

Confessions of an Actual Mad Man

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From 1960 through 1966, I worked in corporate and agency advertising, in Cincinnati with Procter & Gamble, as an advertising copy supervisor, and on Madison Avenue with Young & Rubicam, as an account executive. Both times, I pushed major brands, like Cheer and Maxwell House. I was in what was called the “big time.” Watching the TV series *Mad Men*, set in the same period, I realized with the shock of a Red Bull that during those days, I bore more than a passing resemblance to that show’s protagonist, Don Draper, a deeply flawed man, and that I worked for and with the avatars of Don’s cast. One large difference: I was not a fictional fraud who’d stolen a dead comrade’s dog-tags to forge a dual identity. No, I was, because I chose advertising in one life, where I posited lies that masqueraded as truths. In the other, I lived in a palpable world of gray shadings.

Of course in the Ad World nothing is gray: All our messages were stark and obvious as embellished truths, prettified lies. The kind Don Draper is good at, as was I. Thus, every actual or fictional advertising man’s heart knows that nearly all human activities involve deception. Ask any relationship counselor. The advertising man also knows that while all humans live double lives to varying

extents, Ad Men live such lives for a living. How else to persuade the prototypical marketing target we called “Mrs. Housewife” into buying our goods? We learned in the 1960s through the then-relatively new science of “market research” that men bought stocks and bonds, automobiles, tobacco, alcohol, electronics, gadgets, and hardware. Women bought almost everything else. Little has changed since my *Mad Men* days. Males are hard targets. Women are soft targets. At Procter & Gamble, we crafted appeals based on “end benefit,” how the products will help Mrs. Housewife’s life. At Y&R, we sold the glorified *image* of the end benefit. In both cases, we were pushing product. You watch these strategies not only in *Mad Men* but also in the contemporary version of these house-of-mirrors lives, the scripted, edited lies of Reality TV. It’s “real,” even the movie-TV product placements aimed at the average Mr. Consumer and Mrs. Housewife. The scripts of *Mad Men* document the disconnect between both the advertising life and actual life. Take, for instance, the references to the Vietnam War and JFK’s assassination. At P&G, I was a reserve Army officer apprehensive about a jungle deployment. When JFK was killed, I quit and went to Spain to write a novel.

My later experience with Y&R—you can’t live on bad novels—involved other escapes prominent in *Mad Men*—cigarette and pot smoking—also practiced at P&G. But these vices were as different as the geography and cultural quirks of my two different employers. Procter and Gamble, ensconced in staid Germanic, Ohio, then had offices in a white building that looked like a bar of Ivory Soap stood on end. P&G managers frowned, even in the early ‘60s, on smoking anything, except in restrooms, cars and bars, or at home. We drove to work, parking in a company lot. We began our suit-and-tie careers in brand management working in “bull pen” cubicles, writing label copy, learning media buying and test marketing and studying retail sales. “The most important three feet in the world is that counter

between you and your buyer," we were taught. We drafted slogans and jingles to try out on the ad agencies we'd hired. My last boss there, a lanky polymath named Richardson McKinney, was fastidious about all such obligations, including my Army Reserve tours. He didn't like rude talk or sexual innuendo. He insisted on decorum. That day JFK was assassinated, we rushed to a TV screening room where minutes before we'd judged a new Tide commercial. Many cried. Others smiled. Richardson proclaimed that there would be another charismatic president in our time.

I don't know what they did at Young & Rubicam that November 22, 1963, but I do know on Manhattan's decidedly unstaidd Mad Ave., the cultural ambience shifted in times of high stress. The command was, man your battle stations, a maxim shared by all, including the all-female steno pool that worked in bull pens. To combat stress, all of us smoked tobacco and the occasional doobie, just as Don Draper and his cohorts smoke the brand of their most important client—Lucky Strike—incessantly. Marijuana was a subtext and sometimes the text. My boss at Y&R, Joe Bracken—a generous, knotty, intelligent man—bore no resemblance except as a smoker to the sleazily suave, neurotic, philandering Roger Sterling of the TV show. Joe's boss, Jim Makrianis, smoked Cuban cigars in the office, a protest against the U.S. embargo, he claimed. This subterfuge annoyed our go-to department office manager, Helen McGrenra, a diminutive Irish woman of indomitable integrity, who frowned when "her boys" came reeling in from a three-margarita lunch or worse, she divined, tumbled off the commuter train at Grand Central Station after a morning's club-car beverages (in the TV show, the character Pete Campbell repeatedly tries "booking pussy" on the long commute from Westchester County). This was not uncommon, I confess. Anyway, Helen fended off inconvenient inquiries from spouses or lovers, and made excuses for us to beseeching colleagues in Media or Copy

