you wanted, to the next set of four, or you could pause for a moment and stay behind and slay the rest of them, for emphasis. Which is what a lot of us decided to do.

And then, just before midnight, we reached our beleaguered City Hall, which in the not-two-months since the election suddenly looked broken and sunken in, the boards sagging like being pulled by an invisible string down toward Hell, and the hordes of us surrounded the buzzard-cawing building and readied for an apocalyptic battle against ultimate evil. We were scared,

sure, because as regards how to fight ultimate evil, we had no real idea—some were convinced Brother Wayne would simply clop out of City Hall on his woolly Pan legs and vaporize us with a thought—though we all believed in the power of the Second Amendment, and we hoped violence would do the trick. A few had brought along pitchforks and waved them in the air like a late-night creature feature. Many more, it seemed, had brought along their Bibles and held them in the air like John Cusack holds up the radio in that movie, as if trying to perform a long-distance, radio-wave exorcism, or else they held the books in front of themselves like a shield that would withstand anything; even some of our most agnostic and liberal had a copy of the King James under their arms just in case, what they call Pascal's Wager.

But, as it turns out, we didn't have to fire a single shot at City Hall that night to win back our town, didn't hurl our pitchforks or drive a stake through anyone's heart or cut off anyone's head. We'd expected, when the doors to City Hall screeched open, we'd be face to face with ultimate evil, but instead when they opened, the town square clock striking iron midnight, what emerged from the doors was just a pasty little lawyer, Brother Wayne's legal counsel, who held up a copy of the town Constitution, a document that had grown in the last two months into a tome the size of *Moby Dick*, and reminded us that everything Brother Wayne Butts had done for us, and to us, we'd agreed to.

"Pursuant to article this and that," the lawyer read, "by the power invested him by the town of Walhalla and its citizens, in all that legislation you monkeys signed off on, remember?" He cited back to us chapter and verse until we were all thoroughly confused, and then he took off his round-wire glasses and cleaned them on his tie. "Mayor Butts has resigned, so good luck, suckers," the lawyer said. "You ingrates are on your own."

And that was it.

You might think it would be difficult to go back to our old lives and normal routines after this ordeal...after all the bloodshed and lay-waste, the intolerance and single-minded barbarism, the injustice and crucifixion. But that wasn't the case. In fact we pretty much just picked right up where we left off. In a couple of weeks it was like the whole thing never happened.

Some people, of course, insisted on bringing the whole thing back up, kept talking about pressing charges against Brother Wayne and bringing him to justice, even though we'd given him the legal right to do what he did, but by this time we were all so sick of thinking about what had happened that we just wanted the matter dropped. Let's keep looking forward, we told those troublemakers who wouldn't let it die, making the troublemakers so mad the veins in their foreheads bulged like they were having a stroke. Besides, even Brother Wayne had moved on, spending some time on the lecture circuit, so we heard, charging a few thousand dollars a pop to tell his side of the story to college auditoriums full of white male students and white female students. Apparently his lectures have been received well.

Let him have his moment in the sun, we say. Why dwell on the past anyway? We finally have our lives back. People returned to drinking beer on their front porches, in their living rooms, in front of their TVs and their children, and the beer had never seemed as cheap or as cold. Stores began selling boob lighters again, and their fleshy shapes and flashing lights were never more stylized or degrading. We even found our old coot Buck sitting—well, you know where he was sitting—and we gave him his old job back. He didn't complain or hold any grudge or act like he realized he'd ever lost the job in the first place. He's been running things for us ever since.

About the only ones among us who had any trouble adjusting were our young boys, the ones who'd been recruited to take up arms with us and fight. At the time they'd been remarkably pliant and enthusiastic. All we had to tell them was they were fighting for God, that they'd be rewarded in the afterlife, and that's all it took to work them into a righteous patriotic fury, get them rattling off machine-gun fire without a thought. But once the fighting was done they looked almost confused, unsure, too easily distracted. None of them laughed at jokes anymore...even when you told them a knee-slapper, they just smiled this thin smile and dropped their heads, let out breaths that aped laughter but sounded more like shallow sighs. The youngest who fought with us that day are now football age, and on Friday nights they are the new fighting Razorbacks, still losing games by impressive margins, a Razorback tradition. At the ref's final whistle, when the score is announced apologetically on the PA, they shake off their helmets as if smothered by them, stand out on the field and stare back at us in the stands in a kind of dumb fog, scanning us as if looking for something, those young faces of theirs difficult to read, their young minds somewhere else.