

EPISODE 23: I HAVE BEEN TO THE FUTURE

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[This episode contains extreme violence and language. Listener discretion is advised.]

[Heavy breathing, strange sound, footfalls on ground.]

Huh? [Pause.] Where? [Pause.] No. No, no no no no no! [Sounds of losing balance.] Can't see. Can't see straight. Did I... did I remember the hot sauce? [Pause.] No. Shit. Of course I didn't. What was the plan? Do keep hot sauce on me at all times just in case I get zapped back in time? Even if I'm sitting on my own damn couch? Ugh. It was sitting on the table in front of me. Could it have not come with me? Get it together, Mike. Get your bearings.

[Sound of a cellphone buzzing.] "Time to keep playing." Shit. Shit. It's Matt's house. Quit spinning. I'm here. Again. I'm here to...? No. I thought that... No no no no no. I was supposed to come back here again after I won. To undo this mess. I'm really here again!? Fuck. That's not fair. That's not fair. I didn't even get a warning. I'm not ready. I can't. I can't do it. Not while I'm like this.

God dammit, Mike. [Face slapping sound.] Get ahold of yourself. What's the plan? Deep breaths. [Deep breaths.] I'm at Matt's house. It's the night of the fourth challenge. I have to go in there and be that flash of light that I saw when I was there the first time. I have to say whatever it is that I say that makes Matt put the gun down and let me complete the fourth challenge. Just as soon as the world stops spinning around me. Thank god I didn't drop into the middle of his kitchen like this. Shit. What do I tell him?

Here we go. Okay, okay. Gotta do this. Be cool, Mike. Turn on the charm. You got this. It's gonna be a hard sell. You got this. You have to. It's what has already happened. Brave face on. [Deep breath.]

[Mike knocks on the door, which then opens.]

[Intro theme plays.]

Heeeey, Matt! Funny running into you here. That's a nice gun you've got there. Did you saw off the end of the barrel yourself? That's quite illegal, if I remember correctly. Fond memories we had together, that gun and I. Memories that you haven't had the pleasure of making yet. Just a matter of time. Can I pop in for a quick chat? I don't want to take up too much of your time. Just thought that I would step in and corroborate the stuff that Mike has been telling you. He is already in there, right? He means well, he really does, but he isn't any good at making a convincing argument. He's a pretty green salesman. Did he even tell you that he's willing to throw in a full set of Encyclopedia Britannica for only a few bucks a month? Tsk tsk, probably not. And here he is trying to convince you to let him kill you! [Other Mike in background: "who the fuck is that?"] You're gonna need a lot more than "pretty please," I think. I can help with that. May I? [Sound of door closing, feet walking across wood floor.]

Mike. This is where I'd tip my hat if I had one. [Mike 1 goes to interrupt.] Oh, no. I'm not going to be answering questions. This is a lecture, not a Q&A. You'll pick up on the basics, but I'm here to do a job. I don't want to spoil the whole thing, but you're not going to remember any of this conversation, Mike. We didn't even know that it was us that affected the end of the fourth challenge until a few weeks ago when Ryan dropped that bombshell on us. Yeah, that Ryan. Still not a decent guy, as it turns out, but might be useful to us now. There's some loud noises and flashing lights in your future and then you'll forget I was ever here. Our buddy Matt won't, though, for whatever reason. Probably some WOE.BEGONE magic brain stuff or how timelines work or some shit. Honestly, the specifics roll offa me these days like water offa armadillo, Pilgrim. Sorry I'm... surly tonight. I was drunk and watching Tombstone when they sent me back here. You know, Sam Elliott should be in more stuff, like main character stuff. It's weird. Everyone on earth likes Sam Elliott but every time he's in a big budget movie he's not the main character. What's up with that? [Mike 1: "But, why are you?"]

But, anyway, brass tacks: Matt, all the ridiculous shit that Mike here told you about what happened is basically true. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence and all that. Hopefully seeing me here twice is better evidence than the me from your present trying to tell instead of show. You can tell that he's me, right? Hopefully I'm not that bad a mess. I probably look a decade older at this point from the stress and the scars and the lack of shaving, but I sound the same right? Mike, say something. [Mike: uhhh... the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog?] The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. See? Identical. I can promise you that no one cares enough about us to be such a faithful Mike Walters impersonator.

