

EPISODE THREE - IT'S JUST A PIG

Original transcript edited by Addison, Tony, and Sasha

[BEGIN Episode 3.]

[Warning: This episode contains a description of animal slaughter. Listener discretion is advised.]

MIKE: Charles Thibbideau was an early to mid-20th century French philosopher, best known for his nigh unreadable tome, *Constructing Time*, wherein he lays out his hypotheses regarding the relationship between the mind and body in three dimensions and time as a fourth spatial dimension. Thibbideau was originally a mechanical engineer by trade, and within the pages of *Constructing Time*, he lays out the ways in which a savvy engineer could bodge together a device that could interact with time as a spatial dimension. It's all very back-of-the-envelope stuff: a lot of "well, if you assume that the earth is a perfect sphere then..." and "maybe in 50 years, *someone* will have cracked how to make this particular piece of technology."

Constructing Time was met with a healthy skepticism upon its release. I've cherry-picked the coherent bits into a narrative here, but the book is 800-odd pages that are... let's call it "difficult to follow," especially when translated into English from French. There are full chapters about the metaphysics of consciousness, epiphenomenology, spiritual dualism, and a variety of other esoteric topics. It didn't make a lot of waves in academic philosophy at the time either. Critics largely dismissed it as a text written by an engineer who was just pretending to be a philosopher with mixed results at best. Just another guy with tenure who could publish pretty much anything he wanted while his mind was clouding over with old age.

But you can see why his musings might be relevant to WOE.BEGONE. There is some sort of dimensional fuckery going on and our new friend CANNONBALL thought Thibbideau was important enough to include in his little icebreaker. I couldn't make heads or tails of *Constructing Time*, honestly, so I was hoping that CANNONBALL might be able to give me some guidance.

Also... Charles Thibbideau doesn't... exist anymore. Like, he died in 1985, but I mean that he didn't exist now. He, uh... he doesn't exist then. T-The book existed and it doesn't as of a couple weeks ago. This is the third episode, you know what I mean by now. This is WOE.BEGONE.

[Opening theme plays.]

MIKE: This is the third episode in my series about the mysterious game WOE.BEGONE. Please start at the beginning of the story if you are new here, if for no other reason than to prepare you for how things are about to ramp up.

The coffee shop that CANNONBALL instructed me to meet him at was bigger than I expected it to be, with plenty of outdoor seating. They were fortunate to have the space, especially the extensive outdoor patio. I hadn't thought about how tough meeting up with a mysterious

stranger in order to get information about a deep web of conspiracy would be during a pandemic until I was playing out the logistics in my head. The masks make everything more anonymous though, which is a plus.

I got there ten minutes early, hoping that CANNONBALL would recognize *me* because there wasn't any way for me to recognize *him*. I did have some preconceptions about what he might look like based on the screed he sent me. Probably male, disheveled, unkempt, fidgety, either rail thin or especially rotund but not anything in between. CANNONBALL failed to deliver on most of these preconceptions.

As soon as I got to my table with my coffee, a man turned around from where he was sitting and joined my table. He was tall and, I believe the saying is "built like a brick shithouse."

He was bald and had a thick but well-maintained beard that was dark brown. He looked sort of like those "operator" types. You know, like ex-military or people just pretending to be ex-military. All tactical everything, pants with the extra pockets, army surplus jacket, all that stuff. There's definitely an overlap between that type of people and the conspiracy-minded. I just didn't think of them as the type to play WOE.BEGONE.

I thought about recording him covertly on my phone but thought better of it. So, what follows is a paraphrasing of our conversation. I'm not gonna try to imitate his voice, cause I'm not a very good actor. It would just leave me looking like an idiot. CANNONBALL, if you're listening, I hope I did our conversation justice.

MIKE: "You're CANNONBALL?" I asked.

MIKE: "You're Mike Walters. By the way, you're going to need a codename if you're gonna get through this unscathed. I was able to find your house on Google Maps," he said. Not threateningly, just completely matter of fact. He had a calm and in-charge demeanor.

MIKE: "How did you get my email?"

