

EPISODE FIFTEEN - THE BEAR

Original transcript edited by Theo

[BEGIN Episode 15.]

INTRO: Hey, guys. I'm proud to announce the soundtrack album, *WOE.BEGONE: Songs [sic] from the Podcast, Season 1*, will be available on March 17th for \$5-a-month patrons (that's at patreon.com/woe_begone), as well as on Bandcamp at woebegonepod.bandcamp.com. The album is a collection of the strongest songs from Season One, many of them fleshed out in new and interesting ways. So check that out if you want to know what a full version of an arm amputation song sounds like. Bandcamp pre-orders are available now. Speaking of patrons, thanks to [REDACTED] for supporting the show. Enjoy.

[Warning: This episode contains a depiction of assault. Listener discretion is advised.]

MIKE [narrating]: There was a time in my life that I was a bit obsessive about bears in movies and TV shows? It started with *Grizzly Adams*. I decided to put it on one day, and was struck by my misplaced expectations of it. What I was expecting to be a hokey western show was, well, still a hokey western show, but exceedingly kindhearted and gentle. Grizzly is basically a mountain spirit, made entirely of goodwill and patience, who lives out in the mountains, and corrects any wrongdoing that happens out in his frontier neck of the woods. His only permanent company is a bear named Benjamin Franklin, who Grizzly discovered orphaned as a cub, and took in to raise as his own. Grizzly is played by Dan Haggerty, and Ben is played by Bozo the Bear. There are pictures of Dan and Bozo together outside of filming, and they speak to a real connection between this man and this 1,000-plus-pound bear. Bozo's powerful gentleness mirrors the undergirding themes of the show, Grizzly's gentle stewardship of the land.

In flashback scenes where Ben is a cub, he's played by Bart the Bear, the so-called "John Wayne of Bears." Yes, that is a real thing that people really call him. Bart also plays the bear in the surrealistically-cast wilderness survival movie, *The Edge*, starring, and I am not joking, Alec Baldwin and Sir Anthony Hopkins. Hopkins was so enamored with Bart that he spent all of his downtime just looking at him. From the Vital Ground Foundation, quote, "Anthony Hopkins would spend hours on set sitting with Bart, and admiring his calm presence. Unanimously, his human co-stars marveled at Bart's abilities and temperament..."

I completely understand the allure of these bears, and why these people felt so passionately about them, but it's hard to put into words. Is it because they're "like us"? No. They're *bear-ly* like us. [Fake laugh.] See? We have fun here. I think our puny human brains treat them as gods on the landscape. They're enormous, powerful, intelligent, beautiful animals. They have the appearance of grace and wisdom. If I were alive thousands of years ago, and someone pointed out a bear in the forest, and was like, "You know that thing's a god, right?" I doubt that I would hesitate to believe them.

But all of that mysticism is just that, mysticism. In the real world, bears are enormous animals with temperaments and desires that exist entirely outside the human realm. Timothy Treadwell, subject of the documentary *Grizzly Man*, famously got himself and his girlfriend killed by bears in pursuit of a platonic relationship with them. The only time I've been close to a bear that wasn't in a zoo was when some friends and I came across a bear cub while on a hike. Bear cubs are bad news. The term "momma bear" has the connotations that it does for a reason. We tried to distance ourselves from it, but it was walking the way that we wanted to go? And [*Huffs.*] we didn't want to take a detour, so... [*Huffs.*] This is awkward...

Why did I tell you all of that? Well, why do you think that this episode is titled "The Bear"?

This is WOE.BEGONE.

[*Opening theme plays.*]

MIKE: The story of WOE.BEGONE is being told in order. If this is your first time listening, go back and start at the beginning. If you didn't know what I meant by "arm amputation song" in the intro, you've got a lot of catching up to do.

