

EPIISODE 12: CLEARANCE

[Hey guys. Thanks so much for listening to the podcast. I'm taking a week off after this one, so you can consider this episode the end of the season in a way. I have an idea for an intermission that I want to do, but it requires a small budget. Speaking of, you can help me out by supporting me on patreon. Go to patreon.com/woe_begone to get early episodes, instrumentals, art, music, writing, and more. Thanks to: Risky Coffee, Plumule, Edith Wharton, Cooper Dukes, Mira, Jason Li, and Austin for supporting the show. Enjoy.]

I don't want to talk about it, but this is the podcast where I talk about it, so I don't have much of a choice. I did the fourth challenge and it was unexpectedly easy. Nothing about my plan should have worked. The guy in my fake Canadian passport photo didn't even look like me. He wasn't nearly handsome enough-- the thinnest eyebrows I have ever seen. Oh, and his earlobes were attached, more importantly I guess. I got lightly scrutinized by customs on my way into Canada, but that was it. No more travel headaches after that. Not even so much as a flat tire. It was as if the planets had aligned for me. Or, rather, they were forced into alignments by the hands of a god. Or, even more accurately, by the hands of a gay bear that I met on Scruff who had the power to control spacetime.

Matt was eerily receptive to being killed to further my advancement in an online murder game. I consider any amount of enthusiasm past "aggressively rejecting my proposal and killing me on the spot" to be "eerily receptive." He wasn't supposed to be awake to eerily receive *anything*, let alone an iron rod to the skull. I'll cut the shit: I was clearly set up to succeed in that challenge and I have no idea who would set me up for victory in this way or why they would do it. Matt was awake, alert, and volunteering to die for me. God, and I took him up on it-- what kind of sociopath does that make me? He wasn't supposed to be awake. [Sigh] He wasn't supposed to be awake.

Matt understood what was happening and why I needed to kill him. When I got there, he already knew what was going on. I didn't explain anything to him. I just broke into his house and he was already waiting for me. He knew that I was coming. Standing there baffled in his kitchen, I asked him if I had explained it to him in some other time and it looked like he nodded. It was dark and I was in a frenzy, but I think he nodded. Memory is stupid. I can talk myself into and out of whether or not he nodded over and over again, thoroughly convincing myself each time. He nodded. Or he didn't nod. But I think that I told him what was going on in an iteration of that night that I don't remember anymore and he did. That's the only explanation that makes sense to me.

But if he had memories of that night that I didn't, that means that something WOE.BEGONE-y was afoot. The question is: who? Who was altering spacetime in order to make it possible for me to complete the fourth challenge? There's no way it was Ryan or some other, yet unnamed gamerunner. Ryan was clear to me that I would be doing this the hard way and there was no way that I was going to be getting any help from him. The struggle to get it done was the whole point of the challenge. It was the last step that I had to take to prove that I was all the way in. Matt was the hook, but I had to prove without a shadow of a doubt that Matt was no longer the point of the game for me. The point of the game was the game itself. Ryan intervening to make it easier would make the fourth challenge meaningless.

To wildly speculate: what if it was *me* edited the spacetime around that night in order to convince Matt? Not current me or any version of me from the past, of course. I mean a version of myself that has already received access to WOE.BEGONE and is able to make changes through time, if not already become and out-and-out gamerunner. What could be more convincing than something was up than two Mike Walters, one with a little more rugged grey in his hair, showing up at your door at night and explaining that control over the flow of time was at stake? That image is so convincing that it is the go-to image to instantly convince someone in a story that they are witnessing time travel.

This would also mean that I have won WOE.BEGONE in the future, or at least actually have access to the powers that thus far have only been used *on* me. It is hard to overstate how exciting that prospect is. If I could get proof of that, it would erase all of the doubts that I would come out the other side of this with nothing to show for it. There could be a future Mike Walters that is manipulating time and who knows what else that the supercomputer is capable of.

I needed this hope that I had already won in the future to keep me motivated. It was time to upturn even more of my life for the sake of a game. This is WOE.BEGONE.