or Accounting. In that, she was like the protective, brutally frank Joan of TV-land. But Joan in the show is paradoxically vulnerable, sexy, and brassy. She drinks and does a mean conga line and, in matters of the bedroom, is easily damaged. She presides over the office's operations with a Goddess-like authority that cows all but the toughest mad men and women. Mrs. McGrenra was not this person, at least not that we ever saw, although she benevolently supervised the liquor-laden, we-can't-take-it-anymore office celebrations. Like Joan, she was efficient. We should have followed her example, had we not been so often, as she said, "addled with drink."

Heavy drinking for 1960s Madison Avenue men, as for Don Draper and his crew, constituted a cultural must, just as it was at P&G. I didn't know a single teetotaler at either place. There was a handful of secret office drinkers at P&G, but lunches in Cincinnati, if we weren't meeting one or more deadlines with Lutheran supervisors, often turned bilious. In both workplaces, after-work was given to war stories and boozing. Our private lives, unlike Don Draper's, lay mostly cloaked. We had to learn to lead fake lives so we could sell real things using fake promises.

The P&G group drank with the same determination and competition that drove their careers. Such determination was so required that I was chastised early on by a fellow staff assistant for not "aggressing." That is, I was not walking purposefully enough from office to office. In Cincinnati, some aided such hustling with "nose drops," i.e. speed. At Y&R, speed and LSD came into play for the hard-core, but alcohol remained the favorite. My comrade account executive, Jay McNamara (whose brother rose from New York beat cop to become a novelist and law enforcement guru), advised me always to carry a file folder so as to look productive and sober. Jay, though, could be a dedicated Irish-style drinker. Once caught up in a marital mess, he walked through his front door late one evening, disheveled,

to be hit on the head with a loaded door-top bucket, just like in a TV sitcom.

Prominent in the story line of Don Draper's ad agency are affairs, monetary and sexual. The business affairs of our competition buzzed in my life, just as in Don's. What was BBD&O up to? What about Leo Burnett? Ogilvy? J. Walter Thompson? Saatchi and Saatchi? And so on. Firings for cause and spurious accusation (e.g. poaching someone's account) were common in both Ohio and New York. Tales of fired ad guys, as we said, "on the beach," a reference to the then-popular apocalyptic novel by Nevil Shute, ran rampant down Mad Ave. The man who hired me at Y&R was glimpsed a few weeks later in his Brooks Brothers suit and Burberry trench coat, trudging from agency to agency with his resume. One of my colleagues at a drunken lunch reported that "his [my former boss'] ragged cuffs were dragging." We all laughed and looked over our shoulders. Nothing, though, approached the fate of the *Mad Men* character Lane's suicide. Our suicides were alone and secret via alcohol and a soul-suffocating dedication to business, to doing our jobs, to ignoring their portents.

At Y&R, when I failed as a member of a new-business pitch to land the Canadian Pacific Railroad, we shook not stirred our martinis, recounting how our copy chief (later the agency's president) had rebutted the would-be client's objection that air travel was ruining rail travel with a brilliant print ad showing a train approaching a tunnel, an airplane approaching its mountain, and the headline: *When A Train Goes Into a Mountain, It Comes Out the Other Side*. Better to lose, if we had to, with wit and grace, we agreed. Our bosses didn't, but we kept our jobs and lived to pitch another day, to another prospect. At an ad agency like Y&R, the client ultimately had to be right, no matter how wrong. At P&G, of course, we were the client, so we could hire and fire agencies at will but only with proper corporate decorum.

The mythology of high-octane, advertising-world sex affairs thrives in Don Draper's NYC, hence the show's high ratings. In real-life Cincinnati, we took such matters slightly more seriously; an affair was managed with circumspection and as much dignity as possible, meaning "hide it." In Manhattan, though, affairs were open secrets. I didn't know many not having a sexual affair, including the few women at the agency. Peggy of *Mad Men*, with her scattered existential life and out-of-wedlock child, does not much resemble the ambitious females of my experience.