Like I told you when I was the other guy at the table, you were brought back to life by a violent game, "game" being in the world's largest scare quotes. Like he said, Anne was trying to kill us. She succeeded, actually. We're on life number 3, for the record. [Mike 1 startled noise.] That should give you some solace, Matt. There is potential for the continuation of life after death in our scenario.

The person in control of the technology recruits people to essentially do their bidding in the form of a game called WOE.BEGONE, which offers an initial prize of bringing someone back from the dead. In our case, you, after you died in a car wreck. Get ready for a sappy monologue about how sad that made me in a few minutes. In Anne's case, I died and her prize was me. The game gets harder and less rewarding, culminating at this point where the carrot fully becomes the stick, so to speak, and the player is tasked with killing the person whose life they received as their first prize. By this point, there is a new carrot, the power that started this whole process to begin with. A disgusting spokesweasel stays in constant contact with the players to make sure they value the idea of power over human life.

This technology includes the power to alter events in time, which gets most of the attention because of how flashy that power is, but clearly there are other weird maybe quantum-ish spacetimey things the technology can do as well. I know that it can track people with extreme precision through space and time and can scramble brains to some extent, but who knows if that's additional technology or just creatively applied time travel. If they can move objects through time, they likely have access to parallel technologies that I can't imagine. Get ready for some time shenanigans, by the way, Mike. It's gonna feel like gravity suddenly inverted as soon as this conversation ends. Not like whatever Ryan did to us at CANNONBALL's house, a whole new experience. Not a fun one, I regret to inform you.

That probably doesn't do much in the way of consoling or convincing you, Matt, since Mike here has broken the news that in order to proceed, he needs to kill you. Personally, I

don't like being killed. Every time it happens there's some tension regarding whether or not I will come back and sometimes I genuinely enjoy being among the living, presently company excluded. I hope that both of us being here simultaneously is enough to convince you that we can make good on the promise of semi-permanent nonexistence. If there are two Mike Walterses, how else would that be possible except for time travel? And if time travel is possible, what is stopping whoever controls it from enacting whatever scheme they want through as many attempts as they need? It's no longer one crazy ex-friend come to tell you why he has to kill you. My existence speaks to some reality that is radically different from the one you conceptualized before I knocked on your door. A reality in which what I am describing is not only possible, but probable, I hope.

The rub is that I thought that I wouldn't come here until I won the game and would do the fixin' myself. If I had already won WOE.BEGONE, we wouldn't be standing here having this conversation. I would have simply undone the chain of events that caused this conversation to happen in the first place. No one would have to be dead for any period of time. Instead, I got sent back here by someone else. I'm not in control yet, I haven't won. The past remains locked away, the future remains a mystery.

Here's what I can tell you that that dipshit over there can't because it hasn't happened to him yet. After I kill you, WOE.BEGONE sends me to infiltrate a top secret governmental facility called O.V.E.R. O.V.E.R. is thought to contain the WOE.BEGONE technology, or some of the technology or an instance of the technology. Something that the people running the game remotely desperately want to get their hands on. Since I am their surrogate out there, I am the hands that get on the machine if and when that time comes. That puts me in the perfect position to completely ratfuck them by taking the technology and making a break for it. I don't know what "winning" means to those assholes, but that's what it means to me. Once I get the technology, I can do literally whatever I want, across all of space and time. You can shudder about what other things I might do with the ability to alter time, but the first order of business would be to reverse what happens tonight. I can literally have my cake and eat it, too.

Not only am I willing and capable of taking the technology from the gamerunners as soon as the opportunity is presented to me, I also am investigating using my own resources to try and obtain it for myself. The original gamerunner lost the reins awhile ago and has been working with me to try and break into higher security O.V.E.R. areas. Yes, Mike, Ryan. Our first attempt went poorly, nearly fatally, which is why I was drunk and in my boxers watching Tombstone at home when the new gamerunners sent me back in time. Apologies for the way that I'm dressed, by the way. I was severely injured and mentally broken, resulting in a sudden departure from O.V.E.R., to which I have not yet returned. Put bluntly, I freaked out and left and ended up taking a leave of absence. This leave was respected by O.V.E.R. but not by WOE.BEGONE, which is how I ended up here again.

