

The Summer Of My Beautiful Idiocy

by John Olson

In the summer of '68 my father persuaded me to go visit my grandparents on their farm in North Dakota. I had long hair and dressed like a French symbolist outlaw. Took the train to Minot, spent the night in a hotel (watching *Your Cheatin' Heart*, movie about Hank Williams starring George Hamilton, in the hotel lobby with a few other guests) & reading Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. Next day I caught a bus to Bottineau, near the Manitoba border. The bus stopped for gas in a tiny town and two policemen got on. They walked to my seat (I was reading *An Anthology of French Poetry from Nerval to Valery in English Translation*) and asked to see my ID. I dug out my driver's license. They gave it a look, and asked where I was going. My grandparent's farm, I told them, near Bottineau. They deemed me innocent — though of what crime I have no idea — and left me in peace. It must've been the driver that alerted them. He probably thought he had an extraterrestrial on his bus.

The intent to get me on the train to visit my grandparents in North Dakota was, I believe, to get me grounded in the practicalities of life by reacquainting me with the harsh realities one experiences on a small farm. There were values critical to life on a farm — hard work, clean living and self-reliance — that had to be assimilated for sheer survival. Good values (I was neither mocking nor spurning those qualities), but the hope was that the austerities of farm life might dissolve the residual effects of all the psychedelics I'd been taking that had left me somewhat confused and anxious. Or maybe there was a hope that the smell of dirt and manure and the crudities endemic to farm life might, by osmosis, cut through the otherworldliness deposited by hallucinogenic substance and allow me to flow back onto the shores of Protestant respectability. The

hope was that I would come down from the moon, my feet would touch ground, and I would better adapt to the rigors of life. I would don the mantle of adult responsibility and dispense with this Peter Pan complex of quixotic exploration into the mysteries of human consciousness.

It was kind of my parents and grandparents to take this course of action for me, they were loving people and genuinely worried, but I don't think I could explain to them how deep my rebelliousness and intractability to the modern industrial world had taken root in me. I took Blake's poem "Jerusalem" very much to heart: "And did the Countenance Divine, / Shine forth upon our clouded hills? /And was Jerusalem builded here, /Among these dark Satanic Mills?"

Hard work, clean living and self-reliance were all very fine, but I'd had it with the dark Satanic mills. I was about to turn 21. The course of my life had been set. LSD or no LSD, I was far more drawn by the visions of Baudelaire and Blake than the settled wisdom of Frost or Sandburg.

My grandparents were then in their eighties, and it's a testament to their way of life that they continued to live independently that long, continuing to do the necessary chores and pursue their favorite pastimes, fishing and visiting friends. They still had a few dairy cows to attend to, milked and fed and groomed. I spent a lot of time wandering the prairie with this small, insouciant herd, carrying a transistor radio and yearning — à la *The Sorrows Of Young Werther* — for Berenice Moustaka, a statuesque, lusciously proportioned young woman back in the Bay Area with whom I'd been spending some time but had not yet coaxed into deeper intimacies. The cows mostly ignored me, but whenever Steppenwolf's "Born To Be Wild" came on, these otherwise cud-chewing indifferent animals seemed to take a greater interest in me and follow me around. As soon as another song came on — "Classical Gas" or "Harper Valley P.T.A." — the cows lost interest and went back to grazing.

I returned home to Seattle more anxious than ever to get into the swing of things. Happily, my two stepbrothers invited me along to a

party to be held in the foothills of the Cascades. It was a warm summer and everyone wandered around naked in a forested, idyllic setting with a small lake and a house supplied with all the conveniences of home. It was astonishing how natural it felt to walk around naked. Nearly everyone was high on acid. I hung out with a Welsh weightlifter named Bedwyr Hughes. He was one of the few who didn't get naked. He was there with his girlfriend, a jeweler from Sedona, Arizona named Rowena O'Byrne. We sat in his van and had wonderful conversations about metaphysics and Swedenborg and William Blake. His brain liked lifting weights as well, so it seemed.

An old high school buddy of mine was at the party (he'd become friends with my two stepbrothers) and he told me there was a young woman there who was horny. This made me a little skeptical but I was pretty horny too. He pointed her out and as the day progressed and I got to know her a little she announced that she wanted to go for a walk and explore the surrounding countryside. There was a swamp nearby and that's where she decided to go. I followed, my feet sinking into mud as I traipsed behind, feeling utterly ridiculous and primal. I waited for a clear signal. I intensely dislike imposing myself on women, unless I'm drunk, and I wasn't drunk. I was just muddy. It became increasingly and disappointingly apparent that this young woman wasn't that horny or — if she was horny — she wasn't into me. I returned to the grounds back at the house as the young woman disappeared into the woods. Maybe she met the satyr of her dreams in there. Or turned into a tree, à la Ovid's Daphne.

