

## EPISODE 19: MARISSA NG

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Is there a point to anything? I don't mean WOE.BEGONE. Clearly some choices within WOE.BEGONE are done flippantly and without reason. There is no reason to structure this cruel time travel technology project in the form of a game, for instance. It's an aesthetic choice that someone made based on a whim. It could just as easily have taken the aesthetic form of a widespread blackmailing scheme that didn't have a punchy name or a consistent set of internal rules. There is clearly no point to *some things*.

What I am asking is different. Is there a point to anything at all? Sort of a stoner philosophy question, but I think it's important to pick part in this situation. As far as I'm concerned, we live in a universe that is equally uncaring and large far past the point of human comprehension. I took Geology 101 in college and our professor told us in a lecture once that knowing the perspective of being one person on Earth, much less in the entire universe, was so profoundly shrinking to the human ego that it didn't make sense to care whether or not we passed his class. His class was incredibly easy since it accommodated non-majors, but I appreciate the sentiment. These universe-sized systems exist so high above our ability to process them that any individual can't help but be insignificant in the face of them. Doing something with purpose doesn't matter because we are much too small to affect actual change. This isn't an argument against activism or empathy or whatever. It's just that the whole of the history of mankind will be just a blip in a history of the Earth and of the universe, a history that no one will ever be able to experience or read.

Can a person or team of people create a system that massive? A system so vast that it ceases to make sense to question whether or not it has a purpose? Is WOE.BEGONE like that? It is hard to sit here in 2021 and think about how truly WOE.BEGONE extends forwards and backwards through time. In the first ever time travel novel, *The Time Machine*, they travel to 802,701AD. While my imagination won't allow me to grasp what a future that distant could possibly look like, WOE.BEGONE must be in it, because WOE.BEGONE exists without regard for time. If it exists now, then I don't see how it could ever be truly destroyed. If it were destroyed in the future or in the past, it could be replaced from the present. If it was destroyed in the present, it could be replaced from the future or the past.

As much as I would like a trite explanation for why things are happening to me in the way that they are happening to me, I am going to need to accept that there isn't an explanation. WOE.BEGONE is a giant machine engineered and operated by people. These people have goals. Those goals aren't clear or consistent. WOE.BEGONE is bigger than all of us put together. I'm dicking around in Oldbrush Valley trying to bring small, understandable morsels of information to the gamerunners and hopefully horde some of them just for me. The result is mostly brutality and pain so far.

Maybe I'm just being crabby because my back and arm still hurt. This is WOE.BEGONE.

[Intro theme plays.]

Hi guys. It's me, Mike Walters. You might remember me from being the bear that Marissa Ng shot in episode 18. The asinine nature of this shooting haunts me to this day, which isn't that many days since the incident, though I expect it to last for many more. Something about being lied to, manipulated, and then getting shot after tripping over a garbage can leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

I'm being smarmy, but the truth is that it was a lot of trauma to work through all at once and I haven't been the same since. It has taken a toll on my morale.

I'm going to be a bit of a bum here, but it's important to let you in on what sort of mindset I had after the Bear-themed incidents. I am in a lot of pain. I think this is the first time since I started playing the game that the pain-inducing aspects of the game have been allowed to stick around after the fact. Cutting off my arm was painful and difficult-- it actually killed me-- but that pain was over as soon as I passed the challenge. Neither the bear attack nor the gunshot wound got undone as a reward for a job well done. To be fair, neither of the jobs that precipitated these attacks were well done at all. For the first one, I failed to walk up to a doorknob and touch it and for the second one, I bumbled my way through pretending to be a gamerunner and tripped over a trashcan in the past while trying to complete the challenge. If anything, these wounds are a cruel punishment for not meeting the gamerunners' high expectations.

But the pain has stuck with me. It saps me of my energy. I get distracted by it and can't focus. It makes it a chore to get anything done. I worry over whether the pain will be permanent. I worry that if it is permanent that I will just get used to being in pain, to having my quality of life diminished so severely. I worry that I won't ever get used to it and I'll just exist in agony. I worry that it will affect my ability to do my job or to proceed in WOE.BEGONE. I worry that my pain will manifest in a way that makes me a worse person to the people around me. I'm already kind of a jerk; I can't afford to be even more of one.

