

EPISODE ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHTY SIX - RUGBY, ND

Original transcript edited by Theo and reviewed by Jenah

[BEGIN Episode 186.]

INTRO: Hey, guys. Happy New Year. And welcome to the mid-season finale for Season 16 of WOE.BEGONE. There will be an intermission next week, and then we will get back to episodes that aren't vaguely holiday-themed and self-contained, because I won't feel bad about asking actors to work around their holiday schedule anymore. That's right, I'm back to cracking the whip. *[We hear a clip play of Michael yelling "yeehaw," a whip crack, and a Western-themed jingle.]*

In other news, *the american bison 3* is out now on Bandcamp at woebegonepod.bandcamp.com. It's 12 brand new songs in the form of a lo-fi hip hop beats to study to with a little bit of my own personality sprinkled in. If you've heard the other two *american bison*s, you know what you're getting. It is free, and it is over on Bandcamp at woebegonepod.bandcamp.com.

My other plugs, really quickly: I'm still streaming on twitch.tv/woebegonepod, where every Sunday I write that week's episode soundtrack, and then we hang out and play a video game. New year, new me; in 2025, I think we're going to stop playing *GeoGuessr* for a while and play a more story-focused game. So, if you wanna see that, head over to twitch.tv/woebegonepod.

And if you'd like to support the show, you can do so on Patreon, where you can get early access to ad-free episodes, instrumentals, soundtrack albums, Q&As, director's commentaries, Movies with Michael, postcards, corkboards, and more. For this episode, patrons got it on 2024, and the rest of you have to wait until 2025, and if that isn't reason enough to sign up for the Patreon, then I don't know what is. Again, that's patreon.com/woe_begone.

Special thanks to my ten newest patrons: [REDACTED] for supporting the show. Enjoy.

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

STRANGER *[narrating]*: Day 1

I wrote "Day 1" instead of the date, because I don't know what day it is. There's a calendar in the house, but it's for 2021, and all of the dates are crossed off, so I suppose it isn't 2021 anymore. So, Happy New Year's, I guess. Even if the calendar hadn't been all crossed out, there wouldn't be any reason to trust that we would be on the first day that wasn't crossed out. It does appear to be winter outside, though, so maybe the calendar isn't far off? Maybe it's early 2022? The date isn't actually a high priority—there are obviously bigger fish to fry—but I wasn't sure how to begin writing in this thing. That's as good a place to start as any. It isn't as though I could introduce myself. I found this notebook in my room, and someone else was using it as a

journal before me, and they just started writing. Is it more courteous to rip out those pages and pretend that I never saw them? Whatever, I'm going to keep them in there for now.

It is difficult to know where to begin, because I— I just got here, and I don't know where "here" is, and I don't know who "I" am. What I do know is that I am in a house that feels like it's in the middle of nowhere, and it is cold and muddy and terrible. I guess, therefore, I also know that I am of the disposition to find such an environment terrible, so that's a start, albeit not a very good one. It's a small house, far enough away from civilization that I can't see any neighboring houses from the windows. It has two bathrooms, two bedrooms, and no electronics more complicated than a microwave—except for one, and I will get to that later. There is also no car in the driveway.

I just checked myself out in the mirror, and it turns out that I'm... some guy. Probably about 30, little bit of a gut, thick eyebrows. My hair looks like it was shaved a few days ago. It is in that super soft stage of being short. I don't know what I was expecting. I guess I could have been someone that I recognize? Because I do remember people. I don't remember anything about myself, but I remember... I guess I'd call them "ancillary" things. Assuming that I remember the definition of "ancillary." It feels like the scaffolding that holds up a person is still in there. I remember Santa Claus and Coca Cola and HeadOn: Apply directly to the forehead. HeadOn: Apply directly to the forehead. Thank god I remember that. It is everything else that is missing. Which, to me, is everything. I am missing, and only the scaffolding remains.