And, while I admit that it is discouraging that I am not here as a champion of WOE.BEGONE whose name is posted on the top of some fake leaderboard, there are still reasons to hold out hope that I come out on top. There is at least one other unexplained incident that could indicate that I get to exercise some power over who gets WOE.BEGONEd and when. Not so long ago, I was attacked by a bear while out on a walk at O.V.E.R. That's why my back looks like that. Thanks to both of you for not mentioning it. Sorry, Mike, but this is what you have to look forward to, all of this and more. The bear had ambitions beyond peeling the flesh off of my back like string cheese. From all angles, it appeared set on killing me, possibly eating me, though I'm not much interested in its postmortem plans for me.

Before it could do that, it just straight-up disappeared. I don't think there's any way other than WOE.BEGONE to explain it. I know what I saw and I have the experience to recognize it for what it was. Someone moved the bear to somewhere else in time in an instant. If that wasn't me, then it was someone who was sympathetic to my plight, which is not characteristic of the gamerunners, who would just as soon see me suffer and die. Either way, I think it indicates that I will either have direct or secondary access to the technology at some point in the future. There is no one else that would save me. Hopefully, the bear incident means that I am working through my time travel to-do list starting with saving you and working my way through various other traumatic events to lessen them as much as possible.

Furthermore, I don't think that we have much of a choice. I have been to the future and I don't wanna scare you, but to the best of my knowledge what happens tonight *happens*. This conversation happens, the world turns upside down for a couple minutes, and when this Mike gets his wits about him, you are there and ready for him to gun you down. I don't know if that's an especially convincing argument, telling you that I win this argument eventually so just give up already? But it's something that is in the back of my mind and I talk too much to leave anything back there unsaid. The existence of all three of us rests on you believing me enough to let tonight happen. There's the kicker: either you let Mike kill you or we all die and the chance of anyone fixing the situation is essentially nil. Younger Mike, take note: people are going to call you Mikey sometimes and it's fine and at some point you pick up the phrase "here's the kicker" and you say it too much and at inappropriate times. And you have to kill Matt tonight. You will. I know.

So... Is that all cool with you, Matt? Do you understand what is going on here? Do you understand why you have to die? I know that it is a lot to ask of you and also I am not actually asking. If all of us-- Hey--

[A sudden shuffling, but no sounds of impact. Mike 1 is gasping.] Whoa there big boy! Let's not jump into the action just yet. We explained it to you, right? If he dies then you die so if you pull that trigger then the barrel might as well be pointed the other way. You'd have until his last breath to sit there and think about how you just fucked yourself and with how far you have that gun pressed into his sternum that wouldn't be very long. Now, slowly, back up. Unpin him from the wall so he can catch his breath. Easy, easy. It's a lot to take in, I know. I know. This is confusing, I know. We're going to keep talking. We're all going to be safe and sound in the end. We're going to stay calm and keep talking. Nobody is going to do anything until we all reach a mutual understanding. We're going tuh~[Mike throws a punch while speaking.]

[There is another commotion, with a couple punching sounds. Mike 2 exclaims.] Ugh! Back up, back up. Sit the fuck back down at the table, *now*. Dumbass. I was going to let you hold onto the gun the whole time if you'd just be cool and not freak out on us like that. Sorry, Mikey. I wish I had known that was going to happen. I could have prevented it. It's okay, though. We have the gun now.

The explanations are over. The next phase of this conversation happens at gunpoint, thanks to Matt. I didn't think it would be a pleasant evening out with the bros, but it didn't have to go south like this. I don't have patience for shenanigans like that, not anymore. Maybe back when I was here the first time and nothing hurt once the challenge was over, but not now. You have changed who you are dealing with. Was it worth it, Matt? The black eye, I mean? I'd put an end to all of this right now if I thought it would work. I'm not the one that pulls the trigger. I'm not even here when it gets pulled. I'd do it. I'd spare the younger me the pain of having to

do it and just do it myself if I could. I don't don't think that it would count as completing the fourth challenge, but I'd do it. I won't be hurt again. I won't.