MIKE: "The scoreboard updated and since you knocked me out of the lead, WOE.BEGONE sent me a message telling me that a 'Mike Walters' had taken first place," he said.

MIKE: "Why am I in the lead?" I asked.

MIKE: "Look, man, I don't know your life, but if I had to guess... uh, what challenge are you on?"

MIKE: "I just did the second one," I said.

MIKE: "Okay, so, wait— how long did it take you to cut off your arm?"

MIKE: “Uh... almost three days,” I responded.

He appeared taken aback by this. “Jesus Christ. That’s why you’re in the lead. It took me six weeks to work up to that. I’ve seen and done horrible things to myself and others, but *that?* I almost gave up my wife again so that I wouldn’t have to go through that. And I still think that the part of me that wanted to let it go right then and there was right. You’re a real sociopath, Mike.”

I didn’t know whether or not that was a compliment. It honestly never occurred to me that waiting six weeks to cut off my arm was an option. The gamerunners must be a lot more patient than I thought. “They brought your dead wife back?” I asked.

MIKE: “No,” he said. “We got divorced. The game deleted a whole bunch of fights we had. I’m holding it together now, but I used to be... erratic. But... she’s not the only reason I’m playing the game anymore.”

I didn’t want to know what “erratic” meant, so I didn’t ask. “So, I’m in the lead now. You know what’s at stake here. So, what do you want me to do? Why did you invite me here?”

MIKE: “That’s right. I know what’s at stake here. And it’s not whatever you’re staying in the game for. Or my wife, or any of that. The technology we are dealing with has abilities far beyond these little interpersonal scraps that they’re tossing to us. There’s talk that America went to war with Pakistan for three years and the technology made it so that it never happened. I’ve heard rumors that they’ve stopped two different nuclear strikes before they could happen. This is a geopolitical tool, the likes of which has never even been *conceived* of before.”

That was a lot to take in. “Okay, then why run this game? Why involve *us*?”

MIKE: “Who knows. Recruitment? Debugging? Testing methodologies? Maybe they’re acclimating us with the small stuff, so we’ll be able and willing to do something crazy. Maybe the people who are running the game aren’t the only people with the tech and they’re new at it relative to the people who are using it to puppeteer the world. But the important thing is: I think that both of us can get what we want, and we can get it easier if we work together.”

MIKE: “How do you see that happening?” I asked.

MIKE: “If we ally for as long as we can, we can pool our resources and research to make sure that none of the other players get near the top two spots. If we can just get a handle on the technology involved, we can get out in front of the gamerunners. I think that’s the key to winning the whole thing.”

I was confused. “Wait, what’s the key?”

MIKE: “The tech. We are at their whims until we have the tech for ourselves,” he said.

MIKE: “So, how do we do that? Charles Thibbideau?”

MIKE: “That’s a start. I think? The gamerunners have been disappearing him recently, which is a sign that I’m onto something.”

MIKE: “Can you build any of the stuff that he talks about? Do you understand that book? Because I don’t.”

MIKE: “Man, I’ve got a high school diploma and a traumatic brain injury. We’re gonna need some sort of expert to help us out. I don’t have anyone in mind, but I think it’s a path worth pursuing. Cold calling physicists, philosophers, engineers, anyone who will listen to us.”

I was skeptical. “I don’t know. Why not play the game? I mean, I’m winning.”

He scoffed. “Yeah, and how brutal is it gonna get by round 12 at this rate? What are you going to be willing to do by then? What makes you think that they will even think twice before burning you? You can’t win if you’re dead, or in a coma, or in jail. And what if some psychopath comes along and chops his arm off in one day? The clock’s ticking, Mike.”

I took a second to collect my thoughts. This all made sense, in as much as any of these things make sense, but I didn’t trust CANNONBALL. If he knew all of this about the game, what’s to say that he doesn’t also know things that he isn’t telling me? Things that could jeopardize my place in the lead or even get me killed?

MIKE: “I will cautiously accept this alliance,” I said. Who talks like that? Me, apparently.