[Intro theme plays.]

The story of WOE.BEGONE is being told in order, as it happens to me. If this is your first time listening, go back and start at episode 1. This is going to be loosely considered the end of the season, so now is a ripe time to binge the whole thing.

I understand a little bit better why Anne didn't kill me in my bed when I was out of commission. What can I say? It is hard to look a lifelong friend in the eye and then end their life for the sake of completing a challenge in a game. Surprising, I know. If I couldn't do it, then Anne certainly couldn't do it and I needed a lot of help in order to get there. Whoever helped me kill Matt did not help Anne to kill me, at least not yet. I take this as even more evidence that the person who helped me kill Matt was me. I have a personal fondness for me, something that I could not see myself overcoming in order to help Anne complete her challenge. More importantly, if I came from a time further in the future than I currently am, I couldn't help present Anne kill me because the future me that would need to exist in order to help out would also be killed. That's just Time Travel 101.

I felt a little relief at where I was in the game. The loose ends with Matt and CANNONBALL had been tied up. I had completed the fourth challenge which had been an albatross around my neck since... let me look it up... I finished the 3rd challenge in episode 4? Really? So, eight episodes ago I was anxiously waiting for the fourth challenge. Now it was over and I could finally be sure that nothing they could force me to do would be as awful as that. Even if their imagination exceeded my own, I still don't think that they could hurt me as badly as they hurt me with that challenge. My brain is complete mush now. I have permanently exceeded my ability to comprehend traumatic events. Bring it on.

Progressing on my own terms, however, was not looking fruitful. Ryan was depressingly correct about the utility of my data harvest from CANNONBALL's house. Aside from the player registration rolls, there wasn't much of anything useful. CANNONBALL was running an ARG art project compared to what Ryan was doing. I actually found art assets in a big folder on his

computer. Some of them were for the website that I signed up on, but others I had no idea what they were. This really was just some sort of Slenderman ARG to him. How depressing. A lot of the stuff that Ryan and I talked about must have been shocking news to him.

And I have reason to believe that it is going to be shocking news to him all over again. I think that CANNONBALL's memory about the whole kidnapping incident was wiped. Not just the part that I can't remember, but the whole thing, from the point that I clobbered him in his doorway. I say this because recently I got a quaint little email from him that reminded me of the old times. Quote: "Hey, Mike. I have some new information regarding the 2nd place player and their location. I have reason to suspect that they are female and are a danger to you in ways that go beyond your status as a 1st place competitor. Can we meet at the usual time and place? My placement in the game is in danger, so I'd like this taken care of ASAP. -CANNONBALL."

Um, excuse me? Did you forget that I kidnapped you and figured out that you were running part of WOE.BEGONE? I mean-- yes, he obviously did. It is curious that Ryan wiped his whole memory of the kidnapping. I am beginning to suspect that when Ryan said that he was having CANNONBALL organize the ARG elements of the game, he meant that he convinced CANNONBALL that he was helping Ryan organize a normal ARG where the player-characters are speaking in-character in order to advance plot elements. Meaning, he doesn't think that we are literally out there killing police officers. He thinks this is all a normal game and we are all just playing along. I mean, it is all a game, just not how he thinks.

All of that "changelog" stuff in the emails is just a story to him, built by all of the players. I'm still trying to dig through all of that changelog and player roster stuff. Some of it looks faked. I suspect that Ryan is creating fake players and interacting with CANNONBALL in order to make it look like more of a game to him and keep him as in-the-dark as possible. Making people use burner VOIP numbers and emails make it exceedingly easy to create fake people playing the game. I broke the thin veil of the story and Ryan put it all back into place for CANNONBALL, who remains none the wiser.

This revelation makes it all the more disturbing that he was unwilling to spill the beans when I kidnapped him. C'mon dude, someone takes you hostage and you think that it is over some weird internet art piece and you are willing to take the secrets of your EVEYRMAN HYBRID clone to the grave with you? That is peak Delusional Artist Syndrome. No piece of art is worth dying for, especially the artistic elements of WOE.BEGONE.