[Mike 1: "It's okay Mike. You need to calm down. It's okay."] No, I just pulled that same trick on Matt, it's not going to work on me. I'm you, idiot. *You* need to get your shit together and do what you have to do. Every second of indecisiveness etches another scar into our back. You spend so much goddamn time "figuring" that everyone who spends their time "acting" gets a shot at you. I've been actually shot during the course of this, just like you were about to be. Whatever compassion you thought that you were showing him by drawing this out, that sad stupid monologue that you're going to give when I'm gone, none of that matters. He'll be dead, he won't remember it! It's just more time that he can improvise a weapon or you could get caught or the neighbors could get suspicious. You're wasting time and there's nothing I can do about it because I know that I wasted that time. There's nothing anyone can do so you better get ready to kill him. He was about to kill all three of us in one go. It's time to swallow all of the sentimentality already. And you won't remember this either, so it's just as useless.

It's pointless to care about Matt's life anyway. We made a choice, Mike. A stupid choice with a right and wrong answer and we chose the wrong one, by the way. The correct answer is to die. To let time eclipse our ugly, violent little life and just go back to a universe where Mike Walters isn't playing WOE.BEGONE. You've known that since the very first instant that the stakes were introduced. You said as much into a microphone. Why didn't we do the right thing? Why are we such a coward that we couldn't look the obviously right option in the eye and accept it?

Matt doesn't matter anymore. We chose WOE.BEGONE. Going through these melodramatic motions of how much you care about him is doing him such a disservice. Bringing him back to life is a pleasant thought and we truly mean that we will give it our best shot if and when we get the chance to. Sorry, Mike, but I've seen the chances and they are slim pickins out there. I stopped getting my hopes up when three men showed up where I was staying and put a knife through my hand. I was foolish to keep any hope inside of me for that long. What you have to look forward to is akin to being sucked into a black hole. Your being will be pulled apart strand by strand like spaghetti. And after I'm gone you're going to eulogize this piece of work like he matters. You know he was lying to you about everything. You know because I knew. You knew that his whole life up here had been a total fabrication.

Why did you lie, by the way? What is really going on out here? You told me when I brought you back to life that you had a wife and a kid and some good money. I was too polite to really needle you about it back then, but I did some snooping after I left here tonight. I couldn't find any evidence of any of that. You've been living in this little shithole with its grime and its bare lightbulbs and as far as I can tell everything else was a lie. All of that work to literally alter space and time to save you and you came out here to live in squalor and push me away? I don't know if that's heinous or stupid but I guess it doesn't really matter. This is the time and place that you are willing to live and die for. Pathetic. My time and place isn't any better, but at least I know how pathetic I am. You don't have the perspective. No one has zoomed out the whole picture for you and pointed at the dot-within-a-dot that is your existence and said to you "see that dot? That's you. You suck even more than the other dots." Fuck you, Matt. Just, fuck you. Excuse me.

[Sound of a door opening and closing. A muffled Mike yelling obscenities from outside and some banging noises. The door opens and shuts again.]

[Mike sighs.] Ah, okay. That's a little bit better. I've been flying off the handle a lot recently and I've found that taking a moment to excuse myself and scream for a few seconds does wonders as far as letting some of that pressure out. I am still... frustrated... but no longer too frustrated to do business. Let's ensure that Chekov's gun doesn't go off until the climax, shall we?

So, here's how it is, Matt. You're dead. There isn't any road out of here alive and it's only a matter of time. You can make a fuss about it, but WOE.BEGONE is going to keep sending me back here until the outcome aligns with their expectations. I know that this happens because I was that dipshit that knocked on your door earlier this evening, the first time. That's me. I know what happens. I remember coming to you without a real plan, secretly hoping that you would kill me so that I wouldn't have to do it. I remember telling you that you were the first straight boy I ever fell in love with for some reason. I don't know why I said that, it isn't even true. I guess I just wanted to say something nice before I blasted you into next week. I know what happens directly after this conversation. If you don't do that, then something else happens and you wind up dead anyway. I just keep popping back into this situation until the deed is done. You are already dead. Where I am from, you have been dead for awhile now. On a different timeline, it has been years. It is as inevitable as the sun rising. You're dead.

I am so much more done with this shit than that spry wonderdog at the other end of the table. I spent weeks having my body ripped to shreds and got a "fuck you" for my efforts. My cane didn't even teleport with me so I have to hobble around like an old man but I swear to God I would beat you to death with it if it meant that I could get through with this already. I quit because my life was completely destroyed by this shit. All I have left for you, Matt, is contempt. For standing in my way. For kickstarting this whole ordeal and then blocking the threshold right when the challenge gets the hardest. For creating this point in time where I have to stand here beside myself because the past version of me was too much of a lowlife to bow out gracefully and not enough of a lowlife to do a decent job of killing you. You are my white whale, Matt. You have already destroyed me. You have hobbled me. The only solace I can hope for is that I can reduce you in the way that you reduced me.

