

EPISODE 45: I wonder what it is about that place.

[Hey guys. You probably know about the patreon, patreon.com/woe_begone, where you can get early access, instrumentals, cat clips, Q&As, director's commentary and more, but did you know there is a subreddit, [/r/WOEBEGONE?](https://www.reddit.com/r/WOEBEGONE/) There's also a twitter, [@WOEBEGONEPOD](https://twitter.com/WOEBEGONEPOD), and a Discord, link in description. You never have to stop talking about or thinking about WOE.BEGONE. Speaking of patreon, many thanks to my 10 newest patrons: Bairon, Astrid, Mack McCure, Ariel Diaz, Theo, Seoung Kim, Jeremy Cloutier, Bertie Archer, Moths Teeth, and augustfairies for supporting this show. Enjoy.]

Home. A place that I had not considered home until it was ripped away from me. I've felt adrift for most of my adult life. I had an apartment when I started WOE.BEGONE, but it didn't mean anything to me. I would not feel any loss upon leaving it behind. I left it behind without much consideration as soon as it became convenient. My sentimental nature wasn't pronounced enough to call it home. Oldbrush Valley didn't feel like home, either. It was always somewhere that I was going to be temporarily. It was a place with a room in it that I could sleep in between shifts. It was an avenue for my curiosities. It was a backdrop for meeting my boyfriend, a backdrop for exploring the unknown, a backdrop for being ripped apart by man and beast alike, a backdrop for giving into my most depraved emotions. It didn't feel like a home until I couldn't go home anymore.

I thought that I was going back to the compound. I assumed that they had tracked me down and were reclaiming what was theirs-- a test subject that they were prepared to tinker with as the next part of WOE.BEGONE played out. The Mikes in Riga told me that I was about to be free, but I didn't trust them. They knew that they were free, but they didn't know everything. I felt like I didn't know anything. I was totally at the whims of complicated people making complicated decisions in a complicated system. I didn't feel as though I would have everything figured out by the time that I became them, first one then the other, Mike and then Michael, over the course of what appeared to be about ten years. There were aspects to them that I couldn't imagine the progression of, couldn't see myself in the situations that would produce them, Michael especially.

It would be preposterous to say that anything about my recent experiences gave me hope, but that is what I am about to say. I felt hope, looking at the two of them. There was some continuation of Mike Walters going years into the future. Those iterations had their own eccentricities, but they seemed like they had reached a peace that I hadn't ever experienced. There was a light in their eyes that wasn't there for me. They had energy. They had control of the situation, at least until they didn't anymore and I was whisked away without warning. They had the ability to help me. They took charge quickly and confidently. They knew how to shoot a gun. They told me that Edgar was safe. Michael had a gold band on the ring finger of his left hand. It looked natural, like it belonged there.

I laid in my bed and looked up at the ceiling. There would be chores to do, questions to answer, but it was after late and the world was asleep. I checked the time on my phone. It was well after midnight on the night I left to stay with Matt. The night that my misguided, animalistic desire to flee transformed into an all-consuming need to flee, a need so severe that I was willing to kill for it and that killing in turn fed the need. It was too late to stop me. I was already past the gate, on the road, howling at Matt on the phone and driving for 26 straight hours to Vancouver to try and dissolve into nothingness in his house. I was going to be there relatively soon. It was all going to happen. The Flinchites were going to pick up that Mike, likely regardless of anything I did to warn him, producing me as the end result. Whoever sent me back to that day was not giving me a second chance. If anything, they were rubbing my nose in it.

This meant that my time at Oldbrush Valley was roughly contiguous. I hadn't been gone long enough for anyone to notice. I didn't know what became of Hunter after I left. O.V.E.R. didn't try to track me down. They would have found me. It appeared to be quietly covered up. I could go back to

work. I could go back to normal, as though I hadn't watched the life leave his eyes. As if I hadn't just spent months being put through the ringer. I could show up for breakfast in the morning and see everyone. I could show up for my patrol without anyone asking me where I had been. I could see Edgar.