I have become cautious and skittish. I jump if someone approaches me from behind. I wince when people touch me. I avoid engaging in conversation with Marissa if I can help it and I'm scared that she's starting to notice and wonder why. As I have become aware that I am changing in these ways, I get bummed out by that change, which is just icing on the cake. Sadness just begets even more sadness. A whole sad sack's worth of sadness.

I miss John. I miss the hot sting of that sadness. The interpersonal kind of sadness that you can only experience if you love the person that you are sad about. The antagonist that is outside of the self that, in their antagonism, validate that something is in fact happening and at least one other person agrees that sadness and anger are valid emotions to have regarding the situation. I miss those negative emotions hitting the surface, like a cup turned completely upside down, the water slapping against the ground all at once. Instead of that, I am simply being poured out, drop by drop.

Some sad shit, am I right? I'll be okay, eventually, I think. Don't go feeling sad for poor ol' Mike Walters. It has just been more grim that I've been letting on is all.

Would you be surprised that Hunter doesn't seem to remember anything about my meeting with him? He hasn't indicated at all that he knows anything about WOE.BEGONE, not even in a wink-wink nudge-nudge kind of way. I expected him to take some time off work to go visit his dying mother and complete the fourth challenge, but he never did. I imagine that the model of Hunter Hartley that had the WOE.BEGONE conversation with me took some time off and the other Hunter remained here. I have no way to tell whether or not these two Hunters know that the other one exists or what their deal is, or if there are actually two of them, or if there are *only* two of them. It's not a topic of conversation that I feel that I can successfully breach. If Hunter is aware of his double, he will probably just deny it and act like I'm delusional. If he isn't aware of his double, he will tell me that's impossible and that I am having a break with reality if I can entertain such a notion seriously. I have to figure it out on my own.

Talking it out, I realize that it is likely that the story about Hunter's mom and the fourth challenge was completely made up. The gamerunners told me that there was no way that Hunter was ever going to believe me when I said that I was a gamerunner. If there are two Hunters and only two Hunters, then one of them can't be ignorant of WOE.BEGONE with the other only being on the fourth challenge. The existence of two Hunters at the same time necessitates that one of them must have traveled in time-- I assume from the future back to this time period. I have only traveled back in time once and for a brief period of time and I am past the point where challenges are individually numbered

and structured. If my baseline assumptions of the situation are true: which to be clear is that a future Hunter has come back in time via the WOE.BEGONE technology in order to do work for the gamerunners, then the stuff about the fourth challenge has to be a lie.

This would mean, of course, that the mission I was given was delivered entirely on false pretenses. The reason given to me for doing the mission was to recreate for Hunter what RYAN had done with me. Trap the player in the game right as the challenges become too much to bear. That reasoning made sense to me, because it had worked on me when it was my turn to do the challenge. Now, I was totally unsure of actual reasoning behind it.

The material effect of the meeting was that I was sent back in time for the first time and I created the chain of events that resulted in the Marissa-Bear Incident. Other than that, nothing of material importance happened. I lied to Hunter who knew I was lying the whole time and then left his cabin. This is inconsequential as far as actually changing the world goes. That is not to say that we have to focus solely on the material here. The gamerunners have some oblique interests that require me to sometimes have to do things with no visible effect on the world. Touching the doorknob is a good example of this. However, I do not have any insight into those interests. I can't predict what they might be better than random chance. So, I think that a more productive line of inquiry would be to ask: why would the WOE.BEGONE gamerunners want me to go back in time and get shot by Marissa after knocking over a trashcan?

The best way to get this answer would be for me to put on my big boy panties and get closer to Marissa in order to understand what her day-to-day is like. Her interaction with me was the catalyst for the whole thing, but I don't know her whereabouts before or after the shooting.

