

"MY BEAUTIFUL 20TH CENTURY SON" (version 2.0)
by Yancy Berns

"Oooh, look out, you rock n' rollers"
-David Bowie, 1973

1.

It's not just because I smoked a whole hell of a lot of East Coast pot that I don't remember much of my last year at Penn State. It was cheap pot, mostly, and you had to smoke a ton of it to get anywhere. In 1973, we were all too taken with our freedom to care that we were sucking on cork shavings that either put us to sleep or gave us a headache.

No, no. The reason I don't remember much is because, I think, it is necessary to forget. Those times, my early twenties and the early post-sixties America, were like this wonderful downhill slide into oblivion. You didn't know it was all gonna end right back where it started, you didn't know that the Eighties were just gonna be the fifties with cocaine. You thought that that feeling of sliding, from Woodstock to Altamont to Nixon, was some new kinda freedom, ^{to some technical end.} We thought it was the first page of the new America, an America that spun on a hub like "Dark Side Of The Moon", just spinning over and over until you really KNEW what it was all about. Joni Mitchell said we were golden, and for all we knew she was right.

As I said, I don't remember much. Certainly nothing that I studied. But I remember this thing that happened, this unbelievable thing, and the more I let myself think about it, the more it seems like all those years since then are just some kind of massive fart of the time/space continuum. That everything inside me and everything outside me was sucked in, redefined, and vomited out at the moment that Alfred turned his back to us and started up The Hill in the rain. It seems like, somewhere inside me, I know that everything I know now I learned after that. That everything I knew before that night just went up with the cold wind. Like Joni said, stardust.

The more I think about him, the more he comes back.

I remember Lyman Hall, and I remember our beautiful son. My son, really. And I remember how close I came to opening the door on that last night, when all my bags were packed, when Rudy had

already packed up his ~~old~~ Dylan albums and we just kept listening to "Tommy" over and over. I remember the raspy sound of the sad breeze escaping Alfred's paper lungs.

2.

Mad Magazine had been published by the great William Gaines since the fifties, and for most of my growing up, it was my only source of humor and real release. When I was younger, it was funny cause it was gross. When I got to college in '69, it was funny 'cause it was stupid. But it was always funny. They had really bad movie parodies, and "The Lighter Side Of...", and "Spy Vs. Spy", and Jack Davis artwork. And on the cover, there was always Alfred E. Neuman. Of indeterminate age, height, intelligence, demeanor, Alfred stared out from every cover of Mad. Sometimes he was decked out in Star Trek garb, sometimes he was dressed up like a hippie (always my favorite), sometimes he was incorporated into cover art of nearly surrealist nature, peering forth from some optical illusion. Red hair, smile, gap in the teeth. Years after I read my last Mad, my second wife left me for a guy that had that last attribute, and don't you know I let her know it. I called this guy "Alfred E. Fuckin' Neuman", and I told her that she'd never be happy with the prick. And, as I remember now, somehow, even that remark hadn't brought our Lyman Hall son to my mind.

The Mad collection was one of the few things that I had brought to school. Some albums, some clothes, a globe, and that big old musty pile of magazines. I had Mads going all the way back, back to when it was comic-book sized and a bit beatnik. I could pull out an old issue and items from the past would fall from the pages, dirt from summer days, crunubs from ancient lunches. My Mad magazine collection (kept current by subscription to Mr. Peter Ball, that was me) was the thing that got me in with the Lyman guys. Rudy had his pot, and Steve had the Playboys and the 16mm copy of "Barbarellia", and Carl had the little black book. And I had my old Mads.

3.

Anyone who has ever lived among young men, especially in a dormitory situation, knows how *savage* things can get. It was never a shocking revelation to see the same sandwich crust in the same corner for days on end. Piles of filthy socks and boxers, Twinkie wrappers, crisped pot nuggets, the stuff of long Fall nights away from home. (It helped that our R.A. had long since fallen under the spell of

Rudy's wacky taboos. There were no women allowed anywhere near Lyman Hall, and we knew it. We weren't out to impress anybody. We scratched ourselves and belched like Vikings. We went unshaven and we listened to Neil Young and that was okay by Lyman Hall. Those were the best bunch of guys I had ever met. Still are. All the friends I have now play racquetball and cheat on their wives. There is no honor among the sleazy, like there was at Lyman. There is no fun anymore, not like that.