CANNONBALL looked relieved. “Alright. Here,” he said and passed a note with an email address written on it. “If you hit a breakthrough or hear from a promising lead, email this address from a *new* email account. We should stay radio silent until then.”

MIKE: “Right,” I replied.

MIKE: “You’re on challenge three?” he asked.

MIKE: “Yeah, but I haven’t received it yet.”

CANNONBALL sighed. “It’s a doozy. I’m waiting for challenge four. Godspeed,” he said and then stood up and left the table. My coffee had gone cold.

That wasn’t exactly what I was expecting from an encounter with another WOE.BEGONE player and I’m thankful for that. CANNONBALL definitely provided me with a large quantity of information— information of questionable quality that I might or might not find use for. How could he *know* that the technology reversed a war between America and Pakistan? Who knows how many players *he* knows and tried to make this exact same deal with.

Still, he was right about one thing: the challenge goals so far had been binary— either you do the task, or you don't. The only thing separating players seemed to be how much time it took the player to complete the task. That doesn't leave a lot of room to stratify player scores, which means that there was always a chance that someone who's not invested in my personal outcomes at all could get lucky, or industrious, and pass me, and potentially undo all of the work I'd done. Though I didn't see how it was possible, I did like his idea of harnessing the tech for my own use. I could completely bypass WOE.BEGONE and wouldn't be metaphorically begging them for scraps. The real question was how possible it would be to actually do that. It was looking more and more likely that anyone wanting to do this would need a team of scientists to even explain how to do it, and with Thibbideau disappearing, this would require me explaining a book on theoretical physics from memory. I have trouble reciting even things that I *do* understand from memory. “‘Twas brillig, and the blithy stove did gyre and gimble in the wabe: all mimsy were the borogoves and the mome raths outgabe.” ...But I don't even know what's after that. Shit, is that even right? Is it... out-outgabe? Outgrabe? “‘Twas brillig and the... s-slithy... stove...”

CANNONBALL was utilizing severe understatement when he called the third game a “doozy” and I say this as someone with an apparently psychopathic willingness to cut off my own limbs. I had tried to mentally prepare by imagining what the most awful things the gamerunners might tell me to do might be and envisioning myself doing those things. And then I prepared to be out-imagined every time.

If it is possible to get the tech and if I get the tech, I know that playing WOE.BEGONE is going to have a permanent negative effect on me, no matter how much of the traumatic past I delete. In some cases, it can never really go away. I've never read *The Body Keeps the Score* by psychologist Bessel van der Kolk, but I have seen the cover and read the title. I remember these events happening, even if they didn't happen. My body reacted to the trauma of it and is permanently changed as a result. There is no escaping that. Trauma is not just some retained knowledge of an event, and it surely isn't the objective reality of the event, something that isn't even possible for a subjective mind to grasp. It was all still here. In my body, in my brain, and in my memory. WOE.BEGONE has scarred me.

I was putting together a list of physicists and engineers that might be useful in my search to harness WOE.BEGONE when I heard a loud knock on my front door, followed by an eerie screaming sound. [*Faint sound of a distorted animal scream.*] Unsure of what was going on but terrified of what my neighbors might think, I dropped what I was doing and rushed out to see what was going on. There was no one on my doorstep. Instead, secured by a rope to my doorknob, was a large pig. I say “large” but adult pigs are a lot bigger than I expected them to be. It was a normal-sized pig and pigs are large. It grunted when it saw me but didn't seem scared or aggressive. The rope was secured around the pig's neck and there was a note folded and jammed under the rope at the collar. Desperate to get this *commotion* out of my doorway, I pulled on the rope to coax the pig inside. It followed at its own pace, unperturbed and not

invested in hurrying this process up. I got it inside and closed the door. Man, I really hope no one saw that.

I took the note from the pig. It was a short one.

MIKE *[static overlaying his voice]*: “Part one: Kill it. It’s just a pig. Video. Signed, W.BG.”

