

## The Mills

The black leather of the chairs I sat in creaked as my weight sank into it, as did the others with the weight of the other people within our tour. There were monitors for vital signs, which made some of us shift a bit in the chairs. Heart signs and brain activity and all. But our guide, Tom, reassured us that we wouldn't be facing anything more dangerous than our own bad coordination within the simulation. He grinned, "These are here to make sure no one has a panic attack inside, and if they do, we can pull them out nice and easy."

The white walls also had monitors advertising another virtual tour; the left one of ancient Rome, the right of the Qing dynasty, and a couple behind me whispered about visiting digital Machu Picchu. Caesar would probably still bawk at our Latin even if everything else was right. The other attendants helped to make sure our helmets fit well, and the arm and leg restraints weren't too uncomfortable, and we were plunged from sitting in darkness in a computer room to standing outside of an old mall with an empty parking lot.

"Good afternoon everyone! Glad you all could make it out here with us today on this cloudy Saturday afternoon!" the guide yelled at us.

The building in front of us was a sprawling complex, adorned with fading paints of blue and white, with an old Blue's logo on the side, the old NASCAR side was still checkered with its finish line flag grey and white. We would be entering into the Food Court, and splitting off into groups of five, one guide for each. The building stuck out against its weed infested parking lot that spanned around for hundreds if not thousands of feet. One of the buildings had two blue letters on the side hanging on, and in combination with the legible outline of the other letters, it

looked like the word “SEARS”. None of the other buildings had any such letters on them. A kid started fiddling the weeds, and the guide cut back in.

“Alright everyone, please do remember that your headsets are extremely sensitive. Any damage will be billed to your account that you’ve provided for your deposits today!”

He said this with a smile that hid annoyance since any damages got taken out of his pay for this trip. Understandable in this economy.

“So! You’ll be seeing this old relic in its former glory as we make our way through. Of course, adjusting to virtual may be a bit weird at first, so make sure to take full strides as you walk! That being said, let’s get this show on the road!”

The group I was with was older, with a few youngins strewn about like the impatient kid. Probably grandparents with their grandchildren, trying to show as best as possible just where we all used to hang out when we had the wind blowing on our backs and heads full of thick hair.

The faded sign above our heads, read “W\_lco\_me T\_Ent\_y F\_ve” on its faded orange plaster. Above it, the designation of “Regal 18 Ci\_em\_s” stood all the way ‘till now. I only shook my head at the dilapidated, faded name plate, and closed my eyes.

In the beginning, there was nothing, and then there was orange. There was tan, there was yellow. The paint on the walls that was left to nature was cleaned and finished with digital coats. The trees were cut back neat and tight, and the weeds disappeared from the lot. Potting circles were planted with pink and white azaleas and yellow rose bushes. The light poles were restored to their former glossy black glory, and when you looked into the sky, there was pure blue. Sunshine, with fluffy fat white clouds wafting through the air. Things I never paid attention to when I ran in to shop at stores with my parents money, or to go to the movies with a friend.

We walked into the mall, and gasps of surprise were drowned out by the bustling of people, the shuffling of feet and shopping bags, smells of food from the World's Fair to the right and popcorn from the movie theater to the left. I saw the lights glinting from the ceiling, and parents who smiled at me in apology as their children almost bumped into me as they ran out the doors to cars made of ones and zeros. I looked up to see the other Saint Louis woman staring at the same thing, so this truly would be a shared experience. The ticket person at the movie theater was taking orders from a short line, for daytime showings for that summer's blockbusters: *Spider-Man 2*, *I Robot*, and *Dodgeball*.

“Hello everyone!” Tom called, to the annoyance of a few parents in the mall-of-past. “We’ll be starting the tour now, going back through this mall’s peak year, 2004!” And with that, he started walking with a tablet in tow.

There were a few younger people in our group, looking to be in their late teens and early twenties. They would have stuck out here, with their huge visors that covered most of their faces they wore outside, along with their interesting hair choices. They would have never matched us and our Razor’s, microbraids, low rise jeans, and unfortunate Disney channel outfits for the middle schoolers. A couple snickered at us olds for being so astounded with being transported, since they used the virtual experience often to go to untold worlds themselves. Fighting dragons in front of you, negotiating with aliens beyond you, and they chose to learn the history behind them, or to just laugh at old people and the things they thought were cool once upon a time. Maybe the Galleria tour would be good for that.

The older woman with her grandchild seemed to be taking this better than we were. She didn't jump at the surprise of being transported back to 2004, the world of flip phones and baggy white tees, low rise jeans, and multicolored polos.

"Excuse me," I started, "You've been on one of these mall tours before?"

Her words carried with a thick Saint Louis accent, "Oh yeah. I was on the Jamestown tour about a year ago."

"So you'd be one of these pixel-parents smiling at us then?"

She smiled in acknowledgement and thumbed to the boy, "I wanted this one to see where his father spent so much time when he was the same age."

"And I'd be running around here with dad too, probably." I sighed, "You a local too?"

She crossed her arms, "Vashon, 1988"

"Central, 2006."