MIKE [*narrating*]: I think I know why my previous heists didn't go as planned. I distinctly remember saying, "Cue the heist music," and yet, when I said that, heist music did not indeed cue. To get to the bottom of this, I sat down with my friend and producing partner, *me*, to see what went awry. According to me, he-slash-I thought that "cue the heist music" was a metaphor or an exclamation or something like that. Not an actual instruction to the editor or soundtrack artist, both of whom are me, to actually insert heist music. What even is heist music? The theme to *Mission Impossible*? Is that really what you want? Is that what WOE.BEGONE is? We're doing *pastiche* now? No. We're going to create *ambiance*, *mise en scène*, *joie de vivre*, *beskonechnost'* [бесконечность]. You know, a cheeky horror podcast. I feel like I'm losing you, smash cut—

Ugh, it was wet. Dew had settled all over *everything*, attached dropboxes on the outside of buildings included. I wore the gloves that I had famously neglected to wear during the morning's heist. They were cloth gloves. I wasn't expecting everything to be so wet. I had to take them off because they got soaked, and the cold water got all over my hands. Now my hands were even colder than if I hadn't worn any gloves at all. Thanks, gloves. Jesus.

It was pitch dark. This was the first thing that had gone right during this entire mission. None of the buildings had outside lights on them, and there was a new moon out, so it was difficult to see more than a couple feet in front of myself. This made wandering around in the dark to find a building far away from my cabin that I had only seen once more of a difficulty? But it meant that I would see anyone walking around with a flashlight from miles away, and would have copious amounts of hiding time. I got to the building undisturbed, and decided that I could hide behind it if I saw or heard someone coming. I had to be careful not to make too much light or sound myself, since likewise I would also make myself known from a great distance.

I pulled up the flap to the dropbox, and held it open. It had a sliding mechanism that required thumbs to open in order to keep bears from getting in? And people without thumbs from getting in, I guess. It made a metallic creaking sound that I hoped didn't carry very far. The hole was just wide enough for me to fit my arm in up to the shoulder. I stuck my arm into the dark hole that I could not see into. Great. Almost at the end of my arm's length, there was a stack of envelopes. Thank god they were still here. I did *not* have a plan B if this box had already been emptied. I scrambled around, trying to grab whatever I could that even remotely resembled the size and shape of the envelope that Hunter had taken from the cabin. There were all kinds of envelopes in there, dozens, it felt like. Hundreds? It might as well have been as many envelopes as there are grains of sand on the beach for someone looking for a specific one in the dark.

I heard a rustling a couple hundred yards away from where I was doing my own rustling. In a panic, I grabbed a handful of whatever envelopes were in proximity to my hand, and booked it behind the building. I looked toward the spot that the rustling had seemingly come from, but it was so dark that I could barely see the front of the building from the back of the building, much less something a football field away from me. Hopefully it couldn't see me either. Maybe it had heard me open the flap on the dropbox? Other than that, I had been as quiet as a church mouse. Maybe it was someone who had been following me this whole time? Someone who was out on patrol already, and spotted me being suspicious? And watched me break into the dropbox. If they came over here and found me, they'd see Mike Walters with a handful of envelopes that were not addressed to Mike Walters, cowering behind a building that he had no business in. You know, all the hallmarks of a completely innocent person?

I looked down at the envelopes in my hand. One of them was the right size and shape. It had a little indent in the top corner where I remember Hunter mindlessly thumbing while we were walking on the way to the building. This had to be the one, right? It had no other choice than to be the envelope I was looking for. I *command* it. [*Commanding.*] I will will it into being through sheer need for it to be the one. [*Normal tone.*] The ability to return to the dropbox, and do anything but put the other envelopes back, was seemingly diminishing in real time.