I was dreading trying to get close to her. Don't get me wrong, Marissa is friendly. You know how I feel about Marissa at this point. I've characterized her enough. But she also shot me, which feels like a big deal. I don't think I'm overreacting. The worst part is that she doesn't know that she shot me, which means that she doesn't understand that I have a reason to avoid her. I feel bad that I am hurting her feelings, but there is no way for me to admit to her that she shot me. Because if she learns that she shot me, she will begin to wonder why the hell I was wandering around at night on her patrol route. And she's already seen me go into a red flag cabin. She's definitely smart enough to put two and two together and at least know that Something is up, even if she doesn't have enough context to know what exactly.

So, I started eating breakfast with her every morning. It was surprisingly easy to do so. I asked if I could sit with her and she said yes. Sorry to drop such an intense bomb of charisma on you all.

Marissa's table was the Cool Kids table, at least compared to my normal table. Leave it to me to instinctually seek out the nerd table right off the bat. There were a lot of people at Marissa's table that all knew each other and didn't know me, so I was awkward and quiet the first couple mornings that I sat with them. They were all considerably more boisterous than I was, so I don't think that my participation was missed. It was loud enough as it was.

I started to learn tidbits about Marissa's life, as I gradually spoke up more and built rapport with the group. How breakfast was actually dinner for her since she worked the night shift and she went to her cabin and went to sleep just a couple hours after breakfast. How she spent her time in-between America and Hong Kong growing up. How she had 3 older brothers. How she was playing a mysterious but violent online game called WOE.BEGONE. Well, not that last one. But she did tell me about the army guy she fell in love with right out of high school who taught her how to shoot a gun and indirectly led to her getting a job at O.V.E.R. And indirectly led to her shooting me, of course. I told her about my life, too, but I've been telling you about my life for 19 straight weeks now, Dear Listener, so you know everything that she does and much more, so I'll spare you.

It wasn't hard to hit it off with Marissa. It was only a couple days before I was able to do what I really wanted to do, which was to manipulate her into letting me in on what her patrol route consisted of. Wow, it sounds really bad if you just say it like that. But friends manipulate each other all the time,

right? Maybe not on purpose, but if you know someone really well and you want them to act in a certain way, then you can do or say things that make them likely to do those things. I'm really digging a hole here.

It was the third day in a row of breakfast with Marissa when I made my move.

"It's been awesome getting to know you this week," I said. "It sucks that our schedules are so opposite one another. I'm mostly asleep when you're awake."

"It's been fun, Mikey," she said. I don't like being called that, but it's fine. "Who knew that you could be fun? We should hang out sometime, if you ever want to put in a late night."

"How would that work? You mean like I come on your patrol with you?" I asked. That is exactly how I wanted it to work.

"Yeah, sure. If you don't mind doing double the work for the same pay," she said and winked. "It'll be fun. Patrols are just hanging out and walking around anyway."

"Unless there's a bear," I added.

"If I see that bear again, round 2 is on," she said. The bear was her crowning achievement. She brought up the bear all three mornings that we had breakfast together. I guess it makes sense. It's the only thing that's happened out here since I've been here.

"Tonight then? I'll grab a cup of coffee and just power through right after my shift," I said.

"It's a date," she said and clapped me on the back. I winced, my back having just recently recovered from being roast beef. A look of horror came across her face. "Oh shit! Mikey, I'm so sorry. I wasn't thinking about your back. Shit," she said.

I gave a pained smile. "It's okay, I know. With a shirt on, you can't tell how messed up my back is," I said.

"I'll get that bear, Mikey, just you wait and see. Maybe we can find him tonight while you're on patrol with me," Marissa said.

"Maybe," I said. "I'd just as soon never see it again."

My shift was predictably boring, walking around and seeing nothing. I was becoming intricately familiar with every blade of grass on my route. That's the point of having us walk it on foot. If there were footprints in the grass that weren't there the day before, I would know about it. I was the foremost expert on this patch of Oldbrush Valley. I may as well have a PHD in O.V.E.R. Studies. I wonder how long it is going to take for this familiarity to become maddening. Alone, seeing the same buildings every day, the same trees, that one bird. Eventually the isolation will make you see things that aren't there out of sheer boredom. But for now, I was content that I didn't have to do much in the state that I'm in. Boredom does make me tired, though, which meant that I was tired by the time Marissa's shift started. I grabbed a thermos full of coffee and headed over.

