

Joe Restoule General

Age: 29

Dokis First Nation

Ohsweken, ON

Occupied

The wheels keep spinning and spinning and spinning, stuck in a rut among the loose gravel. It's an uphill climb as I push my daughter towards the bridge at the top of the path. I prefer the click-clack of the stroller on the uneven sidewalk stones over this two steps forward, three steps back monotonous dance. As I reach the bridge I catch a glimpse of the flags crackling in the distance. The occupiers remain on the territory as my daughter sleeps a peaceful sleep.

It's been almost two weeks since the OPP removed a handful of protestors from the Douglas Creek Estates building site. Another two months since the group took over the entrance to the site to protest the unresolved land claim. Another eleven years or so since the federal government was made aware of the issues surrounding these lands originally given to the Six Nations of the Grand River in the Haldimand Proclamation. Just over a year since the night my daughter entered this world.

I'm not sure if it's curiosity, thirst, or absolution which brings me near the simmering stand off between the OPP and the Native protestors, as the media refers to them. Right now, the only thing simmering is the heat, as officers sit in squad cars at every entry point to the Estates, probably doing their public duty to remain in the shade. Meanwhile, protestors make the journey to cool libation half a mile up the road at the local Tim Horton's, passing through the barricade and the squad cars without notice.

I've seen these images on TV. It's the third squad car that surprises me, parked at the end of a dead end street. As I wheel my daughter in her stroller away from the dead end, we cross the road to get to the other side. Though I haven't been in this neighbourhood in awhile, I'm taken aback by the outpouring of patriotism more commonplace in an American suburb. Every third house sports a brand new Canadian flag, not yet faded by the afternoon sun. They hang limp, not yet accustomed to the wind's

caress, denied free movement by the starch hangover of plastic packaging.

I peek inside the sunroof of the canvas canopy to be sure my daughter hasn't stirred. She lies with her hands and arms above her head as I pass a fourth squad car at yet another dead end. I'm walking in circles.

An elderly couple blocks the sidewalk ahead of me so I slow my pace down so as not to scare them. They're dressed in salmon sweaters and khaki pants, carrying bags of groceries from the nearby supermarket. It's difficult to navigate around them, as their walk is slightly crooked, and the woman is at least seven feet ahead of the man. I take to the grass, trampling the dandelions, and the man takes notice of me.

"Excuse me," he says in a hoarse growl.

"Oh, I'm sorry," the woman says upon hearing her husband's voice.

"No problem," I reply, and continue past the Catholic school. There's a sign outside celebrating Catholic School Week. Oddly self congratulatory. This school was shut down the day of the OPP raid. Public safety was a concern. Apparently someone in power thought the Natives posed a threat to the children inside. Or perhaps it was the OPP's own actions which may have been contrary to the public well being. It's never been explicitly stated.

Kitty corner to the school I hear children screaming and squealing. I see two young girls skipping through the sprinkler, cooling off on the nicest Spring day of the year. Possibly celebrating Catholic School Week from home. I imagine my daughter hopping through the hose spray when she comes home from school.

"What did you do at school today, sweetheart?"

"We had a social in the morning and watched Finding Nemo 2," she replies.

I'm distracted by a milk carton twirling from a tree branch. A homemade bird feeder welcomes the soft, warm breeze and I look for my daughter's fingerprints on it. What will hers look like five years from now? Her future feeder?

My thoughts are interrupted by the sound of a backhoe arguing with a bulldozer. Construction sounds fill the air, drowning out the girls' screaming and causing my daughter to rustle in her stroller. You can put a stop to one construction site, and two others take its place. I pick up my pace, speeding over chalk outlines of preschoolers etched on the pavement in sidewalk chalk. Each has a name scribbled beside it, in

memory or recognition. It hasn't rained in sometime and I can't imagine when these ghosts will be washed away.

Even though my daughter is sleeping, she brings smiles to people's faces. At my brisk pace, home owners between dwellings with flags smile, nod their heads, and say a friendly greeting. This small town spirit feels odd in context of the current occupation. I can't tell if the residents' greetings are on account of my very beautiful young child, that all parents can relate to, or whether they are going out of their way to express their kindness, as if to say, "We're on your side. Don't paint all of us in Caledonia with the same brush." Perhaps that's why I'm taking my daughter into town on a peace walk. To say the same thing about First Nations.

It's hard to ignore the fact that this sleeping wonder, this harmless child was once the image of the warriors who stand behind the barricade, wearing a bandana to conceal that peaceful face. That one day, this snoozing child which elicits smiles from non-Native residents may one day be the one awakening her people to the unresolved land claims. A future leader asleep in the present, dreaming of an outcome to this historic occupation which alludes us for the time being. Will this issue be history by the time she comes of age, taught in school as the day the Canadian government agreed to negotiate with the Confederacy council, for the first time in over 80 years, when in 1924 they forcibly removed the hereditary government by gunpoint? Or will she be forced to see history repeat itself, over and over again?

I pause at the top of the hill, in the middle of the bridge which carries us over a small creek. I look to the sun and follow the flow of the creek as it splits the park in two equal sections. On one side, there's a thousand dandelions, a massive army of yellow and gold taking over the hillside. On the other lies a solitary, strong tree. An evergreen, alone among the grass, not a dandelion in sight. The smell of freshly cut grass fills my head.

I cross that bridge and ponder the historic nine span bridge that crosses the Grand River in Caledonia. With the blockade increased traffic has been diverted over the concrete structure built a couple of years after the Indian Act. There's always been concern about the long term strength and stability of the bridge and this stand off continues to apply pressure to the bridge. I can't help but feel the weight crushing the

pillars of the past and whether or not this added pressure will perpetuate the bridge's inevitable collapse.

Just then, my daughter wakes up, springing to life, as a Yellow Warbler flies past her field of vision. She giggles with delight, seeing something so beautiful, so peaceful, so gracious for the first time. I want to join in her laughter.