There was only one bathroom on the hall, a heinous fact that all the girls we dated during those four years could not reconcile with their own housing circumstances. We shared one solid toilet, looked out the same small window onto the green that led to The Hill while we crapped, shaved into the same wheezy drainpipe (when we shaved.) Steve told me years later that he can't believe he EVER was comfortable with showering while one of the other brothers was taking a shit. (Steve's in Glendale, California, now. He sells old baseball cards to snottosed skateboard punks. What that has to do with Liberal Arts I can't even begin to imagine.)

I originally resisted when Rudy first tried to take one of my Mads into the can with him. These were "collector's items", I said, and they would be worth money some day. Alas, I also had long since become beholden to Rudy's little green friend, and it didn't take much convincing on Rudy's part for me to relent.

I guess I was already letting go.

"I won't wipe my ass with it, Pete. Don't you worry." That was what he had said. Rudy was my roommate for that last year, and God bless him. He rarely slept, farted zombie farts when he DID, and listened to prog rock, but I loved him.

Now, this became an epidemic. Whenever the felias were ready to "hold court" (you figure it out), they always came in to grab a Mad first. David Fenster, who got hit and killed by a ~~W~~⁸⁵Wolvo in Lexington back in '89, actually attempted to read them in order. The midterms that last year were piled on thick and heavy for the pre-meds, and he developed irritable bowel syndrome (known pre-nineties as "The Runs".) Needless to say, he made it through my whole collection almost twice before graduation.

By the fourth or fifth week of that last year, it was evident that my Mad collection was never gonna be auctioned off at Sotheby's. The ends of the pages were all darkened, the covers had gotten brittle and chipped. They smelled like hands and sweat and sandwiches. I wasn't too upset, though. I

don't think I ever would have been able to part with them anyway. If I had just held on to them after graduation, that is.

4.

I don't know when ^{that} my pile of Mad magazines came to life, exactly, but we were later able to figure out that it must have been over the Thanksgiving holiday. Most of us had gone home, and I had too. And while I was back in Bennington, Alfred became aware. He was still a pile of magazines when I dropped my duffle bag down on my bed after that long drive back, and none of us would really know about him for a day or two. But he was there already, and I should have noticed. There had been a soft murmur that night, like a little mumble, and Rudy and I had assumed that Kenny James (a small-claims lawyer, now, and still a horse's ass) had taken Rhonda Denny behind the dumpster again. But that wasn't it.

I first noticed the strange phenomenon one night while I was sitting on Rudy's bed and pretending to read "Beowulf". That murmur had come back, and I had been convinced that it was some sort of a ruptured drain pipe (or, very possibly, a huge, fat, and hungry Lyman Hall rat—HIPPEST rats on the Eastern Seaboard!) But, that night, a very strange throat finally cleared and spoke to me.

"Dad?", it said.

We were all young then, and we didn't really know what pot was capable of. You have to understand that the only reason I didn't run out of the room screaming was because I thought I was having some crazy "Yellow Submarine" hallucination.

"Dad?", again.

I looked at the pile of magazines. It had shifted towards me, a column of paper with some unknown musculature. I watched as, three quarters of the way up the pile, two of the magazines curved away from each other in the center to form crude lips.

"Dad, I'm hungry," it said. A pile of dirty Mad magazines was talking to me. I know, because of ^{that} ~~them~~.
And, for what may ~~have~~ have been the last time in my life, I listened.

5.

He didn't know his name, he didn't know where he was, he didn't know where he had been before this. He said that he had heard us calling from some place green and snowy, and that he had gone

towards this funny humming sound. As he talked, as I listened, those lips began to move more smoothly.

The voice was young, like a little boy.

"Dad, what's your name?" he said.

"I'm Pete. Those are my magazines you've got there," I said, not realizing yet that he didn't HAVE the magazines. He wasn't inside them, they weren't haunted. He WAS them.