"Mikey, hey!" She said. That's four "Mikey"s at this point, for anyone keeping track at home. "Ready for your second shift?"

"Sure thing," I said, lifting my thermos of coffee. "Brought enough coffee to make sure that I never get to sleep tonight."

"You'll need it to keep up with me. You're lucky that I drive a cart so that you *can* keep up," she said.

There's a form of tenderness and honesty that emerges late at night, when you're outside and the weather is nice. Like you can bypass all of the small talk and actually talk about stuff, no matter how well you know the person you were with. It is a prime situation for making yourself vulnerable. It felt like one of those nights as we drove around in our own little world inside of Marissa's cart.

"So, how did you end up at O.V.E.R.? No offense, but the isolation doesn't suit you." I said.

"None taken. When I was growing up, I thought that I was going to go into the Army, but I lost interest by the time it came to actually enlist. It chews people up and spits them out. And for what?" she said.

"I can't imagine you taking orders from a drill sergeant yelling at you," I replied.

"Yeah, it would have been a bad fit," she said. "But then I felt aimless. I didn't go to college. Nothing about college spoke to me. I didn't want to go into debt to end up with a degree in marketing or whatever and end up in an office building with nothing going on in my life. Normal work completely sucks the life out of me. I turn into a zombie. You've never seen me like that. This job is a waste of time, too, but at least I'm not stuck in an office with some manager micromanaging me every day. No one ever tells me what to do. I'm loud. Not well suited to sitting down and doing paperwork."

"That makes sense," I said. "Funny how everyone has a different reason for coming out here to do the same thing."

"There's some cool shit out here, too. No offense, but I know your route because I showed you the ropes on it and it's kinda lame. It's luck of the draw, you just got the spot that was open when you applied. There's all kinds of cool shit on my route. And there's a lot more of it, too. They give the cart crew a bigger area because they can survey it faster."

"Well, then let's see some cool shit," I said.

"One cool shit, coming up," Marissa said and pumped the gas on the cart. We sped off into adventure.

It was about a mile down the road that we hit the first landmark that Marissa wanted to show me. It was an outdoor part of the valley surrounded entirely by fencing with ominous signs up all over. "LEVEL 2 ACCESS ONLY," one of them read. This was the border of the inner circle, but it jutted out into our circle in this area. Our group has no access to anything in Level 2. We got out of the cart and walked up to the fence. It didn't have any buildings on the other side of it, at least from what I could see in the dark. Instead, all that I could see were enormous boulders, about ten of them, resting in the valley. They looked out of place. I can't seen anything like them in the whole time that I had been here.

"Here we are, exhibit 1," Marissa said. "Don't ask me what they are. I don't know. They're some huge fuckin' boulders that are just out here in the middle of nowhere being given extra security detail. Whatever those rocks actually are, they don't trust me to guard them."

"Weird. Maybe they're secret entrances to underground tunnels? People don't seem to enter the red flag cabins through the front door often. Or they could go further into O.V.E.R." I said.

"Well, that's a smarter idea than I had, Mikey. I thought that they were robots. Like big, Transformers sized robots that disguise themselves as rocks. If you dropped one of those somewhere that no one was looking, you could wait until the right time and deploy them."

"[Laughs.] Well, whatever it is, they are going out of their way to protect it even further and there has to be some wild stuff going on here, so I don't think you can rule anything out," I said.

"Yeah and how cool would it be if they transformed into robots?" She said.

"I guess that depends on which side of the robot war you're on," I said.

"C'mon. I got another place to show you. Have you ever been up to the Level 2 gate?" She asked.

"I don't even know where it is," I said.

"It's about 2 miles that way," she said and pointed down the road. "Also on my route."