This is the end of the line, Matt. High noon. Pistols at dawn. Or a sawed off shotgun in the middle of the night in our case. I've been watching a lot of westerns recently. You can see the reality of the situation for yourself. There's me and there's other me. That should be proof enough that something is happening right now far beyond your control. It's beyond mine, too. I knew that this day would come again, but I thought that it would be under much different circumstances. I thought that I would still be like him. I thought that I would care whether or not anybody in this room lived or died. I thought I would be wearing clothes. I thought I would have some shred of humanity left inside of me. I thought the point of this would be to maintain that humanity. I thought there would be something about myself still remaining that deserved to be protected.

[There is an unspeakably uncomfortable silence. Mike 1 sobs quietly.]

This must be near the end of the conversation. I don't have anything left to say to either of you. My only purpose for being here was to make sure that you hand Mike the gun at the end of it. ...Oh. You ran your hands through your hair! Ha, that's pretty funny actually. See, when I was here the first time after my memory left, I remember thinking that your hair suddenly being parted the other way was some timeline shenanigans. I actually doodled out what happened to see if I could get a better grip on it a long time ago. You were doing it to try to cover up the black eye so that I wouldn't know that I did that. Well, it doesn't work, but I didn't notice anyway. My mind was racing way too fast to take note of something small like that, especially in this dark, dingy kitchen. That's funny. Well, not *funny*.

Look, let an old pro give you some tips on this whole dying thing: if there's no way around it, then there's no reason to panic about it. My colleagues and I are doing everything we can to gain access to the technology in a way that we can control for ourselves and we are closer than we ever have been. If I've been returned from the grave twice, then you can do it, too. Hell, Matt, people like you. Someone might start the game and bring you back to life on accident before I can even get a chance to do anything. When you get back, it will be like nothing ever happened. I feel no pain from Anne killing me to complete the fourth challenge. The stuff that doesn't kill you is the stuff that you need to watch out for. What doesn't kill you can require you to walk with a cane. I am not anywhere near as capable of hurting you as the world is. The world won't wait until it's at its wits end, either.

Mike, for what it's worth, I envy you. You think that you have already lost what makes you human, but caring about that proves that you haven't yet. You are going to. You are going to. I shudder to think what kind of Mike Walters will look back on me and say the same thing. There is somehow always somewhere deeper to plunge. Just because you got used to the falling doesn't mean the descent is over yet. I haven't hit the ground, but this must be terminal velocity. We're going to hit dirt hard enough to kill us, Mike. It's too dark to see when that will be. It could be a time so far away that it is indistinguishable from eternity. What a horrible curse that would be.

[Silence, punctuated with light sobs from both of them.] Well, you're crying, Mike's crying. That's about where you pick up after I leave. That's a good sign. Keep that energy up and we might just make it out of this situation yet. Mike, be sure to lock up when you're done. It makes it look less like someone broke in and killed him if the doors are locked and there's no sign of break-in. He lives alone, so it throws the cops off and they end up deeming it a suicide even though it doesn't make any sense. I think it's because he lives like this. Cops don't care about dead poor people in possession of illegal weapons. They find pot in the bedroom, too. This is the easiest murder to get away with so far.

Don't make me come back here. This is the third time that I've been back here to fix this shit because it didn't shake out like it was supposed to the other two times. They won't tell me what happened but I'm guessing that Chickenshit here either couldn't bring himself to do it or you couldn't bring yourself to slide the gun across the table. Either way, cut that shit out. It is going to happen no matter what any of us want. We are dolls being posed by gods. Let them play with you and get their rocks off, for God's sake. Give up on wanting to be a real boy. That was never actually an option.

And that's my time for this evening. You've been a great audience. Tip your bartender. I won't be here all week. If I have to come back for a repeat performance, I will be even more on edge than I was tonight. One black eye is actually my record low. Thank you, Cleveland.

[Door opens and shuts.]

Fuck.

[Strange time travel noise.]

[End theme plays.]

[GUIDE DOG 2 plays]