"Dad," he said, "I really, really want to have some chicken noodle soup, 'cause it's cold and I feel strange."

"Strange?" I asked.

"I feel...like...I'm...flying," he said. I didn't understand then, and I still don't.

Any thought I had of keeping this whole thing a secret was shattered when Rudy burst in the room, stoned as Janis Joplin and more than ready to accept a naive, babbling pile of newsprint and staples. Rudy yelled like a house afire, exclaimed that this was groovy and these are the times to come and this is what we dreamers had wrought. Rudy was the guy who got Alfred (we named ~~him~~ ^{our son} Alfred, of course) stoned, Rudy was the guy who had tried to get Alfred laid, Rudy was the guy. But I was the dad. I always figured that it was my special affection for Mad Magazine that brought Alfred to us that winter, that and those trips to the bathroom with the Lyman boys.

It was no secret, of course, that more than just defecation and urination and Mad occurred in that one bathroom. I won't get graphic, but you have to remember that there is nothing more unstable sexually than a nineteen or twenty year old male. After screenings of "Barbarella", the line to the bathroom was sometimes longer than the lunch line on Pizza Thursday. We all knew what we were up to, we all went unafraid and unembarrassed. And, with the roommate situation, there was an unspoken agreement that no solitary under-the-cover mischief was allowed while the other person was home.

So, I suppose it could be said that Alfred sprang from that one bathroom at Lyman hall, the son of the Lyman boys and a million mothers. The son of Jane Fonda and Natalie Wood and Sophia Loren and Julie Christie and Raquel Welch and every amazing inch of Ann-Margret.

As those last months wore on, Alfred learned from us all. And not just knowledge, but the way to hold himself together in a humanoid shape. First, we noticed that the bottom half of the magazine stack had split into odd leg shapes. Then, arms. For a month, he waddled around boxy, like Robbie The Robot. He was doing so good.

Eric Liddy was the first to notice that the Alfred E. Neuman faces on all the covers (and the covers were constantly in circulation over that strange body) began to overtake the rest of the image. That is to say, a cover of Neuman as Warren Beatty from "Bonnie And Clyde" eventually just became a close-up shot of that leering, gap-toothed face. All the covers were like this, and it became apparent to us that this was part of Alfred's attempt to be like the Lyman Boys. This was his skin, see? By the end of things, even the Alfred E. Neuman features had faded, leaving leaves and leaves of skin-colored slick magazine cover flesh.

"Do I look right?" he asked one night as we all watched "Honeymooners" re-runs.

"Yeah, Alfred," Steve said, "You're lookin' good."

"I hope I look good, 'cause I wanna go outside soon." This was the main dilemma in those days, keeping Alfred a secret. He was our mascot and our friend, but even the generally hip student body wouldn't have understood. This meant smuggling him food (which he couldn't actually eat, but which he would bring to his "lips" and drop clumsily) and having somebody stay home in the days to be with him. This was not a major problem, as most guys were happy to skip class once every couple of weeks. These were the days that Rudy gave Alfred pot (just blowing the smoke in his face, not wanting to get fire close to those paper cheeks), and that David showed Alfred "Lawrence Of Arabia" (Dave said that Alfred gave the truest and biggest sigh of wonder when that desert first filled the small screen in the common room. It chokes me up thinking of that.)

John Clay taught Alfred poker and ping-pong. John Burgess showed him how to make us Beef Stroganoff (a bit selfish, if you ask me, and Alfred could never quite get it right.) And on the days when I had him, we just talked.

"Why didn't you go to Vietnam, Dad?" he asked me one of those times.

"I'm a student. You didn't have to go if you were a student."

"Is that WHY you're here, Dad?", he said as he played with a small pledge pin, sticking in clumsily through his paper chest.

"No, Alfred. Things are cool these days. At colleges everywhere, people are changing things. For the better."

"Better?", he said. Another new idea.

"Yeah. You don't know this, but things were pretty shitty a few years ago. Police were beating up kids, kids were dying for old white men who had no idea what was going on. We just said we weren't gonna take it anymore, not ever again." I really believed all this, you have to understand.

