

EPISODE 2: REVERSE PHANTOM PAIN

[Warning: this episode contains a description (but not a depiction) of body gore. Listener discretion is advised.]

Woooooow. Wow wow wow. Your brain will turn anything into a morsel of nostalgia, won't it? I did a whole episode about the first round of WOE.BEGONE and I made it sound like it had a happy ending. And it felt that way, too, when I was telling the story. That's the magical power that the brain is capable of. It can completely rewrite the past. That wasn't a happy ending. It wasn't an ending at all. The peace of mind of my dead friend coming back to life like nothing had ever happened was the eye of a storm... a storm with a thousand eyes—that's a bad metaphor. It should've been obvious that it was all peaks and valleys as long as I would be playing WOE.BEGONE.

I was wrong in my first episode. This whole thing *is* blackmail, right? By the time I saw the results I was pretty certain that the prize goes away if I stop playing the game—and I was right by the way. And that first prize was only to get me hooked into playing the rest of the games. The quote-unquote “prizes” stop being prizes. If you listened to the first episode of WOE.BEGONE and thought that this was going to be a story full of catharsis and dramatic but ultimately wholesome venues for me to discover my self-worth, you're dead wrong. My self-worth remains undiscovered.

But after the first game, I wondered how anyone could ever drop out of WOE.BEGONE. We're dealing with magic, or a technology fundamentally indistinguishable from magic. How could you look at that and not becoming obsessed with figuring out the extent of these powers and how to harness this technology for yourself. *Or* for the good of the world, if you're a better person than me. How could you not stand in awe at the power of this thing and decide it's not worth it to learn more?

Well, I get it now. I really get it now and the second challenge was my first taste of wanting to walk away. Don't get me wrong, I'm not out of the game, but I get it now. This is WOE.BEGONE.

[THEME PLAYS]

So, my old best friend is back in my life—and, you know, back to life in general. The reality-shift that I had set into motion by winning the first game hit me in waves. My brain just did not accept these new conditions. I would catch myself feeling certain that my friend, let's call him "Matt" from here on out, wasn't really alive again. I wanted to know everything about him. What had happened in the last two years with him, who he was now, what he was doing and thinking about. How he was living. The phone conversation that confirmed his renewed existence was a huge blur to me. I was too emotional to hear any of the substance of his words. I wanted to know everything, do everything, speak to him in person, see him, feel him. I thought about flying out to Vancouver but thought better of it because of the pandemic.

The next conversation we had, however, was markedly... tense. I called him again the next day and he was busy with his newborn child. I told him I had no idea that he had a child (or a wife!) and he snapped back that *of course I didn't* because once he moved to Vancouver, I hadn't had anything to do with him. He wanted to know why I was so interested all of a sudden. Did I want something? I spluttered instead of answering and this only made it even less convincing that I didn't want something. Because I guess I do want something, but I can't tell him about it. He had apparently come into quite a lot of money recently and thought that I knew that and was trying to get some of it. I assured him that that wasn't the case, but he said that the timing was too perfect to be a coincidence. Plus, all of that stuff he had heard about me recently.

Wait... heard about me recently?

He harrumphed, said "I think we're done here" and hung up the phone. I was left confused and, admittedly, a little hurt by this. I was still head-over-heels happy that Matt was *alive*, and that that traumatic evening was gone for everyone involved, but now there was just the *tiniest* asterisk next to

that happiness. If Matt is alive but the cost is that he doesn't want anything to do with me, fine. It's not optimal, but it's fine. Matt's alive.

I was scared when he said that he had been hearing bad things about me recently. Maybe that's not related. I'm not always the best guy. I remember on my freshman floor in college a new friend was on the phone with her parents, and she was talking about everyone she had just met. When she got to me she said, [Electronic vocal effect] "There's the dude, Mike. He's pretty cool. He's not "nice" but..." Woof. I'd like to think that I've done some self-reflection since then but have I really? I tend to bulldoze over other people and their needs and problems more than I should. And more than I would like, I would add. I don't always like myself and I definitely don't like when I figure out that I've done this. So, this could just be my reputation finally catching up with me...Or it could be WOE.BEGONE.

If everything is going to go back to normal or better every time that a round is completed, there has to be something that makes the game harder to play. And "the game" is largely about me and events that happened in my personal life, so this sort of muckraking would make sense as a game mechanic. They might have even put words in my mouth or even made me do something in the past that is coming back to haunt me now. I don't *remember* my past changing in a way that made me more villainous, but that doesn't mean that it definitely didn't happen.

