

EPISODE 33: Woebegone

[Hey guys. There is a merch store coming soon! I'm trying to find a merch platform that is right for us, but in the meantime, tell us the type of merch that you want to see from WOE.BEGONE on the discord, link in description. And if you want early access to episodes and instrumentals, Q&As, and a whole lot more, stop by patreon.com/woe_begone. There's a lot of fun stuff going on there, including a new episode of The Diary of Aliza Schultz this Saturday. Thanks to my 10 newest patrons: Brynne Clouse, Samantha Topfer, C(l)ow(n)girl, jean, beth Bronwyn, tarabyte3, Mitch Gerads, Ben Rowe, Laser, and David Ault for supporting the show. Enjoy!]

I was going to start this episode with something snarky along the lines of: The Butterfly Effect is commonly described by scientists as "something that doesn't exist. Why do we keep a 2004 Ashton Kutcher movie so prominently in the public consciousness?" But then I looked up the idea of the butterfly effect as a mathematical concept and there's a whole Wikipedia about it with math that I am not trained to understand. The thing about a butterfly flapping its wings causing a hurricane across the globe isn't substantiated (or possible to substantiate, as far as I can tell) but a system being highly sensitive to its initial conditions is. This is why complex systems are so difficult to predict. There are an unknown number of initial conditions and some of the smallest initial conditions can become outsized in importance through chaotic motion. And, of course, you can do math about this. If there is something that has been described, then some nerd has done math about it. Our civilization is built on this principle.

Some systems and events are complex. For instance, the sequence of events that led to one of the most locked-down buildings inside of Oldbrush Valley Energy and Resources being broken into—"broken into" isn't the right word, they put a big fucking hole in it—whatever happened that made that possible was multifaceted to a degree that I'm not sure anyone will be able to forensically analyze after the fact. There is what the people involved were planning to do, what they accomplished, and all of the other systems operating around them. If O.V.E.R. ever hope to figure out what exactly happened that day, in broad daylight inside of their closest monitored buildings, they will have to extricate all of these different factors from each other. I wish them the best of luck.

Then there are potential factors that cannot be excluded from the conversation but might have nothing to do with the event at all. I am on the record saying that I am a staunch believer in coincidences. Sometimes things happen for no reason or for unrelated reasons and part of making peace with life is accepting that that is so often the case. However, some connections are too big to be ignored. The breach of the building at O.V.E.R.—the compromise of building 357A through some sort of explosion—happened partway through a vacation that Edgar and I were taking far from O.V.E.R. at Glacier National Park. This wasn't a normal vacation. I had just succeeded in handing WOE.BEGONE back over to Ryan through some data theft that I didn't fully understand, Ryan being part of that ancient cohort of nerds who do math about things. After some violent protestation, we seemed to have an understanding that I was going to be left alone. My intention was to get the hell out

of Dodge with my man on my arm, but my man wasn't fully convinced so I settled for a vacation. I was hoping that being outside the gates for a couple weeks would convince him to never want to walk back through them again. But alas, I failed to convince Edgar to run away with me. I even told him that over the weekend we could turn the world to gold, but I had yet to convince him when plans abruptly shifted. Apologies to the straights for the Carly Rae Jepsen reference.

And then there was a crater where an important building was supposed to be. And that crater was on the news.

Plans changed, fast. Security personnel were ordered back to O.V.E.R. A.S.A.P. We were not threatened with firing if we refused. We were threatened with arrest and subsequent imprisonment. The implication was that the normal kind of imprisonment would be pleasant by comparison. I don't think that they simply wanted all hands on deck in order to deal with the fallout from this disaster. I imagine that they suspected that someone on the security team might have been involved and wanted to subject all of us to as much scrutiny as possible. We are all easy suspects. In fact, it is hard to tell how it could have happened without the help of someone who was working security because someone had to get in somewhere.

And I'm sure you're wondering: Mike, was it you? Or do you think you were related to it somehow? Well, I hate to have Main Character Syndrome and assume that everything is about me, but it sure smells that way, doesn't it? I gave Ryan keys to WOE.BEGONE and this happened not long after. Is that a coincidence? Is Ryan smart enough to pull that off with so little time? Is it really so little time?

Is this WOE.BEGONE?

[Intro Theme Plays.]

