

## Flint, MI (circa now and whenever)

- kxs

*Markets topple established customs, they raze settled communities, and erase whole ways of life. – Jonah Goldberg*

*It's easy to get buried in the past  
When you try to make a good thing last. - Neil Young (Ambulance Blues)*



### The Special Sauce

It was around 11 a.m. on a weekday and I was driving to a furniture store on the south side of town to scout for a decent sofa and chair to replace what I had abandoned in California. While dodging potholes on [Fenton Road](#), a controversy raged in my head—leather or cloth, solid colors or patterns? Aside from I-475, Fenton Road is maybe the best connector between downtown and the South Side. The corridor is lined with buildings— businesses and residences— some occupied, some not. Paint stores stand

next to liquor stores with walls of peeling paint which stand among bars with neon domestic beer signs usually fastened to a single small darkened window. A chemical plant and public works station adds variety. It's typical modern Flint; not the worst of it, not the best of it either.

I was thinking about my furniture options, and maybe Flint's options going forward when the front bumper of my Jeep was nearly sheared off by the passenger-side of a mud-covered pick-up, its body atop wheels and hydraulics that put it at roughly the height of a single-story dollar store. The driver had just cut across two lanes to make a hard right into a liquor-store parking lot. I thought I saw, across areas not coated with mud, what appeared to be bullet holes through the truck's fender and door. Funny what stands out when a crash seems imminent. New to this environment after a 12-year absence, and in a state of shock and anger, I pulled a u-turn and took a left into the liquor-store lot, eager to remind this prick about the pitfalls of bad driving.

I parked three spaces to the right of the monster-truck, shut off my engine, and before stepping out, paused to appreciate the size and styling of the driver as he walked from the truck into the party store. He was very large, and hairy, with a sleeveless and soiled flannel shirt-jacket that looked clean next to his trucker cap— which looked like it had been smeared with tar and vomit. This was a 30-ish man who would look natural with a heavy blunt tool or large firearm in his hands. I stayed in my Jeep, as a different set of survival instincts asserted themselves, and then noticed that the monster-truck driver had a friend waiting in the passenger seat, slumped over towards the middle of the dash. I wondered if he was alive. The penetrations through the fender and passenger side of the truck were indeed the marks of bullet holes. They formed a distinct pattern. From my vantage point, about 15 feet away, somebody had pumped a few rounds of buckshot into the truck.

A few more seconds of quiet observation told me that the passenger was fine; well, he was alive. This slight and shaky fellow under an orange knit cap (discolored by grime) was either fiddling with the radio or his hypo-kit while his friend was in the store. It seemed entirely reasonable that these folks were returning from a nearby swamp or pond, where dead bodies can decompose fully without being discovered; or maybe they were loading up on booze and cigarettes before some Michigan Militia flavored day-trip. I decided to wait in the parking lot for the driver to buy whatever he was going to buy and let them leave first. I wanted to slice down my chances of dealing with these greased loons again on the road— they can go one way, and I'll happily go the other way, even if it means a detour to the furniture store. I had just purchased a new vehicle and was thinking about insurance rates and hospital costs. I've developed enough sense in this world to know when to let things slide.

The monster-truck driver soon emerged from the store with two cases of Busch. He opened the driver-side door of his truck and chucked one case into the cab, startling the passenger, and then dropped the other case into the truck's bed. I had, at that point, been back in Flint for about a week, and though inside Flint is where I spent 75% of my childhood, maybe too much refinement and travel have since made me forget, exactly,

what this place is about. Thankfully, those two men and their large machine provided a splash of cold water to my face, reminding me how far removed I was from the hippie-vegan nerd-haven of San Francisco.

When someone pulls an asshole move on a main drag in San Francisco, you can call the clown on it, immediately, without much fear. Middle fingers, taunts, and horn music are ubiquitous. Not so in Flint. Act out on every jerk who wrongs you on the road around here and you'll get shot. Half the busy streets are laced with armed, pissed off, broke, and maybe crack-addled locals just waiting for an excuse to add another bizarre twist to their broken lives. That's the dark side. Most everyone else around here is trying, real hard, to do the right thing. Flint differs little from Rust Belt burghs like Youngstown or Akron, OH; and Flint's a damn sight nicer than crumbling crime pits like Gary, IN, or Chester, PA—possibly the scariest town I've ever passed through. Flint's not the third world, but it is rather gritty. Lap-dancers and dope-dealers are respected professionals across large swaths inside the city limits, less so in the suburbs. I've attended funerals in and around Flint for friends or associates who ran afoul of the *wrong* people, and I'm no gangster through anyone's goggles. It's just how it is.

Later on, I was recounting the incident on the phone with a friend in Cali, Balke, and one of the first things he said was "You sure they were bullet holes?"

"Of course, there were a lot of them...would've seen more 'cept the truck was half-caked in mud."

"You know, rednecks and ghetto boys put bullet-hole stickers on their vehicles."

"What!?"

"Yeah, all the time."

"Dude, these weren't stickers, they were bullet holes."

"They look real," Balke said, employing a tone that suggested I shouldn't be surprised. But Balke's from the Pacific Northwest. Places like Flint and Detroit are abstractions to him. "I've seen them."

I didn't want to hear any more. Who would do that to their ride? *Bullet-hole stickers, for that gangsta look, scare dem bitches but good.* I poked around a bit and, sure enough, [they exist](#). Unless I run into that monster truck duo again, I'll never know for sure. But, it doesn't change the fact that these cats were drinking heavily and driving maniacally, early on a weekday, with accoutrements and vibes to suggest that any work they actually did was bookended by cash payments, no questions. For all I know, I went to high school with them.

Flint is more than big trucks on choppy roads. My hometown is also a gnarly blend of stoic pessimism, occasional landscape genius next door to year-around Christmas-light

displays, overdoses, family values, golf courses, fast food, cheap mansions, stripped cars on the curbside, dollar stores, titty bars, and churches of every size and condition. Don Williamson, our mayor, is a half-bright but successful car salesman who runs the city like Iceberg Slim ran his stable. These days it seems there are more locals trying to sell cars than trying to build them. Automobile factories are notably fewer and leaner in number than in glory days past, but much more efficient. Residues of our smokestack heyday still stand: an excellent parks system, auditoriums, museums, and a large planetarium. They remain in good shape. General Motors, in obeying the forces of socio-technological evolution, certainly pulled some asshole moves against the city of its creation, but it was not all slash and burn. Flint's decline was long, almost 40 years. The public's overall stereotype of Flint, fueled in large measure by Michael Moore's *Roger and Me*, along with some dry and ignorant screeds by [socialist-leaning tenured academic types](#), have some merit; but they miss a larger reality.