I lived high on the hog for a while. Some incredible things had happened for me, and I was knee deep in a mysterious game that was unraveling in more and more interesting ways the more threads I tugged at. I called into work fake-sick and got drunk one night. I splurged on fast food and bought some stuff on Amazon I had my eye on that I always talked myself out of. I'm gonna turn into one of those guys who won't stop talking about his bidet.

Overall, I was generally just a little less responsible than normal. I knew that the second challenge would be starting sooner rather than later. I had no idea what it would entail so I was living

like everything could go to shit in a jiffy. And I wasn't wrong for once that things were about to get turned up to 11.

The second challenge was delivered through an even more dramatic method than the first, if you can believe it. Without hearing my phone ring at all, I looked down and noticed that I had a new voicemail message. I try my best to never talk on the phone and everybody in my life knows this. So, when I saw that I had a new voicemail, I freaked out thinking that there was an emergency. And there sort of was. This is WOE.BEGONE after all. So, I hit play on the voicemail. It played... this:

[In Mike's Voice with varying degrees of distortion]: "I'll cut the shit. If you found this it's because you were googling "What is WOE.BEGONE." None of that stuff happened. It never happened. Maybe being so far in the lead will grant me some leniency. Unlikely. It is definitionally impossible. Next time: a new game. A mysterious contact. **Mike Walters saws his left arm off at the shoulder.** If I lose, that everything from that voicemail will return to my lived experiences. Mike Walters saws his left arm off at the shoulder. Winning WOE.BEGONE. None of that stuff...happened. If I lose. **Mike Walters saws his left arm off at the shoulder.** If I lose I'm out of the game. I'm out here and, strangest of all, I'm in the lead. [Distorted sound of cackling laughter.] Send us the video. Signed W.BG."

So, you might recognize the voice in this voicemail as Mike Walters, podcast host and WOE.BEGONE player...handsome guy. Most of those voice snippets were taken from episode 1 of WOE.BEGONE. If you can't exactly make it out the voicemail says, "I'll cut the shit. If you found this it's because you were googling "What is WOE.BEGONE." None of that stuff happened. It never happened. Maybe being so far in the lead will grant me some leniency. Unlikely. Definitionally impossible. Next time: a new game. A strange contact. Mike Walters saws his left arm off at the shoulder. If I lose, everything from that voicemail will return to my lived experiences. Mike Walters

saws his left arm off at the shoulder. If I inch closer to winning none of this ever happened. If I lose I'm out of the game. I'm out here and, strangest of all, I'm in the lead. Send us the video. Signed W.BG."

They chopped and screwed my podcast just to make their second game more arch. How could you possibly be more arch!? You're telling me that I have to chop my fucking arm off or my friend dies! Or... my friend died? A future world that uses this technology will have to have a whole new grasp on verb tense. Maybe a tense that only describes something that once was... but I'm getting off track.

The real kicker to this whole thing is that this challenge happened a month ago. You, dear listener, have not yet caught up to the point where you are watching me play WOE.BEGONE in real time. At the time, I had no idea where these voice clips of me were coming from. I thought that maybe the gamerunners had used some sort of vocal synth to mimic my voice. I wasn't thinking about this recording at all when I decided to make the podcast. By the time I got around to *actually* making the podcast, I had forgotten the specifics of what I had said on the voicemail but then recreated them perfectly. I guess for them to be sent back in time to taunt me. But I never said, "Mike Walters saws his left arm off at the shoulder." Ohhh, I say it *now*. I get it.

So, you might have just put it together that this challenge is one where Mike Walters, *me*, saws his left arm off at the shoulder. I thought about titling this episode "Mike Walters saws his left arm off at the shoulder" but I didn't want to be as dramatic as the gamerunners. And you're asking "but if you're still in the game... and Mike Walters cut his own left arm off at the shoulder... then that would mean... Mike, nooo, you don't! You couldn't! That's insane. That's downright preposterous claptrap!"

And you'd be right, midcentury man in a top-hat. It *is* preposterous claptrap. It's untoward malarkey. And, most of all, it's balderdash, tomfoolery, hooey, piffle, magniloquence, poppycock, and baloney. But, in this episode...[Pause]

Mike Walters saws his left arm off at the shoulder. [Pause]

You get enough takes of me saying that, gamerunners? Just pick the one that sounds best. I like the last one. It's the most dramatic.