The rustling continued, seemingly unperturbed by whatever I was doing across the way. I squinted hopelessly into the darkness, trying to figure out what was over there to no avail. I had only been out this way one time, and that whole time, I was laser-focused on that envelope, and then this building that the envelope had been delivered to. I had no idea what the rest of the area looked like during the day. There could have been a fully functioning roller coaster across the path from this building, and I wouldn't have seen it that morning. Whatever the rustling was, it was more frantic than mine. It had the sort of character that mine might have had, had I failed this mission, and in one final attempt, just scraped everything out of the dropbox with no regard for who might hear it.

A pair of headlights appeared in the distance, closer to the source of the sound than it was to me. It was a golf cart. Whoever was on patrol in this area finally heard one of us, hopefully not

me. It sped towards us at top speed... which is, like, ten miles per hour, but that's still pretty fast compared to how fast I could move on foot. As it got closer, I could see that its headlights were shining on a figure across the path from me, digging in the trash can. It was dim, and there were obstacles in the way, so I still could not make out for certain what it was. It began to retreat back into the trees, and I could hear branches snapping as it fled.

"Get out of here, you *fucking bear!*" I heard a voice shout from the golf cart. Soon after, and without warning, a shot rang out. I heard the report of the bullet in flesh.

"Fuck!" the bear yelled.

The person in the golf cart got out, and walked towards the treeline. In the light of the headlights, I could tell that it was Marissa. I mean, you *knew* it was going to be Marissa, right? Out of everyone who I had talked to so far, she was the one who was the most violently enthusiastic about taking care of Oldbrush Valley's bear problem, in addition to being the most violently enthusiastic person in general, of course.

I didn't get a good look at whatever Marissa thought was a bear, but I know what I heard. That bear screamed "fuck" when she shot it, which leads me to wonder, what if that wasn't a bear at all? And was, in fact, a human person? It's a... long shot, but *bear* with me. "Fuck" is an exclamation in the English language, not bear language. Were a bear to exclaim an obscenity, he might say something more along the lines of [*Distorted roaring noise.*]. While it is entirely possible that one of the projects at O.V.E.R. could be to teach bears to speak English, I think it's *slightly* more likely that Marissa just shot a person that she thought was a bear.

I couldn't tell if Marissa realized that she had shot a person or not. It was entirely likely that she didn't hear him cry out. Guns are loud, and she was right in the heat of the moment. Based on the amount of sound that he made while getting away? I assume that he didn't stick around to explain himself. The sounds did go on for quite awhile, which gave me hope that he made it to safety, and hopefully somewhere that he could get patched up. Marissa was loud and confident, but she was also pretty nice. She didn't rat me out for sneaking into a red flag cabin. I highly doubt that she would be the "shoot first, ask questions later" type if she knew that it was a person that she was dealing with.

The headlights slowly crept into the distance as Marissa made it further down her patrol path. That would be one hell of an observation report for her to fill out tonight. While still behind the building, I quickly opened the envelope, took pictures of the eight pages of content with my flashlight and phone, sealed it up with some glue that I brought with me, and stuffed all of the envelopes back into the box. I then made my way back to the cabin as quietly and quickly as I could, and messaged the gamerunners the pictures of the files.

They wrote back, "How the hell did you get these? Scratch that, we don't care. Standby for next mission. In the meantime, get settled. W.BG." Communication with them had become more casual since I did the Big Challenge. I felt like one of the gang, which I knew that I wasn't. I just

had passed some level of trustworthiness and usefulness. I was a minion at this point. I was *CANNONBALL*. Yuck, now that I put it that way...

The files were gibberish. Not binary, not hex code, not a polybius square. Here's an excerpt: "b97040afe6d085eea5f2180bf[Speed-up effect starts.]1f661b78f95a77a[Speed-up effect ends.]4e[Speed-up effect starts.]1c104d7ea5d9210[Speed-up effect ends.]952a7." There are about a couple hundred of these printed across a handful of pages. It could be some type of hash code, or a series of hash codes? Which means that I have virtually no way to decrypt them, and the gamerunners might not either. But they seemed to know what they were looking for, so they must have been able to turn that into something that they could use in some way. Hell, they could have sent it forward into the future 50 years, and solved it with some extreme code-cracking that we can't even imagine yet. But there was no way to get myself further in my quest just by pouring over these numbers and letters? So I just went to bed.