Edgar. He hadn't received the message yet. It was a ruse on top of a ruse. They told me to record a fake message to him, giving him instructions that would lead the runners of WOE.BEGONE into a trap inside of O.V.E.R. They were tricking them (we called them Arbiters because the enforcer of the fourth challenge called himself an "arbiter of access"), but the Flinchites were tricking me as well. They did send the message. Michael told me that the operation landed Edgar in the hospital. The Flinchites, of course, would not tell me what happened while I was in the compound. Ty shrugged in his polite and professional way and explained that those details could not be disclosed to me. But that message hadn't arrived yet. Surely, it couldn't have its intended effect if I were here to intercept it and warn him. Whoever returned me wasn't the Flinchites. I was going to ruin their entire plan. I was going to make sure that when I became Michael that I wouldn't have that story to tell. That would be the first order of business in the morning. Edgar was asleep. I took solace in that. He was asleep and he had no idea that anything had happened. He would never have to know. He would never have to worry about it, about me. I could endure the grief of those months separation for the both of us and I would be happy to do so.

O.V.E.R., WOE.BEGONE, Flinchites, Hunters, Arbiters, Flinch, Ryan, Anne, Marissa, the Bear. Oldbrush Valley.

I wonder what it is about that place.

[Ol' Brush Valley (Reprise) Plays.]

[INTRO THEME PLAYS.]

I knocked on Edgar's door at 6:37am and 0 seconds. Edgar set his alarm every morning for 6:30, even on days that he didn't work. He kept a much more orderly schedule than I did. He would try to keep me on some semblance of a schedule on the nights and mornings that we spent together, but that was usually a wash. I am one to lay around until noon unless there is something to get out of bed about. 6:37 was enough time for him to get up, and put on the coffee. He got in the shower at 6:45 every morning. I was hoping to intercept him before he got to that part of his routine, but not so early that my knock would wake him up. I knew that it took exactly 11 minutes and 4 seconds to walk to his cabin if I walked at my normal pace. Because of the circumstances, I got there 36 seconds early and then proceeded to wait nervously on his doorstep for those 36 seconds in anticipation of knocking on it. I had been awake since 3:45am, not being able to sleep due to thinking and rethinking and ultimately overthinking about showing up at Edgar's door as soon as it made sense to in the morning. I am terrible at waiting in the best of times. The time in between getting ready and leaving is torturous. Watching the sun rise that morning was the most hellish waiting that I had ever endured. To say that I was "anxious" to see him again is a terrible understatement. I was shaking hard enough that it was difficult to actually knock on the door. I had no reason to believe that he wasn't in there, but I had learned to fear the worst. I peeked in his window before I knocked but didn't see him. My teeth were chattering even though it was warm out. It was still the end of summer, which is something that I hadn't considered until I walked out the door in a flannel shirt. It has been winter when I had finally made it out of CANNONBALL's house. It was freezing cold in Riga. I had severely overdressed.

I knocked and waited a full calendar year for Edgar to answer, which my watch registered as 16 seconds. He opened the door nonchalantly, not in any hurry. He smiled, surprised to see me. I was struck by how beautiful he was and how effortlessly he was beautiful. Even opening the door I could

see the grace in his movement. His kindness was externalized on his face in a way that I can't quite pinpoint. He looked at ease with himself and the world.

"Mikey!" he said, relaxed as ever. "You're up early. Did you tell me that you were coming?"

"Hey Edgar... no I [spluttering noises]" I choked out. So much for being cool and not letting him know that something had happened. I could tell from the moment I saw him that I wasn't going to be able to hold back my emotions. I am terrible at showing emotional restraint during the best of times and it had been over 4 months from my perspective since I had seen him. Edgar's surprised smile turned into a look of concern as I tried not to weep on his doorstep. His expression ultimately settled as the concerned look someone gets when they know generally what genre of thing has gone wrong but has been kept too far in the dark to be able to understand exactly what it was. He ushered me in, quickly but gently, putting his hands on my shoulder. I winced, being protective of my back after all that it has endured, only figuring out that he was taking my coat when he had gotten in mostly off of me. I could feel the heat in my face. I thought that I must have looked quite alarming when he answered the door.

He sat me down on the couch and situated himself close to me. "Is this what I think it is?" he asked.

"Probably," I said.

"Mikey boy," he said, "You can't keep doing this. I worry every night that I'm going to find you dead the next day."

"You wouldn't. Whoever kills me will probably hide my corpse," I said.

"Stop," he chided me. I was calming down. I snuggled up closer to him on the couch.

"I wasn't really in the neighborhood," I said.

"I know," Edgar replied. "But I'm glad you're here." He paused to look at me. "Have you been up all night? You look--"

"Awful," I cut him off.

"What? No. You look tired," Edgar said. He was quiet for a moment again. "Is your... is your hair longer than it was yesterday? Like, a lot longer?"