The City of Flint differs aplenty from the suburban spread that cups it, especially to the west and south, where steady growth with respect to both population and infrastructure continues. Thirty years ago, 200,000 people resided inside Flint's borders, today there are roughly 125,000 (~54% black, ~40% white, ~3% latino, ~3% asians and others). Flint is the seat of Genesee County and covers about 34 square miles with everything from [gated mansions](#) to abandoned buildings surrounded by eerie urban meadows. White flight and the withering of Flint's industrial tax base from the early 60s onward created the extra space for the empty lots to flourish, wrecking the property market. You can find \$50,000 houses in Flint, but make sure you can afford floodlights and can shoot moving targets. You can also find that aforementioned mansion for under a million and hire a rent-a-thug to shoot the trespassers for you. There are a couple of large neighborhoods on the west side of Flint with hidden driveways and hedgerows that obscure magnificent brick and brass American-styled castles...pound for pound the best housing values in America. Housing prices here are roughly one-tenth of what they are in San Francisco. For the most part, folks who move to Flint from faraway places are either repatriates drawn back to families who never left (they usually wind up in the burbs, not Flint itself), or they arrive from foreign lands south and east in search of cheap land to start their climb towards the middle rungs of the American Dream. These folks find those \$50k houses a bargain, use school vouchers to send their kids to suburban schools, and have no qualms keeping a couple guns loaded to protect their property. A typical family that wields significant cajones to move from China or Mexico to Flint won't be skittish about a few years of ghetto living.

Chinese and Middle Eastern restaurants are everywhere. Per capita, Flint has as many Chinese restaurants as San Francisco, though the overall food quality of the latter still exceeds that of the former. Some places like Moy Kong and Ivanhoe serve top-tier chow, some serve decent buffets, and others grind their meats into an indistinguishable mush and cover it heavy with sauce to conceal the food's true origins. The explosion of Chinese restaurants has happened within the last 10 years, after Flint had bottomed out from its post-industrial freefall, and these ethnic islands are spreading out into the burbs too, bringing folks together one egg roll at a time. Greek coney island diners (think chili

dogs but much better) have been part of the landscape for half a century, and there's still a lot of them, in Flint and in the burbs.

Genesee County has tacked on a couple percentage-points of population since 1990, meaning, as Flint continues to shrink, the suburbs grow, colliding to the south with metro Detroit's economic sphere of influence. Most of Flint's satellite towns are doing well. Flushing, Grand Blanc, and Micheal Moore's Davison, to name a few, have nice sidewalk shopping avenues lined with indie hardware and family buffets, good schools, and clean gas stations. The town squares themselves often have a lot of character, some coming into shape before the Civil War. Still, wander a few block in any direction from the founder's square and it all looks familiar, modular, and a tad numbing. Justin Fox of Fortune Magazine aptly nailed our suburbia as thus:

*[Genesee] county's landscape, with its McMansion-filled subdivisions, Home Depots, and Applebee's Neighborhood Grills, has a certain modularity to it--it's often hard to tell if you're in suburban Flint, as opposed to suburban Atlanta or suburban Indianapolis.*

Not warm and fuzzy, but not Fallujah either. Best not to project Flint's lingering issues out onto the islands of educated post-modern wealth that surrounds it. Plenty of people around here like Picasso and Chagall, F. Scott and O. Henry, Needless Markup and REI.

By most domestic standards, Flint is still mired in a bog of decrepitude. The excuses that some folks proffer for that reality have worn on many, and worn out a few. The socio-economic factors that brought Flint low are not a mystery. An unholy combination of racial tensions, automobile industry decay, and an under-educated and company-dependant general populace coalesced to wreak havoc in and around these parts and throughout almost every smokestack city in the Rust Belt. The fact that Flint has been on its hands and knees for so long now, while formally desolate inner cities like Toledo, OH, and Fort Wayne, IN, are on the come-up, is appalling. There are some culpable faces in abstract, concrete, and karmic senses that need a kiss from the back of a swinging hand. I'm getting to that.

### **The Parallel Declines of HST and My Hometown (rock the blame)**

*The [Mustang] was extremely unstable— one of those Detroit classics, apparently assembled by junkies to teach the rest of us a lesson. I had already removed the air filter, in order to manipulate the automatic choke by hand, but there was no way to control the unnerving accelerator delay. At some stoplights the car would move out normally, but at others it would try to stall, seeming to want more gas— then suddenly leap ahead like a mule gone amok from a bee sting. – Hunter S. Thompson (Fear and Loathing on The Campaign Trail '72)*

I used to be a big fan of Hunter S. Thompson. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was scanned into my brain-chips somewhere around my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday, and soon after I devoured *Hells Angels* and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*. You can read

detailed reviews of these books most anywhere that publishes such things, so I won't dwell too much on their specific merits except to say each work is an amazingly clear portrayal of interesting subsections of the American tapestry: the mechanically inclined meth-snorting rebel; the politically inclined pill-popping operative; and whatever you want to call the flotsam that gives Vegas it's freaky pulse. Then, starting in '73, Watergate managed to get off the entire journalistic establishment not writing for *The National Review*. HST had a field day, with every dark prediction he made about Richard Nixon between '68 and '72 coming to pass. The Watergate saga saw HST cranking out article after article that combined anger, wit, philosophical clarity, and remarkable storytelling woven together across a stream-of-consciousness presentation. Not one political writer on this planet, not Sy Hersch, not Bill Buckley, not Tom Wolfe, no one came within screaming distance of the flat-out mind-blowing prescient prose that HST dropped every few weeks like a spurned lover cast aside by Nixon's version of the American Dream:

*What almost happened here— and what was only avoided because the men who made Nixon President and who were running the country in his name knew in their hearts that they were all mean, hollow little bastards who couldn't dare turn their backs on each other— was a takeover of total perversion of the American political process by a gang of cold-blooded fixers so incompetent that they couldn't even pull off a simple burglary...which tends to explain, among other things, why 25,000 young Americans died for no reason in Vietnam while Nixon and his brain trust were trying to figure out how to admit the whole thing was a mistake from the start. – HST (Rolling Stone, 2Aug73)*

After Nixon resigned in August of '74, HST's work went from stylishly ragged to sloppy, veering from so-called gonzo journalism towards lameness, biting his own 60s catchphrases and publishing hack columns to support his various habits. Two exceptions: HST lashed together a very nice essay about Jimmy Carter's Law Day Speech to Georgia politicians in '75, and wrote wonderful and twisted sendoff for Nixon's journey into the ethereal realm. You can hear him read part of it on Paul Oakenfold's *Nixon's Spirit*, but like that Jimmy Carter essay, it was a one-off. If HST has cobbled together a stunning paragraph since they stuck Tricky Dick in the ground, I have yet to read it.