I got up bright and early, and made my way to the cafeteria. I was hoping that Marissa would be there, and she would already be talking to someone about what she was up to last night? Because it would be pretty suspicious for me to bring it up. "Hey Marissa, how's it going? Shoot anyone last night?" I also scoped out the crime scene on the way. I found a drop of blood, but that was it. Whoever it was was probably fine, or at least not dead. I would keep an eye out for anyone with a bandage, though.

This whole thing made me wonder if there ever really *was* a bear. Maybe there was someone out there meddling, right alongside me. Could they also be looking for the key to *WOE.BEGONE*? If they are, I will have to find them, and figure out if they are a friend or a foe. It would be nice to have someone who was in on the whole thing here with me, but it would be *not* nice to have a competitor that would keep me from getting what I want. *WOE.BEGONE* has a way of attracting unsavory types? Myself among them? I mean, I sure as hell wouldn't cut *him* into *my* plans if I ended up with the tech plopped into my lap. Screw that guy! Unless he wants to help me, I mean.

The cafeteria had mostly the same faces as the day before, except I recognized Marissa this time. Chance, Shadow, and Hunter were all sitting together at a table again, so I joined them. What else was I supposed to do, make *new friends*? That's *literally* impossible.

Oh, and to head things off before anyone asks, this is an enormous governmental operation of the utmost importance and secrecy. Everyone has been vaccinated. Not because they care about us or anything. *O.V.E.R.* can absolutely not afford a drop in the labor force.

So, anyway, I sat down at the table. I could hear Marissa being her normal loud, gregarious self across the room.

"I met her yesterday," I said, and motioned at her. "Marissa. What's she going on about?"

"She says she shot the bear last night," Shadow said.

"Shot the bear? Did she kill it?" I asked. Looks like even if she did figure out that it was a person, that's not what she was telling people.

"Dunno. It ran off," Shadow said.

"I hope not. All it wanted to do is eat trash," Chance said. I can relate.

"Yeah, I hope that she just scared it off. Maybe it won't be back," I replied.

"I could hear the commotion from my cabin," Hunter said. "I thought about going out and investigating? But I remembered what happened last time I did that, so I minded my own business, and went right back to sleep. I told you that story, right, Mike?"

[Sharply.] Oh, so *now* Hunter remembers stuff? What is *up* with him? *[Normal tone.]* "Yeah, it's the only thing I've heard that was actually something instead of nothing," I said.

"It's much better to mind your own business around here," Chance said. "If something really sinister *is* happening? There are much more important people that know how to deal with that stuff. Even button stuff."

"Marissa told me never to push the button," I said.

"Marissa is right," Chance said. "Everyone that I've ever seen get fired at O.V.E.R. were people who pushed the button. They all got into some sort of trouble, or fell and hurt themselves, or something, and panicked, and pushed the button. The last day of their security job, every single one of them."

"So what's the point of the button?" I asked.

"My guess is that there's something that might happen that is a Big Deal, capital "B," capital "D." I'm talking about nuclear explosion levels of important and catastrophic. Something so intense that we can't even wrap our heads around it until we see it," Chance said.

"Or they use it to weed out people who can't handle the job," Shadow said.

I think they're used to locate people who have witnessed time-travel related events, and then make it such that they are no longer witnesses of those events by altering their pasts, but I didn't say that out loud. I just ate my biscuits and gravy.

After my shift ended, nothing happened during it, by the way, I got a message from the gamerunners. "We need you to go to the red flag cabin tonight. It has to be at night, and you have to take the long way. You do not need to go in; just touch the doorknob, and walk back. Sorry in advance. W.BG."