MIKE *[normal voice]*: Oh, goddamnit! I don’t wanna kill a pig! I mean, I know, I *eat* meat, specifically pork, and so I’ve just been outsourcing this exact labor for my whole life. I’m a hypocrite if I’m willing to let suffering happen as long as it’s just outside my eyeline, but f-fuck it! I can be a hypocrite. I’m worse shit than that all the time. I’m a liar, I’m a bad friend, I’m a shitty podcaster. Just throw “hypocrite” on the heap, it’ll fit right in.

Fuck. The clock is ticking, isn’t it? I mean, I’m gonna do it, right? And the sooner I do it, the sooner it’s over with, *and* the more points I get. And I’m not doing it any favors by keeping it alive in my apartment while I deliberate on killing it while it just *stands* there. I have to do it fast before the adrenaline wears off and I can’t bear to do it anymore. No, it’ll be easy. It’ll be easy! Mankind has been killing pigs for millions of years, or however long people have been around.

I didn’t have a gun and even if I did, I wasn’t going to fire a gun in my apartment. I knew that in slaughterhouses they used that thing that the main character in *No Country for Old Men* uses, but I didn’t even know what that was called and I didn’t know how to get one and I was in a hurry.

I laid down some plastic and got my phone set up in the tripod in the living room, just like I did when I sawed my own arm off. I fumbled through the house looking for any sort of weapon. I could use the electric saw, but that seemed unnecessarily extreme. I ended up finding a hammer in a closet and a big, sharp knife. My plan was to incapacitate it with the hammer and then bleed it out. I wasn’t sure I had enough plastic sheeting left over to not make a huge mess.

I led the pig to the plastic sheeting and it, again, moved lazily and unconcerned wherever I led it. I poured out a bag of salad mix on top of the plastic as a final meal. Look, I don’t know what pigs eat. I’m pretty sure they’ll eat anything. I just needed to distract it enough for it to stand still and let me do this.

The pig took the bait... and by that I mean it was just as docile as it had been the entire time, except now it was eating salad. I readied the hammer, practiced the arc that it would need to take to hit its target three times. Then, I strengthened my resolve, gripped the hammer with a white-knuckle grip, and brought it down between the pig’s eyes. The pig dropped to the ground, letting out a pained grunt in the process, but I hit it again with the hammer in order to ensure that it was fully unconscious before I got on top of it to bleed it out.

Bleeding out the pig was more difficult than I thought it would be. The pig was convulsing because I had just scrambled its brain with a hammer, so it was kicking uncoordinatedly while I

was trying to figure out where to cut. My knife wasn't nearly as sharp as I thought it was. It was fine for everything that I needed to do in the kitchen, but it did not slide easily into live pig flesh. Once I did get a cut going on the neck, it was difficult for me to find the carotid artery. After a brief exploratory surgery on the pig's neck that almost completely decapitated it, I successfully found and pierced the artery. It pumped copious amounts of blood onto the plastic sheeting, intensifying during heartbeats. Eventually, the kicking slowed and came to a stop. The bleeding slowed and came to a stop as well. Everything was completely still. The whole process from taking in the pig to putting it down took less than two hours. That seemed fast to me, but I had no way of telling. The pig shat on my floor exactly two times and one of those times was on the plastic sheeting after being hit in the head with a hammer.

Its eyes were open. I had forgot that that would happen. It's creepy.

I took some deep breaths and turned off the phone camera. I was learning how important my breathing was. When I cut my arm off, I realized multiple times during the process that I was forgetting to breathe and almost passed out in the rig, which could have had disastrous consequences. Breathing also did wonders for my demeanor and mental status. Not to gloat over this no-longer-breathing pig or anything, but breathing was doing wonders for my disposition.

I sent the video to WOE.BEGONE. They responded immediately. "Bon appetit! Lay low for a week. Stay tuned for part two. Signed, W.BG."

What a relief! If this message was to be believed, I had a whole week before the next part of the challenge. Knowing when the next challenge would begin was a huge load off. Up until this point, I would complete a challenge and have to anxiously wait for the next one to drop into my lap. Now, I could mentally prepare for a future date.