Many different things have been the "scariest part of this whole ordeal" since I've been back at O.V.E.R., following the Tier 3 break-in. Right now the scariest part of this ordeal is that, given the spacetime agnostic nature of the technology in question, there seems to me to be a high likelihood that O.V.E.R. doesn't ever fix this. If they could prevent this from ever happening... wouldn't they have prevented this from ever happening? Why can I remember it happening? Why can I bring up a video from CNN of this happening? Unless we are in some sort of liminal state where this has happened now but won't have happened later, O.V.E.R. either never gets the power to reverse this or they do get that power but they don't use it. Either scenario is a shocking progression of events.

This leaves one worrisome possibility wide open: was the technology in there? Did someone successfully do the thing that I could only ever dream of doing and actually stole the technology away? From the U.S. government? In such a chaotic and dramatic fashion? And could that person have been Ryan? Surely not. The same Ryan that couldn't hold onto WOE.BEGONE in the first place, leading an actual attack on a high security building? He would require a massive upper hand to get that done and I don't think WOE.BEGONE is massive enough on its own. It is not even the more massive of the two counter-operations that I know of.

Surely if I was directly responsible for this O.V.E.R. would be able to prove it and deal with me accordingly, by which I mean I wouldn't be alive to tell you this. I

cleaned up as best as I could and I'm sure that Ryan did some extra cleaning up after me to make sure that he could get away with it as well, which lends some credence to the idea that it's Ryan getting away with the perfect crime, as unlikely as that sounds. Otherwise, I don't see how Ryan and I could still be free men. I assume that Ryan is still a free man. I'm not invested in his freedom either way.

What was left for me to do in the wake of the attack was to figure out everyone's perspective on the story. I wish that I had some way to get in contact with the Flinchites. I would be interested to learn if they were involved and to what degree, but they would never give me the time of day. Anne was being radio silent, as well. I had expected her to contact me immediately, as soon as it became a national news item. Seeing that should have made the gears start turning in her head. She's smarter than me, so she might have already had an idea and has set out to find some answers for herself. Still, I'm worried that she didn't check in with me. I worry that for some reason she can't check in with me. I'm fully aware of some of the more morose explanations for why she hasn't, but I am refraining from indulging in them because there is enough on my plate already.

I was quickly exhausting my intelligence resources. I sent an email to Ryan—half inquiry into if he had done it and what his thought process was, half premature “fuck you” for dragging me back to O.V.E.R. for the Nth time. I've lost count. He deserved a hearty “fuck you” for a host of other reasons, even if he wasn't involved in this particular slight against me. He did not respond. I texted WOE.BEGONE. No response there either. Good riddance on that front, if you ask me.

The only people that I could hope to get any information out of were my coworkers and friends. All of them were working in Tier 1 at the time, so there's no way they had any idea what was going on in Tier 3. Even Innocent Hunter could not have been any further in than Tier 2. Tiers 2 and 3 might seem compacted together if you've only ever heard them described, but both tiers are huge and it is a long way from the gate of Tier 2 to the gate of Tier 3. Edgar could have been in proximity of Tier 2 as well, but alas, my wonderful boyfriend was out having a wonderful time with me while it was happening.

Though my Tier 1 friends were not close enough to see what was going on, that's not to say that people did not have opinions. Marissa was particularly strongly opinionated about how everything went down.

“The person who did it was already inside Tier 2, at least,” she said. “Think about it. Someone would have to get past me and Charlie. Both of us know everyone who goes between our gates and both of us know what someone with bad intentions looks like. No way that we would ever let anyone through, but even after that, they'd have to make it past the gate 2 security.”

“Much less making it past you with a bomb,” I replied. I refrained from pointing that she was not assigned to the gate. She merely drove by it every day on her patrol.

“There's no way that Charlie would let someone in with a bag unless she looked inside of it. And that fucker took out a whole building,” Marissa said. “You can't stuff a bomb like that under your tshirt.”

“So you're saying that there was nothing that we could do?” I asked.

“Whoever was responsible for this is probably some middle manager who hired the wrong guy and promoted him up the chain. Security never stood a chance at stopping him,” she said and sighed. Then, her face hardened. “But that doesn’t mean that we can’t stop him now.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“Well, Mikey, I know you’ve been in there. Don’t get me wrong; I know that it wasn’t you that did this. You couldn’t do all of that even if you wanted to. Besides, you were in Aruba or wherever when it happened—”

“Montana,” I corrected her.

“But if you can still get inside, we can still get inside, if you catch my drift. At least into Tier 2,” she looked at me expectantly.

“What are you asking me to do?” I asked. I knew what she was asking me to do and was preparing to let out a reluctant and audible groan when she said it.