"Sorry in advance"? I really *am* developing a better working relationship with these guys. They've never been sorry about anything before. But also, ugh. Can't I just saw my arm off again? *[Whiny.]* That's a long walk, and my feet already hurt from walking? Come *on*, guys! *[Normal tone.]* Seriously, though, I expected something like this would happen. It's not a "challenge" anymore. I'm calibrating some sort of system for WOE.BEGONE, and tracking my movements or something will help do that. Maybe they can pull me out of trouble better if they already have something like that on file? Who knows. But I'm basically doing data entry at this point.

As soon as the sun went down, I set out on my walk. The earlier the better, since it looks less suspicious the less late it is that I'm out walking. Since I would be walking a total of eight miles, I would almost definitely find someone out on patrol. What am I even saying? I'm not doing anything suspicious. I'm just taking a walk. These guys aren't mind readers. They won't just magically know that I'm doing this for WOE.BEGONE. But what *if*... Nah. If there are mind readers at O.V.E.R., they are definitely *inside* the gate.

The muscles on the top of my foot hurt from walking all day? So I was taking it slow. This was infuriating to me. Knowing how long a walk I was in for was at least as physically painful as the foot pain. I was hesitant to put in earbuds, or listen to music or a podcast, because I didn't know if it would mess with the results, and I didn't want to be caught off guard. There could be any sort of surprise out here waiting for me.

[Sardonic.] Do you remember the cold open? Do you remember what the title of the episode is? Have you figured out what the surprise that was waiting for me was? *[Ad-reading voice. Static effect.]* Are you tired of standing in line at the post office? Then you need Stamps.co—

[Normal voice. No effect.] So there was a bear after all. In addition to whoever it was that Marissa shot in the middle of the night the night before. I was about two-thirds of the way to the cabin when I saw him, digging through a trash can on the side of the path. Not unlike that guy from the night before, actually. The bear was fully grown, maybe the size of six Mike Walters? Easily. Being one Mike Walters, I found the size to be *quite* intimidating. Unsatisfied with just eating trash and trusting me to leave it alone, the bear immediately saw me, and took on an aggressive posture.

"Get the *fuck* out of here," the bear said. I'm kidding! There are no talking bears in Oldbrush Valley. At least, that's what they want you to think.

[Distorted roaring noise.] the bear said. They say that if you are attacked by a bear, that you should curl up in a ball as tightly as possible. That way you can kiss your ass goodbye, because you don't stand a chance in a fight against a bear. *No*, I didn't have a gun. *No*, I didn't buy bear mace. That stuff is so expensive, and it has, like, a one-year expiration date? What's up with that? How does it go *bad*? I think it's all a scheme to get you to buy *more*, because you probably won't ever even *be* in a situation where you can use it. I mean, I was in exactly that situation, but

you probably won't be. That is not advice. Do not take advice from *any* podcast, especially this one.

I'm rambling. But I did curl up in a ball as it approached me. I don't know if this is *actually* the right thing to do? But now I'm afraid to look it up, because I don't want to get embarrassed if it's not. I know that I couldn't have outran it, especially after walking so much that day. I could smell its breath as it came over to decide whether or not to eat me. Its breath smelled like garbage, naturally.

The lashes from its claws came brutally slowly, like it was toying with me, or trying to figure out what my deal was. Like, "Why is this guy curled up in a ball? That's not the right thing to do if you're attacked by a bear. Fuckin' weirdo." Except There. Are. No. Talking. Bears. In. Oldbrush. Valley.

The lacerations from the bear's claws were hot and sharp, completely untempered by adrenaline or shock. I think I cried out in pain? But if I did, I wasn't directly cognizant of it. I'm jealous of people who describe leaving their bodies during times of intense pain. People who say things like "I could see myself, and I was screaming." But, no, I was very much inside the now-tattered body of Mike Walters. The back of my shirt hung down around my face like ribbons. My back felt *wet*, like someone had poured water on it, but it was, in fact, my blood. The bear struck me for what I believe to be the third time. I was feeling weak. This was so much worse than cutting my arm off, because at least I was in control of that.

