

5 **All my life**, I have wanted to stop time. I see almost no value in the future, and I suspect that virtually every technological advance since the advent of the gramophone has been -- on balance -- detrimental to the human race. Our slow erosion of authentic consciousness will never stop, and there is nothing we can do about it.

10 This, of course, is merely my opinion, solely based on anecdotal evidence.

As such, it's possible that my opinion is wrong. And I certainly hope that is the case, because if I have learned only one thing from existence, it is (probably) this: It is more lucrative to write about why things are good than about why things are bad, 15 chiefly because the former is so much more complicated than the latter. Moreover, I cannot deny my irretrievable enslavement to the very elements of modernity that I bemoan; for the purposes of my own psychological security, it would be nice to believe that "progress" is actually progress, even though it (usually) is not.

20 This is a story about slowly flying to Tulsa and not seeing a car.

Getting There

25 In June of 1957, the community of Tulsa buried a Plymouth Belvedere in a downtown concrete bunker beneath the Oklahoma topsoil. The car would act as the public vortex for a time capsule that would be unearthed five decades later. It would also be the grand prize in a stridently futuristic contest: During the summer of its entombment, various local citizens were given the opportunity to guess what the population of Tulsa would be in 2007. Whoever was closest (and was, presumably, 30 still alive) would win the (now classic) car, along with several gallons of gasoline and oil. It appears that people in 1957 weren't positive that gas and oil would still be in use half a century later. This is how optimistic Americans used to be: We used to imagine that cars of the future would probably run on uranium, potato peels, and distilled water.

35 It was this optimism that drew me to Tulsa. The motive behind any time capsule is inherently positive -- at worst, it suggests some kind of (non-robot-dominated) future will, at least, exist. Cynics don't bury cars in the ground. The excavation was scheduled for June 15 of this year; it was the linchpin for an event unironically titled 40 Tulsarama! I left for Tulsa on June 14. Unfortunately, I elected to travel via Northwest Airlines, an organization whose incompetence would be best described as Ruthian.

The problems start immediately: My plane out of LaGuardia airport sits motionless for almost an hour, causing me to miss a connecting flight in Detroit. The airline redirects me to Minneapolis, but that flight is also delayed; when I do arrive in
5 Minnesota, I miss another connection and find myself forced to stay overnight. I return to the airport the following morning for a 5:58 a.m. flight (to Memphis!), but the plane doesn't take off until 7:40 a.m. No explanation is given. This causes me to miss another connection, so I sit in the Memphis airport for four hours. My eventual flight to Tulsa is also late. I miss the excavation entirely. That fucking car was in the
10 ground for fifty fucking years, and I still couldn't get there on time. It's too bad the 9/11 terrorists did not patronize Northwest Airlines; they undoubtedly would have been stranded in Logan airport until they all collectively renounced Islam.

When I finally arrive in Tulsa, the city is abuzz over Tulsarama!, at least judging from
15 the front page of the Tulsa World. Almost every hotel is filled to capacity. However, there's now a shared grimness regarding the condition of the Plymouth Belvedere: Several feet of water seeped into the vault, coating the vehicle in rust and grime. They remove it from its watery tomb, but there is no possible way the engine will turn over. Still, people are trying to stay positive. "This is nobody's fault," a seventy-
20 three-year-old man named Jim Sosebee tells me as we share a cab ride downtown. Now living in Texas, Sosebee had been an Oklahoma marine when he attended the car's funeral in 1957. "Back in those days, nobody knew nothing about waterproofing a concrete vault."

25 I assume this man knows what he's talking about, but I'm still a little surprised by this revelation. Waterproofing a concrete vault seems exactly like something people would have understood fifty years ago.

Being There

30 Having missed everything except Saturday night's Tulsarama! Sock-Hop (Fabian, Bobby Vee, and the Chiffons are scheduled to perform), I decide to find a bar and drink until my situation improves. This turns out to be harder than one might anticipate; taverns don't seem to exist here. I have lived in some of the least
35 exhilarating cities in America, but Tulsa is almost like urban sarcasm. Tulsa makes Akron seem like Las Vegas. It's Friday night, but every downtown street is a reenactment of the opening ten minutes of 28 Days Later. All the avenues have names like Denver and Detroit and Cincinnati, as if those cities were theoretical, unattainable utopias. The townsfolk are incredibly nice, but the emptiness is
40 relentless (and kind of terrifying). I can't fathom what things are like here when they're not having a festival. After forty-five minutes of meandering, I finally find a restaurant called Tsunami Sushi, just up the street from a dive bar called Dirty's and another called 1974. There is a superthin kid outside the sushi restaurant wearing an apron and smoking a
45 cigarette. His name is Eli, he's nineteen (bearded and laid-back), and he's on break

from his job as a cook. We talk a little about the '57 Belvedere and the town that buried it.