I'm flippant about it now because I *can be* flippant about it. It's been a month. I already know what happened to me. I can assure you that my inner monologue upon receiving this message was something to the effect of "Oh god oh god oh god oh god what do I do? Do I cut my arm off? Does Matt die? If I cut off my arm will it go back to being there after I send them the video? Is it even legal to send a video of that to someone? Oh, god", which very quickly became an outer monologue to the same effect but with more swearing while I paced the full width and length of my house repeatedly, holding my head in my still-intact hands.

It was not an easy decision, to say the least. After my sort of tense conversation with Matt earlier in the week, a part of me felt like maybe it was time to just let things go back to normal. On the other hand, I couldn't just let a man go back to being *dead* because of a bad conversation. The stakes were too high.

So once my deliberation changed from *if* I was going to saw my own arm off to *when* I was going to saw my own arm off, I had a different sort of panic. Can I really do this? What if I get partway through and I can't finish the job? What if I bleed to death before I can send them the video file? How am I gonna take a video of this? How do I look up how best to do this without getting added to a watchlist? I mean, I'm surely on some government watchlists already, but it is best to minimize one's inclusion in that sort of thing.

I spent an inordinate amount of time researching how to cut my arm off. I looked at videos of animals being butchered, I look at pages from anatomy books online, I watched some horror movies where effects were used to make it look like an actor was torn limb from limb. At one point the plan was to pop my arm out of its socket and to use a butcher's knife to cut the meat around the socket so I

wouldn't have to break through any bones. Ultimately, I didn't think that I'd be able to do this precise butchery through the intense pain of performing it.

You know, I bought a prepper book once. It was a fictional tale of a family trying to make it after "shit hit the fan," which is their term for complete societal breakdown. In the first chapter, one character has to give a makeshift blood transfusion to another character. It's touch-and-go, but in the end both of them survive and recover. I remember reading that and thinking, "Yeah, I think I'd just die." And it was that flavor of gory hopelessness that was setting in when I could not find a solution to this problem where I walk away, alive and competently without a left arm.

Some of the worst part of preparation was the loneliness. I had more people in my life than I had had in a long time, but I couldn't reach out to any of them. I wasn't averse to calling up John and Matt was back in my life in some capacity, but it's not like I could ring them up and say [Tinny vocal effect] "Hey man, I'm brainstorming right now. Do you know how to amputate an arm at the shoulder? Don't worry it's for a game. Should I cauterize it at the end or what? I'm really flying by the seat of my pants here."

I did decide to cauterize it. I build quite the contraption. I bought some wood to fashion into a pair of walls, which were reinforced with cinder blocks on the back so that they were sturdy. I put plastic sheeting all over the setup so that the blood didn't get everywhere, which is an idea I got from *Dexter*. One side was for me to brace against. On the other wall was a table saw attached facing the opposite wall. I looked up a guide and took off all of the safety mechanics so that it wouldn't accidentally stop while I was doing the deed. [Sarcastically] "*Doing the deed.*" Even now I'm talking about it in euphemisms.

My plan was to start the saw, brace against the wall, and push with my right arm and my feet into the saw and try my best to make deliberate cuts. My phone was mounted on a tripod opposite this

rig to record the whole thing. I had looked up DIY cauterization methods and there was a blowtorch next to the rig for when I was done. Simple as that. Round 3, here I come!

“There is no *fucking* way,” I said the first time I stepped into the death rig. I started by just turning on the saw and standing there. That was all I could bear at first. I knew that I was on a timer, but I didn’t have any idea how long the gamerunners would let me build up to this. I knew that the quicker I got it done, the better it would be for my placement in the game, for my future and Matt’s and God knows who else. The first couple times I got in the rig I would just stand in it and panic, tears streaking down my face. I wasn’t getting any calmer sitting in it and was panicking more and more about how much time I was taking to get it done.

It took 2 and a half days for me to go through with it. I turned on some loud metal music, the phone, then the saw. I sat in there for 5 minutes with the rig going with my eyes closed. Then I opened my eyes, screamed a scream more primal than I could ever recreate, tensed every muscle in my body, and pressed my left shoulder into the saw blade at the armpit as hard as I could with the rest of my body.