I arrived on the front porch of this house this morning. I don't know how I got here. I don't remember feeling disoriented or anything. I wasn't drunk, and I didn't have a head wound. It's like I started existing this morning. I came into existence on the front porch of this house. My scaffolding reminds me that this is not normally how humans come into existence. I knocked on the door, because I couldn't figure out anything else to do. To my surprise, a man answered. Short, dark hair; slight build; scrawny—smaller than me, at least. He did not seem surprised that I was there and that I didn't know what was going on. In fact, he sighed in a way that suggested that I wasn't the first person to knock on his door and bother him in this state, and that he understood that I was about to be his problem now, but nonetheless ushered me inside.

Once inside, the man explained that he himself had arrived at the house in that same state a couple of weeks ago, unceremoniously dropped off without any idea who he was or why he was there. He gave me a tour of the house, which felt dusty and empty. It had furnishings and food, but that was about it. Very little in the way of personalized decorations, except for one room, which was to be my bedroom. That is when I noticed that there was no TV, and checking my pockets for a cellphone revealed that I didn't have one of those, either.

The man explained to me that we seemed to be forbidden from contacting the outside world. There was nothing here that could transmit a signal to anyone, though I don't know who I would try to transmit a signal to. I suggested that maybe we weren't so far from civilization after all. Maybe we could pack a bag with some supplies, and head in one direction until we found a road, and then follow that road until we found a town. Who knows, maybe my scaffolding

contains some wildlife survival training. The wilderness seemed preferable to a house that we were seemingly trapped in.

The man shook his head and sighed at this suggestion. He explained that he had tried that on the first day that he arrived. He said that he had arrived here with another man, and that they had attempted this as soon as they got there. They made it a mile or so away from the house when the man suddenly found himself in the house again. It was like he had snapped back to where he was before he left. The only difference was that the other man was no longer there. And he never saw this other man again.

Using my trusty scaffolding, I pointed out that what he had described did not sound like real life. People can't teleport. That is impossible. It is fictional technology or magic. Something more believable had to have happened to them. Something real. They were drugged, or their memories were altered. Their memories had already been altered once, so what was keeping whoever did that from just doing it again?

When I said that, the man walked over to a cupboard, opened it up, and pulled out a strange electronic device. It looked old, brick-shaped, DIY, like someone had taken one of those TI-84 Calculators and pulled all of the parts out to use the case, right down to the grid of buttons below a low-resolution screen. I asked the man if he made the device, and he said no. He said, perplexingly, that it "came with the house." And he said that it was proof that he didn't simply forget how he got back there.

The man walked to the kitchen and took an apple off the counter. He placed it on the coffee table in the living room, and instructed me to watch him and to stand back from the coffee table. He powered on the device, pointed it at the apple, winced as though he were afraid that something might come out of the device, ricochet off the coffee table, and hit him, and pressed a button. Instantly, the apple was gone. No sound, no flash of bright light, no assistant hiding under the table. It was gone.

I asked him where the apple had gone to, and he claimed not to know. He just knew if he sat something down on that table and pressed the button that it would vanish. He told me that he first learned what the device could do when he was messing with it and accidentally teleported the pistol that he was keeping on the table, which happened to be the only firearm in the house. There weren't even any more firearms in the bedroom that was to become my bedroom, the one with cowboy accoutrements scattered about haphazardly, as though a cowboy had been scared away on short notice and could only take what he could carry, leaving the rest of the room in a tiny whirlwind mess.

This incident, he said, is why he kept a knife on him at all times. He retrieved it from his makeshift holster on his waistband and showed me. It was a large, sharp, serrated tactical knife. Not the sort of knife that you would find in the kitchen. He gave me a look that informed me that no, there were no more knives like it in the house, and that he was prepared to use it in case of

interlopers or if I proved dangerous to him. I took the hint. I was probably great at taking hints before I lost my memory, given how quickly I understood.

He showed me to my bedroom, which is where I am now and where I found this notebook. I am writing all of this down, because I am determined to remember. If something happens to me, I want there to be a log for myself, or, god forbid, someone else, to read and discover what is going on. I can't make sense of it yet, but there appear to be rules to follow that keep us here. And if I can decipher the rules, then I can come up with a plan to break them without consequence. So, that is the next step. Break the rules.

