

TITLE: I work at a knock off 'Pocket Monster' theme park. Another kid has gone missing

Before you ask, yes, this place is a pretty blatant rip-off of everyone's favorite franchise featuring an electric yellow mouse.

But I'm not going to reveal the name or location to disparage the business owners. They've been around for a long time, and people work hard here.

I'll call it 'PocketMon World.'

Normally the park would have to release a statement about the third kid going missing, but because there isn't quite enough evidence that it happened on company grounds, technically they don't have to.

Obviously it would be a PR nightmare if word spread that three kids total have now gone missing at our park.

I feel terrible for the missing kids, all the employees do. But this theme park employs like 50% of the people who live on this tiny island, so no one wants to cause a stir.

"I'm going to try and find him," Wakako told me one evening.

"What?"

"I'm going to try and find the third kid."

We were in the employee mess hall. One of the big perks of working here is that everyone ate together at the end of the day.

"They already searched for the boy," I said. "They're combing through the forest now."

"I don't think he's in the forest," Wakako whispered. "I think he's stuck in the heap beneath the pirate ship".

Beneath PM World's pirate ship ride was a 'sea' of blue tarps, which were actually covering tons of old props and discarded junk."

“Why would he go in there?”

“He's a kid. I dunno. Maybe he thought that's where he could catch a rare shiny.”

I scoffed, but it could have been true. All the kids with their phones were constantly looking for the virtual creatures everywhere.

“We're not supposed to look for the kid. It's going to make the tourists uncomfortable.”

“That's why I'm going at midnight,” she said. “Are you coming or not?”

Of course I had to join, for multiple reasons.

One: I got this job through Wakako, so I felt like I owed her a lot.

Two: She's also allowing me to stay at her aunt's cottage, it's the only way I could afford to be here.

Wakako has been pretty much my entire “in” for this whole situation. I met her teaching English in Tokyo (she was the receptionist). We had gone on a few dates and eventually she invited me to join her at her summer job working for PocketMon World. It's the main tourist destination and pretty much the only place of work on her hometown island.

At exactly 11:50 PM we snuck our way into the theme park, skirting around all of the security cameras. All of the animatronics looked creepy.

The normally cheery Crocozard, who would blow bubbles at the entrance, was now this dead, scary statue, leaking soap water from its mouth.

And the cat-lemur guy (I always forgot its name) who would usually give friendly waves to everyone, instead had its arms frozen in a pleading prayer, as if to say: *Help me. Please. Don't leave me here.*

We stuck to the shadowy rear of the attractions until we came across the pirate ship in question. It was a massive boat, attached only by a single swinging joint above the blue tarp ocean.

Koko lifted one of the tarp flaps and directed me to duck. Inside was a crawl space that was about the height of a child. I could see why Koko thought this was where the kid went.

My chunky flashlight illuminated rows and rows of support beams, the kind you would find under bleachers. I could see old food carts laying on their side, and wooden signs that said たこ焼き and 唐揚げ. (Although I could hold an okay conversation in Japanese, I still struggled to read anything.)

“Okay, let’s stick together and cover the whole area.” Wakako said. “We’ll go row by row.”

I nodded and gave a thumbs up.

We checked under every shadowy nook. There were tons of cardboard cutouts of smiling people, and discontinued PocketMon to peek under. All we found were cobwebs.

The kid’s name was Kaito, so we went by each row calling: “Kaito-kun, kikoemasu ka?”
Kaito-kun, can you hear me?

“Kaito-kun, minna sagashiteimasu!” - *Kaito-kun, everyone is looking for you!*

For a moment I gasped—we had spotted a child-shaped mass on the ground, and something was leaking out of the belly. Neither of us wanted to be the first to illuminate it.

I bit the bullet and lifted my light ... it was just a jumbo plush toy of a monkey-thing. (I didn’t know the name of this one either.) It was leaking stuffing.

“Come on, let’s check the opposite side,” Wakako said. “I think I see something.”

We continued to the rear of the crawl space where Koko pointed out a hole in the tarp. It was child-sized and led outside towards the entrance of the Epsom Gym.

“Could the kid have wandered in there?” I asked.

“We have to check.”

The Epsom Gym was slated to open over three years ago, but kept getting delayed. The park’s been struggling to compete with inflation, so it put Epsom Gym and other future attractions on hiatus, even if they were partially built.