I suppose that if I'm right, this also means that CANNONBALL wasn't the one sending the bulk of the text messages sent after the challenges. Or maybe he really did send them, thinking the whole time that I had done something virtually or metaphorically and he was playing along with it. Like *Ender's Game*, but with the grotesqueness of the real life author of *Ender's Game*. Ryan alluded to being in charge of surveillance himself through the WOE.BEGONE technology, so it would be as easy as him telling CANNONBALL that the challenge was complete and having him send the message. It is both amusing and disturbing to think that CANNONBALL was running his part, thinking that it was all pretend, while he sat across the table from a player who was the only person in the universe left that remembered that they killed a cop.

I don't know if I will interact with CANNONBALL any further. I think he might be a dead end for me. He gave me all of the stuff that I needed to get started, but now I feel like I've leveled past him. Ryan erasing his memories of our encounter suggests to me that all he will

ever be is a hint system to get players to figure out the stuff that I have figured out. Where is he going to lead me next if I can't even be sure that he knows everything that I know? He's like an NPC in the early part of a game that teaches you the tutorial. You don't talk to him again unless you need him to repeat something because you weren't paying close enough attention. Maybe if I talk to him and fly to Cinnabar Island and swim up and down the coast I can catch a MISSINGNO.

It looks like the gamerunners have come to the same conclusion about CANNONBALL that I have. I got a new email from a new burner email account. Actually, I got several. The gamerunner who sent it to me-- who knows who that is, but I don't think it's CANNONBALL-- titled it "CAN YOU PASS A BACKGROUND CHECK?" which, unsurprisingly, wound up in my spam folder. The foresight and professionalism I have grown accustomed to playing WOE.BEGONE. After he finally got one into my main inbox, I checked my spam folder and discovered that he had been trying to get in contact with me for three days but was getting filtered out every time. I knew that it wasn't an actual spam email because I had only ever given this email address to CANNONBALL and hadn't used it to sign up for anything. A cryptic email in all caps: that must be WOE.BEGONE. The whole message read: "CAN YOU PASS A BACKGROUND CHECK? CAN YOU GET A GOVERNMENT SECURITY CLEARANCE FOR A JOB? REPLY WITH ANYTHING THAT THEY MIGHT FIND. -W.BG"

Ah, I missed all caps screeds with not enough information to fully clue me into what's happening. Classic WOE.BEGONE. Remember when this podcast seemed like it would be about me doing a different challenge every week? The good ol' days.

Of course I couldn't pass a government background check. I mean, have you been listening? I'm the sort of person who plays WOE.BEGONE. You think that murder was the first crime that I ever committed? When the United States government does a background check, they dig up pretty much every time that you've ever even thought about doing a crime. Even worse than committing a crime, I have a podcast where, in addition to detailing killing a cop albeit in a way they can never prove, I sometimes mention scary leftist politics. The United States government would never let me get anywhere near something secure and I don't blame them for that. I resent their existence in its entirety and if my security clearance gave me a shot at impeding the imperialist war machine, they are correct that I would absolutely do that. I wrote the mysterious email account back with my (short! I promise!) arrest record and a comment to the effect of what I have just said on this podcast.

They replied. "All of this is trivial. We will get to work in order to get you to work. Attached is the job listing. -W.BG"

I could use a job, actually. I had been unemployed for some time following the CANNONBALL incident and I was barely employed before that with how I was using my time to complete WOE.BEGONE challenges, so I could use the money. It's not like I'm out here doing ad reads. Don't you hate standing on your mattress at the post office? Then, you need socks. Warby Parker socks. Whether your hairline is receding while you hike through the forest in the pacific northwest or your dick doesn't work right while you sit and write a script for a podcast, Stamp.com is right for you. Enter code WOEBEGONE to get 10 stamps.coms with your first Squarespace order.