[Opening theme plays.]

STRANGER *[narrating]*: Day 14

I think that the previous owner of this notebook was a shinigami named Ryuk. I'm kidding, of course. I am extremely frustrated that I seem to remember everything about the world and nothing about myself. In actuality, I think that the previous owner of this notebook was a cowboy named Michael. There are parts of his notes where he refers to himself in the third person by that name. Between the chicken scratch, the dialect, and the jargon that I don't recognize, it is nearly impossible to figure out what he wrote. His writings call this place an "Affiliate House"? And refers to other people living here with him. He also said that there's, quote, "hogs what I'm feedin' in that there backyard," but I checked if there were any hogs, and if there ever were, I imagine they've run off into the woods. More importantly, he writes about this place like it's some sort of, I don't know, teleportation experiment? Or some kind of experiment, at least. It's difficult to tell what he's describing, because each sentence is so packed with jargon. It's like he's talking to someone that already understands what he is talking about. I didn't go to school for this. Unless I did, I wouldn't know. He brings up "the disconnectivity of iterations" and "anonymous councilships" and "Arbiter-Nobody parallelisms"? I searched my scaffolding for these terms, and I could not find them. I tried to diagram out what he was writing, but I don't know if that exercise has gotten me any closer to the truth.

The last thing that Michael the Cowboy ever wrote in the notebook was a short entry, just: "the new guy is here."

I think I like Michael, what I can understand of him. He's funny, and seems like he'd be easy to get along with. He also seemed capable and knowledgeable about his circumstances, which is disheartening, because it seems as though he was not able to escape them alive, which makes me wonder about what chance I have. I assume that he didn't escape because of the state that his things were left in. The notebook is still here. It doesn't seem like something that he would want others to see. He would have taken it with him if he had fled. In my opinion, at least. Just me putting myself in his shoes.

I feel like I know Michael's life better than I know my own. Even the way that he writes alludes to a full life of qualities and idiosyncrasies. He's a cowboy. I can say that about him. What can I say

about myself? That I don't know anything. That I live in a house that I can't leave with a man that I don't know, neither of us even having names, neither of us knowing how to escape.

Maybe I can be Michael for now, until I figure out who I am. I could use the grit and determination if I'm ever going to get out of here. The man that I live with seems resigned to stay here, or else he's invested in keeping us both here. Maybe a strong cowboy figure could rally the troops, or guide the herd, or whatever the metaphor is. Not that I plan on becoming a cowboy. In fact, if the man that I live with knew Michael, then me turning into Michael the Cowboy would look suspicious. He would know that I have the notebook. So, I will carry on as Michael in spirit. At the very least, it will give me something to sign off with.

—Michael

Day 15

The man that I live with acts strangely around the word "Nobody." I first noticed it after I read Michael's note about "Arbiter-Nobody parallelisms," a term that I am no closer to understanding. The man never uses the word "Nobody." He always says "no one." One time I noticed him start to say "Nobody" and then catch himself and change to "no one" mid-word. It's as though "Nobody" and "no one" have different meanings to him. "Nobody" doesn't mean "nobody" to him, it means whatever half of a "Arbiter-Nobody parallelism" is.

Once I picked up on this, I decided to use the word "Nobody" in front of him as much as I could to gauge his reaction. Just as I had suspected, it raised some eyebrows. The first time I said it, it elicited a mild reaction. Literally raised eyebrows. After an afternoon of using it in every context that I could conceive of, the man seemed agitated with me. I saw his hand graze the handle of the tactical knife that he kept on himself in consideration of using it on me. Ironically like a cowboy in a Western film flashing his pistol. I think that he couldn't tell whether I knew something or not (and, to be honest, I don't), but blowing up at me about using the word "Nobody" would reveal that he knows something, too. And even though he didn't do that, his reaction assures me that he does, in fact, know something.