Maybe the highs and lows of working the seams of Americana between the Hells Angels and Nixon's political operatives was too much for HST. A well-documented 30-year coke-binge, known by medical experts to hamper both productivity and clear thought, didn't help either. HST's friends and various ass-kissers still praise some of his later work, but it's praise given in the same way you might cover for a talented friend who has slipped into a deep and ugly rut. In 2004, hardcore liberalism with the mental jerks and tweaks of a paranoid cokehead is not reasonable *or* profound. HST's more recent work can be funny to read for a line or so (check out his [ESPN Page2 column](#)), but such intellectual junk-food wears thin, even in small doses.

In the 60s and 70s, it was fashionable for hip writers to blame society's ills on the cruel machines of corporations and government, and their military lackeys. Considering the hideous carnage of Vietnam and various backlashes to the Civil Rights movement, those

government machines did look quite ominous, and to that end, HST captured an essential pulse of our nation. The problem, of course, is that time changes everything, especially perspectives and realities. In democracies, governments change as well due to constant infusions of new political ideas, even if the essential nature of a politician remains the same. Hobbes was right both about the essential nature of government— a bloated self-serving sea monster, yet the only guarantor of security mankind's civilizations need to evolve— and man's need for such a wasteful, corrupt, yet essential guarantor. The Rockefeller Republicans and New Deal Democrats who ran the country 40 years ago are quite different than the folks who run the show today, though from the mountaintop they are still part and parcel of the Hobbesian notion of government. Think about it this way: In 1964, Barry Goldwater was considered a far-right vicious loon who would bring instant armageddon should the electorate be loopy enough to put him in office. He was duly stomped by Lyndon Johnson, who went on to have some difficulties in Southeast Asia and with his electorate. Today, Mister Goldwater, if he were still alive, would stomp any politician for our highest office— Hillary Clinton, John McCain, Your Mom, or Jesus Christ himself. Yet, Barry Goldwater and Hillary Clinton both supported strong national security policies, social safety nets for the old and infirm, and many tiers of taxations...their differences were of a series of small degrees next to, say, the policy differences between Hillary and Kim Jong Il. HST would have been wise to employ this perspective, especially as he grew older and supposedly wiser, but he chose to keep writing like a bonehead 60s radical... forever comparing the likes of Nixon to the likes of Hitler with a straight face.

HST might have meditated, at least once, on the forces that generate wealth in modern society— education, entrepreneurship, smarts, work ethic, etc.— and thus the forces that provide millions of impressionable teenagers and 20-somethings the disposable income to buy his stick-it-to-the-man screeds. HST grew up alongside old money in Louisville, so it's not like he would have to think about this sans empirical evidence. He might have also pondered the evolving relationship between government and the governed in a post-industrial representative democracy. Alas, HST chose to do neither, and slowly and surely over the last 30 years, he has been drawn into the haze of irrelevance after a high ride at the top of his craft.

Flint used to ride high as well. From the 1920s through the '60s, this town bristled with progress and pop as the engine and driving force of Genesee County's growth. Flint was also the native soil of the largest automobile-manufacturer on our planet, General Motors. Standards of living were near the tops of the nation, with the associated benefits: cultural resources befitting a city twice the size of Flint, excellent public works, clean well-lit streets, a bustling downtown with scores of fashionable shops, and a corollary happy and well-heeled working-class population. In largest part, this was courtesy of our benevolent Sugar Daddy.

Billy Durant put together General Motors in Flint in 1908, with a loan from hometown Citizen's Bank. Durant lost control of GM in late 1910, but the ball was rolling. The automobile industry, and thus GM, grew quickly— the source and suckle for much of the Jazz-Age boom of the 1920s. Before the Great Depression, there were dozens of

domestic automobile companies fighting for consumer dollars. Just as we saw with the tech-bubble pop of 2000, the stock-market crash in 1929 ramped up a growing trend towards consolidation, this time in the automobile industry. Because Durant was ahead of the curve by consolidating Buick, Oldsmobile, Fisher Body and others near the turn of the last century, GM, and thus Flint, fared better than most places during the Great Depression.

Before 1937, management and labor in the automotive industry were two tools of the same organization, both wholly owned by said organization. High management made the real money, basic labor built everything that consumers actually bought and earned just about enough to eat for their troubles. Enter unions. In 1937, Flint's infamous [Sit-Down Strike](#) inside GM's Fisher Body plants launched the legitimate phase of the United Auto Workers, and gradually brought wages to a place where relatively unskilled production workers could afford a decent house and a couple cars on a 40hr/wk salary. Bringing the labor forces of heavy industry into a unionized collective helped to create the modern American middle class. The division of labor and management on its face seemed to be helping Flint as well. By the 1960s, 80,000 well-paid workers staffed Flint's automobile factories, which had obvious pleasant effects on the local economy.

GM, and industrialists in general, were bitter about unions. When the government decreed that corporate gunsels couldn't kneecap or tire-iron strikers anymore, manufacturing magnate had to draft new plans. Peaceful coexistence became the way of doing business. Being steeped in Flint's history, I suspect that GM plotted revenge the minute they capitulated to the Sit-Down Strikers. Fairness and social justice were not important cogs in the mindset of industrialists. Morality had little to do with it. In a boardroom culture where loss of face is passed down through the generations, few atop GM's hierarchy could utter United Auto Workers without gritting his teeth. From World War II through the 60s, GM did well while paying their production workers and skilled tradesmen union-negotiated salaries and benefits.