I opened the attached job listing. It was for a private contractor doing security at a remote government facility. They wanted someone who could pass a rigorous background

check to do monitoring, patrolling, and reporting at a site called Oldbrush Valley Energy and Resources. Must be willing to relocate semi-permanently, lodgings and other accommodations would be provided. Must submit to psych evaluation in addition to background check. The pay was pretty good, especially since I wouldn't be paying rent for the time that I would be living there which looked to be at least six months. It didn't seem like such a bad gig. It seemed remote and lonely, but I mostly keep to myself anyway.

It would also give me an opportunity to relocate to somewhere that other people didn't know the location of. And by other people, I mean Anne. Just because she didn't kill me when I was bedridden doesn't mean that she isn't still trying to kill me. I have about 3 times as much stalking experience as she does at this point, so I can tell when such a rank amateur is following me around. I know that it sucks to lose someone if you are tailing them, but you can't just be in the car directly behind the person you are stalking. You have to know the layout of the city fairly well and figure out what direction they are probably heading in and then try to keep them in your eyeline. I could see you in my rearview mirror is what I'm trying to say, Anne. I texted you from my car and you told me that you were at home in St. Louis. I didn't even bring up where you were first, you did! That's suspicious! To think that my life hinges on the abilities of an amateur like this. I spit at thee. Ptoo!

But Anne couldn't kill me if she didn't know where I was and she definitely couldn't kill me if, even if she knew where I was, I was somewhere that it wouldn't be possible for her to get a security clearance in order to come get me. I would be safe from her, which would free up my mental bandwidth to continue pursuing the truth about WOE.BEGONE instead of, for instance, pretending to be asleep while Anne knocks on my door because I suspect that she is there to kill me. Something may have convinced Matt that giving up was the right choice for him, but so far no one has convinced me of anything nearly that drastic and I'm not interested in letting Anne in to try.

So, Oldbrush Valley it is. I put together a fake resume and sent it to WOE.BEGONE. I instructed them to make it look as much like a real resume as possible and they replied in agreement. One of the things I added was 3 years of private security experience. Real Paul Blart Mall Cop shit. There could be some good money in a resume faking service that can alter spacetime so it really looks like your resume is legit. Just a note to save for later.

In addition to submitting a resume, there was a lengthy questionnaire with more specific questions related to the job. Can I lift 50 pounds? Yes. Can I lift 100 pounds? Uhhh... yes? Can I lift 1,000 pounds? No. In fact, I'm going to go back and change 100 to "no," also. "Using as many words as you need, describe your personal philosophy." Great, this is an easy one. Just lie. I wrote a 4 paragraph essay about how my favorite book, *The Fountainhead*, exemplifies my rugged individualist philosophy and encourages me to achieve my best with the expectation that my best will display my determination and talent and take me to where I need to go in life. *The Fountainhead* is a great choice of reference because it is just as ideologically horrendous as *Atlas Shrugged* but doesn't have the same political implications because nobody has ever read it. Except me. I actually wrote a similar essay for my college admissions essay. Worse than being a murderer, I, Mike Walters, was a Teenage Libertarian. I understand if you refuse to forgive me.

The psych evaluation was a bit trickier because I had to speak to a real-life person over Zoom and convince them that I am stable. As I have mentioned in previous episodes, I have

never been to therapy, so I didn't really know what to expect. It was another limited hangout. I tried to reveal just enough to make it seem like I was a person who wasn't trying to game an evaluation in order to get a job. I am a man who is in touch with his feelings but would never let that consume him to the point of cynicism or depression. There is always a bright future to look forward to and that allows me to stay well-adjusted in the present. That actually is sort of true at the moment, with what I suspect about the fourth challenge. I've never felt compelled to hurt myself or another person, not by my own emotions and not by the possibility of winning an online game. I thought I did a pretty good job of seemingly like a normal, well-adjusted person. A perfect fit for a security job. Secure enough in myself to be able to live alone, but also secure enough to be able to have the confidence to tell someone on government property that if they don't leave I will have no choice but to take action.