In both my ad venues, the crass word of males was that women put out for superiors but tell on inferiors. Not entirely true. One of my bosses had an affair with the daughter of the chairman of the United States Lawn Tennis Association—conducted, I hoped, in court whites. Later the lady told her father, and we waved goodbye to the man with a hearty "good luck" and a brow-mop. In the TV world, Don Draper's marriage dissolves. He takes up with the Frenchified character Megan, never revealing his true identity; in that era's ad parlance, this was "whore trading."

My own transgressions, small steps that I lengthened on Mad Ave. in the win-win ethos, led infidelity by infidelity to festering marital woes. The first shameful Big Apple sin was with a colleague's wife, who bore an emotional wobbliness similar to Don Draper's "now" ex-wife Betty. She had a taste for LSD and Manhattan literary life. The second was with the fractious Mrs. Housewife of an account exec at McCann & Erickson. He spied us *in flagrante* by climbing up a tree—no mean feat, he had a stunted arm—which arched near the bedroom window of my carriage house in Westchester County, ironically rented from the "father" of market research and focus groups, Ernst Dichter.

Sex, as we know, suffused the innuendo-rich movies of the 1930–1960s. Following suit, we marketing men specialized in supplying double entendre, knowing that selling sex is a prime function of real life and hence

advertising. Therefore, when my colleagues and I scripted sexual fantasies for our customers—automobiles, cosmetics, even clean white shirts, new drugs, and good coffee over a breakfast charged with longing-spouse looks—we in the biz thought for the most part that, although we were supplying unconscious needs, we lived apparently normal lives. We put the kids to bed, confident in White Parental Superiority after we made them say prayers. Then we had drinks and made love in the missionary position. And by God, the ad-brain said, we could make post-coitus even more real and desirable with a little more schmaltz, more suggestive situations, and an insidious slogan-cum-jingle. We didn't much consider that double or even treble-lives make for exponential angst.

Don Draper's tangled sexual life demonstrates these facts, of course, with great verisimilitude, including orgasmic moans. Every bed, hat, tie, chair and ash tray is accurate for the time in which it is, as are the ironies. Don Draper was in a war, we know (Korea, it seems), and leads a double life as Don (the assumed identity) and Dick (his true self). Each has a family at opposite ends of his spectrum, geographically and financially. Yet, unlike most of us, he bears it all well, aided by booze and guilt. There also lurk in the TV scripts hints of the pill, the geopolitical unrest, but they are subordinate to the melodramas of the office—oh, my, how will all this affect our business, our bonuses, our prospects? The scripted life emphasizes relations with big accounts, dubious parenting (I was seldom home before 9 p.m.) accounting irregularities, and the usual vices of pride, envy, sloth, greed, gluttony, lust, plus being just plain pissy/angry. Conspicuously muted are we-should-do-something references to the Bay of Pigs, Sputnik, nefarious political troubles and assassinations (JFK, MLK, RFK, Malcolm X) and civil-rights struggles (Selma, Montgomery, Freedom Summer, and so on). Then as now, the TV series shows life as a matter of personal ascendancy and material gain,

everyone hoping his or her existence is divinely inclined onward and upward to The American Dream—Realized. Or the opposite, as it is often enough in American lives, fictional and actual.

It's odd, then, that *Mad Men* exhibits only veiled contempt for the American consumer. It is manifest in sly asides, like "They don't know what they want until we tell them." Above all, ad men don't want the sponsors to offend their audience. Nevertheless, in my advertising life, we knew absolutely that nobody ever went broke betting on the stupidity of the American people. Slogans or "selling points" could fool all of the customers all of the time, and so the aptly named "soap operas," a staple of P&G media buys. "Cheer washes so white you can see the difference," we wrote, putting shirts washed in flourescers under flourescent light so the white would shine. Sales soared, as they did for "Winston tastes good like a cigarette should." "Coors brewed with Rocky Mountain spring water." "I dreamed I went to the prom in my Maiden Form bra." "Puffery" we called it, a law-suit-proof boast of product superiority for Cheer or Winstons or a Chevy or a Denver-based beer or uplifting underwear could give you the happiness our Founding Fathers wanted you to pursue (John Locke, the Deist, upon whose work much of the 18th-century enlightenment was based, had it "the pursuit of property"). The bedrock truth was that if Mrs. Housewife (and her Dagwoodish husband) could be sold, then I could be rich, and they could fend for themselves.