"Wow," Alfred whispered, "what an adventure. Like Lawrence Of Arabia. Just like that."

"Yeah, I guess," I said. Alfred always talked about things he wanted to do after college. Strange things learned from the movies, fantasy things. Bicycling through the Sudan, catching butterflies in the sun. We tried to teach him how things really were, but he just couldn't stop dreaming.

7.

Those Lyman days finally came to an end that May, and it was the saddest time of my life. Somewhere inside, the part of me that was growing up knew that it was a rough world out there. We may all get our own bathroom on our own, but I was already missing the rough arms of my Lyman brothers. After May, there was never gonna be another excuse again, no reason not to be on top of things every day. The free ride was coming to an end, for me and for America. Soon, we would all go forth on our bellies and learn how to give up proudly like men.

We had a meeting late in April, about Alfred. We told him to wait in mine and Rudy's room for a surprise, and the rest of us went down to the common room to talk.

"Okay, I guess I'm gonna have to be the one to bring this up," I said, trying to sound mature, "but what are we gonna do with Alfred when we leave?"

I could tell that some of the other fellas had thought of this same problem, but that was the first time any of us had said it out loud.

David was the first to speak. "One of us is gonna have to take him home," he said, but he looked at the shag carpet and I could tell that that person wasn't gonna be him.

"Well, I can't do it," Steve said, "I'm going back to Rochester, and my folks would never understand."

"Maybe we can just leave him here for the next bunch," Tony Morelli posited, "he IS the Lyman Hall mascot, anyway."

"No," I said, "You know that won't work. Nobody's gonna understand Alfred except us. Who knows what these new kids would do to him, He's gotta leave when we leave."

For fifteen minutes, the question bounced around the room. Nobody could take him, nobodies folks would be hip to it. I thought for a minute that Rudy might save the day, that maybe Rudy was gonna take ^{some} his old Mustang cross country and "find America", and maybe show Alfred Mardi Gras, but it wasn't to be. Rudy was just gonna go home and work at his dad's hardware store until he could find a job in Manhattan. (I talked to Rudy just a few weeks ago. We didn't mention Alfred, or even Lyman Hall. We just talked about the Clinton thing, and about how we both missed smoking pot, and maybe we could get together on Cape Cod next summer, and all that stuff you talk about when you're too ashamed to admit to each other that you've lost something precious inside.)

I hate to admit it, but it all came down to me. Everybody knew that Alfred called me "dad", everybody knew that my just bringing up the subject of Alfred's placement wasn't enough. If I couldn't take him, nobody was gonna take him. And when it came down to it, mine was the lamest excuse of all.

"I can't take him," I said, "My dog would be jealous."

This is how decisions are made. This is where those repercussions come from, years down the line. These are the moments you wish you could change. But there are no do-overs, at least not since 1973.

When Rudy and I went back up to the room, we brought ^{a ringed} something to stand in for the fictitious "surprise" that we had promised Alfred. I'll never forget how he looked when we opened the door, as fidgety and nervous as a real person. Hopping up and down on Rudy's bed, shaking with excitement.

"Here you go, kid," Rudy said, and slipped an LP from under his arm. It was a recording of the score for "Lawrence Of Arabia", that great desert hero music.

"WOW, OH WOW!!", Alfred said as he shot up like a rocket. "This is the very best! This is the very finest!"

Alfred clumsily made his way over to the record player in my corner of the room and slapped the disc down. His feet were still little more than two rolled up monthlies, but he was making great progress. The great Maurice Jarre music filled that small dorm, the room I still miss and sometimes dream I'm sleeping in, and I'll be damned if Rudy and I didn't have to turn our faces away from Alfred to hide our shameful tears.

"Oh, this is GROOVY!!", Alfred blurted out as he spun around and around, "I feel like I'm STONED! I feel like I ate PIZZA! I feel like I'm ~~listening~~ ^{A feeling up} ANN-MARGRET! This is just like a STONES concert!". He just kept regurgitating these things, these things he'd heard from the Lyman boys. Things we loved, ^{desires} ~~things~~ he wanted so badly to experience himself.

