

Occupied Memories

8/13

Lake Sweney is what got most people to the park. My grandmother told stories of how Northpoint Park used to be a hell hole in her time. Fiendish youths with drink and smoke enjoyed free rein while political provocateurs shouted proclamations atop their lofty soapboxes and sleazy schemers pushed their products in the background. As a kid I always found this depiction of pre-hydrated Northpoint so fantastical- such a rebellious cabal, all harmoniously going about their respective racket. Shoot!- sometimes I would even imagine a drunken youth assisting a frail, old provocateur from off their soapbox. But my grandmother did her best to expunge that feeling of solidarity in me, claiming that the flood of '77 was an act of providence.

You see towns like the one I grew up in sprung up all over the place in the late 60s to early 70s. Exurbs- I think they call them. Little pieces of heaven to retreat to after a long day's work in the other -urbs. Before the exurbs poured onto the landscape in the form of asphalt and concrete there was mainly just farmland and pockets of little "villages" (groups of markets, churches, or rundown shanties). Best believe any time we were on a dusty, 2-lane backroad grandma would always be reminiscing about how she'd kick up dirt on these trails on the way home from Sunday school. However, these dusty roads were only phantoms. Villages had been molded into mall complexes or office centers with a vast gradient of townhouses and McMansions occupying the former farmland. The exurbs rolled through with the pace of inevitability, but the path towards doom. In the height of urbanization massive rainfall hit the valley in which several of the old villages sat in. The pool of synthetic material stuck on the bedrock prevented soil from soaking in rainwater and runoff turned into flash floods. "We lost a lot of people" they say- but that's just about all the old folk say about that. It was soon after the flood of '77 that locals demanded the creation of a reservoir for excess runoff drainage. They designated Northpoint park as the location since it was outside the valley- but more importantly was the only piece of wilderness left.

8/14

The outings to Lake Sweeney were my favorite field trips in school. I'd be super attentive, making sure to check everywhere, but never did I see the ghouls of grandma's past- only gentle wanderers enjoying time over the calm blue tide. The main activity taken up was walking; though many public gatherings, parties, and naturalists flocked to the shores of Sweeney.

It's now been some years since those memories. Living in the valley "village" closest to Northpoint Park I had no excuses for not revisiting . Yet the bustling town centers are so alluring... still, couldn't I have visited just once- to pay my respects at least? No, why fake it. And besides, my friends and I can't race with our new, industrial toys in the park.

*Ring**Ring* One of my fellow racers had dialed me.

"You got to download this app. It's called *Surge!* and the more you flood a location with friends, the more points you get and after a certain amount of points you all can go on quests together for these dope rewards! Its super awesome, I'm about to go test it out at Northpoint, you want to come?"

They're a fast talker, all I had time to say was "Sure."

8/15

The game was ridiculously fun. After that initial test run we kept returning to the park to play it. More and more people joined in, roaming through the park looking for places to congregate. The picnicking families join us, then the public lecturers, and finally those elusive naturalists. Eventually the whole town was playing *Surge!* with Northpoint Park being the perfect *Surge!* field. The park's natural beauty intoxicated you into a blissful stupor; as you played for hours, racking up points, the vast space and huge number of players made each quest unpredictable.

8/30

It's been a couple of weeks of *Surge!* camping and I'm hooked. Tomorrow I'm meeting with some friends I haven't seen in a while to play at Northpoint.

9/3

Hadn't been worried about *Surge!* the past couple of days. But there was this one customer who came in towards closing- wandering the way of us veteran players. I'd find them caught in a reverie again, as I went to lock up our garbage. They were standing besides their car, just gazing down the back alley.

"We're closed." I went. (all for public Surging but to do it at place of business, around closing, is a bit sketchy)

After corralling folks back into their car I went to get in my hoopty. Not even ten seconds later is when the accident happened. I didn't T-bone them or anything serious, just a small collision with their front bumper as I backed out. Sure I was fumbling around with the aux cord but honestly neither of us could tell you who was most distractacted.

"What the hell! How'd you not see me?" They started panicking under my scrutiny. "Uh...it's really not a big deal. Just give me your insurance information and-"

. "You'll have to wait," they interpreted. "I'll call my parents, they have all the insurance stuff."

"Sure, whatever." I thought, just wanting to get this over with. Looking back, it was desperation rather than trust that kept me in that parking lot.

I got back in my car and not far after-

Tap *Tap* went the passenger window. I looked up. "What's up?"

"It's freezing out here." They shouted.

"Okay?"

"My heat doesn't work..."

After I cleared some room, they slid into the passenger seat with a silent nod of gratitude. For what seemed like ages the only thing we shared in that car was the blaring music coming out of folks earbuds! Folks was really zoning; full on head-banging and arm-waving. I took a minute just to admire the audacity, then tried for their attention.

