

EPISODE 36: RESPITE

[Hey guys. Welcome to the season finale of WOE.BEGONE. There will be an intermission before season 4 begins. This intermission will be more ambitious than normal, so buckle up. The season 2 soundtrack is also going up soon on bandcamp and for \$5 patrons. If you want all the cool Patreon stuff, it's still all there. Thanks to these patrons that I'm sort of choosing at random: Alex LeMire, Ben Rowe, David Ault, Ryan is bitter about Mike's Scruff messages, Ashley Moo, Harrison Minnix, Si, Harvey Jane, BertBert, and Johnny Bazookatone. Enjoy the show.]

So, you might have assumed that everything turned out fine. I lived with Matt for the rest of my life and nothing ever came of this whole WOE.BEGONE thing. That's satisfying, right? You want me to come out of this happy and well-adjusted and living my best life, right? At the very least, you want me to come out of this. Right?

Astute listeners of the previous episode will have picked up on the fact that I both claimed that I drove to Matt's house and that I didn't feel comfortable stating where I currently was. Which means, unfortunately, that I am no longer staying in the junk room at Matt's house, sleeping on a futon every night. Settling down, finding peace, resting for even one fucking second of this horrible life of mine: none of these are real options. I see one scant glimpse of a chance for that sort of ending for me and I become ravenous. I work single-mindedly in my pursuit of that life for myself. I become flighty and erratic. And then something happens to demonstrate that I am not in control here. Nobody is truly in control of what happens to them in life but I am even worse off in that regard than most people. I live at the whims of people who seek to control me for their own benefit. But enough about capitalism.

I also live at the whims of people who seek to control me because of the outcomes of several choices that I have made regarding time travel. This list of people is not limited to the set of people that I know about. Because of the knock-on effects of my actions forward through time, even decades forward through time, there are people who do not know who I am yet, people who might not have even been born, that have a bone to pick with me. In my experience, they are interested in picking that bone and breaking it. They are not pleasant people.

This is why I couldn't stay at Matt's house. It was never going to be a permanent location for me. I couldn't mooch off of him forever. That he was allowing me to mooch off of what little he had was more charitable than he could actually afford. It just so happened that I also would have no say in the matter of whether I would be able to stay there. Other people had other plans for me.

I could have accepted it as a fact of my life that I was never going to get the chance to see how things played out if I had my way. I could have worked tirelessly in preparation for something that I always knew was coming. I could have used my knowledge and my contacts to become formidable, ferocious, grizzled. I could have come back better than ever, ready for the fight for the first time.

I sat around feeling sorry for myself and got high for a couple of days. That counts for something, right? This is WOE.BEGONE.

[Intro theme plays.]

Matt was more generous than I deserved. That's not saying much considering that I literally killed him in the house he was allowing me to live in. What I deserved was retribution, but he didn't even know that. What he knew was generosity. For the time that I was there, what was his was mine. I guess what was mine was his, but I didn't have anything. I had to borrow his clothes, which were a little bit too small for me but I didn't bring anything when I left O.V.E.R. I couldn't use my bank account because that could alert people to where I was. I paid for gas in cash on my drive to Vancouver out of paranoia and ran out of said cash by the time I reached his house. I had a car with a quarter tank of gas in it, a pair of sunglasses that I wore when driving, and a can of air duster that was capable of cleaning electronics and breaking into buildings that used a specific type of sensor on the door or get high if you're a rebellious and stupid 16 year old. Not included was a will to live, which made me quite pathetic when I showed up on Matt's doorstep and in the intervening days that I stayed there. Matt essentially had to nurse me back to health. This made me feel even worse about myself because Matt clearly did not have his shit together.

I have alluded to the state of Matt's living conditions in the past. When I completed the first challenge and called him in order to know that it was really him and he was really alive, he made it sound like he was doing well. He told me that he was married and had just had a child and that he had come into a lot of money recently. In fact, he was sure that I had called him up because I knew that he had money and that I needed some, seeing as *my* life was in shambles at the moment. People were saying things about me, at least according to Matt.

