

Episode 76: Mustardseed

[sigh.] I was hoping we had moved past “mysterious and online” by this point, honestly. Isn’t that played out? Haven’t we gone on to bigger and better things like bears and Latvian cowboys? When I started playing WOE.BEGONE, I was so young. So full of energy! Barely 30 years old. Practically a child. No, I don’t know for sure how much older I am now. This isn’t about that. My point is that a solid chunk of my life was defined by discovering WOE.BEGONE from some briefly available internet post, getting drawn into completing the challenges, and then when the challenges ended, I moved to O.V.E.R., and that part of my life got left behind. Except for when it didn’t and I had to help my younger self complete the fourth challenge, also when I had to play WOE.BEGONE all over again while being held captive in the Flinchite compound, and all of the other times that it was made obvious I was never truly free. But, with the formation of Base, I thought we had finally pushed past even that. An outlet dedicated to researching this technology, alongside trusted friends I had made along the way, with their help and protection, without the fear of that particular specter, the specter of WOE.BEGONE, constantly haunting me.

Which is why I found it quite perturbing that someone was threatening to drag me back into that world: an anonymous messenger by the handle of mustardseed. I didn’t care that someone was posting guides on how to begin and complete the WOE.BEGONE challenges. That was between him and the WOE.BEGONE gamerunner, presumably Ty Betteridge. WOE.BEGONE could continue forever in whatever form it pleased, as long as that form never had anything to do with me. Perhaps I should have cared more, since more people involved in WOE.BEGONE means the formation of even more factions like ours, the Hunters, the Annes, the Arbiters, the Flinchites, O.V.E.R., and who knows how many other already existing groups.

What I did care about was that this new person posting these guides was not satisfied with merely addressing the broader internet in quick bursts. No. This person had to also concern himself with the affairs—past, present, and future—of the members of the Base. Everyone was receiving messages from mustardseed: the Annes, Edgar, Charlie, Marissa, Chance, Shadow, even the Hunters. Whoever they were, they were resourceful enough to know who to contact and how to contact them. Mustardseed had been in contact with everyone inside of this particular sphere of time travel exploration except for, notably, anyone with the name Mike Walters. I had never received messages from mustardseed, nor had Latvia Mike or Michael.

This, of course, made it look to many people as though I was the one sending the messages. If I were mustardseed, then I wouldn’t send messages to myself because I’m already in on it. That’s solid reasoning, but that would be too sloppy, right? I’m better than that. I *am* better than that, aren’t I? If I were mustardseed and trying to cover it up, I would send all sorts of messages to myself. I would be exactly the third person to come forward regarding receiving the messages, making sure not to be the first or the last to do so. They would be juicy messages. They would reveal true things to the group that I didn’t want known. It would be a full-on limited hangout, planned down to the smallest interaction. I’d have a much better response to the scenario than “oh, uh, I dunno, shrug. I guess he just like isn’t messaging me or whatever.” Give me a break. Conniving is one of my strong suits.

I truthfully had no idea who mustardseed was. This wasn’t for a lack of trying on my own. I knew the sorts of places where posts about WOE.BEGONE would appear and disappear like

ghosts—generally surface web stuff, no “deep web” mystique here; real, proper posts meant to be seen before disappearing abruptly. In my free time, I had been trying to catch him in the act to no avail. I considered two possible options for why the posts never remained up for longer than a few minutes. One was that mustardseed was taking them down in order to limit their reach or to protect themselves. The other was that this was not allowed and someone, for instance the gamerunners, were using the technology to take them down. The gamerunner would have to know who mustardseed was and that combined with the ability to manipulate time would make it possible for them to gain access to the account and take the posts down. A type of time travel phishing if you will. Let’s call it “tishing”—wait let’s not, I already hate that. The posts were going down as fast as they were going up, either as part of mustardseed’s plan or an extensive tishing attack. Finding the post that started me on this journey was a fluke in itself. I had yet to find one of mustardseed’s posts in the wild.