"Hey!-So your parents gonna be quick?"

"Yep." Back to the music.

"Ah..." I stuttered. Time was ticking. And through the distant sherberry that lined the lot, I caught a glimpse of the red and white streaks which glazed across the highway. "Traffic!" I thought. We'd be here for a while.

"I'm going outside to smoke."

I made sure to note how it must not have been that cold, especially with the mask they had on. "Its for fashion." they retorted slyly.

"Fashion." I scoffed to myself.

The fool spoke more out there than next to me. I don't know if it was the smoke, or the theoratic ambience set forth by the brilliant gleam of street lamps, but they came alive out on that vacant parking lot.

"Les go Les go

"Wo ay"

"Les go"

"Wo"

"Les go Les go"

"Wo ay"

"Les go"

"Wo" Hey I had to join in- its a catchy song!

That's when they slid through the passenger door with more force now, mask lowered."Nights like this, I can spend hours gliding from city to city, counting the rolling stars that zip by." I had to agree, realizing the drive back home was a highlight of my day. It hurt to catch them in a lie as we shared that genuine moment of wanderlust.

"City to City? You not from around here?"

Part of me wanted to just kick them out and flee from the scene, but we were now conspirators who needed to be on the same page. I told them to tell me everything. "Who did you call?" "Where are you going?". Wasn't even their parent's car! They told me how they had recently quit their job and joined in with a group of hitchhikers making their way across the country to an estranged cousin's old farm, where they plan on squatting

"Why not get another job?"

"Come on... they're not paying enough. How much you make?"

"But imagine you pass and someone just comes along and occupies your memory?"

"Hey- If I'm not there it's whoever's place now." We had reached an impasse. There was no conceiving them.

“I can’t let you do this, you’ll never return home.”

“That’s the point.” they mumbled as I dialled the police.

The energy in the car became foul as we waited to see who’d reach the lot first.

“You’ll thank me later.”

“I don’t even know you.”

****9/5****

I’m writing about what happened the other day.

****9/1****

Looking back, I should’ve stayed home. Without my phone I’d be a glorified tour guide. A curious dread filled my stomach as I surveyed the landscape. Maybe I wasn’t up for the task. Having to dodge packs of players flying through quests I made it down to the southern shores of Sweeney where a group of misfits stood idle, waiting for my instructions. I didn’t have their attention long when my old friends began pulling away, checking a series of alerts on their phones. Then a loud voice, presumably from a distant speaker, boomed across the park. “Attention *Surge!* Players, due to high demand, Northpoint has opened an expanded section on its Northeastern border.”

“I didn’t know there was more park.” “Me neither.” “Isn’t there a business and office park over there?” I didn’t say anything.

Could’ve sworn we remembered a bunch of warehouses on the other side of the park’s eastern woods, yet as we walked, there was only more forest. “Was it abandoned or are we missing?” I thought to myself.

Walking in the woods has always been surreal to me. A reason why I avoid doing it so often. Something about the tactile concoction that lay underfoot in the woods that always illicit a solitary moment of reflection. It was otherworldly. Every crackle of top layer vegetation and debris was so gratifying to the ear. I was here. And I was lighter, steps more buoyant from the cushiony tension that history laid under leaves and topsoil. My foot sprung upward. While bouncing along, the sheer mass and omnipresent of the animals’ calls added to our extraterrestrial experience. I’m not sure if the crows were calling or warning but it didn’t matter. The ground beneath us was pushing us towards a primordial land.

We spent moments of quiet together, looking up, down and all around. Then one of my friends remembered the phone in their hand. “Yo let’s stop here, look at all the points I’m getting.” I started towards the huddle we were forming when I realized one of the figures making its way toward us was unfamiliar. As I stood stunned, the rest of the group turned to face the stranger. They hobbled closer and it was clear they weren’t a *Surge!* player as there was no phone in sight. Just tattered clothes over aged skin and what seemed to be a giant, flashing dice cube jammed into the figure’s temple.

“Help meee-” It pitifully gagged from its dehydrated vocal box.

None of us could produce a response. But all our phones saved us from such embarrassment by displaying a quest alert with the following voiceover. “Congratulations you’ve unlocked our beta SuperQuest. You may choose to either ignore our capture this-” But before our phones could finish the figure staggered towards us with increased hostility, startling some of us into jumping back

“Nooo take tracker! Noooo take tracker!” It pointed to the blinking red cube embedded in its skull.

“Is that how we capture it?” “No clue.” “Ay come on y’all let’s go look for some other spots, this quest is lame.” Almost everyone agreed and turned to head deeper into the forest. Something caught the figures attention and it hurried away in a bewildered path. But before this, me and the figure shared a glance during one of those infinitely finite moments. As I turned around to follow my friends something told me things were not right.