

EMAIL FROM THE FUTURE

Notes from 2084

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Email from the Future?

As regular readers of this blog have heard before, when you're a futurist, you receive strange email.

Perhaps that's because we futurists are the last generalists. We tend to know a little about a lot of stuff, and we try to piece it together. So if you're a disgruntled citizen who wants to rant about kids these days, or Apple software updates, or the state of healthcare...well, the people who could do something about your problem probably just ignore you.

But then you find a blogger or a YouTuber who actually talks about how these things might change, and you think: maybe they'll listen. Worth a try!

So, I get a lot of strange, but occasionally interesting, email. Last week a particularly large message appeared in my inbox.

The subject line on the email was simply "TXT." And that was accurate: It was a very long document in plain text, one giant run-on page, no paragraph breaks, only occasionally punctuated, words sometimes run together, a bizarre unbroken digital rant. A real pain to reformat into readable prose.

I was about to delete, but for some reason I stopped, and began to repair the first page or two. Why? Idle curiosity. Plus, we're in the middle of the COVID lockdown and I have plenty of time on my hands.

After I read a bit, I realized that this was an unusual piece of writing. I finished reformatting and then did some digital forensics on the original email.

The sender address is null@null.com which is, of course, a meaningless spoof. There's also almost no other origin information attached to the email: no message id, no mime version, none of the standard digital identifiers that even the most clumsily-faked email would normally carry.

I know what the security-minded among you are thinking: it wasn't an email, it was inserted via some strange new hack. By now I've run three different malware detectors on my computer. No virus, no backdoors, nothing out of the ordinary.

In short, I'm not certain how this found its way onto my desktop.

However, I've now read the whole document. Someone went to quite a bit of work for no clear reward.

Someone apparently named Aldus, who claims he is living in Brooklyn right now. (The only Aldus I can locate in New York City is a street in the Bronx.)

I'll post the entire piece below. Readers can make of it what they will.

And Aldus, if you happen to see this, please do send me another email. But this time, try to use some punctuation.

[Click here](#) to download "TXT" (540 KB)

JUNE 2084

Thursday, June 2

The idea to write these essays came to me two weeks ago, as I stood beside your mother, late on a crisp Ohio afternoon in the spring of 2084. I was watching you, my only grandchild, toss the ashes of your dream list into the cold, clear waters of the Scioto River, at the edge of New Williamsburg.

You are about to turn five, and it was a day of firsts for you. It was your first 350 Day celebration, the first time you'd been allowed to burn your wishes yourself. You even wrote—well, scribbled—them with your own hands, your first experience with graphite and natural paper.

Dozens of other families surrounded us on the newly green riverbank for the Wishes Toss. There was music and food and a big black metal pan—the “wishes foundry”—where all the children's folded pages were burned.

The excitement of the day had you flushed and giggling. They say you resemble me, but I am 70 years older than you, and to my eye I resemble no one except, perhaps, Father Time.

You craned your neck as we watched the ashes disappear downstream; you wanted to keep them in view just as long as possible, although they were already invisible. But I could imagine the ashes traveling down the Scioto, out into the Ohio River, then merging into the Mississippi, through the new National Park, and finally, seventy kilometers west of New Orleans, coursing into the 2032 Atchafalaya Flood channel and out to the Gulf of Mexico. The carbonized fragments of your wishes will pass through more than a thousand kilometers of healthy land once tormented by floods, chemicals, droughts, toxic algae.

Your mother Sofia asked softly: “Luca, what does 350 Day mean?”

You replied quickly: “Wishes come true!”

“But why today?”

You returned to earth for a moment. “Uh...it means we fixed the air!”

“And much more,” Sofia said. “It means anything is possible. Ask your grandfather. Nonno was there.”

Well. Of course you didn’t ask me at the time—what five-year-old celebrating his first 350 Day would, when the food is being put out and the lasers about to paint the dusk?

In a few years, the day may come when you do ask, perhaps urged by Tutor: “This weekend, ask an elder what the War was like, and we will talk about it on Monday.”