We talked and walked, distracting ourselves from Tom's tellings of suburbia, and I answered her grandson's questions. His name was Tobias, he loved science, and wanted to be the first man on Europa someday. "No Hal 3000 jokes, though." he said.

After we veered right, through the jungle-gym, we stopped for kids who almost bumped into us. A small carousel was full of kids, We noticed others from the group splitting off from the main group, and with them went some of the other mall-guides. They were heading to the Levi's store that used to be there. The lady, (whose name I learned was Lanae), her grandson, and I stuck with Tom.

"No need to peruse the stores, you all?" he asked us.

"No, not really. We're here to reminisce, not shop."

I wondered what our group looked like to Tom and the other guides, but I didn't want to think about old people meandering around an empty store, ooh-ing and ahh-ing about virtual baggy jeans being held up by fake store employees, so I kept the illusion on.

A few of us olds were marveling at the old prices of clothes we used to wear, and notably enough, Tobias went to a Sunglass Hut and bought a pair of oversized, frameless, red sunglasses that mostly looked like a massive face visor that shaded his eyes behind two ovals. I can't believe we thought they were cool, and even more so that the other kids with us thought so too.

Seemed like Lenae disagreed with me, and her compliments for the kid flew out like any grandmother's. "You look just like your daddy." she chuckled.

The boys' eyes glinted with pain behind the visors, "I wish he could walk through with me here too."

I was about to say something, when the other kids yelled over to Tobias. "Hey! We're going over to the hockey-rink with this guy." the ringleader pointed at a still smiling Tom behind their small entourage. "Wanna come?"

He looked at us, and his grandmother's nod of approval sent him away. "You all can walk around that way faster than us anyway." she said, jabbing her thumb over to the other people our age, "We'll stay with the other old people, so just ask the guide where you can find us when you're ready."

One of the guides stayed around as we plopped on small benches outside of an entrance to a mini golf course to take a break. Lenae and I people-watched again, seeing fake teenagers skateboard away from fake security guards, their teenage hubris in full bloom as their middle fingers chastised the guards whose lungs and legs foiled the pursuit. Out of the corner of my eye,

I saw Lanae slip from her seat onto the floor, calling for the guard to help her up, disregarding me and the fact that she didn't actually need any help. Locking eyes with one of the teens as they rolled by, I felt an unnerving chill run up my spine. Can pixels express gratitude? The teens rounded a corner and disappeared into another section of the mall.

Lanae started laughing, and jumped into an explanation after seeing my confused face.

“I just feel like my grandma now. Sitting down and letting the kids run around.”

I laughed back, “It was built for them more than us, honestly.”

“Mhm, Jamestown was nothing like this, and at least I could keep up with my son when he came here.”

“And how was Jamestown?”

She started to tell me, but she stopped.

“I was about to say ‘take the tour’, but their Jamestown and the one I remember are so different. I can talk about the people, the rich kids and the poor kids that got run off by security. The lack of people who looked like us for sure, also because of security, and the air that felt smelled of permanent, solid wealth that bounced off the cream colored walls and always waxed floors. Even the business guys and their fat ass cellphone briefcases sitting on benches doing business at the worst place to do any business. But I can’t give you a view into my memories directly, and they’re rose-tinted as it is. I’m sure you probably feel the same here.”

She was right. The bright colors seemed too bright, people were a little too kind; the most perfect experience you could get somewhere like this. It felt like trying to remember Grandma’s chocolate cakes; even with the full recipe, it just didn’t taste the same. Malls weren’t made with love, and they simply wanted wallets, but they were full of people who brought their love and

humanity into them. The purchasing of things together, eating and walking around, all under the umbrella of the dollar. The dollar was a problem, but the emotions underneath were not, necessarily. Pixels can try, but they just won't get it.

“So why did you bring your grandson?”

“He won’t know the difference. The malls are gone, and they aren’t coming back. And he asked. Didn’t you ever wonder what it was like for your parents to grow up? What they did to hang-out? Going to a “retro” restaurant and watching their faces or hearing them complain, ‘This ain’t totally right?’”

I thought about trying to tell her my view of the aughts, but I couldn’t. All we knew was that those were not golden eras. Everytime, the neon lights shut off, the big buildings in the middle of nowhere rot, never to be freshly painted or have receipts printed from them again.

“So it’s not ‘good enough’ for us, but it is for him.”

“For the smiles I’ve seen today? Of course.”

“And he’ll do the same thing one day.”

“More than likely. Always trying to make vivid memories into experiences, into reality. But they’ll always be wrong. People think they remember ‘exactly’ everything from moments, from times in their lives.”

She tapped her forehead. “But these brains? They age, forget, rewrite, make certain what never truly was. Make throwing money and life into things that would never last look like the good old days.”

We got up to walk over to the ice-rink, right close by to the NASCAR go-cart park. Music and squealing tires screamed from the tracks, and hockey sticks clicked and slapped the

ice and each other across the way. The pizza shop right at the entrance had families coming in and out, tired from a day of using credit cards. The floors glistened with fresh wax, and we stopped to get pretzels that came out perfectly golden brown, not too salty, not too plain. The other old people's faces all read the same, and I was no different. Tobias was having a great time with the other kids, so that was something. Maybe I'd try out the tour of unauthentic Rome next.