

Note from an Extinct Species of PNF-404

—*I'd call it either 'rugged sentimentality' or 'a subtle taste of cheese.'*

—*isn't that like 'the shock of your life or a piece of cheese' from that one puppeteering showcase? Myrna and Tyche?*

—*Oh, you're talking about the Oyeyemi story?*

—*Yes, "is your blood as red as this?"*

—*Exactly, it is like that. And of course it is.*

I have a penchant for subtlety. It's a word that smirks like 'sublime' does (do you taste the thorny lime squeezed over this word? Or the water droplets splashing onto 'subtle' in a cave?). Perhaps it's their secrecy, the subterranean quality of crypticism. I use these words with the keenness of my desire to unlatch thousand year old doors. Touch your tongue to sugardusted paper, but please, don't get it wet.

I remember one evening when I was 8 or 9, driving with my dad and brother to the Westfield Topanga Mall, years before The Village was even greenlit. We parked on the second floor of the brutalist, concrete parking structure, and the night sky was not too dissimilar from those you'd see in Japanese citypop Youtube videos. Likely because this memory is far away, and the night sky was already far away then. So my brain may be making things up to segment the subtleties into tangible nostalgia pulp. Perhaps that's why these tiny increments of idiosyncratic flavor abound with the magical truth I believe is real and unlockable. Why, we haven't even touched ground yet.

The three of us walk through the mall to Gamestop, though my best guesswork tells me our primary motive for coming here was not to shop for videogames. My brother and I were browsing like an inspired visit to the library. I was examining the sale rack for Gamecube games when a disc case caught my eye. There were these primary colored creatures with stems on their heads scrambling on earthlike terrain, reacting to a spotted, bulbous, biting entity ready to chomp down on them. These frantic beings—red, yellow, blue— with leaves, bulbs, and flowers sprouting from their craniums, attracted me. It may have just been the colors, or their simple expressions as they ran away from the polka-dotted, stalk-eyed predator, but I convinced my dad to buy Nintendo's *Pikmin* for me. My brother had no objections either.

When we got home my brother and I immediately went to my room and booted up the Gamecube. With the *Pikmin* disc spinning inside it, the console illuminated the screen and the classic intro sequence unfurled: a xylophonic shuffle into place as an indigo cube rolls into cube like a spider skittering inside a music box. All go for the

Gamecube to load the next adventure. Story Mode: to this day this is the style of play I've been choosing.

Pikmin is a game that begins with a crash landing onto unknown planet PNF-404 when an asteroid collides with the *S.S. Dolphin*, sending both rocket and captain to the planet's surface. Captain Olimar wakes up at The Impact Site, a quaint garden of posies, tree stump, and clamshell beach, and takes stock of his misfortune: he's stranded on a planet whose oxygen is highly toxic, and his rocketship is nosedeeep into the ground, shooting sparks, which is unhelpful.

"Olimar?" I say, looking at my brother, Ollie. He bears the resemblance to this name proudly like any older brother would; he gets to be captain.

We play the game together, him controlling. After only a few steps in the arena do we encounter what Olimar labels as an "onion," the mothership to all pikmin. The first color onion we find in the game is red, and the red pikmin has a distinctive proboscis, like the yellow has its batlike ears and the blue has its frowning gills. The first pikmin to spew from the onion's zenith has to be plucked from the ground, and it is after completing this menial task and observing the lifeform before him that Olimar names the creatures "pikmin," inspired by his home planet Hocotate's very Pikipik carrot.

What is this universe? In the Impact Site we can see a cardboard box blocking the path to the *S.S. Dolphin*'s most invaluable part: the engine. Olimar takes advantage of the pikmin's obsequious nature to populate them and command them to lift the engine and carry it to his ship. Later, as the game progresses and we're free to scout new regions of the planet—The Forest of Hope, The Forest Navel, the Distant Spring—the pikmin are led into battle against larger omnivorous foes: bulborbs, cannonbeetles, snagrets, wollywogs, blowhogs, breadbugs, goolixes, mamutas (once the game is completed there runs a taxonomy of each creature in the credits).