“I want you to go in there and do some recon to figure out a list of suspects,” she said. I could see her plan forming in front of her eyes with every sentence. “Really rub elbows with people until you can get an idea of what it’s like in there and who might be involved. They haven’t caught anyone and if it was someone from the inside, they couldn’t have up and quit during all of this. It would make it obvious that they were the culprit. Plus, they won’t even let us quit right now anyway. They’re stuck working there until further notice, under threat of immediate imprisonment. They’re still in there. You can still get the codes from Edgar, right?”

I let out that reluctant and audible groan. “I... can get the codes from Edgar. We talked and he—” I immediately knew that I said too much. Marissa raised her eyebrows.

“He’s in on our little scheme now?” she asked. “No more hanging out at his job and waiting to catch him putting in the codes?”

“You can never tell anyone that. Marissa. I need you to repeat back to me in a self-contained sentence that you will never tell anyone what I slipped up and said just now,” I said. I was sweating. We were outside. It’s the summer. I had been sweating the whole time. That’s my secret: I’m always sweating. But now I also felt light-headed and guilty. Potentially sweatier.

“I promise,” Marissa began, a smile creeping across her face, “to never tell a living soul, even under threat of punishment or torture, to tell anyone that Edgar is leaking you the codes to 116E. Remember, Mikey, you’re not telling a living soul that I shot you because I thought you were a bear,” she winked. “So, we’re even. That boyfriend of yours really has you tied up into knots, huh?”

“What can I say? He came and swept me off my feet at the right time. I was—”

She interrupted, “Lonely and horny in the middle of nowhere. But there’s no way he swept *you* off *your* feet.” She laughed. “I see it out here all the time. Don’t get me wrong, you two clearly love each other. It’s disgusting. But it happens all the time out here. They rip everyone out of their previous lives and stick them out here and connections form fast and strong. Haven’t you ever wondered about Chance and Shadow?”

“I wonder about Chance and Shadow every single day,” I said, the release valve on this particular gossip being opened for the first time. “Did I miss something when I was gone? Are they an item now?”

“Who knows,” she said and shrugged. “They are extremely private about it and everyone is too polite to ask. I’m not too polite to ask but I don’t want to look like an asshole, either.”

“So we’re all on the same wavelength. They could just be close friends but they would be such a cute couple,” I said.

“I am also glad we’re all wondering. I guess now we all have to wait for the housewarming invitation to be sure,” she said.

Marissa and I might or might not have gossiped for another half hour or so. It’s fine. There’s nothing important going on. We’re just out here shooting the breeze. The world can wait.

The next name in my old-timey detective notebook was Charlie. She was at the gate when it happened, which was an interesting spot to be in. It was on the grounds but it was as far away from the attack as someone could possibly be while still being on the grounds.

Charlie was her ever-pleasant self when I approached her to ask about what happened.

“Mikey!” she exclaimed and wrapped her arms around me in a hug. I allowed this.

“Hi, Charlie. It’s good to see you again, too,” I said.

“Glad you’re back from your vacation. There’s a lot of work to be done,” she teased.

“Tell me about it,” I said. “You were out here when it happened, right?”

“Yep,” she said. “I couldn’t tell much from out here. There was a light rumbling. I thought it might be an earthquake at first but I don’t think we have earthquakes out here. Then I saw some smoke coming up out of the center of the complex and that’s when I knew that something was going on. Seconds after I noticed the smoke—and I mean seconds, it’s like they appeared out of thin air—there were all of these Tier 3 guys at the gate. Those are some tough looking dudes, Mikey. They showed me some ID and told me that they had been assigned to the front gate for now and that I was needed “inside” for questioning and evaluation.” She still seemed slightly rattled by this, even as she was recollecting it.

“Holy crap. *Inside* inside?” I asked.

“*Inside* inside. Tier 3. They escorted me to a windowless building in Tier 3. I had only been as far as Tier 2. I have never been anywhere close to where they took me. Tier 3 is huge. The building they took me to was nowhere near the one that had been attacked,” she said.

“What did they ask you about?” I asked, secretly hoping that she wasn’t going to say that they asked about me. Surely she would have lead with that.

“They asked about every single person that had entered the gate in the past 6 months that wasn’t an employee. It took hours. They showed me video footage and everything. It wasn’t hard, though. I never forget a face and I can figure people out from a single conversation,” she said. “That’s why they put me out here, after all.”

“I can’t relate,” I replied, mind-breathing a mental sigh of relief. “Did you give them anything they could use?”

“I don’t think so. They seemed kind of pissed off at me by the end of it. I never let anyone in that could pull off something like that. I’m good at my job. I mean, you know that. I didn’t let that asshole in that was trying to get to you, remember? That guy that was your drug dealer or whatever from your previous life. And that pipsqueak wasn’t even a threat, he was just an asshole.”