We got back in the cart and headed further down her route. There were many important buildings out this way. Buildings that looked like the one that I stole the letter from. It was too dark to make out what any of them were called, but I made a mental note to check back here later. A few minutes later and we were parked in front of an impressive and foreboding gate. The signs were even more severe than the signs on the boulder area. These promised "extreme retaliative action" toward anyone attempting an unauthorized breach of the gate. This was Level 2, alright. The gate was part of a larger wall, maybe 15 feet tall, that stretched into the darkness past us.

I stood up to get out and examine it, just as we had with the boulders. Marissa put her hand out to stop me.

"Nope! Get your ass back in this cart, Mike," she said. "I'm not going to be the one responsible if some Level 2 guard gets antsy and turns you into paste."

"It's that strict, huh?" I asked.

"I'm not taking any chances. They are serious about security at the gate. We're playing around out here. They're in there with the big guns and the scowls on their faces. They patrol the outside sometimes and they do not look friendly. I just wanted you to see what it was like."

"Scary stuff," I said.

"Yeah and then some," she added. "Get a good look because I don't recommend coming back here unless you are expressly commanded to do so." With that, we sped off back down our patrol route.

Marissa was being accurate when she said that her patrol route was long. It took us an hour to travel around it in a cart, with Marissa often pushing the cart to its limits in terms of speed, so probably 20ish miles of driving. We were almost back to the point that we started at when we ended up in familiar territory. She stopped the cart.

"And this is where I shot the bear," she said. I was expecting a beaming smile to accompany this, but instead there was a crestfallen quality to her voice.

"That's the trashcan he was digging in?" I asked. She was silent for a moment.

"Mike, have you seen anyone with a bandage or anything after that night?" she asked.

"What are you implying?" I said.

"It wasn't a large bear. I've been wondering this whole time if I didn't get a good enough look at it. I thought it looks like it ran off on two legs," she said.

"Bears can run on two legs," I said.

She ignored me. "But if I shot a person, then why didn't they rat me out to O.V.E.R.? I would be fired for sure. Or if he died, then his body would have been found by now and there would be an investigation, surely. I keep second guessing myself. It was dark."

"It was probably a bear," I said.

"I know, but I just had that thought in my head and I can't get it out," she said.

"I know the feeling," I said.

"You're a good listener, man," she said. "That good, because I'm good at talking."

"You are that," I said. "I haven't seen anything. I feel like if someone got shot that night that they wouldn't stay quiet about it."

"Yeah, it doesn't make sense. Hunter said something weird about it, but he's weird all the time so I shouldn't worry about it," she said.

"Isn't that the truth?" I said. "One of the weirder guys I know and I know myself."

We continued down the patrol route and I didn't question the story any further. I felt confident that Marissa didn't know that she had shot me and I didn't want to burden her with the knowledge of it or with the thought that it could have been a person at all that she shot. There wasn't any purpose in it. She would feel bad and I would feel bad for making me feel bad. It's not like she can turn back time and prevent it from happening.

The rest of the patrol was pleasant. Once the first loop had been done and the fact-finding mission was out of the way, it was just me and Marissa having fun and hanging out. She was quieter after showing me the spot where she shot the bear, which was more my speed. The night has a way of enforcing calmness in its own way, as well. Time flew and I hardly noticed that I had just pulled an all-nighter with her. The sun was up when she dropped me off at my cabin and bid me farewell. A productive night where nobody brutalized me! Who knew it was possible?

I did come up with a material reason for the gamerunners to want me to get shot by Marissa that night. If Marissa was dealing with me and speeding past her normal route, she wasn't paying attention to the boulder area, the Level 2 gate, or any of those important looking buildings on the other side of the route. That would guarantee that they had as much time as they needed to interfere however they saw fit without the most aggressive guard in this section of the complex giving them trouble. I think

that they used me to sneak past her and do some nefarious stuff, probably inside of Level 2. And you know what they say: you can't make an omelet without tricking someone into shooting Mike Walters. That might be a regional saying.

This has been WOE.BEGONE. Next time: I explore some of the possible targets that Marissa was distracted from guarding. I'm dying to learn what those weird boulders are all about. Thanks for playing.

[End theme plays.]