As you might have expected based on the content of the message, the pig did not go away. The gamerunners didn't undo the result of this challenge. I had a dead pig in my living room that was my problem to deal with. Of all of the challenges to not have a reversal at the end, I was obviously grateful that it was this one. Overall, it wasn't actually a big deal. I had handled it quickly and expertly, and as fast as anyone else I hoped. I still felt like I was firmly in the lead. Plus, there's the obvious utility of slaughtering a pig. I now had more meat than I knew what to do with. Like literally, I didn't know how to butcher a pig or where I would keep all of the meat. It's not like I could give it away either, that would look highly suspicious. I didn't know what, quote: "lay low for a week," truly meant, but surely it didn't mean telling all of your friends and family that you slaughtered a pig inside your apartment and needed to get rid of some of the meat so that it didn't go to waste.

Luckily, I had watched a plethora of animal butchery videos in my attempt to cut my arm off, so at least I had a guideline to go by, even if I didn't have any experience. It was... trendy, in a way. Humanely slaughtered farm-to-fork meat butchered and cooked all by myself. People pay good

money for an experience like that. I mean, I would never pay any amount of money for an experience like that, but some people would.

It was an industrious week. I felt... lighter, knowing that I had a whole, uninterrupted week to try and get some normalcy in before the next storm hit. I was better at my job, better at talking to loved ones, and more productive. I even got some reading done. I finally sat down and read *The Conquest of Bread* by Alexander Kropotkin, so now I get to have an opinion about that and sound all smart and important. It wasn't until the last couple days that I started to mentally prepare myself and start to get nervous.

This was all too good to be true. CANNONBALL called this challenge a "doozy" and he doesn't look like the type for anything to be a "doozy" to him. If it was physically challenging for him, I just might not be able to do it, period. The first part was actually easier to do than any of the previous challenges. It wasn't as emotionally taxing as the first challenge, and it wasn't nearly as painful as the second challenge. So, whatever was about to come my way was likely considerably more extreme than those challenges if the parts combined were going to be that much worse. This sort of speculation spun around in my head in the hours leading up to part two of the challenge. I knew it wasn't healthy or helpful to focus on them if the challenge was just going to arrive anyway, but I couldn't put them out of my mind. My imagination was my own worst enemy.

Like clockwork, exactly one week to the hour that the pig arrived at my door, I heard another loud knock. I ran to the door and threw it open, but still didn't see anyone there. No pig this time either, thank god. I looked around and then down at my feet. On the ground, there was a manila envelope with my name on the front, but it wasn't addressed. It had been left there by what was probably a courier for the game. I took it inside and locked the door behind me.

In the envelope were a series of photographs. A picture of a house, with the street name and house number clearly visible. A picture of a man shopping for groceries. A picture of a dead pig. A picture of that same man in a police uniform inside of a cop car. A scan of a document alleging a complaint of excessive force, complete with the officer's name and badge number. A grizzly image of a woman, maybe the victim of domestic battery or some other traumatic violence. And finally, a note in the same handwriting as the one from a week prior.

MIKE *[static overlaying his voice]*: "Part two: Kill it. It's just a pig. No need for video, we'll know. Don't worry, we've got your back. Signed, W.BG."

MIKE *[normal voice]*: I wish that I had saved my "Jesus Christs" and my "fucks" and "goddamnits" for this heightened intensity because my use of those swears thus far has created a semantic unimportance that makes those swears insufficient to describe the state that I was in after receiving this package. Though I can't say that there is *any* language sufficient to describe my extreme frustration and reluctance to do this challenge. I know that I was just bragging about reading a foundational anarchist text, but there is a line between working toward meaningful revolutionary action and killing an individual cop to progress in a *game*. No matter how bad a

dude this guy seemed like from the documents and images I was presented with. This challenge was make or break. Honestly, *[whiny]* can't I just cut my arm off again?

This has been WOE.BEGONE. Next time: well, you know what happens next time. Thanks for playing.

[End theme plays.]

AFTER-CREDITS: *[Stacy and glitchy animal breathing]*

[END Episode 3.]