My paternal grandfather was a closet socialist, and welder for GM back in the day. He thought it nifty that a tradesman could make a good wage in GM's health-crushing manufacturing environments of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. To manage such a feat while corporations still made profits was in the best light of Socialism. In practice, because of the structural wedges between management and labor, the situation was akin to a cold war. There were two forces hostile to each other, yet forced to work together for mutual survival. GM hated the loss of control over their resources, and GM most certainly saw their labor force as machines, as chattel. For management to successfully fire a perpetually drunken worker, and there were a few, it took a stamina and paper trail that few foremen could actually stomach to see through. It was more cost-effective to take the productivity hits from an inebriated employee than to take the steps necessary to purge him from the plant. Such things strengthened hostility from the management end. For the United Auto Workers, the set-up not only looked viable, but practical. There were always grumblings regarding pay disparities between labor and executive forces, but that's been true since the Division-of-Labor concept was put into practice by the Romans. Issues like inter-industry competition, productivity, and earnings to profit ratios

were not on the minds of the blue-collar organizers; it wasn't their problem...but it would be.

Meanwhile, a lot of people moved to Flint, especially blacks and whites from the poorer agrarian south, for what seemed like an endless supply of good jobs...no job experience or post-primary education necessary. This migration kept going deep into the 60s. The city was soon packed with well-ordered working class neighborhoods, new houses, property owners everywhere, thanks in large part to the benefits of unionization. There were places for the old and new money wealth as well— scions of automaker families, engineers, doctors, and lawyers. These folks had their huge Tudor houses, their formal balls at formal hotels, and connections with similar stock around the nation. Flint's boom peaked right around the time JFK took one for the country.

Major change reveals itself in small increments, and so it was for Flint. Everyone wanted the same basic things: good jobs, education and security for their children, happiness, in sum, a legitimate shot at the American Dream. But white folks were particular about their neighbors looking like them. Akin to urban centers across America in the 50s and 60s, whenever black families moved into a hitherto white neighborhood in Flint, white folks got skittish. At first the whites tried reasoning in the form of inflated selling prices to blacks, rocks thru windowpanes if the former didn't work, and various taunts and threats. To be fair, Flint was never a place rife with lynchings and cross-burning festivals. The Party Line went something like *I ain't nothing against them negro families, but they're gonna be hell on my property value. I guess we'll have to scoot into a nice clean plot in the near-country while we can sell at a decent price.* That's exactly what white property owners did.

My father purchased his first house on Flint's north side in 1967— a two-bedroom brick dwelling on a lot full of trees and in a neighborhood full of brick houses and nice lawns. Three-fourths of the grown-ups in that neighborhood worked for General Motors, as my father did. Black families had been moving into the neighborhood at a moderate pace for years, some from Detroit, more from the South. Reactively, whites were moving to townships ringing Flint at a quickening pace. Dad was 26 and a married homeowner with a nice car. He was ready to get the family thing rolling. Most everyone else in that neighborhood, regardless of race, sailed on the same boat. Again, everyone wanted the same basic things. But the nastiness inherent to white-flight and long-lingering race issues in general steamed and bubbled and finally boiled over. Race riots broke out everywhere between Watts and Newark...not nearly as bad in Flint as Detroit, but still. Dad told me of a black teenager who asked to borrow a gallon of gasoline for his lawnmower...on a hot summer evening as Detroit looked like a roman candle some 55 miles south. Dad being Dad, he laughed and shook his head. "I don't think you intend to mow lawns tonight. Wanna beer?" The kid laughed too. Dad was always good at disarming people when he had to.

Generally, blacks felt like they were being screwed out of an honest shot at prosperity. Almost every black homeowner wound up paying too much for a house that went on to depreciate in value. This happened everywhere black families went, hurting their wallets,

pride, and totally skewing any notion of fair play as something real. Blacks also grew weary of getting their asses kicked around the streets regularly by Flint's white police officers. The North's version of segregation was, and is, of a different flavor than the Jim Crow nonsense practiced in the Dixie South, but no less degrading. Fair housing issues were a huge during the 60s and 70s, and it's still an issue. We're as segregated today as we were in the 50s. When my parents discovered that I was one of three white kids in my kindergarten class, they immediately put our nice little brick house for sale and moved to Flint's east side, which was still predominately white. As a five-year-old, I didn't know what all the fuss was about. I also didn't understand the concept of collapsing property value, which I think was the largest motivation behind my parents move. The fact that I was one of three white kids in my class was simply a signal flare to my parents that they had better sell quick or take a financial beating...a vicious cycle on several levels. Vicious, because white flight, at the end of the day, cost black families billions of dollars all over urban America. That's a lot to overcome for folks who spent an awful lot of time overcoming an awful lot of bullshit. Not long after settling in my new, and overwhelmingly white, working class neighborhood on the east side, two houses on the block were burned to the ground on the same night, by two stoned teenaged arsonists—bored white boys looking for a thrill. The property value in that neighborhood held just fine for many years afterward. Eventually, as Ronald Reagan was getting settled into his new role, we moved out of Flint entirely, like so many others, to settle in the outer suburbs.

Flint's long decline is inextricably linked to the race card. How it played out was sad in many ways, but what often sticks in my head is this, and it's nothing new: Whites feared blacks as neighbors, yet most everyone loved black music and rooted for local and regional black athletes. Everyone I grew up with loved barbequed spare ribs, and all the best rib joints in Flint were of course owned and run by blacks. Anyway, that mess was one factor. The real and karmic toll that racial issues extracted from Flint's soul are heavy. Yet fate had more in store for Flint. Additional factors every bit as damaging as racism aligned to slap down my utopian company town another peg or sixty. Chief among them was the qualitative decline of General Motors, and American car-cobblers in general. It was a decline long in the making, but one that was allowed to progress unimpeded nonetheless.

Bright lights were first cast on the questionable quality of American automobiles early in the 1970s. Positive angle first: American muscle cars were pound for pound and dollar for dollar the most exciting beasts on the road. Chevy Chevells, Plymouth Gran Furys, Ford Mustangs, Olds Cutlasses, and the like combined heavy bodies with mammoth V-8 engines that sounded like early Black Sabbath through a 4,000-watt amp and ten blown speakers when they charged down the road. American automakers were able to build fast brutish cars that achieved power and speeds that made rivetheads drool, and there were millions of them throughout the country. Hitherto, a car that could hit 160 on the highway was attainable only to the very rich. Given an endless supply of cheap fuel, the muscle-car concept was one that could have lasted for another 50 years. Aside from the ingeniousness of the muscle car, there *were* problems.