“You do have a way of reading people,” I said and smiled. “You know Marissa thinks that someone who works here did it.”

“That’s the only thing that I can think of too,” she said, “and not only because it totally lets me off the hook.”

“Any idea who?” I asked.

“I don’t want to spread ugly rumors,” she said, “and I don’t think that he is the one that did the attack, but something is going on with Hunter. I’m sure you’ve noticed it, even before all of this started happening. He’s changed since he started the transfer to Tier 2. I’m not saying that it’s definitely related. People change a lot when they go past the second gate. But the timing is unfortunate, if you know what I mean.”

“I really do,” I said. “I don’t see him nearly as much as I used to.”

“No one does. He’s either inside of Tier 2 or holed up in his cabin. He used to leave through the front gate every now and then but he hasn’t left the premises in a long time. I don’t think that I’ve seen him since the attack. No, I know that I haven’t seen him since the attack. I don’t know if anyone has.”

“Interesting, maybe I’ll reach out to him,” I said.

“Let me know how that goes,” she replied.

“Thanks for the chat, Charlie. It was illuminating. One last thing,” I said, “Settle something for me. Chance and Shadow...”

“Are they dating, you mean?” she interrupted me. “I suppose that it’s possible for two people to be attached at the hip like that and not be dating, but it sure does feel like they are dating.”

“I know, right?” I said.

I would not be fazed if you told me that Hunter Jeremiah Hartley was a mischief demon or a trickster god come to earth in order to interfere with the best laid plans of Mikes and men. The sheer number of him scattered around O.V.E.R. and their differences in disposition made piecing together the puzzle that much harder. Even the existence of a quote-unquote “Innocent” Hunter put a wrench in everything. It was all a game of who knew what and who was where and when, that was impossible to resolve from an outsider’s perspective. I didn’t even know how much the Hunters knew about each others’ movements.

I had messaged Hunter a few times after the incident while I was still in Montana. He hadn’t responded to any of them. That’s not suspicious on its own. I’m not sure that I would be taking outside calls during a crisis if I was part of an inner ring of O.V.E.R. either. But Hunter—all of the Hunters actually—were operating outside my scope and I didn’t have a clue what their plans or goals were. Maybe this was all part of it. They certainly were already inside in a significant way. They could have orchestrated this, *could* being the operative word. I don’t know what they

would want out of an attack like this and whoever did this must have been highly motivated.

Hunter still wasn't responding to messages or calls and I had not seen him around since I got back. After speaking to Marissa and Charlie, I decided that my only hope was to go to his cabin and knock on the door and pray that he answered. He probably wouldn't know anything either. If any of them were involved, it would have to be his later iterations. Not only did they know more than him, they had more malicious and deliberate intent.

I was strangely nervous as I knocked on the door to his cabin. The whole situation between us has become more dissonant every time I talk to any of them. Hunter is someone I would have considered my best friend only a couple short months ago. This Hunter, Innocent Hunter, had only ever been kind to me. I had only ever been kind to him. Yet, there was a future for him (in my past) where he slams my head into the cold hard floor of an office building inside Tier 2, but that hasn't happened yet for him. Innocent Hunter didn't know about it yet. But his lack of knowledge did not prevent either of us from becoming distant. I did not know why he was becoming distant. It was as though he had foreknowledge of something he had no right to already know.

I knew why *I* was becoming distant. I knew what was going to happen between us, at least some of it, and couldn't stand to look at him. Looking at him made me scared and then guilty for feeling scared and then indignant because I have a right to be scared and then upset because this is the same guy that kept me from bleeding to death in the middle of the road, then forlorn because I lost a friendship and then a whole bunch of other things—it's a whole emotional effort to just look at Hunter. And I know that neither of us have done our worst yet and that bleak future looms over us every time I talk to him. But still, I had to talk to him.

As I approached his cabin, I could partially see him through his window, typing on a laptop, I think. He was mostly obscured by curtains but I could see movement inside. Good. There would be no pretending not to be home, or as I like to call it "The Mike Walters Special." The Mike Walters Special being when someone knocks on your door and you don't move and wait for them to give up and leave. You can do this even when someone knows that you're in there but it isn't as effective.

I knocked on the door and waited for a response. Nothing. The Mike Walters Special, the counter to which is "Hey, Hunter, is everything okay in there? I can see you through the window. I just want to talk," which I successfully deployed.