Today, the eternal hucksters are full-bore out with miracle drugs (don't take them if any of the rare side-effects should occur, like constipation or diarrhea, a rash or death). There are smart electronics that can monitor every move and deluge you with messages about "home cooked meals" you don't have to prepare, robots to vacuum your floors, self-help for the helpless, and all of this, as it was in my Ad Age, are tricked up vermiforms of snake-oil. In fact, if you

are too dumb to pick out the music you want, there's an app for that. Nirvana, indeed. Granted, today there are many more TV channels than the three or so in the '60s, when the world was narrow and there was a larger middle class to be conned. Now we have a vast TV market, to be collected and culled with bigger and louder commercials enhanced by photo-shopped, computer-generated images, and digital videos, radios, billboards, bloggers, and assorted jackasses who make Father Coughlin's racist rants of the 1930s seem like—do you remember?—pabulum. Oh, and now it's breast-milk ice cream

I left my P&G advertising days in 1964, sickened and dispirited by the assassination of JFK. I went to Spain to write that bad novel, accompanied by my wife and toddler son. I returned to the Young & Rubicam job later that year for the money and satisfaction I thought awaited me on Madison Avenue. For a time, it sufficed. In late 1966, I earned today's equivalent of \$130,000. Life was so good I despaired of it. I took on love affairs, drank too much and eventually went to my boss Joe Bracken, saying I couldn't take it anymore. He said the door would be open for four years.

I didn't walk back in that door. Instead, I took my young family and went to the only graduate school that would accept me, where I learned there were real mad men who had a lot to say about the human condition. When I received my Ph.D., I gladly took a teaching job paying \$10,000 a year. I endured and so far have survived the brave new world of instant communication and gratification. Today, without compunction, I can surf the Internet and find any irrelevant fact I want. I can stream video and satellite radio. I can access Facebook, YouTube, Twitter. I can find boorish mugwumps and nativists with online advanced degrees, who opine and bluster and think Hitler was a philosopher. I live in a world where "middle-class" is an irrelevant adjective/noun. I live in a world where

despite our nanosecond access to information, despite our hundreds of cable channels and electronic miracles, we are no less susceptible to sales pitches than we were fifty years ago. Contrived macho sex still sells cars. Wrinkles can be lotioned away; erectile dysfunction is easily curable; and plastic surgery, once reserved for the faces paraded on celebrity outlets, is now available at a corner clinic. So, too is medical marijuana. Oh, how happy Peggy and Joan and Betty and Megan and Don/Dick and Roger would be!

For all that, I remain a Mr. Consumer, prey to slick commercials and product placements. Sometimes, in dreams, I revisit the 1960s and then harbor dreams of later times, of helos on a Saigon roof and Nixon waving and sad Gerald Ford and sappy Jimmy Carter and hollow Ronald Reagan and doughty George H. W. and Bill Clinton (who also couldn't avoid office affairs) and George W. and the perpetual state of wars, disasters, famine, plague, and then I'm with Barack, so gentlemanly, so smooth, so well marketed.

In these fugue flights, despite myself, I struggle to escape by imagining the long-ago Ivory Snow babies and Andy Griffith's and Mary Tyler Moore's faux lives (sponsored by semi-true ads) and walking to school and bedtime stories, and families eating dinners together back when I was single-lived. Then I awaken, turn on the light, and the cable box, which reminds me to avoid fats, starch and sugar except when eating, and I rise to read and write what passes for thinking. Wide awake and ready for the day, I dress in sweats, forgetting suits and long, narrow ties, although, I often look back at my advertising days with a mixture of nostalgia and ironic satisfaction, knowing that in the end I decided I had only one real false-life to lead. That teaching literature is teaching news that stays news, conveying falsities that are true. My ad-days wife and I divorced after forty-seven off-and-on years, though we occasionally share memories of that time. I remarried

a woman who knows what I mean when I ask, "Do you remember?" I take memories of my mad man days with me when I go into the double life of literature. Afterward, I go home where my current wife and I make love a lot, read more than we should, and where I write stories that I hope inspire slick "infomercials" and "come ons" for focus groups, print and TV ads, or soap-package or coffee labels.

But even tinctured as I am by the news that isn't news, I still watch TV, especially *Mad Men*. I'm now particularly moved by the toilet paper commercials. They instruct us that the world should be not too rough or too soft, to bear with it, squeeze it to test its worth, and be gentle with your ass.