Anyone living outside of Florida or the Southwest who purchased an American car during this period, and actually up through the mid 90s remembers the rust. Up here it was impossible to escape. After only a year or so, rust spots commonly appeared on fenders and fittings of all domestic models. The undercarriage started to disintegrate after a couple winters. The inner parts fared about the same as the body. Poor intake systems, engines that seized up after ~60,000 miles— a Buick specialty in the mid 70s— and prematurely crumbling exhaust systems shredded patience and pocketbooks. If planned obsolescence is a fact of life, at least be sneaky about it, but domestic automakers ran their fiefdoms like a cartel, one that treated contrarian opinion like the bums who milled about the dumpsters outside Corporate Headquarters. General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler were basically the only automakers of note in the United States. Their combined market share exceeded 90% at the dawn of the 70s.

Our first true family car was a 1972 Ford station wagon. It actually ran like a champ, but by time Jimmy Carter took office in January 1977, Mom had to caution me from putting my little feet through the corroded floorboards and onto the road. Within five years of purchase, that station wagon was monolithically rusted through, beyond the help of prayer or bondo. Mom and Dad also purchased, at various times, a couple new Buick's, a Mustang, and a Dodge van. They ran okay, considering, which is to say they usually started. However, without exception, they fell apart within five years. A few rounds of well-placed buckshot would have caused them to disintegrate. Dad once said ruefully of the Dodge van: "It's not worth the powder to blow it to hell." He was not the only one thinking such thoughts. Folks all across our fruity plains, and on both coasts too, grew tired of forking over several grand for mediocrity every few years. Many of these places were not company towns and therefore not beholden to domestic automobile manufactures. The duration of product loyalty shortens considerably when your purchased product screws you, every time, without invitation.

Throw in an energy crisis, and....

Hello Toyota!

The Arab Oil Embargo got going in 1973, and within a couple years, Japanese automobile makers were assembling and promoting their sporty and fuel-efficient cars for American consumption. Prior to the energy crisis, imported autos were a niche thing, to be found in and around coastal cities and university squares. The high price of gasoline, mixed in with a newly suburbanized culture that needed wheels to get to and from work, changed everything. The Japanese were delivering a bit of payback for our rude and wasteful energy expenditures.

Stuck at a competitive disadvantage with fleets of gas-guzzling autos of suspect quality, and feeling the screws tighten on their market shares, General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler cut costs, car sizes, and appealed to patriotism. Obviously, young engineers inside design shops across Southeastern Michigan had better ideas, but it took another decade of competitive humiliation to stir the sleeping asses of the boardrooms and bring these new ideas to the fore. Meanwhile, unimaginatively designed boxy compacts made of plastic,

with smaller and sackless engines, were hastily slapped together for American consumption. The Big Three's strategy also included 'Buy American' promotions, which worked okay in many places throughout the Rust Belt (between Pittsburgh and Duluth) where there was a direct relationship between buying American and having a job and therefore money for the mortgage payment, but not so well everywhere else. Many lucid consumers, still healing from the burn marks of their last American car purchase, needed about three to six seconds to choose a Toyota Celica over Chrysler K Car or Buick Century.

Being an old-school electrician inside the largest Buick factory on the planet, at the time, Dad towed the company line and bought American, as almost everyone in Flint and Detroit did. Because my father was a smart man, he knew exactly why American car-makers were getting stomped in the marketplace, but because of job loyalty, he didn't dwell or speak on it much. It's human nature to slack a bit when you're not being pushed. One reason New York has been such a successful city for so long is that you can't be a slacker with ties to obsolete ideas and expect to survive in Manhattan. There are always lines of hungry and talented new arrivals jonesing to take your spot. When Reagan swooped into DC, fired the Air Traffic Controllers, and announced a new morning in America, every UAW colon in Michigan should have clinched, respecting what was going to be a dicey future. Layoffs, which had already started at this point, gathered steam, everywhere.

Through consolidation, modernization via robotics, and to a smaller degree cheaper overseas labor, General Motors underwent radical production changes during the final two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Many old and obsolete factories were demolished while a few new ones were built. New assembly plants in Mexico and California were erected during this time, employing roughly 40,000 workers. Part of GM's plan was spreading out production facilities, making them more modular, automated, and relying on outside organizations for many parts. In Flint, GM's dwindling market share and modernization drive, typified in the new Buick City assembly complex— a consolidation of local body and powertrain plants that got going in 1984— applied a double-squeeze: fewer automobiles to be manufactured by fewer workers per automobile. Automation was one answer to GM's prayer for freedom from the socially leveling hand of the UAW.

What General Motors did to Flint was dodgy at best, despicable at worst. It laid waste to the canard that the company looks out for their loyal workers. Espoused for years by many socialist-leaning liberals, and certainly by the UAW and Michael Moore, entrusting the 'company' to look after your best interests is barely more sane than hiring a junkie to watch your money. This mindset comes from a socialist supposition that governments are supposed to micromanage the governed, and tragically, this form of socialism's inherent dependency transfers from functions of the state to functions of private enterprise. In the case of GM, the City of Flint, and tens of thousands of clockpunching workers— more concerned with their wives, children, and refinishing the basement before deer season opens, than the long-term motives of their employer— the fallout was brutal. Occupants of GM's higher echelons knew of this, well acquainted with the works of Milton Friedman and Adam Smith, and the long-term inevitability of globalization.

GM could have sounded the warning bells themselves, loudly. *The Japanese are kicking our asses, fellas, and it'll take us 20 years to get our legs back...the hammer is fallin'. Better go to school, learn computin', learn refrigerator repair, hell, learn to cut meat...cause we're gonna have to cut you.* If you're going to kick someone out of the shelter, at least provide a coat. Don't suckle someone for thirty years and then expect him to understand the harsh conditions of the world at large overnight.