Pretending that I still believe that he is just as confused as I am, I proposed an excursion. I told him that I was going to pack a bag of supplies, walk out the front door, and keep walking in that direction until I found something. If I vanish, I vanish. If I end up back at the house, I end up back at the house. Consequences be damned. I told him that he could come with me or stay here, but that I would appreciate the company. He was quiet for a moment. I thought that surely he would either say no or force me to stay, and maybe I could learn why. Instead, he said that he would come with me. I think that he wants to supervise my trip. We will have to see if the journey proves fruitful.

—Michael

Day 16

The search for civilization went differently than I expected. I thought that we might wander for hours until we found something resembling a road or even a human footpath. I would settle for a bear path. Instead, it took about 20 minutes of us wandering through the mud that devoured the front lawn of the house until we found a gravel road. We were not, as it turns out, deep into the wilderness. We were simply at the end of a long dirt driveway that had been washed out by the rain. I think the man that I live with already knew this. I thought that maybe him letting me discover the gravel road was his way of telling me that he knew more than he let on. He didn't react when we reached the gravel road. We just chose a direction (I picked the one that was slightly downhill), and we continued to walk.

The road was rural and unkempt, one of those roads that still exist even though the state no longer maintains it, destined to return to the earth someday far in the future. We didn't see any cars or other houses. No one else appeared to live on this gravel road. We walked in silence for maybe an hour. The man that lived with me had an inscrutable facial expression. I could not tell what he was thinking. Was he humoring me? Was he leading me somewhere? Was he the mastermind behind what was happening to me, or was he just someone who had been around long enough to know the ropes? Had he read Michael's notebook?

The gravel road eventually gave way to a paved road that met it at a perpendicular angle. The road caught me by surprise. I was expecting the gravel road to go on forever, or at least be so long that we didn't make it to the end. There was a sign on the paved road: "Welcome to Rugby, North Dakota: The Geographic Center of North America." That's where we were. Rugby, North Dakota. The Geographic Center of North America. There wasn't a more specific location in the entire world. You could find the geographic center of North America no matter where you were. It was a math problem more than anything.

Before I could say anything, it happened. One split second, I was standing in front of the welcome sign for Rugby, North Dakota. The very next second, I was standing in the living room of the house that I had left a couple hours prior. There was no sound, no flashing light, no magician doing a trick. I had become the apple from the demonstration. I felt dizzy. My stomach turned upside down from the sudden change in location. I fumbled my way to the couch and sat down, nauseous.

Despite the nausea, I was elated. There was reason to hope now. We knew where we were. We were in Rugby, North Dakota! The geographic center of North America. Someone could find us! If we could find someone to tell our location to, they could retrieve us! The only problem was that I didn't know anybody. We could try to find a phone and call 911 or the police or the government, but what if this was a military experiment? The government might set us back to square one, or worse.

The man that lived with me was much less shaken by the sudden change in location, as though he had become used to it. I relayed to him all of the thoughts I was having about how to contact the outside world, and he shut them all down. "We're never going to find a phone, so it doesn't

matter," he said. I pressed him on that, tried to get him to tell me how he could be so sure. He couldn't actually know, I said. "*Nobody's* been in this situation, after all," I said.

"Mikey—" The man that I live with chided me with that name, as though it were my own, before realizing what he had done. Mikey? Mikey as in Michael? He did know about the notebook. And furthermore, he had been reading what I wrote in it! He knew that I was signing off as Michael. He slipped up and called me by my name.

His face turned red. He gripped the handle on the tactical knife. He gave me another look that I couldn't figure out. Without saying anything else, I walked to my bedroom, closed the door, locked it, and wedged a chair under the doorknob. I haven't left the room since. I don't know what he knows. I don't know what is going to happen. But if something does happen, I hope that someone finds this.

—Mikey

Day 24

Michael didn't escape. I'm sure of that now. I escaped, and, even in the frenzy of getting away, I managed to bring the notebook with me. Michael surely would have, too. To me, that means that he's gone. He's either dead, or he was taken somewhere else against his will.