"My hair grows fast," I replied.

"And how many days growth is this, exactly?" he asked.

"...140" I said.

"Mikey, Mikey, Mikey. And you're never going to tell me what happened. I know that look. That look means I'll never get the whole story out of you." He was right.

"There is one thing that we have to talk about," I said.

[Painted Glass (Reprise) plays.]

Edgar took a shower. I helped myself to some coffee but ended up falling asleep on the couch before he got out of the shower anyway. At some point he gently nudged me away and guided me to the bed, an offer which I graciously accepted. I don't think I have an actual memory of this. I think that because I woke up in Edgar's bed that my brain decided that I must have gotten there by some means and made up a story that seemed appropriate. If Edgar didn't do it, how else could I have gotten there? Well, I suppose that the technology to move me without touching me does exist and has been the bane of my existence for a long time now, but I think I would have been roused from my slumber if I had been moved that way. At some point, I woke slightly as Edgar got in bed beside me.

"Did you get the alligator back from the store?" I grumbled.

"Alligator?" Edgar asked, confused.

"You don't get the points unless you come back with the alligator," I explained.

"Mikey, are you awake or asleep?" he asked. "That sounds like dream logic."

"Both," I said.

“Are you feeling well enough to tell me what you wanted to tell me?” Edgar asked. I opened my eyes.

“There’s not enough time before you have to go to work,” I said.

“I’m back from work,” Edgar replied. “You slept all day.”

“Oh,” I said. The world was coming into focus around me. “I haven’t been in a nice bed in a long time.”

“Are you going to tell me how there were somehow 140 days between yesterday and today?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

“You’re really not going to,” he said, realizing that I was serious.

“Is that okay?” I asked.

“It’s not,” he said and sighed. “But I guess it comes with the territory. What did you need to tell me?”

“Did you get the alligator back from the store?” I repeated.

“No, seriously.” He laughed in a way that indicated this was the last chance I would have to riff before he started being more firm about demanding answers.

“Fine,” I said.

“We should sit up, maybe?” Edgar asked.

“Fine,” I said. We sat up.

I looked at the clock. “Fuck, it’s 8pm?” I asked.

“Yep. Talk,” he said.

“Okay. So, I have been to the future,” I said. “And I don’t want to scare you, but I ran into some future iterations of myself there.”

“You live long enough to have future iterations,” he said, trailing off. “I’m not teasing. That legitimately makes me feel less concerned.”

“I’ve got at least ten years left in the tank, assuming that them being alive means that I live long enough to become them,” I said.

“It has to mean that, right?” he asked.

“You would think so, but I try not to be optimistic about these things anymore,” I said.

“Anyway, the oldest one, Michael, told me that something is going to happen. To you, I mean.”

Edgar went quiet. He froze in place. “...is someone going to kill me?”

“Well, everyone gets killed some day, Edgar. Nobody lives forever,” I replied. He glared. The time for riffing was, in fact, over. I hastily got back on track.

“Michael was like ‘see here partner, there’s a plot in Ol’ Brush Valley bound to go belly-up for them operators ‘n’ whatnot and Edgar’s gonna get laid up in the hospital a few days ‘cause of it’ but that hasn’t happened yet. I think we can stop it,” I said.

Edgar stared at me. “...why did you do a southern accent just now?” he asked.

“Michael has a southern accent,” I explained.

“But you’re Michael,” he replied.

“Yes’m,” I said.

“So you’re saying that in the future you will have a southern accent,” he said.

“Guess so,” I said. “Why, ya like it?”

“... Kind of,” he admitted.

“Well’n I’m hafta work on it,” I said.

“Did you say that I’m going to be in the hospital?” he asked.

“It’s gonna be a real OK Corral by the looks of it [clears throat]... during my captivity, I was coerced into sending a message for purposes of leading a rival group into a snafu. It purported to be a message to you, though I was told in confidence that it was a ruse and that your involvement was a fabrication. I learned in Riga that I was deceived and that you are severely injured in the ensuing melee.

Since you have not received said message, I believe that we can subvert this mission and keep you out of the fray entirely. It should be as simple as ignoring it. You have not received this message yet, correct?"

"Uh... yeah, no I haven't," he said. "Captivity? Riga? Rival groups? Mikey, are you seriously going to say these things and not explain yourself?"

"Uh huh," I said.