Wakako tried her keycard at the door, but it wouldn't work. We circled the hexagonal building and found a side entrance— it was also closed.

“Guess not,” I shrugged.

“Wait. Let’s look for shinies”

Wakako took out her phone and opened the PM World App. It was a low budget game where kids could try and collect PocketMons that were superimposed on geography in real life.

On her screen appeared a crappily animated rat made of bones. It was dancing on the moonlit gravel by Koko’s feet.

“Skelemouse!”

She proceeded to tap her screen, throwing nets at the rat. But it dodged them left and right.

“Is ... that a shiny?”

“Yes! Skelemouse is only catchable during the week of Halloween!” She followed the rat as it ran behind weeds and circled the building. “He shouldn’t even be here right now.”

I followed skeptically. “So the app is broken?”

She kept tapping her screen and following the rodent. The biggest reason Koko liked to work here was for the novelty of course. Sure the pay was mediocre, and sure the park was run down, but the board still released new PocketMons each season, and actively promoted their growing bestiary. If you could get past the sun-bleached decor and second-rate kitschiness of it all, there was a lot of passion to admire here.

“Look! He’s climbing the door!” Koko showed me her phone, I could see the virtual rat skitter up the front entrance door—and then phase through solid metal.

I went up and tried pushing on the handle. The door opened.

Woah. “Did you know that was going to happen?”

Wakako checked her phone. “No idea. I had heard they had scrapped stuff where the app could interact with the park. But this is the first time I've seen it.”

Before going inside, I grabbed a big stick to wedge in the door, to make sure we didn't get locked in.

We both entered side by side, painting the darkness with our yellowy flashlights. In the middle was a gym floor composed of LED panels arranged into a circle, all facing upwards. Guard rails surrounded this floor, leading you around the circumference.

Wakako aimed her phone along the perimeter, there were little busts and statues of PocketMons all in fighting stances.

"That Skelemouse is gone," she said, a little disappointed. "Do you think he could've *lured* that little boy into here as well?"

Lured. That's an English word I had taught her last weekend, when we came across fishermen at the island lake.

"I mean yeah. If the rat unlocked the door for us. Maybe he also lured Kaito?" I looked up at the ceiling and spotted dome cameras. "Is it possible security can see into this gym?"

Wakako shrugged, she was as confused as I was. We had all been instructed as employees to leave this building alone because it was still 'under construction'.

But besides being powered off, the inside looked completely finished. There were three other functional gyms at PM World where kids could come face off against actors pretending to be 'gym leaders'. All the gyms looked the same as this one, albeit in different shapes.

Why was Epsom Gym closed off?

We walked until we reached the opposite end of the octagon layout, where a washroom seemed to be located, when suddenly we heard a rumbling come from the ground.

Both our lights aimed at the gym's center. Some of the LED panels activated.

"What—"

A white, sugar-puffed raccoon dog appeared floating above the gym floor. It was none other than PocketMon's premiere mascot: Mashumaro.

It was a projection of course, confined to hovering between the LED panels. Normally Mashu had a pumped, jovial demeanor, but here, staring with empty eye sockets, half of his face was missing from poor pixelation. His voice was deep and distorted, speaking in Japanese as subtitles

ポケットモンスターワールドへようこそ！

Wakako looked away, frightened by the sudden activity. Whereas I couldn't stop staring.

“—The fuck is going on.”

Detecting my English, Mashumaro floated up towards me. Bits of him kept peeling off, revealing a wireframe underneath.

“Hello J-J-James Naka, employee #604373. Welcome to orientation!”

Koko and I swapped shocked glances.

*“Today you will learn how to —**SAVE ONE SOUL**— and how timesheets work!”*

Without saying anything, Koko and I walked backwards, edging our way towards the main door. Something was very wrong here.

Mashu followed by the railing. *“Question one: each employee must ensure they are w-w-wearing What kind of garment?”*

Gigantic numbers appeared behind the tanuki mascot. A countdown started at thirty seconds.

When we reached the entrance, The door slammed on its own, splitting the twig I had left there.

“Shit.”

The numbers were growing brighter and brighter. A loud, ghastly buzzing came from the gym's room. I cleared my throat and looked at the projection.

“Uh, the answer is: we need to wear a uniform and er... nametag?”

DING!

The floor panels lit up with faint purple light. A smile spread across Mashumaro's broken face

“Correct! Be sure to wash your uniforms regularly.”