Despite what I thought was airtight logic regarding why I couldn’t be mustardseed, people at Base were beginning to get standoffish with me. Chance, Shadow, Charlie, and Marissa were all choosing their words carefully when they spoke to me. I had to be the one to initiate conversation. This was especially odd when talking to Marissa, who previously always had something to say. They wouldn’t talk about whether they were still receiving messages or what those messages said. I tried not to pressure them into telling me, but any sufficiently long conversation would come back around to mustardseed and they would always deflect. Sometimes I would catch them staring at me, studying me. At least I *think* that I saw them do that. My mind could have been playing tricks on me.

More upsettingly, Edgar wouldn’t tell me what mustardseed had sent him. Little goody two-shoes, Edgar. He had given a copy of what he was sent to Anne but hadn’t shown anyone else. He said that he knew that mustardseed wasn’t me, that he would be able to tell. I looked him in the eyes and it felt like he was telling the truth. He said that he worried that compiling the different messages would result in information being propagated in a way that we didn’t understand but that the propagation might be what mustardseed wanted. A very plausible, reasonable explanation for not showing me or anybody else. But I caught *him* looking at me strangely, as well. Or I thought I did. Surely I didn’t. Surely he was treating me the same way that he always had. Surely it was just the confusion and frustration of the whole mustardseed situation driving me toward a nervous breakdown. Maybe *that’s* what mustardseed wanted to happen.

Which leads me to Anne. The Annes. I was in my interview about the Elder Hunter murder when she brought up mustardseed. The messages had only just begun to appear at that point. I asked if I could have a copy of everything that had been collected on him and she initially said yes. Then, another Anne came in and whisked her away, claiming that there was an emergency. When she returned, her answer regarding whether or not I could have that information changed. Suddenly, I was not allowed to see the messages. I knew what had happened. A correction had been issued. In an iteration that had happened to the other Anne, she had shown me the messages and then something happened that someone didn’t want to happen. Who didn’t want it to happen and issued the correction? Base? Or the Annes? Or both? Or someone else, like the Hunters?

The barrier between myself and mustardseed was transforming into a barrier between myself and everyone else. I understood the precaution, but that didn’t keep me from feeling

alienated from everyone around me. No one was offering help. If I wanted to discover what was going on, I was going to have to dig for it myself.

So I went digging. This is WOE.BEGONE.

[INTRO THEME PLAYS.]

In my Elder Hunter interview, Anne told me that the Hunters were getting messages from mustardseed as well, something that had irked them and led them to suspect that mustardseed was my secret attempt to reestablish connections with them. This was absurd. I missed my friendship with Innocent Hunter, sure, but other than that I was glad to never have to hear from them. Their paranoia that I might try to contact them was wholly misplaced. I would certainly never communicate with them in a way that would so easily provoke their ire. I hoped that Chance would relay that Base had been getting messages, too, though with the new protocols about how mustardseed was to be treated, I wasn't sure that was the case.

But knowing that the Hunters had received messages from mustardseed got the gears turning. Everyone involved had received a message from mustardseed. Everyone. Was it truly everyone that was connected to this through me? The Hunters had received messages, after all. It wasn't something that was limited to the current iteration of the Base, which didn't include the Hunters. How wide was this field of recipients? Did Anne find them all?

Matt picked up the phone on the first ring. I was in my bedroom at the Base, with the door locked, the closest thing I had to complete privacy.

"Knew you were gonna call," he said.

"Oh really?" I asked. "Is it because I'm wearing the Pikachu boxers that you loaned me? Are we psychically linked through the boxers? Hold on, what color am I thinking of?"

"Yellow," Matt said. "Because you were thinking of the Pikachu boxers."

"Yellow was the correct answer," I replied. I had clearly underestimated Matt's power.

"And because you called to talk about mustardseed," he continued.

"Are mustardseeds actually yellow?" I asked. "I thought they were like... brown or something."

"Doesn't matter," Matt said. "I got the message yesterday morning. I knew you would call about it."

"How did you know that I would call, exactly?" I asked.