As a child who only had his brother's partnership that first night, I never made it very far into the game. Olimar's life support system can only last 30 days, and I remember vividly that I'd still be ambulating around the game's second area, The Forest of Hope, on critical day 26, having collected a paltry number of parts to repair the *S.S. Dolphin* and missing an entire pikmin species. I was a daft astronaut and survivalist who lost focus for his own rescue, yet in those 20 odd days I didn't lose interest in the celestial body whose gravity had swallowed me. PNF-404 is a deserted Earth, abundant in human relics but absent in human activity. As cantankerous as the flora and fauna may have become in our absence (or may have retained), the planet's peace and wonderment endures, secretly more enthralling now that human history is over. Olimar

and his pikmin are mighty small, I should add; the wilderness revives where a brook seduces a hollow.

Playing *Pikmin* made me a better observer of the world's intricacies. My brooding culture of intrigue into plant and insect life was catalyzed and spread to more lobes. Pikmin would occasionally fish for underground honey with blades of grass, pick up bomb rocks to hurl at stone barricades or hungry foes, or shriek and squirm as they drowned or were devoured... You see, the smallest gardens are actually the most dangerous. The game's inch-off-the-ground ambiance was an ingenious sonic mix of botanical whimsy and zoological paranoia, complete with whizzing, splashing, croaking, chirping, rippling, ringing and trickling. All the musical instruments sound as if they were played by a pond. Exploring as Olimar, I felt as much in command as I did no match for the threats of hostile PNF-404. The little Hocotatian was leader and larva, alone and engulfed. The more I shrunk down to Olimar's level the more I found the subtle wilderness of what lived below my knee to be full of curios. Seedpods and thistles, stymen and bug carcasses, leaf litter and shed bark—all my make-believe could very well have come from the dirt. *Pikmin* taught me new words too, like *extinction* and *navel*, which I will forever associate with the game's naturalism, and *analog*, *sagittarius* and *libra*, which I will forever associate with the game's spacetravel.

This game was in no way a sandbox, but even with the map borders the pikmin planet always posed an uncoverable mystery. The overworld map was dense and atmospheric, uncommunicative of the explorable regions' ecology or terrain. The way Olimar named each area cast him as torchlight in an uncharted world, looking for hope, seeing the forest's concavernous layout as a bellybutton, calling mist distant and the stages trials. Everything was touched by his sentience, most notably the pikmin themselves, whose name bears the tidings of his home planet.

I played *Pikmin* and *Pikmin 2* and I waited for *Pikmin 3* with fiery anticipation. I had a release party planned and I would tickle myself with fanmade trailers of the new game where original pikmin types handmade in plush—black, light pink, pale yellow, brown velvet—peeked through the trees or grass. I took *Pikmin* seriously, maybe because it opened my mind to phenomena of this world I had hitherto been unaware of. Do I owe my predilection for mushrooms and insects to the *Pikmin* franchise? What about my awe for the whims of deep space? Discovering new creatures, exploring patches of wilderness unreachable by trail, tasting the textures and acidity of nature's tchotchkes just by looking—my penchant for subtlety: where were you born?

PNF-404 is supposed to be Earth in an era following the anthropocene. Olimar and his pikmin are tiny navigators of a posthuman world, and it's an ever so slightly

poignant, hushed comment on the longevity of our own species. Poignancy was certainly not a sentiment I understood at that age, but perhaps *Pikmin* incited emotions in their protoforms. I was learning about ‘small’ and its sister subtleties, and my penchant grew ever more dazzling—the shiver sent through my whole body from a graze.

—I think I get it now

—Really?

—Yeah, apart from you calling sentimentality ‘rugged’

—I think rugged is...hard to study. And it’s raw, like ore, and takes a lot of geologic force to make

—You’re using metaphor to explain to me what’s already unclear?

—Yes, I think I am