After that, I went to his house to kill him and learned that he was living in a state of semi-squalor, in the same house that I was in while I stayed with him, living completely alone. When I was tasked with helping my past self complete the fourth challenge, I picked up some more facts about him and how he was living. He owned an illegal sawed-off shotgun. There was some pot in his bedroom. Nothing seemed to have been dusted in ages. The house was old. It smelled old. Walking with a normal amount of force would shake everything just a little bit. The house had settled on an angle, which meant anything round that dropped on the ground would roll. The yard was unkempt, obviously rarely mowed much less maintained. I ended up with a serious amount of bug bites on my ankles from having to trek through his yard during that whole escapade. The water pressure was bad. He told me after I moved in that I shouldn't drink the water if I didn't filter it first. The whole thing added up to something that didn't make sense if he had any amount of stable income.

It wasn't hard to get the truth out of him. I didn't have to ask. It came up through us having so much catching up to do. From his perspective, we hadn't seen each other since some time before the day that he died. He brought up that day. I thought he would. I had moved him that day from right before the incident. I have had a long time to think about that day, exactly where he would have been at certain times, where his car was parked, when he would have gotten in his car based on how long it took to get to that intersection, stuff like that. He went out to his car and I

simply put him back in his house. Simply from my perspective, that is. From his perspective, he thought that he was having a mental break and was nauseous on top of that from the travel. He said that day was like being a train getting taken off of the tracks but still moving. A train can still move forward if it is off of the tracks and there is nothing in front of it, but if there's a brick wall coming up then it is going to plow straight into it. He said that whatever it was that happened that day, it had ruined his life. I had ruined his life. I wanted to tell him that I didn't ruin his life as much as getting t-boned at that intersection would have, but I held my tongue. I didn't want him to know.

He said that the incident had freaked him out and made him wonder if he was developing a serious mental condition. He was in his mid-20s at the time, which is around the time that something like that is prone to manifest if it is ever going to. He calmed down after a couple of months when it didn't happen again. He got a job opportunity in Vancouver that was too good to refuse. He met a woman there, settled down, had a kid, and got a sizeable promotion. That is when I first talked to him on the phone, when I started playing WOE.BEGONE.

He remembered that phone call, too. He joked that right around that time was when he hit the metaphorical brick wall. I can't help but wonder if there actually is a connection there. If he remembered telling me that people were spreading nasty rumors about me, he didn't say anything about it. Everything was undone just as quickly as it was done. The company he worked for ended up having to downsize, which meant that they fired Matt. Matt pretended to go to work for awhile but his wife found out about how he had been lying to her for weeks and this betrayal caused them to separate. Eventually it became clear that this separation was going to be permanent. He went into full bachelor mode, living in the sort of place that he could afford without a steady income. He maintained that it all started the day he had that break with reality.

I don't believe in fate. I don't believe that by saving Matt's life, he was destined to live through what he had lived through. And I do believe in coincidences. But I also believe that sometimes people actually conspire and that the road of my actions is rocky enough that there could be a correlation between me saving Matt's life inside of that security building and everything that happened to him as a result of that. Still, I had no way to make it up to him. He was better off than I was by that point. Much better off, in my opinion, owning fancy things like clothes and food.

I didn't leave his house for the entire time that I was there. At first I was paranoid that someone would spot me and throw me into an unmarked van, but mostly I simply did not want to be anywhere public. I wanted to shrink into myself. I didn't even want Matt to see me, but I wanted to see him after all of this time, so I was at a bit of an impasse in that regard. Without divulging more than I had during the phone call on the roadtrip over, Matt had no idea what I was going through. He knew that I had danced with extremely powerful technology and as a result had done something unforgivably bad. It's hard to tell what he could even discern from our conversation because I was screaming myself hoarse for most of it. He saw the symptoms without seeing the cause. He was radically kind to me while I was there. It

didn't matter what I had done. We were friends and had been for many years. I would like to think that I would do the same for him.

The days were lazy. Matt was trying to put in 8 hours of work in some capacity every day to maintain some normality, to try and find an actual job, and to make some pocket change doing freelance writing, editing, data entry, stuff like that. I'd get high and watch movies all day on Matt's Netflix account. After dinner, we'd get high again and watch a movie, sometimes one of the same ones that I had watched earlier in the day if I found one that I wanted to show him. We watched *Lapsis* together, which was fun. He wanted to show me *Terrible Help Is Hard To Find*. It was alright, not really my thing. I don't think that my movies were really his thing either. A few days passed in a haze. Probably not the healthiest way to cope, but he offered and it was definitely healthier than what I would have done if I had gone home which would have been to get drunk every day.