The subject eventually got dropped and we moved on to smaller talk. I would have to keep an eye out for the message. I wondered in what form it would be delivered and if it would be exactly as I had recorded it or if the Flinchites changed parts of it. That was all stuff for a future Mike Walters to worry about. That night we got comfy on the couch and watched *Dune*. The David Lynch *Dune*. I had returned to a time where the Denis Villeneuve *Dune* hadn't come out yet. I had squandered my chance to see that *Dune* during my time in the future and would have to wait for it to come out all over again. There's nothing wrong with the David Lynch *Dune*. It's not as good as his best work, but it's passable in my opinion. It's fine.

[GUIDE DOG 3 plays.]

I felt much better having seen Edgar in the flesh. Making sure that he was safe was my main motivating factor for the past several months and I could now confidently say that Edgar was, in fact, safe, and that we were developing a plan to keep him safe from the eminent danger heading his way. That is an enormous chore to strike off the list, but it is far from the only one. I had a lot of time to myself in the few months prior and I spent a lot of that time thinking about Oldbrush Valley, specifically wondering what it is about that place. I had several questions that needed answering, but the morning after staying at Edgar's cabin, I had a starting place-- namely, the man around which the intrigue of Oldbrush Valley Energy and Resources tended to revolve, the very first person that I met upon arriving there, the one, the only, Hunter Jeremiah Hartley. Okay, so not "the one, the only." The three, the many, Hunter Jeremiah Hartley. I went home, took a shower, changed clothes, and immediately set out to cabin 44C.

Hunter answered the door. I didn't know that he would. The last time that we spoke, Hunter had told me that someone with my voice had led him into 357A, causing it to explode and leaving him with a scar across the side of his face. I winced when I saw the scar. In addition to the distinct possibility that an iteration of myself that I could not account for gave Hunter that scar, it was the same scar that Punished Hunter had. Punished Hunter, if you remember, being an iteration of Hunter that I shot and killed after he initiated an altercation. Seeing Hunter's much fresher scar reminded me that, if I understand things correctly, I was going to eventually drive him into a perpetual rage and then kill him when that rage became too much for me to handle. Punished Hunter did look older than Innocent Hunter, but not by too many years. The things that would culminate into that moment would happen in the next few years. Hunter only had a few more years to live. I pushed all that down as he let me into his cabin.

"You look different," he observed. "Shave and a haircut?"

"Something like that," I replied.

"It looks good on you," he said. I think he was trying to be polite. "What brings you out this way?" He was speaking to me as though nothing had ever happened between the two of us.

"Uh... so you know... the other two of you?" I asked. I had rarely been as blunt as to point out the fact that there were three Hunters Jeremiah Hartley.

"That's classified," Hunter said. "You're Tier 1."

"C'mon Hunter," I said. "You know that I already know about them. I just need to know when the last time you talked to them was."

"That doesn't sound like something you should know. You're Tier 1," he repeated.

“Look, it’s really important to me. Did you speak to them today or yesterday?” I asked, putting on my best puppy dog eyes.

“We...” he gazed into the middle distance, deciding on his word choice carefully. “We meet daily to discuss work related business.”

My puppy dog eyes lit up. “So you met with them today? Both of them? That’s all I want to know. I don’t care what you talked about or anything like that.”

“I don’t get what you’re going for,” Hunter said, “but yes, both of them. Today.”

“That’s all I wanted to know,” I said. “I owe you one.”

“You owe me more than one,” he replied.

“True,” I said. “I’ll get out of your hair.”

“That’s fine by me,” Hunter said. We said our goodbyes and then I left.

I waited until I was out the door before I gave my enormous sigh of relief. [Sigh of relief.] Punished Hunter was alive by the sounds of it. I held out a single sliver of hope that was the case. Someone had dropped an even older Hunter’s corpse into my cabin some time ago, so I wondered if we had really seen the last of Punished Hunter. Some version of him has to live to be even older.

But Hunter died after the technology was stolen from O.V.E.R. Whoever saved his life, it wasn’t them. Could it have been WOE.BEGONE? The Flinchites? Someone else? I had no clue, but I intended to find out.

For the first time in a long time, I wasn’t being commanded. WOE.BEGONE wasn’t telling me what to do. The Flinchites weren’t telling me what to do. The Arbiters weren’t telling me what to do. CANNONBALL wasn’t telling me what to do. Future versions of me weren’t telling me what to do. I had a moment of freedom. I knew that it wouldn’t last forever. Someone had put me back in Oldbrush Valley. Whoever it was had a reason to put me there and soon that reason would become clear.