General Motors in fact often denied that labor-constricting moves were being made, even as they lost money hand over foot. It became apparent to anyone with a head for figures that the human costs were going to be substantial. Looking at the whole of GM's century-long relationship with Flint, pulling up stakes and bailing on its hometown seems like a work of cold artful revenge, all those wonderful GM-built cultural resources aside. One of the first rules of good Machiavellian management is to avoid being placed at the mercy of your workers. In 1937, when the Sit-Down Strike was raging and it seemed as though workers had discovered a neat tool to apply leverage on company, be assured that General Motors started planning to rid themselves of the UAW. The UAW of course fought as best they could, but obviously the forces in opposition to the UAW were too great, and they could not stop the slide. Along this sea change, labor negotiations between GM and the UAW moved from issues of wage increases and better health care to managing the scale of layoffs and wage stagnation. Flint UAW locals lost two-thirds of their members since the layoffs and plant closings started, from nearly 80,000 in the 70's to fewer than 30,000 today. With the attrition of dues-paying members, there have been more concessions, and a march towards irrelevance. Maybe as a final kiss-my-ass to the boss, the UAW in Flint went on strike in 1998, shutting down production and outsourcing—the strike was very much about outsourcing— facilities all around the world. It cost GM billions, and Flint's gigantic Buick City complex, which Flint's UAW Local 599 worked very hard to save, nonetheless was closed two years later, and demolished a bit after that, to provide ever more open space for dollar stores, titty bars, and maybe a casino or two. Flint had long since entered the national consciousness as a perfect business depot for crack dealers, pole-dancers, excuses, and those dollar stores...always dollar stores. I guess folks need the option of salving their sorrows in an endless sea of cheap crap.

Looking back, the warning sirens of Flint's decline worked best for those on the outside looking in. From white flight, to the energy crisis, to the rise of Japanese craftsmanship and the atrophy of our own, and finally to the slow bleed of a generation of layoffs, it was not tough to see. From the 60s thru last week, the writing has always been on the wall, but the culture stung hardest was never one of bookstores or chalkboards. Yet it's hard not to shake fists at local and regional politicians for their part in this dark comedy. Since GM wasn't about to be straight with the locals regarding their futures in Flint, the politicians should have been ringing the alarm bell for their constituents and pushing through mass education and redevelopment plans to temper the fallout from Flint's post-industrial reality. A succession of five mayors, from Floyd McCree in 1966 through James Rutherford in 1983, each had opportunity to see and grasp the size and scope of Flint's problems and soften the landing. Instead, the best politicians could cobble together was a downtown luxury hotel, and, oh that's right, the [Autoworld](#) theme park.

### **Never Let Me Down (a michael moore lite refrain)**

*Well, the million tourists never came to Flint. The Hyatt went bankrupt and was put up for sale, Waterstreet Pavillion saw most of its stores go out of business, and only six months after opening, Autoworld closed due to a lack of visitors. I guess it was like expecting a million people a year to go to New Jersey to Chemicalworld, or a million people going to Valdez, Alaska for Exxonworld. Some people just don't like to celebrate human tragedy while on vacation. – Michael Moore (Roger and Me)*

Well, that's one sentiment Michael Moore captured perfectly for the ages. As Hunter S. Thompson has said, *even a blind pig finds an acorn every now and then*. The absurdity, the stoner-level stupidity, of a struggling Rust Bust city in a micro-climate dominated by overcast days trying to revive its fortunes by transforming itself into a tourist magnet deserves every epithet of mockery it receives from now thru the end of time. Some mistakes should not be forgiven. The sad-sack mayor who pushed for Autoworld, James Rutherford, and our congressmen, Dale Kildee, both stinking hacks and backwards-thinking Tammany Hall-type ward-heelers, ought to live in infamy for what they did. Autoworld opened for business in July, 1984, with over \$80-million in financing that the likes of Rutherford and Kildee secured. It meant that favors were promised, City of Flint was leveraged. It was precious funds that should have been spent on mundane but effective ventures like business redevelopment zones; or spent on educating a blue-collar workforce growing ever more idle, and ever more attracted to strong booze and the sweet sizzle of little white rocks, that is, those who didn't know better and move to Arizona or Cali.

Objectively, it's hard to deny that Autoworld looked nice. It was like a mini-Epcot. A filtered section of the Flint River ran under a geodesic dome past talking robots in Jazz-Age clothing and old cars and wonderful gas lamps and other ornaments that romantized an era no one seemed to care about, except people who spent at least half the year in Florida. Within two years, Autoworld was reduced to a part-time operation. It was shuttered forever before Bush 41 took the throne, and then demolished in 1996 to make room for an expanding University of Michigan-Flint campus. The irony of the last 200 words is so thick it's making me breathe funny, which happens when caretakers of your hometown can't stop shooting up everything around them when all they mean to do is just shoot themselves in the foot. It's cool that the space is finally being put to good use, and big up to Michael Moore for dealing us one of the best soundbites of the Reagan Revolution.

Dad always thought that Michael Moore was a gaseous douchebag, though he used stronger language than that. In large part, I agree. It's not so much that growing up near Flint made Michael Moore what he is: a conspiracy freak who figures that all human misery is created by some powerful cabal that resides somewhere in DC, unless they're in NYC, or Switzerland. It's the socialist-liberal game of pin the tail on the honky, which is fine sometimes, because it makes for good entertainment, as long as it stays fixed to entertainment. In the realm of entertaining people, Moore has shown himself to be one of

the better filmmakers of our age. Unfortunately, Moore also fancies that he can change the world into a place where greed doesn't exist, which would require changing human nature, which would require some serious social engineering, and, you know where this leads us. The man-keeping-us-down bit plays nicely in a theater but doesn't work in a modern democracy. It hasn't worked in a long time.

I've watched *Roger and Me*, all the way through, twice. It was one time too many. Moore's class warfare rantings are best exemplified in this film via a *Great Gatsby* party. Held when seemingly ten of thousands of noble souls are being tossed on the cold street as GM and GM-related plants scrap operations, Moore is astounded and pissed that wealthy Americans are telling laid off shop workers to do something else with their lives. Those rich bastards. How dare they throw a literary-themed party and suggest the laid off workers use their own wits in perusal of achievement and or kibble? The well-heeled should all be working in the soup kitchens, building new soup kitchens, teaching the newly dispossessed the needed job skills to get by in post-industrial Flint...one on one, old time tutoring. After all, the decline of heavy industry was a huge and sudden shock. Folks only had two goddamned generations to prepare. Yes, Michael, the rich folks did it on purpose. Sex and wine is quaint, actually, and the only thing that really gets a multi-millionaire off these days is watching the jobless suffer in deepening decrepitude. It's better than midnight raids on the butler's snuff-film collection, really. A poorly educated work force with obsolete job skills have nothing at all to do with it. Rosie the Riveter is not needed in the age of robotic assembly, which means we need more people who know how to build robots. A job is only secure so long as it's relevant and cost-effective. Oh, and there is this unstoppable force called globalization which thus far has proven to be the only successful method of lifting the third world towards the arms of the first. Idiot.