It felt briefly like the old days, like we were in college again and it was the summer and we were scraping by without summer jobs so that we could maximize downtime before the fall semester. It's hokey to romanticize your teens and twenties because things were never as good as you remember them being and there is so much depth to life that happens after that, but my 30s have been profoundly and fundamentally awful so far, so it feels like a much needed respite. That is when Matt and I were the closest. We didn't need to do anything other than be in each other's company. We were free in a way that most people don't ever get to be again, or only get to be when they are old and their bodies are uncooperative. Sounds pretty gay if you ask me. Matt's straight and I am a professional boundary respecter, but I mean c'mon. Just dudes being bros all day every day. That's hot. What if one of them was a rugby player? And his shirt got pasta sauce on it so he had to take it off and throw it in the washer. But there's a bad storm and he has to stay the night. That's okay, but there's only one bed... I have lost the thread here.

I promised him money but I was scared to try and get it. It's a shame. If I wasn't so down on crypto I would have actually bought and kept some which would have been perfect for this exact situation and pretty much nothing else that I will ever be interested in. I gave him my bank information and told him that he should use it to withdraw however much he needed after I was gone, which sounds ominous when I put it that way. He took it as ominous and assured me that it wasn't necessary. I ended up finding an old paypal login that had \$170 in it from who knows what and sent him that. He told me that he was going to send it back but never did. I owed him a lot more than that and frankly he needed a lot more than that. That should cover the weed and the food, though.

I slept like it was going out of style, even after I had corrected my sleep debt from driving up there. I couldn't remember the last time that I got a normal amount of sleep. It must have been when I was on vacation with Edg—with Edgar and we would lay around in bed until one of us was industrious enough to get the morning started. Sorry, I'm not going to cry on two episodes of the podcast in a row. That would be embarrassing.

I lose track of days easily when I don't have a schedule, plus I didn't have my phone. Matt said that he would let me use his phone or his little Android tablet but

any sort of connectivity frightened me. I think it must have been 12 days that I was there, plus the one day of driving, so nearly two weeks. I had recovered enough that I was getting up before noon, sometimes even several minutes before noon. I wasn't high every second of every day anymore. I didn't have dreams that devolved into screaming every single night. Those are the worst because I can't tell if I was actually screaming or not. I asked Matt about it and he said that he didn't hear anything but that he also puts on his favorite song, Smoothed Brown Noise 10 Hours Black Screen For Sleeping And Studying, every night while he sleeps so that he can't hear the nearby road as much. I could have been murdered and dragged away and Matt wouldn't find the blood trail until morning.

One thing that I did every morning/afternoon when I got up was dishes. It was one of the only things that I could think of to repay him. I had also tidied up his junk room, but that was for my own comfort as well as his. Matt didn't own a dishwasher, so I had to wash them by hand, which took a chunk out of my day. I appreciated that because the longer I was doing something, the less I would have to think about myself and how I was feeling. It was while I was doing dishes, wearing Matt's Pikachu boxers and a Death Cab For Cutie shirt that was too big for him and fit me just fine, that I was suddenly no longer in Matt's kitchen. In an instant I was somewhere else.

It was disorienting (time travel is always disorienting), but I knew exactly what had happened to me. It always feels the same and it never gets any easier. I landed hard against a tile floor, though not hard enough to sustain injuries. When the nausea and blurred vision subsided, I sat up and looked around. I was in a white room with white. There wasn't anything in the room except for two folding chairs. There were no windows. There was no door, either. I had no idea where I was, other than in a white room. The plate that I had been cleaning when I got moved was no longer in my hand and wasn't in the room, which means that it fell about 5 feet and hit the floor of Matt's kitchen and probably broke. Rude.

My initial reaction was one of anger. I was irate that someone had once again plucked me out of my life in order to fuck with me. If O.V.E.R. was going to be so preoccupied with whatever it was that I was doing, why wouldn't they just kill me? I couldn't do anything then. I would be out of their hair. That could be why I was there, though they didn't have to make me come to them to accomplish that. They could want to show me that they did indeed get the technology back, which means Ryan's probably dead in a gutter somewhere. Show off that whatever I thought that I was doing, I was never going to out-clever the clever assholes that I was up against. Then they could shoot me in the head or something more clever than that because they are so goddamn clever and I am no one.