After the third strike, everything got quiet. I could no longer hear the bear breathing over me. As soon as the breathing stopped, I snapped my head up, and looked around. Nothing. The bear was nowhere to be seen. I looked around to see if someone had scared him off, but I didn't see any people or any lights. The bear was just... gone. Even if it had been spooked off by someone, I would have at least seen it taking off in some direction. I looked towards the treeline; nothing. Nothing anywhere. It had completely disappeared. I have been involved in discovering the underpinnings of a mysterious and violent online game uploads on Wednesdays for long enough to know that there was some WOE.BEGONE-ery about here.

Those gears would have to turn later, though, because I had just been mauled by a bear? The bear may have disappeared, but the wounds were still here. I was *incredibly* weak. I *bear*-ly (it's not so funny this time, huh?) got myself out of the fetal position, and laid down on my stomach. I didn't have the energy to stand. I just laid on the dirt path that I was on, and screamed and cried. I don't even think I had the capacity to shout "help!" I was in so much pain.

I remembered that morning's discussion. Even if someone did hear something, there was a high likelihood that they would stay in their cabins, and mind their own business. It's what they've been conditioned to do. 112 guards actively tasked with discovering nothing. Temporality is a blur, but I think about 12? years? later? someone finally heard me, and came out of their cabin to see if I was alright.

"Mike Walters!? What the heck?" It was Hunter, come to save the day. Makes sense; I had to be in the ballpark of where his cabin was.

"Bear," is all that I could really get out.

"Did you hit the button?" Hunter asked.

"No," I replied. I hadn't even thought of the button. It was in my pocket the whole time, though I had been warned that this was not a legitimate reason to push the button.

"Good. I'm gonna call EMS, Mike. Are you okay?" he asked.

"No!" I said.

"Did he get you anywhere other than on the back here?" He asked.

He continued to ask questions to keep me alert while EMS arrived. It's all sort of hazy from that point until they got there. What a guy, Hunter Jeremiah Hartley.

I'm alright, obviously. I'm back in my cabin recording this. If I ever die during one of these adventures, I'm legally required to talk in [*Spooky ghost voice.*] spooky ghost voice [*Normal voice.*] so that you know I'm a ghost now. I'm permanently scarred, but who isn't these days? Bear attacks are *far* from the worst part of playing WOE.BEGONE. A smarter, more determined animal could have killed me right then and there if it wanted to, and a lot of those smarter, more determined animals are controlling this whole time travel game? I'm *much* better at murder than that bear. Stupid bear.

I messaged the gamerunners as soon as I was left alone in my medical ward bed that night. "Didn't make it to the cabin, obviously. Couldn't you have stopped the bear *before* it mutilated me?"

They responded almost immediately, despite it being almost two a.m. at that point. "We have no idea what you're talking about. This is not a joke; we really don't know. You can't make it to the cabin? W.BG."

The gamerunners not understanding the severity of my injuries led me to believe that they really didn't know what had happened to me. But I *know* that bear disappeared. True, I didn't see it with my own eyes, but I did look up as soon as the breathing stopped. I *know* I did. True, I was under attack, and my account might be far from an objective one, but I know what I saw. I know what happened.

And we're right back to the Matt thing. Who did this? Who is helping me, and why? It doesn't make any sense, and I don't have any way of figuring it out. Is there someone else with access

to Flinch? Who would that even be? Are there *two* shadowy groups of people toying with me now?

This has been WOE.BEGONE. Next time? *[Huffs, annoyed.]* I don't know, man. Maybe I can walk down a path, and walk up to a cabin door without it being a big, dramatic production? Unlikely. *[Normal tone.]* Thanks for playing.

[Closing theme plays.]

AFTER-CREDITS: *[Distorted roaring noise that pitches down in steps.]*

[END Episode 15.]