"Because, if I were you, I would be desperate to get to the bottom of this," Matt replied.

"Did Anne talk to you?" I asked.

"Anne? No. Anne!?" Matt asked. "Why would Anne ask me about this?"

"Everyone has been getting messages," I replied.

"So it's not just me?" he asked.

"No. It's anyone involved with any of this in any way," I replied. "Even you, even though you aren't here."

"Did you get a message from mustardseed?" he asked.

"Yes," I lied.

"Oh..." Matt said. I could hear the incredulity in his tone. "If you did, what did it say?"

"It was about one of the challenges," I said. "Not one of the ones involving you. I don't know how much Mike and Michael told you when they were there."

"They didn't tell me everything, only the stuff that included me," Matt said. "If mustardseed sent you a message, then it was a much different message than mine."

"What was your message?" I asked.

Matt hesitated. I let seconds pass without him answering.

"Are you still there?" I asked. I could hear him breathing, so I knew that he was still there, but I needed something to say to break the silence.

"Yeah. I'm..." he trailed off. "I'm deciding if I want to show you," he said.

"Matt, things are getting strange out here," I explained. "I need to know what is going on."

"There are some things in this world that you don't need to see," Matt said. "I didn't need to see this, Mike."

"You're scaring me," I said.

"I hope so," he replied. "It's scary. It's..." he was quiet again for a moment. "It's sent. Check your messages."

I checked my text messages. Sure enough, there was a new one from Matt. I opened it. It was a sound file:

[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.]

[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.]

[Sound of a shotgun firing.]

It was... a recording from the night that I completed the fourth challenge. When I had to try to get the sequence of events perfectly aligned with what the younger iteration of me had experienced when he completed the challenge. When he killed Matt. A set of realities that only I knew the contents of. Something that had been undone ages ago.

I stood there, in my bedroom, with my head in one hand and my phone in the other, listening to the recording. When it finished, we were both silent. I waited for Matt to say something.

"The other two Mikes told me about that," Matt said, "so I knew what it was when I heard it. I had made peace with it after talking to them, but hearing it happen is a completely different beast. It is more than I can process."

"That was the worst night of my life," I said. I wasn't sure if that was true. It would definitely be in consideration. "I went through a lot of trouble to make sure that it retroactively never happened. Any of it."

"I know," Matt said. "And you understand that that doesn't uncomplicate things."

"I understand," I said. "Matt. That was the most twisted inside out I've ever been. I started playing WOE.BEGONE because I needed you back and then I had to..." I couldn't bring myself to finish the sentence.

"I know. This has all been explained to me," Matt said. "I know. And I know that isn't the world that I live in. I'm not... that Matt. That didn't happen to me. It's like a dream."

"I don't understand why you even would answer the phone if that is what they sent you," I said.

"Because you needed to know that I know," he said.

I laid down on the bed, phone still pressed to my ear. I wasn't capable of standing. My knees felt wobbly. My head was spinning.

"I didn't have the good decency to die before it came to that," I finally said.

"Look, Mike. I don't forgive you. Because in order to forgive you, I would have to be capable of understanding this as something that happened to me. I can't see it that way," he said. "I talked to the other Mikes about this. They clearly carry a lot of guilt about what happened and you obviously do, too. And what I heard disturbs me. I've barely dipped my toes in this, you're in over your head. When I hear that recording, what I hear is you drowning."

I couldn't bring myself to reply through the brain fog of having that experience brought back to the front of my mind.

"I needed to let you know that I know," Matt said. "Even if I don't know what that means yet."

I still didn't respond. 21 times. He only heard snippets. There were 21 tries until it went like it was supposed to. He hadn't even heard the worst ones. He hadn't even heard the successful attempt.

"I haven't had a chance to talk to you since the... when you got taken from here," Matt said. "I talked to the other 2 Mikes, but not you. We should talk some time. In person. You can get here pretty easily, right?"

"Yeah," I managed to force out. "I'm sorry."