"So, Al," Rudy said, and thank God for that, 'cause my voice would have come out all wet and cracked, "When you are you gonna get to a Stones concert? I hear they have this huge inflatable prick on stage."

"Have YOU ever seen the Stones, Rudy?", he asked. The "Lawrence" theme swelled.

"Yeah, baby, yeah. Ditched my folks and hitchhiked to Schenectady. Fun times. Got high, got laid. Mick and the boys did "Angie" for the first time that night."

"HOLY COW!", he said, "it must be RIGHTEOUS to ditch your folks and see the Stones!"

I thought then that maybe Alfred had bought it. I thought that maybe Rudy had planted the seeds of some strange kind of adolescent rebellion in Alfred's head. That's it, Alfred, ditch those boring old Lyman guys, hit the highway, get laid, get going.

Didn't work that way.

8.

Finals were okay that last year. Nobody sweated, nobody went crazy. We all felt like it was winding down, like there was no way for us to screw our futures up anymore. Alfred started to get a sense that things were ending, too, I think. He kept asking the fellas to repeat old stories that they had told him, to see the same old movies.

He wanted to come to graduation, but we told him (of course) that it wasn't time yet. That was the only time that Alfred stayed home all day by himself, and I came back to our room to find that he had cleaned up and alphabetized all my stuff. Like I was staying, like we were gonna have another

stoned summer.

That last night was the hardest night any of us ever lived through, harder even (I'm sure) than Dave's last night hooked to the respirator after the Volvo flattened him. We all had decided to close our doors on Alfred, we all had decided that that was for the best. We left him down in the common room watching t.v., and we all went up and finished packing and saying our mature good-byes.

*had stomped
his small
intestines
chest
and cradled
his jaw
apart.*

At about 11:30, Alfred wandered up the stairs and began to knock on doors. He was just a kid, but he picked up on this thing eventually. I could hear his voice down the hall, I could hear him asking Steve "what was happenin, man?", and I could hear Steve's muffled response. Nothing, Alfred, just packing now and really busy.

The same from David and Tony and Carl and the rest. Alfred wasn't the type to realize this massive betrayal was happening. He just kept knocking, wondering why everybody was being so boring. "Oh, you guys," he laughed softly time and again. "SOMEBODY must wanna hang out!"

Rudy had packed up all his sad stuff, and that's good. He had put away "The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan", which has "Bob Dylan's Dream" on it. That's a song about Dylan dreaming about old times and friends, long gone. It's the saddest damn song I've ever heard, and even before college I knew that one day it would just kill me. I've only heard that song once or twice since then, and I have to fight to keep the sound of Alfred's soft knocking out of my head as I cry like a motherless child.

We were listening to "Tommy". Pete Townshend was singing "Got a feelin' twenty-one's / gonna be a good year / maybe for you and me / but not for him / no never." The song is about Tommy's mom and her lover plotting Tommy's dad's death, but that rock opera coulda been about Lyman Hall for what my soul was crying that night.

Like a victim.

The knock came.

"Dad?", those paper lungs exhaled, "Why is everybody being so weird?"

It was so hard. "We're just packing, Alfred. We're busy. You should start packing, too," Rudy said.

"Packing what?" Alfred asked.

"Any shit you wanna take, to remember us all by. You know, right, Al?" Rudy was turned away from me.

"Dad? Let's go watch 'Barbarella' again, Dad. I wanna take that to remember."

I hadn't said anything yet. I never had a child, and I'm sure that night was the reason why. I betrayed our son, I let him go, I left my soul there on the floor of that dorm room. It flopped around in front of me, and it died slow. *exposed to the real world, wanting to be back into my chest.*

"ALFRED, YOU GOTTA GO!", I finally said. The words tore my insides like hot smoke ripping up my throat.

"...why, Dad?", he squeaked. I could tell that he was getting the picture. I could tell that he had been waiting for my ~~input~~ *decision*.