Michael Moore would be the same tiresome hag had he grown up anywhere in the U.S.A. Though he was an Eagle Scout, he wasn't one of the boys in a social sense. Think back to your school days and ponder for a moment how chunky dorkish Eagle Scouts did amongst your peers...think about it, I'll wait for you...exactly. Watch *Dazed and Confused* for further clarification. From that, it's safe to assume that Michael Moore developed a potent dislike towards the popular and powerful. It is a reflex, and that's fine, indeed, normal. Most smart folks figure out their own prejudices and toss them aside sometime between college and their 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, and a few shoot up their school. Michael Moore did neither. Instead, he decided to make a mint from criticizing those who, because of some blend of genetics, talent, opportunity, etc., fit in better than he did. Matt Stone and Trey Parker do the same thing with *South Park*, but do it way better and without the petty bitterness that infects so much of what Michael Moore films, says, or writes.

Michael Moore is the liberal version of Eric Cartman, spewing vitriol to win friends and love among a sizeable minority of the masses. Michael Moore's Flint is black and white at every level. Moore admittedly sucks at both math and objectivity, which means that truth ritualistically eludes him like the Snipe evades the determined Boy Scout. Millions take Moore seriously, as millions pay psychics for love advice. Moore's version of Flint,

like everything he creates, is a deft blend of truth and bullshit. It makes for poisonous product when passed off as documentaries.

This is no screed about the beauties of conformity; I'd rather scrape out my tonsils with a rusted spoon than do such a thing. This is more of a screed about honesty. General Motors wasn't honest. Local politicians damn sure were not honest. Mr. Moore, who is a talented artist, where honesty is supposed to be paramount, is not honest. Otherwise, he's remarkably ignorant, so ignorant in fact that he's managed to learn nothing new in twenty years. Since Eagle Scouts tend to be curious sorts, I choose to believe that Michael Moore is doing the very thing that small-minded and inconsiderate kids used to do to him.

Had Mr. Moore paid attention to the real pulse of Flint when he was a kid, or especially when he made *Roger and Me*, the outcomes of his work would have been quite different, and I think, much better. There was a lot more to Flint's vibe in 80s than Great Gatsby Parties, bunny slaughterhouses, and folks getting shot up or bounced from their houses.

I spent high school in Davison, and stayed weekends at my Moms and Stepdad's place on Flint's south side. My stepbrother Jason, who introduced me to hip-hop when Whodini and Run-DMC were coming up, always had a fat sound system constructed of found parts and stuff swiped from the basement or our parent's bedroom. When our parents were away, which was often, because though they were blue-collar— Stepdad turning screws at Buick, Mom at the hospital teaching premies to breath on their own— they were active, and had a lot of fun, anyway, when our parents were away for a few hours we liked testing whatever sound system Jason had lashed together that week. Sometimes during the summer it could morph into little neighborhood parties. Once, Jason was playing a mash-up with a loop of Peter Frampton's wah-wah solo from *Show Me The Way* and the instrumental version of Run-DMC's *You Talk Too Much*, loud as hell, and I was freestyling on the mic. It was loud enough that a few neighborhood kids gathered to see what was up, and the entire neighborhood could definitely hear it. My Mom and Jason's Dad caught us doing that at max volume...we didn't even hear them coming into the house, or into his room for that matter.

I couldn't tell what my Stepdad was saying when he snatched Jason by the collar, but I was pretty sure he wanted the volume cut.

"...from Fenton Road," were the first words I heard as the music wilted, "We could hear your goddamned noise from Fenton Road!" That was a solid 5 blocks away, and a busy street no less. *No way*, I thought, *it wasn't that loud*. But I didn't try to correct him, since my Stepdad had his most serious face on. Everything was cool within a few minutes since Jason and I were teenagers, and that's what a lot of teenagers in Flint did. The DIY ethic ran deep. It seemed like half of everyone I knew was either in a band or a DJ. How truly horrible could Flint's eighties downfall be when all these sons and daughters of shop workers could still lay their hands on the materials needed to make their music, dioramas, or industrial water-bongs? Again, not saying it wasn't rough at times —the local rock station once sponsored a concert for the unemployed— but it wasn't Kabul.

Michael Moore might consider relating a bit of Flint's soul through his movies, the city's funk, as it were. It's not about smell. When I was a teenager there used to be these weekend parties at St. Andrews Church on the East Side, and inside the Buckham Theater downtown, and inside Bowling Alleys and Elks Lodges all over the place, and it wasn't a bunch of old folks playing euchre and drinking Old Milwaukee. At St. Andrews, various groups, usually civic minded, would rent the space out and promise the clergy that no booze or snow-baggies would foul up their holy spots. It was about the music anyway. Walk in, pay five bucks, and you'd hear Parliament, Prince, Gap Band, Brick, Run-DMC, Afrika Bambaataa, Midnight Star, Ohio Players, and various top secret jams I've never heard anywhere else. Everybody got their freak on, in a positive way. And there were hundreds of people at these functions— black and white, grooving and jamming themselves together into a frothy brown shake. Man, it was awesome. Some of the coolest girls I've ever met were at shindigs like that. It was better than what the wonderbread utopia of Davison had to offer. That vibe was just as much a part of Flint as the downtrodden stuff, and it permeated everything, and it's what kept this town from going crazy, but Michael Moore wouldn't know.

Ebb and flow are inescapable forces. Mutations, while sudden and harsh under a microscope, are simply how we evolve. That Flint was ground zero in America's industrial decay was painful to many but that's the nature of change. I think the locals have figured it out. There are 25,000 students packing four local colleges and new subdivisions springing up all over the south county area. Small business are opening in every section of town, and a new cluster of nice houses just went up where Buick City used to stand. This place will never again be the center of a manufacturing universe, but the locals and the politicians finally understand that a dearth of GM does not mean a dearth of hope. The worst is over.