"It doesn't make sense to apologize," Matt said. "Not right now. Not when I don't actually understand."

"You're right," I said.

"I'll leave you to process. I'm still in the middle of processing. Call me tomorrow, okay?" Matt said.

"Okay," I said.

"We'll talk tomorrow. We'll make some sense of this," he said.

"Okay," I said.

"I'll talk to you then. Don't be too hard on yourself. Bye, Mike."

"Bye, Matt," I said. I heard the call disconnect. I laid on the bed in silence.

It took a couple of hours of lying on the bed thinking about my phone call with Matt before I could will myself upright again. The conversation had given me a lot to chew on. His admission about what he had been sent, as painful as it was, was a good start toward understanding why everyone was acting like they had been toward me. Were all of the messages about how I had hurt members of the Base? That wouldn't be too hard to swing, assuming that mustardseed had access to the right resources (and it very much appeared that he did). There was a time not that long ago from my perspective where everyone at Base was dead. Just because it all had mended doesn't mean it never happened. There was a whole reality, just as real to me as the one I was currently inhabiting, where my actions got everyone killed. And that was only one of a myriad of things that could be used to drive a wedge between myself and any given person close to me.

I was reminded of the phone calls I had with Matt when I initially completed the first challenge. After the bliss of learning he was back alive, I had come to learn that something he experienced had soured his opinion of me. I wrote it off as the byproduct of the series of events that would have led him up to the present still alive, but I always had cause to wonder. Could someone have been sending him messages like mustardseed had? Could it have been mustardseed sending the messages? That would require access to the technology. There was a faint possibility that mustardseed had come across this information and this ability to contact Base members in other ways. But c'mon. It really looks like they have the ability to send and receive information from time periods that they are not currently in.

Of course, there would be no way to prove that Matt had received such a message after the first challenge. I had changed that reality when I had used the security program inside of O.V.E.R. to "give the game back to RYAN," though who knows what I was really doing at that point. The messages were from a time that never happened, a reality that only I had a remaining experience of.

Maybe that was unlikely. Maybe that was a poor fit. The answer was likely simpler. Maybe I was right in what I had concluded before the appearance of mustardseed, that Matt's wariness had more to do with his material reality than it did with meddling from some other point in time. But I had decided to focus on that *because* it was trivial. There was a much larger closet skeleton to interrogate, one in a closet much closer to home. If Edgar had received a message with information meant to turn him against me, there was a chance that he had learned about the one thing that I promised myself to always keep from him. Something that even Michael hadn't mentioned to Edgar, even though they were married. A reality so dark that I was determined to never expose him to it. Pitch black like the bottom of the ocean. And, if he knew about it, if he had been looking me in the eye, been lying next to me, been held by me, knowing about that and not giving any indication, that was too much to bear. It was better to focus my considerations elsewhere.

I spent the next few days checking the internet for signs of mustardseed in every way that I could. Someone more proficient than me could have set up a bot to periodically check for

keywords across different websites, but I had to sit there manually and refresh dozens of potential websites that mustardseed might use to get his message across. I focused on social media sites since they were public posts meant to be noticed, but I also set up a google alert in case something popped up elsewhere. Reddit was the go-to, since you can sort the whole website by “new” and see every single new post across the whole site, which isn’t something you can do with any of the other social media sites. I did this in secret, because I didn’t want anyone at Base to know that I was trying to get to the bottom of this on my own. As frustrated as it had made me, Edgar had a point about how mustardseed might be trying to get us to compile this information into one complete set that could then propagate through our knowledge of it. Like an Exodia The Forbidden One of time travel. I was potentially doing the worst possible thing by seeking mustardseed out, but I felt increasingly cornered into doing so. I needed to know what everyone else was seeing.

As far as day-to-day Base operations, everything came and went as though the mustardseed stuff wasn’t happening in the background. We had group meetings, made plans, and completed assignments. There were preparations made for field work, though they were still in the planning stages. I was the field work expert, which meant that field work would mean cooperation between me and a partner at Base. My partner for this job remained undecided. No one was volunteering to work with me. Edgar was busy on another task on the day the mission was scheduled.