The morning after the Excursion, I woke to the man that lived with me banging on the door. The knocking was loud and frantic. I told him that I saw him reach for his knife and that I wasn't coming out. His voice wasn't threatening. Instead, it was pleading. He was pleading with me to come out. He said that he never intended to actually hurt me, that the whole reason he was there was to protect me. He told me that someone dangerous was at the house, and I needed to get out now. He said that he would do everything that he could to keep them from discovering me, but that I was no longer safe. I didn't believe him. I had an imagination, too. I could concoct a lie as easily as he could. He was saying exactly what I would say if I wanted to scare someone into coming out into the open and making themselves an easy target. I ignored him, and kept the door closed. I would need to come out eventually for food, but I would figure that out when it became absolutely necessary.

The house became eerily quiet after the man gave up on convincing me to open the door. There was a moment—maybe 30 seconds, maybe a minute—where it felt like not even the leaves outside were stirring. Then, there was a knock on the door. I assumed it to be another ploy. But then I heard the man take a deep breath and open the door.

Instantly, there were sounds of a scuffle. Sounds that the man could not make all on his own. Overlapping grunts and hard thuds against the floor. The man wasn't lying. Someone was here.

I opened the door just a crack, and peered out into the living room. There was a second man, larger than the man that lived with me. He had tackled the man to the ground. The man was

slashing wildly up at him, grazing his face and sending spurts of blood across the carpet. The second man grabbed the arm with the knife, and the man that lived with me punched him in the temple with the other hand. The second man kicked him away, and reached for a pistol in his holster on his side.

The man that lived with me charged at the second man, slashing at him as he tried to produce his pistol. Still on the ground, the second man brought his shins up to block the attack, the tactical knife cutting through his pants and into his shins. He leapt onto the second man, but it was too late. The pistol was already out. The second man rolled onto his side, pressed the muzzle of the pistol into his chest, and pulled the trigger. The gunshot was quieter than I had expected, muffled from the contact with the man's body. His eyes went wide, and stayed that way as he went limp. He looked at me through the crack in the door. I knew that he could see me. I saw his eyes go gray and unfocused, unable to see anything anymore. It's possible that the second man may have seen me as well, though he had been struck in the head several times. Seeing the man that lived with me lying dead on the carpet, I bolted from the bedroom and out the back door, running with no regard for whatever might be chasing me, carrying the notebook in my hand.

I ran until I couldn't run anymore, and collapsed in the woods. Nobody was following me. I was completely alone. I don't think the second man ever actually knew that I was there. Nobody teleported me back to the house. I was surely further out than the Rugby welcome sign at that point. I thought that maybe the person who teleported us back the first time thought that both of us were dead. I had slipped through the cracks.

For the first time since I had begun to have memories again, for the first time since I came to the house, I recognized someone. I recognized the second man, the man that had killed the man that was living with me. I recognized him from my first day at the house. I recognized him from the mirror. A man in his 30s, bit of a gut, thick eyebrows. The man that killed the man that lived with me was Mikey. He was me. There was no mistaking it. This was not a man that looked like me, this was a man that was me. I didn't have an explanation, but I knew it to be true. I knew in some fundamental way that he and I were the same person, and that person was Mikey, whoever Mikey is.

I'm not sure where I'm headed next. I don't know if I should try to find the people that know what happened to me, or if I should avoid them at all costs. Michael left some interesting personal notes in his notebook. The name of a place that I might seek out. It's all I have to go on, so I'm going to start there. Michael, if you're out there, I'm going to find you.

—Mikey

[Closing theme plays.]

BLOOPER (DYLAN): *[Singing to the tune of "I Want It That Way."]* Tell me why / It always seems like Tuesday / Everyday / It always feels like Tuesday / Oh / I never wanna hear you say

/ Why is it Tuesday? *[Stops singing.]* Don't look at me like that, Riga. I'm normal. You're weird, I'm normal.

[END Episode 186.]