But I might no longer be there to answer. Ironic, considering that my generation will be the first regularly to live beyond 100. Media tell us that one’s seventies are now middle age and we have decades of active life ahead.

It may be so. But even with the formidable medical tools of today, all the genomic interventions and neural implants

and replica organs, there are still disorders we cannot heal. And I may be one of the unlucky ones, carrying a nasty bit of our unhappy early century that still lingers in a few unfortunates of my generation.

I still clearly remember the joy of the first 350 Day, May 15, 2049, when the planet's carbon level had averaged three hundred fifty parts per million for a full year. Certainly, three hundred fifty was still too high and most of the Warming's impacts remained, but there was a collective burst of confidence. The goal was three hundred, which had been the global average in 1900. In the decades since the first 350 Day, the capture factories and global greening continued the drawdown so dependably that when we reached three hundred a decade ago, little fuss was made.

During the 2020s and 2030s, at the height of the Warming, the global birthrate had dropped precipitously—floods, famines, fires, droughts, mass migration. Even in the wealthy countries, where suffering was less, there was a contagious climate angst among the young.

Why launch children into a future that appeared so tentative and perilous? Most people we knew chose to freeze. And it was not just a lack of desire to bear children—the fertility rate declined significantly, for reasons not fully understood, most probably stress-related. Nature itself didn't want more babies.

But in 2049 we knew that we were going to win the War. And the result was, as one humorist put it, a run on the egg banks.

I was thirty-nine, your grandmother Marianna was thirty-seven, and we were living in a townhouse in New Williamsburg. Your father was born almost exactly nine months after

that first 350 Day, an early arrival in the largest generation since those misunderstood Millennials.

Everyone, of course, was choosing optimistic baby names. And so that's why your father is named Dylan, after a Nobel Prize-winning songwriter from the famously optimistic 1960s. (Maybe archaic names are a family trait; my name, Aldus, comes from the 15th century printer who created the form of the modern book.)

In a few years you'll learn all our century's history from Tutor. So why do I feel the need to repeat it?

You will turn twenty-one in the first year of the 22nd century. A fresh page to inscribe. You and your generation have known no society other than this one, which we now find mostly pleasing and just. Problems remain, of course, and much work is yet to be done, but it feels as if our species has arrived at some benign plateau.

For now. Time is never kind to contentment, and we don't know what lies ahead.

But this is about what has already gone right: the transformation of our species and the planet in the 21st century, starting when the outlook was dire, and what it was like to be there.

In the early century, when I was your age, we had the technologies, the social models, the economic understandings...all the tools we needed to make the planet a healthy and just place to live.

As a species, we simply needed to do everything right for fifty years or so.

Did we do everything right? Of course not.

But we were close enough.

What I write won't be instructional; you'll learn enough

facts from Tutor. Neither is this a memoir; that would be pompous and unwarranted. You'll see many biographies of my generation's greats, and I was, at best, a foot soldier. But there is also value in the soldier's perspective.

And of course my media is tagged for Lifepath, so you'll have that also.

I refuse to sit for a Simula, although I know it's all the rage among people my age. I can't bear the thought of an AI avatar of myself, some digital doppelgänger prattling on, a decade after my passing. It would be a cheap and tawdry souvenir, telling you little of my essence. Your parents agree with me on this but if, a decade hence, all your friends have Simulacrum grandparents and you have none, just tell them your Nonno was irredeemably old-fashioned. And then count yourself lucky that you have these words from me rather than a glowing shapeshifting blob of bloviating AI.

Writing is a skill I achieved late in life, and this how I want to leave my words, even if it's the static language you'll call a fossil document. Fossils have taught our species a great deal. And for me, writing is still a unique medium: the thought travels straight to word, and then the word returns directly to thought. Even today, no neural link is as precise as the well-chosen word.

The essay is a literary form best suited to freehand writing, so I will take that as my challenge. And there will be family history, when I can't resist.

Please bear with me as I choose my words. I might ramble a bit in the telling, but we are certain to arrive at an end.

And may you read this in an even better world than we have today.