"I hate Tulsa, but only because I live here," says Eli -- the kind of sentiment anyone
5 who comes from anywhere can instantly understand. "Still, there are some good things about living here. I love working at Tsunami's, for example. The people who work here are hella cool. And Tulsa has some awesome underground tunnels. Huge, train-sized tunnels. They're amazing."

10 I don't know what this means, so I ask him how he views the future. I ask him what he thinks the world will be like in 2057.

"I'm pretty pessimistic," he says. "The way America spends its money, the way we are hated around the world . . . I don't know if there will ever be an all-out war, but
15 people are walking around angry."

I ask him when (or how) America went wrong; curiously he says, "Disco."
Considering that this kid was born eleven years after the release of Saturday Night
20 Fever, I find his thesis intriguing. "It was terrible music," he explains. "And it was all flash. It was just something to make stupid people happy. And after that, things only got worse." Eli finishes his cigarette, and we shake hands. He goes back inside to work. I continue to sit on a bench outside the restaurant, staring at a barren street.

25 Two minutes later, a different nineteen-year-old comes outside for five minutes of smoking.

This kid's name is Levi. He's a busboy with a ponytail. And unlike Eli, he adores Tulsa. He will never leave. "I love it here," says Levi. "In my opinion, it's the world's biggest little city. I know they say that about Reno, but they should say it about Tulsa.
30 This is kind of a hard thing to explain, but there is so much action here -- it's just that there's nothing to do."

I sort of know what he means, but not totally. When I question Levi about his vision for the future, he insists that he's very optimistic. But when I ask him why, his
35 reasoning is confusing: He starts talking about how high the per capita murder rate is and about all the problematic issues with Tulsa's exploding Hispanic population. He tells me, "Every street in this town is dangerous at 1:00 A.M. Every single one." Why, I ask, would these things make him enthusiastic? "Tulsa is growing like crazy," he says. "It's headed in the right direction." And then his cancer stick is extinguished,
40 so Levi returns to busing tables.

Obviously, these are just two nineteen-year-olds, chosen in a manner that's less than random. Neither is a metaphor for anything. But I want to point something out: One of these teenagers was pessimistic about the future while 1) enjoying the present and
45 2) worrying about the past. The other was optimistic about tomorrow, despite the fact that his description of today was terrible.

It took me a while to figure out which person I could relate to more. I'm still not completely sure.

5 Leaving There

Not wanting to be on any street after 1:00 A.M., I find a taxi. The driver is forty-nine years old and resembles vampire novelist Anne Rice. I mention what Levi had said about the murder rate.

10 "That's all true," she says as her car radio plays "Escape (The Pina Colada Song)" and something off the second Bad Company album. "I don't feel safe in my own home. They will come right into your house and kill you. I wish they would all just kill one another off, because that's all they know." At first, I'm pretty sure I know who they
15 are supposed to be, so our conversation becomes vaguely uncomfortable. But then she starts talking about attending a recent Kool and the Gang concert at a casino, so who knows? I am in no position to judge this woman.

20 Up in my hotel room, I turn on the television. It appears I have missed the first eight minutes of the local news, so -- once again -- I don't see any footage of the rusted Belvedere. Its existence mocks me, even as I consume room-service gnocchi. I notice that Showtime is airing Basic Instinct 2, and Sharon Stone suddenly strikes me as the human equivalent of the '57 Plymouth: an iconic creation that was once glamorous and futuristic but that now only reminds us of a slightly better, slightly weirder past
25 (particularly during moments when we try to jam her back into the living present). Stone was born less than one year after the burial of this Belvedere. All things considered, I suppose she's held up considerably better than the car. No water damage.

30 I guess I don't know why I believe the world is getting worse. It seems like it obviously must be, but I've been wrong before. Maybe it's my own fault. If nostalgia is remembering the past as better than it actually was, what word is its opposite? What word describes imagining a future that will be worse than logic dictates? Whatever it is, I need less of it. And perhaps Northwest Airlines needs more.