I submitted all the documents and waited. I wasn't too concerned. The game was rigged in my favor. If only everyone in this job market had the ability to perfectly manipulate an employer into thinking they were the perfect candidate. It only took a week to receive a phone call in which an absurdly pleasant woman with a tinge of a southern accent told me that I had been offered the position at the starting salary listed. I accepted the offer right there on the phone and she gave me an address to report to in exactly 3 weeks. That wasn't a lot of time, considering that I was moving across the country on that amount of notice, but I had already begun prepping under the assumption that I was going to get the job. I thanked her copiously and ended the call. Everything had gone according to plan and I was getting the hell out of here. Away from Anne, away from CANNONBALL, potentially closer to WOE.BEGONE. It was the first time that I had felt anything apart from dread in what felt like my entire life.

One question still remains, though. What is in Oldbrush Valley that the gamerunners want to find so badly? The only thing that I can imagine is that they suspect that the WOE.BEGONE supercomputer is there somewhere and they picked me to try and find it under the auspices of being a security guard. If not the computer that Flinch is operating, then a similar computer with a similar level of technology. I maintain that Ryan's whole motivation currently is to get direct access. Alternatively, maybe Flinch is a government operative and the goal is to find him and remove him as the middle man between Ryan and the supercomputer. Sidenote: dibs on the name Ryan And The SuperComputer for a quirky electronic prog-rock band.

I hope that the purpose is for me to look for the goddamn computer, because I want my hands on it. Ryan thinks that he has perfect control over me because he is submitting code to Flinch and I don't know who that is or how to write the code, but if I can get close to the computer, I can stand a chance again. I should also be operating under the assumption that someone there *is* Flinch and try to create a methodology for determining who he is. Or she. Or they. But c'mon, Flinch spelled like Flinch spells it is definitely a hacker bro's name. Flinch is vital to me getting directly to the tech. Either a partnership with Flinch, or impersonating him to Ryan, or taking him out and having completely direct access. It all comes down to this new target. And if this new target is just some nobody like CANNONBALL ended up being, I am going to completely lose it-- a thing that I heretofore have not done yet.

I told all of my friends and family that I had received a job offer that I couldn't refuse and that I would be moving away shortly and might not see them for a long time. I told them that my recent bout with illness had caused me to reevaluate my life and that life was too short to stay

stagnant like I had been recently. They were all embarrassingly supporting. “Yeah, Mike. Your life has been kinda stagnant and shitty recently. I totally understand why you want to get out of here. Go.” Uhh, thanks. It feels sort of like you all wanted me to leave and you’re excited that I finally took the hint. I didn’t post on social media about it and I didn’t tell Anne, so she won’t know until the last possible minute. She’ll probably see me packing my bags and will only know something is up then. It should be trivial to keep her from trailing me all the way across the country considering how bad she is at it. I didn’t tell CANNONBALL, either. I’m curious whether or not he knows. More importantly, I didn’t tell Ryan. I’m not sure that he is the one who set this all up. If he isn’t, then I don’t want him to know. It could be interesting to see if it is not him and there is another gamerunner, especially if there is another gamerunner with individual interests that they keep separate from Ryan. But it was definitely a gamerunner and not a fraud that set me up with this job because there is no way in hell that the United States government would give me security clearance unless a powerful entity had abused the fabric of the universe in order to make it happen.

Oldbrush Valley here I come! It wasn’t just a fabrication in order to explain why I was leaving to my family. I am extremely excited to get away. I’m not even panicking over what awful shit is going to go down once I get there yet. Everybody needs a big upset to the status quo every now and again. The seclusion will be a welcome relief, too, if it comes as advertised. Ryan was being truthful about the consequences of completing the fourth challenge. I had proven myself as being worthy of taking on a narrower mission, one that appears to be in line with the mission of the WOE.BEGONE gamerunners themselves. Finally, I wasn’t just doing random crap. I was playing the game.

This has been WOE.BEGONE. Next time: dispatches from the front lines of the Oldbrush Valley Energy and Resources security apparatus. Thanks for playing.

[End theme plays.]