### **Outro With A Localized Bad Haircut**

About a week before I left San Francisco for Flint, I got my hair cut at my favorite Russian Hill low-rent parlor, Harry's. For a reasonable price, Mary at Harry's does a magic job on my locks. She goes about two-thirds scissors, one-third clippers. Aside from an outright butcher-job, my biggest haircutting fear is paying someone to make me look like some half-retarded reactionary wannabe hipster. Mary never did that to me. I loved that place, and when I'm back in SF, the second or third thing I'll do after arrival is make an appointment.

Now, being new again to the Flint area, I wasn't sure where to get my hair cut, but I've been adamant about contributing to the local economy during my tenure here. I really haven't seen too many heads where I can point and say, *Yes, exactly, that is the haircut I want*. I had a pretty good idea where not to go, say, any hair facility that specialized in weaves and extensions. Being the gambling sort, I decided to hit my childhood hair-chopping place— a shop inside a Meijer's (part Target, part Safeway) complex, on the east side of town, called The Golden Knight. Now, because I tend to romanticize my

childhood, I expected a clean well-lit place with a staff of highly trained smiling and attractive young stylists, just waiting to apply a hundred-dollar haircut onto my head for twenty.

I walked into the Golden Knight and saw a floor with too much hair, no one getting their hair cut, and no one sweeping. One stylist was talking to the other about how basically rotten her kids were. She then spoke to me.

"Kids are a sonofabitch, ain't they?" The first stylist said to me. She looked about 60, but was more likely in her mid 40s. She was thin, with few visible teeth and hair that looked like it had seen nothing but a lifetime of bleach and blow-dryers.

"Well," I said, "not always." I wanted to leave, of course, and just grow my hair out for the next year or so. "My niece is pretty cool."

"You got kids?"

"Uh, no. Do you cut hair?" The other stylist, a big woman ~35 watched me like Nixon would mind a Communist spy, and started sweeping the nasty floor, as if my presence had ruined their hitherto exciting and rewarding day.

"Sure sweetie, sit down here." She pointed to her chair, I sat in it. She asked me how I wanted my hair and I said same style I walked in with, but two months shorter. It usually works. She did the prep work and started cutting.

"No kids, huh? What do you do?"

"Well see, I don't have kids per se, but I use them, if you know what I mean. Yes. I make movies." Then I broke out into a big smile because I don't think she understood that I was joking. "I'm kidding. I don't have kids, nor do I make movies." At that point I figured silence would be best. Just sit back, drift off, let my stylist do her thing.

"Looks like winter's comin', huh?"

"Yeah, right on schedule."

"I always hate the cold."

"Yeah."

"My damn furnace needs to be fixed. I don't know how I'm going to do it for a bit."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, it's always a squeeze when it gets cold."

"I bet." I'm thinking, *damnit, of course it had to be this way. Whining and moaning and bitching and intrusion.* At Harry's back in SF, Mary always asked me how I was doing, asked maybe one other question, or not, and I'd ask a question or two, and the rest was beautiful silence. I didn't bug her with small talk, and she didn't bug me— of course small talk is a mighty currency in an environment bursting with dollar stores, cheap items smothered in cheap words— instead Mary used this combination hair-cutting and scalp messaging technique that totally relaxed me. I really can't describe it because my eyes were always closed when she did this. I was literally high when I left that place because I was so languid. Mary got big tips, every time.

Ten minutes into my Golden Knight haircut, my ragged and chatty barber understood, I think, that I'm not so talkative when I have nothing to say and so she focused on chatting up the heavier mean-vibed stylist who was cleaning up the place.

"So, when you finishing up school, Darlene?"

"December."

"Yeah?"

"Yep."

"Gonna be a licensed stylist."

"Looks like it."

"Better money."

"Lots better."

"Little Erin finish her marking period okay?"

"Oh yeah. She's a smart one. I think she's figured it out, how to get along."

At that point, the conversation between them developed a good flow. They talked about their kids, school, and discipline, and I was relegated to part of the interior décor, along with the copies of Road and Track, People, and Cosmo, and the upset drawers full of hair utensils circling a space meant for twelve people, but holding three instead.

"Erin might be skipping the third grade."

"No kidding?"

"Yeah, she's doing so well. I got her on fractions and cursive paragraphs and hell, she's better on that computer than I am."

"Wow, that's special."

"I was talking to one of her teachers, a nice young girl with funny Buddy Holly glasses, and she said that Erin's smart enough in her mind to go ahead if she's emotionally ready. That's the tougher question, you know, because she's doin better but she's still got that temper."

Soon enough, my barber was done. I had mellowed considerably during the last half of my haircut, and felt most relaxed, until she handed me the mirror.

My bangs were mangled, but passively so, and pressed unnaturally tight against my forehead. It would take me maybe four minutes to repair the damage back at my place...she wasn't touching me again. I looked at my bangs, then I looked at the barber. I tousled my bangs a bit as she tried to hand me a comb. "I don't use a comb," I said, "I don't like to iron my hair against my scalp either, but this is okay." I had an Egyptian Pharaoh thing going on. "I can always wear a hat."

I saw her frown, and that this hurt her. I didn't mean to, damned smart-assed honesty. I guess I'm too old for that, especially in these parts, or maybe I'm not old enough. Kids and the geriatric crowd get to say anything that crosses their mind, no matter how brutal, but us Gen X'ers, we're supposed to make nice now. My barber and I had very few common points of reference, and my hair was fixable. In truth, I could have downed a pint of Maker's, grabbed some shears and a hand mirror, and saved myself some cash.

"You did fine," I said. "I'm just going to tweak it a little when I get back home." I realized that this person was going to get a nice tip...purely out of guilt.

I was bummed that I didn't bring a hat. I never had to worry about bringing a hat to Harry's. I was thinking about that when this very large scary hairy fellow came into The Golden Knight. He looked familiar, and of course, I thought about that monster truck that almost killed me on Fenton Road some time before. Of course, there are legions of huge hairy and scary people around here, so my imagination was certainly just getting the best of me. Besides, this cat looked like he had bathed in the last day or three.

"Hey Laura," he said to the larger and more youthful stylist. "Comin' here for business. Chop it down to the topsoil, sweetheart, I got a job interview on Monday."