I thought about that, though. Why? What good was all of this *revolution talk* if we were just gonna go home and work for our dads and eat our mom's food again and marry Mary Jane or Betty and drive a station wagon? Why go home? The last years, for all of us, had been an exploration, an anthology of possibilities. We knew we could make that world real, that world of flower power and free love and peace and music and all that stuff that makes the kids laugh and snicker today. It was closer to us, that Nirvana, than it ever was for any other poor shmuck who ever walked the Earth. But we finally agreed that it was just too dangerous, too chancy, and we really kinda liked those station wagons. They were safe, and they were reliable.

I almost reached for that doorknob, though. I almost let Alfred in. And if he'd come in, if I'd held him, I never would have let go. The two of us would have bounced around this world together until we died. If, that is, death had ever ~~waited~~ *bothered* to come knocking. Anchorage, Alaska. Memphis, Tennessee. Wherever we wanted. That life I passed up that night, that life of fantasy and sci-fi possibility—I like to think it really happened, in some other universe. Some plane of reality where Lyman Hall still burns with the lights of my boys, till all hours of the night. Some world where Alfred and I led the way towards that

world we had all caught a glimpse of in those last years of the big rebellion, that world that is now as ridiculous as Shangri-La or Oz.

"Because," I said finally, "it's time to go." Those were the last words I ever said to Alfred, my beautiful son, that crazy conceit, a pile of pop culture with an untarnished soul. I sounded like my father, repeating the old reasons, not thinking of immortality at all.

He didn't knock again, and Rudy turned The Who up loud as we both finished packing. Later, we all gathered in the lobby window after David told us that he had heard the front door slam. It was a rainy night, strange for May. We could see wet pieces of newsprint on the wet concrete outside, footprint shape.

In the distance, at the base of The Hill, we could see Alfred leaving. The wind and the rain were whipping at him. He had a small sack over his arm, but nobody ever figured out what he took with him. Nobody went home missing anything, to my understanding.

As he walked up the hill, out of our lives and away from that great version of Pennsylvania that's never gonna come back, he looked like ^{afraid, sincere} the painting that Norman Rockwell never got to finish. "Paper Boy Leaving In The Rain," or "Going Home." Except he wasn't going home at all.

He didn't look back at us. He spared us that. He struggled against the elements, shaking and fluttering pages of his body as he crept up The Hill. Up The Hill, through the rain, and out of sight. I think we all stopped believing in him the minute we could no longer see him. ² He stopped making sense.

9.

I never saw Alfred or anything like him again. I went home to Bennington, and I worked for a while at one of the big supermarkets, and then I moved out to L.A. ^{and} I got a job with a housing inspection company. Needless to say, this is not what ^{Andy's body and for myself} I envisioned ^{as} a little boy. But I guess I get by.

Eddie Jones, who loved Philly Cheesesteak sandwiches, had been coming back to Lyman that last night just after Alfred left. Cutting through the rain with those hot foil wrapped sandwiches, he said he saw this strange pulpy thing through his rainy windshield, standing at the top of the hill. And he thought he heard a kind of gurgly sobbing just before the thing collapsed into one of the rain gutters by the main student parking lot. He had asked what it might have been, but I think he knew.

Me, I choose to think that it wasn't Alfred that Eddie saw. I choose to think, I NEED to think on nights like this, that Alfred made it. Sometimes I get postcards, strange ones, blank ones, from odd places I've never been. From the American frontier. From North Bend, Washington. From Colorado Springs. Someday, if I get one from Arabia, I'll know who's sending them.

One time, last year, I was driving down the 405 and I spotted someone up in the window of one of those office high rises that creep closer and closer to the freeway every year. It was just for a second, just for a flash. But I thought it was him, my beautiful 20th century son, waving at me. In a suit, in an office, from a board meeting. Staring out at the L.A. sunset, catching me in the corner of his pupy paper eye. Drinking Starbucks coffee and wolfing down a Krispy Kreme donut.

But then I thought, nah. There's no way Alfred would have sold out like that, is there? There must be SOMEBODY out there who still believes in all those crazy dreams, and on nights when my soul lifts me out of my cold bed I wish I were with him.

↓
Maybe his stay on Hunt Thompson
ranch or long in Malibu w/ whatever is
left of Bruce Shek.