These emotions seamlessly transitioned into fear. What were they doing to do to me? Is the door locked? It was. Where was I? Am I going to die in this room or be tortured? What about Edgar? Was he in a room just like this one? What about Matt? Were they going to undo what I had done? What about Chance and Shadow? Are they dating? I don't know why they would hide it. People were super accepting when I started dating Edgar. I know it's a military operation, but I genuinely feel like we've had an immense victory in the culture war in the last 5 years or so regarding

baseline acceptance of the gays, to the point that it is much less normalized to be an out-and-out homophobe no matter where you are in America. Where was I? Oh, right, I was asking "Where was I?"

I also wondered about Matt. What would he think happened? I hadn't gone into the specifics of time travel with him, so he might not even have a framework to attribute my sudden disappearance to. He would see the broken plate and my car still in his driveway and could only assume the worst about what happened, accurately enough. And the can of air duster. That would be the biggest clue of them all. Mike Walters would never suddenly leave, not without his can of air duster. I hoped that he would take me seriously and get some money out of my bank account.

I wanted to bang on the door and scream for help but there was no door. It seemed like there was only one way into this room and no way to get out of it without a device of some kind. Equally and oxymoronicly, I wanted to be as quiet as possible and hide from anyone who might enter. I thought about hiding under one of the folding chairs, but that was my brain protesting the unacceptable reality that there was nowhere to hide and nothing that I could do.

There's a Rafael Muslani novel where the main character wakes up in a room like this and it turns out that it is made of paper and is in the middle of Grand Central Station, so I tried punching my way out. Nope, that's definitely concrete. This isn't an escape room. Also I think it was aliens in that book because that's how those books normally go. I didn't think that it was aliens this time. I entertained the notion that no one would ever enter or leave this room ever again. They put me here out of sheer hatred of me and I would sit here under a bright fluorescent light in a white room while my sanity slowly depleted. I would die of dehydration before I could starve. I don't know if I could survive long enough to dehydrate if the room was airtight. I don't know how long that kind of thing takes. But I could be stuck here, entirely alone, waiting for my body to betray me.

It was as I was having this thought that a man appeared in the room with me. He was clean cut, with short hair and no beard, wearing what I would call business casual attire. He appeared with his feet firmly on the ground, standing confidently. He had taken to the side-effects of time travel much more gracefully than I had. He did not look fazed by what must have been a similar experience to the one that I had. I could tell from the look in his eye and how he paused several seconds before moving from the spot he had appeared that he had been affected to some degree and he was waiting for his vision to stop being blurry. I didn't know whether the process I had become accustomed too was outdated or if he was really good at pretending not to be in pain.

His eyes found me in the room. He looked at his watch. "Hello there!" His voice sounded welcoming in a professional sort of way. "You're Mike Walters. Have you been here long? They told me 11:30. I was going to be in here when you got here."

"I don't think so but I can't exactly tell," I managed to stammer out.

"Oh. Well, I hope it wasn't long regardless. Would you like to take a seat with me?" He asked. He was charming.

“Um,” I said. “Um, so I’m going to be blunt and just ask the question: are you going to kill me? Or, more accurately, is anybody in this building or as a part of this organization going to kill me, now or in the future? Or in the past, I guess that’s on the table as well.”

The man smirked. “That’s funny, Mike. They’re going to like you, I think. You have nothing to fear, at least from my co-conspirators and I. I suspect that you have much to fear in other capacities. I am here to put you at ease and see what kind of agreement my organization can come to with you.”

He was right. I did feel at ease listening to him. His voice was calm, slow and low. I detected what might have been the remnants of a British accent.

“You said your “organization.” I am beginning to suspect that I am not inside of O.V.E.R. right now,” I said. He had taken a seat in the folding chair and so I took the seat opposite him.

“That is correct. My understanding is that they do not have the power to do the demonstration that brought you here at this point in time. You were employed by them when that power was taken away, correct?”

“I was on vacation,” I replied.

“We know extremely well where you were when the event occurred. You and your husband both,” he said.

“He’s my boyfriend,” I corrected.

“Ah, yes. My point still stands that you were both employed by O.V.E.R. and witnessed the fallout from the attack in person at the O.V.E.R. compound. You know better than most, I think, what happened there and what has gone missing,” he said.

“Yes, I believe it was the technology that allows a snappy dresser to teleport into a room with no doors,” I said. He smiled again.

“That’s good. They will like you, I’m sure of it,” he said.

“So, if I’m not at O.V.E.R. . . . are you with the Flinchites?”

“That’s more of an inside joke than what we actually call ourselves,” he replied.

This has been WOE.BEGONE. Next time: well, I still haven’t told you where I am, have I? Thanks for playing.

[End Theme Plays.]