Around half a minute passed. I didn't knock again. He knew that I was out there and I knew that he was in there. "Hunter? I just want to talk. I wasn't here for the attack and I've been worried about you. Nobody I've talked to has seen you since then."

He was quiet for a few more seconds, and then said flatly and gruffly, "Now's not the time, bud."

"Now seems like a great time actually, *bud*," I said. "I want to know what has been going on and I've been left in the dark. You're the only one I know that can go into Tier 2. Have you heard anything?"

"Go away, Mike," he said.

"C'mon Hunter. You saved my life. You can't open the door for me?" I asked, attempting the verbal equivalent of puppy dog eyes.

"It's been a hard week. I would like to be left alone," he said.

"Oh, well that's easy. Talk to me for 15 minutes and you can be left alone all that you want," I said.

"Mike, you know I hate this crap. What do you want?" he asked.

"I want you to open the door so that we can talk," I replied.

"The door stays closed," he shot back.

"Why won't you open the door?" I asked.

"The door stays closed," he repeated.

"We can't talk through the door. What if someone comes by while we're talking and we're talking about something that we don't want anyone else to hear?" I asked.

"Like what?" he asked.

"Like, what the only guy I know that could have been inside Tier 2 might have seen when someone reduced 357A to rubble," I said.

He was quiet for awhile. I was about to speak again when he replied, tersely, "what do you know?"

"Well, with the way that you answered that, I think that I know *something*." Truthfully I didn't know anything or suspect Innocent Hunter of anything at all. He's Innocent, after all. If not in his way of living then in his ability to cause harm.

He went quiet again. "Mike," he said in a calm voice that I could tell was fake, "I am going to open this door and step to the side so that I am not in the doorway. You are going to enter. You are going to close the door behind you. And then you are sure as heck not going to tell anyone what you see and hear inside of this cabin this evening. Do you understand me?"

"Of course I do," I said, trying to balance my true concern for his feelings with the excitement at the fact that I had managed to get him to open up.

"Okay then," he said. I could hear him take a deep breath and put his back against the outer wall of his cabin. Then the doorknob turned and the door opened for me. Hunter was not visible from the outside of his cabin. It was like a ghost had opened the door for me. Eager but nervous, I rushed in and closed the door behind me.

As I made sure that the door was closed and locked, I turned to see Innocent Hunter. He had a nervous expression on his face. But more importantly, he had a fresh and gruesome scar that had been stitched up along the left side of his face. I unthinkingly grimaced in sympathy pain. Confusion slowly crept into my sympathy.

"You were there..." I said.

"I didn't do it, but if anyone sees my face, I'm a dead man," he said. "I know what it looks like."

"I know what it looks like, too," I said. In fact, I knew *who* it looked like, but the situation didn't add up.

I struggled to remember if Hunter and I had ever spoken of the other two Hunters during a time that had not been undone by time travel. He helped me when I almost killed Edgar, but I had made sure that that event never happened and thus any conversation I had with Hunter had been erased as well.

This couldn't be Innocent Hunter, right? Innocent Hunter could not have made his way into Tier 3. He wouldn't have a reason to do any of the things that Mystery or Punished Hunter were up to yet. And he had to be from before Mystery Hunter's time, or else Mystery Hunter would have the scar on his face as well. I wasn't sure how to tell Mystery and Innocent Hunter apart, except Mystery Hunter wouldn't have been hiding in the Tier 1 cabin for days on end. He doesn't live in this cabin. I always assumed that he lived in Tier 2 somewhere. The only time I know that he was in this cabin was to receive WOE.BEGONE challenge 4 and I think that whole thing was some sort of trap to lure me into the line of fire the night that Marissa mistook me for a bear.

I could only think of one way to make sure and it wasn't foolproof.

"WOE.BEGONE?" I asked.

His expression was blank. He clearly didn't recognize what I had just said to him. There was not the slightest glimmer of understanding. There was nothing for him to lie about. He simply did not connect that word with what was going on.

"A little bit, but you're a little bit woebegone yourself, Mike," he said. It was the real word, no caps no period. Woebegone. It was Innocent Hunter. Innocent Hunter had the scar on the left side of his face. Innocent Hunter was in the vicinity of 357A when the attack happened. Innocent Hunter had gone into hiding so that no one would suspect that his new scar had anything to do with the incident. It was Innocent Hunter.

I forgot to ask him whether or not he thought that Chance and Shadow were dating. Damn. I think it's basically a settled matter at this point, anyway.

This has been WOE.BEGONE. Next time: Innocent Hunter. Thanks for playing.

[End theme plays.]