During this time, Michael’s interview appointment came and went without any hiccups. It had been postponed for a week for unknown reasons. In Michael’s brief time at Base, I found him and asked him if he knew anything about what was going on. He shook his head no, going uncharacteristically out of his way not to speak. This rattled me more than I had expected it to. Michael was supposed to have the wisdom of a grizzled old cowboy, the wisdom of a Mike from a decade in the future, and the wisdom of someone who had experienced about a dozen different iterations of reality. If he didn’t have any wisdom to offer, then what chance did I have of figuring anything out?

Six days into my covert research, I hit paydirt. I clicked on a post made by an account with the word “mustardseed” in the name, one of hundreds of different hits that had, up until that point, had not yielded any leads. I almost absentmindedly exited the tab as quickly as I had opened, having become so accustomed to finding something labeled “mustardseed” that was spam or unrelated. It didn’t help that the post wasn’t a guide to WOE.BEGONE and didn’t make any explicit reference to WOE.BEGONE, the Base, or time travel. Superficially, it looked like emoji spam from a bot.

The post was two seconds old when I found it. It simply read: “📞 ← 🐷🐷🏆”

Phone left pig pig prize. Or, I guess that’s a “trophy” emoji, but the intention reads the same way. Phone left pig pig prize. First challenge: phone call. Second challenge: left arm. Third challenge: one pig and then another. Fourth challenge: prize. Phone left pig pig prize. Phone left pig pig prize.

I immediately sent this mustardseed account a message. “Hey,” I wrote. What? What would you have written? I didn’t know what to say, so I just said hey. Time was of the essence. I had to fire off a message fast. Who knew how long I had?

I started typing “what do you know?” then erased that and started writing “what have you been telling everyone?” When I saw that mustardseed replied nearly immediately to my “hey,”

with “.” Two hands. The bonus challenge. The one that no one else that I had spoken to had been assigned. The “once upon a time” Cut Off Your Hands challenge. They knew that they were talking to Mike Walters, even though I was using a VPN and my username had been randomly generated. Granted, VPNs aren’t the be-all-end-all of privacy, but that is a discussion for another time. They knew that it was me. That shouldn’t have been possible for an average user with average access to information.

I finally decided on a follow-up to “hey”: “what are you trying to say?”

The answer, again, was nearly immediate. “Why? Are they cutting you out?”

“We are playing it safe,” I shot back, defensively.

“So they are lol,” another immediate response.

“What are you trying to say?” I asked again.

“I’m already saying it, don’t worry,” they replied.

“Then why did you reply?” I asked.

“Your turn,” they said.

“I know what you sent Matt. Is that the sort of thing your sending everybody?” I typed out.

“That’s the wrong “you’re”,” they corrected me. I looked at the message. I *had* used the wrong “you’re,” but I also hadn’t sent the message yet. It was sitting in the message box unsent. I spun around and checked my bedroom. I was alone and the door was locked. The curtains were fully drawn and I was far away from them. I checked under the bed, in the closet, even the smallest nooks and crannies where a person could never fit. There was no one in the room with me.

When I made it back to the computer, there were more messages waiting for me. Too fast?” then ““I’m tired of waiting. If you knew what you wanted, you would want to see what I have sent to Hunter,” they wrote. “It pertains to that investigation you are doing, with the Elder.”

I started to type a response but mustardseed’s replies were so fast and so numerous that by the time I had a thought typed out, they had already sent something that made me change what I wanted to ask. I watched the messages accumulate on the screen, letting them say what they were going to say.

“We can do a trade,” they wrote. “It’s a win-win. It won’t seem like it. I’ll let you know. Don’t delete this account. Bye, Mike.” I then received a message informing me that I had been blocked by this user. Less than a minute later, the account had been deleted entirely, the post gone with it.

This has been WOE.BEGONE. Next time: A win-win situation that doesn’t seem like it. Thanks for playing.

[END THEME PLAYS.]