The tearing was immediate, but it wasn’t enough to sever the bone. The blood kicked up in my face and everywhere else. I tried to get control of my mind, but it was racing. My left arm was limp at my side, useless, but not amputated. I screamed again and pressed my arm into the blade. I made some progress, but it was still hanging on. The body seems so fragile most of the time. We are frail sacks of blood that can be knocked over dead by the slightest thing. But now my body was a warrior. It wasn’t going to let something as insignificant as a sawblade keep it down. I hated how resilient I was.

Tears in my eyes and not screaming so much as babbling non-syllables at the top of my lungs, I pushed into it one last time. The world was getting blurry, and I was losing energy fast. I wasn’t sure how much longer I could do this. I pressed forward harder and harder and harder and harder and...

Thud.

I felt relief immediately. Arms are *heavy* when they aren't being used and the surreal feeling of the dead arm was almost as horrible as the sensation of amputation. I rushed over to the blowtorch and tried my best to burn the wound closed, but it was not as simple to do one-handed as I had hoped. I hadn't practiced this, and I was regretting it now. I trudged over to the phone, stopped the recording, and sent it in a text message to the WOE.BEGONE gamerunners. I smudged my own blood all over the screen. I could see my fingerprints, mirror images to the ones that were lying dead on the floor.

Everything was going dark.

I propped myself up in a chair. I was losing consciousness quickly. I wanted to call 911, but I had spent all of my energy texting the WOE.BEGONE gamerunners. What a way to die, huh? Anyway, I was certain that I would be dead if I was wrong, and the game didn't undo this event for me. There's no way an ambulance could get here in time. There's no way I'd last even ten minutes.

I remember the last coherent thought I had before falling unconscious: "I'm really sorry if I was wrong and I'm putting someone through having to clean this up. I hope the plastic sheets were enough. I got the idea from *Dexter*."

I woke up an hour and a half later and my whole left arm was dead... asleep. I had been laying directly on it in my bed and had pinched the nerve that gives it feeling. I rolled over and groggily flopped it free from under me. This had happened to me a few times before and it usually took a couple minutes for it to come back to life. It would hurt in the process, too. Ugh.

It took a minute for reality to hit me, but I was so relieved when it did. I got up and went to my living room only to see that my contraption was no longer there. The video and the text message were not there. Matt's new phone number was still in my phone. Proverbial bullet dodged. My brain was still panicky and likely traumatized, but I had two functioning arms. That's my second prize, by the way: continuing to have two functioning arms. I told you that the prizes only get worse after the first one. I was *so* tired. I had never needed real sleep as much as I needed it after this incident.

I was getting ready for bed and putting my phone on the charger so that I could slip into an exhausted and well-earned sleep when I saw that I had a new email. The subject was just “SCORECARD”, and the address was a one-time-use burner email. Part of me wanted to wait until morning to read it. I could still feel a pain in my left shoulder from the memory of the amputation. It was like my body couldn’t rectify what happened with what the reality now was. Like a reverse phantom pain, like my brain knew it was supposed to not feel it there anymore, but it was there all the same. I sighed and opened the email. It didn’t look like it was from the gamerunners.

[Read very quickly] “Do you know history? Do you know Charles Tibbideau? Have you seen the scoreboard? Do you think you can win? Are you going to take the bread out of my mouth? Let’s meet to discuss this. Let’s get coffee. Let’s get dinner. Let’s eat bread. Are your woes gone yet? What three letters would you enter on the scoreboard? What if I just unplug the scoreboard so we have to start from the beginning? Would you still take the bread out of my mouth again? What do they have on you? Who did they kill? Who will they kill again? What do you want with me? What will happen to me? What will happen to me? What the fuck will happen to me? Skip the voice recorder. Tuesday 5:30pm” and then the name of a local coffeeshop, followed by the signature: CANNONBALL.

I had no idea what to make of this. This was clearly another player. I didn’t tell anyone that I was playing the game so no one else would have contacted me about WOE.BEGONE. How did this person get my email address? Did he get it from the gamerunners? Why would they give it to him? And what was up with this screed. It sounded almost like Qanon nonsense. I didn’t know if he was speaking in coded language on purpose or if WOE.BEGONE had just completely fried his brain. I wouldn’t be surprised if it had.

I had a lot of reading to do to try to figure out what was going on in this email. I’d start with the easy keywords. But one thing stood out to me:

WOE.BEGONE has a scoreboard. And I was winning.

This has been WOE.BEGONE. Next time: coffee, a history lesson, and the same loss, felt twice.

Thanks for playing.

[END THEME PLAYS.]