Wakako tried scanning her key card to exit, But it wasn't working. She tried again.

*“Now can anyone guess wher —**THE LOST CHILD**— is located for all employees?”*

We gave up on the door and continued to sidle along the railing, looking for another way out. The countdown of numbers returned, growing brighter and brighter. In the last ten seconds, we had to squint in order to keep walking.

Wakako yelled, “Here! The lost child is being kept here! Isn't it?”

The power suddenly faded. Even Mashumaro disappeared. Electrical arcs shot up from the LEDs. Sparks fell from the ceiling. We both ducked in a little alcove for statues, shielding our heads. For a moment It seemed like something was going to explode.

“Cor-Cor-Correct! This is the Epsom Gym!”

The mascot reappeared above the floor, this time it was projected at a massive size. His marshmallow body was shining white light in all directions.

*“Final question! What is the name of everyone's favr— **CAPTURED BOY** — any guesses? He's sweet and puffy!”*

We reached what we believed was the employee washroom and tried to jiggle the handle. It was locked.

Mashu was a blur of low-res intersecting shapes, I couldn't tell what was supposed to be his face. The bright countdown returned, it was starting to get blinding again.

“Kaito!” I shouted “The boy is named Kaito!”

The white blurriness suddenly sharpened to a resolute creature. Mashumaro looked photoreal above the LEDs. He grinned immensely with numerous sharp teeth in his soft white mouth.

*“James Naka, congratulations! You are now a proud team member of PocketMon World! As a show of appreciation, here is your —**NULL OBJECT**.”*

The washroom door beside us popped open, and a small, limp shape tumbled out.

It was a child.

Wakako gasped and bent down, holding the little boy's face, checking his pulse.

I watched as the LEDs faded. The disturbingly real Mashumaro smiled at me and slowly flickered out of existence. Some text appeared below him.

贈り物が贈り物ではないのはどんな場合ですか?

Then we were in complete darkness again. I turned on both our flashlights.

“I can't tell! I don't know if he's breathing!” Wakako lifted the child until she could cradle him.

I peered through the opened bathroom and could see yet another door. “Come this way, before everything locks.”

We scurried out of the side exit until we were outside the building. The night breeze relieved us of the gym's inner heat.

Wakako passed the boy to me. “We need to get him to a hospital!” She grabbed her phone and dialled immediately.

The child felt warm in my arms. Fevery. Though I wasn't sure if that meant he was alive, or if it was leftover heat from where he was held. I put my ear against his mouth and felt the smallest trickle of escaping air. *That had to be a breath right?*

Wakako had contacted the island's emergency services, and was doing her best to remain calm. After she was put on hold, she had trouble containing her tears. She looked at the Epsom Gym and asked me: “What was all that? Was that someone's idea of a joke? How could someone do that to a child?!”

I held the boy as still as possible, making sure he didn't swallow his tongue. “I have no idea. Let's wait for help. One thing at a time.”

Someone got back to Wakako and instructed her to find a road. An emergency vehicle was on its way.

We circled back through the attractions under the pallid moonlight, I did not find any of the frozen animatronics scary anymore. It just felt like what it was: a theme park at night.

My real fear was losing someone's son in my arms. My real fear was having to talk to Japanese police and explain what had happened. What would they think if the park's one white employee was caught holding a dead child? That had to look more suspicious right? Am I overthinking it?

When we exited the park and got to the road, it was actually a PM World van that came to pick us up. The driver was going to take us to a designated helipad, where a medical helicopter would transport the kid to a city hospital.

In the van, I laid the boy on his back, making sure his head was still turned to the side. I'm no doctor, but I'm pretty sure his chest was rising and lowering. He looked alive. *Thank God.*

During the whole ride to the helipad, Wakako kept arguing with the driver. Their Japanese was too fast for me to fully translate, but I did understand the basics. The driver wanted us to claim we found the boy in the nearby *woods*. He said under no circumstance can we admit we found the boy in the theme park.

Wakako counter-argued and said that was stupid. She wanted to give the authorities everything they needed to figure out what was going on. A child had gone missing and was found inside the park. She didn't care about keeping her job.

Eventually the driver had had enough. He pulled over, killed the engine and stared at Wakako deliberately. The words were slow enough for me to understand.

"You will wait until tomorrow and speak to the park board. That is your only option." He let out a long, exasperated sigh. "You must never say you found this kid in the park. Ever."