

EPISODE ONE HUNDRED AND NINETY ONE - JŪRMALA, LV

Original transcript edited by Theo

[BEGIN Episode 191.]

INTRO: Hey, guys, quick plugs, regular plugs. *the american bison 3?* Streaming services. *The Proof Is In The Podcast?* Wherever you get your podcasts. That's a recap show. Episode Two coming soon, you know the deal.

I'm still streaming on Twitch over at twitch.tv/woebegonepod, where every Sunday I write that week's episode soundtrack, and then we hang out and play a video game. Last week we listened to people's February Album Writing Month submissions and played *GeoGuessr*. I'm having a lot of fun playing the indoor world map on *GeoGuessr*, it's all indoor locations, and it's been a blast. So, check that out if that sounds fun to you: twitch.tv/woebegonepod.

And if you'd like to support the show, you can do so on Patreon over at patreon.com/woe_begone, where you can get early access to ad-free episodes, instrumentals, soundtrack albums, Q&As, director's commentaries, Movies with Michael, postcards, corkboards, and mor...kboards. We are coming up on a season finale, which means that I will be posting my two-part behind-the-scenes videos about the making of said season finale. Those are always a lot of fun; I have a lot of fun making 'em. There's lots of videos of my dog in there. So, check that out if that sounds like something that interests you. That is patreon.com/woe_begone.

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

[Warning: This episode contains threats of violence and false imprisonment. Listener discretion is advised.]

[Opening theme plays.]

MIKEY [narrating]: "So, this really works? How? The signals travel through time?"

I put the glorified earbud into my ear before getting an answer to the question. It didn't actually matter how it worked. If Ryan said that the communication device that we were going to use to talk back and forth between the ice lair and Base worked regardless of where in spacetime we were, then it worked. The earpiece felt light and plasticky, like the cheap headphones airlines hand out on flights. I was scared of accidentally breaking it in my hands as I put it in.

"Um, it uses time travel, dummy? Are you not picking up on a theme here?" Ryan said, sitting at the desk-shaped carve-out in the massive machine that was sitting in the middle of the hangar-like main chamber of the secret ice lair. He said this into the microphone in front of him and therefore directly into my ear through the earpiece, even though I was standing right beside him. The sound was ear-piercingly tinny. The frequency response was entirely treble, and it

made my teeth hurt, even more than the Longyearbyen cold had been already. I wished he had sprung for something higher quality. I wasn't asking for reference headphones, just something that isn't painful. You know, painless.

"Oh, so... does it, like..." I scrambled for a conclusion to my sentence, "store the message from the one that's further back in time, and then it, like, it forwards it to the other end at the time that they're in? So it sounds like real time... B-But- n-no, 'cause what about the other way around?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. It- It's something like that. It- Yeah, it yadda yadda yaddas and whatever, and we can talk to each other- Hey! Mikey! What are we doing here? We didn't smash Toph's head open like a watermelon on this very expensive time travel command center just so I could give a presentation on how the headset works. Focus! We have work to do."

"Yeah, there's still blood on it," I grumbled. And there was. Not a foot from where I was leaning against the machine, there was a corner that had been bent into a concave pool filled with blood. There was more blood on the ground where Toph had fallen afterwards.

"That'll buff out," Ryan said. "Plus, we can beat it up, it's not like we have to return it. The building it used to be in got blown up years ago. So, if you think about it, it's in better shape than if we had left it there. You need to get focused on the mission, Mikey. We did your favorite thing, killing Toph, and now we need to do my favorite thing, which is stealing from Base. Okay, my favorite thing is also killing Toph, but we only had the one."

"We killed Toph!? I-I didn't do anything!" I said.

"I know! You weren't very helpful at all," Ryan chided. "Toph's a big boy. I don't like to wrangle him all on my own, but I'll do it in a pinch. So much dead weight. But, what's done is done. I forgive you for not helping, and Toph is outside providing a nutritious frozen meal to Lucky while we get our work done.

"Who is Lucky?" I asked thoughtlessly, figuring out the answer through context clues and then wishing I hadn't asked.

"Well, you're lucky that I'm here to help you, little Mikey bear," he said. "But, more importantly, Lucky's the polar bear. You know, this isn't the first meal I've tossed out to him. Why do you think he keeps hanging around the front door? He's looking for lunch. You have to start figuring out these kinds of things on your own, Mikey. Keep up, or you're going to be lunch. I know you have a memory problem, but you- you have memories, right? Like, you remember yesterday? All the stuff we did? Like, you remember 30 minutes ago when we threw Toph out to be lunch meat? Because if you forget why you're at Base in the middle of our mission, we're going to have a problem." Ryan knew that I wasn't going to forget where I was in the middle of the mission, he was just frustrated.

"I'll remember just fine," I said.

Killing Toph had been surprisingly simple. And I had helped, just not with the actual act of killing. Killing Toph had been organized as part of our plan to get the Stinky Device and get free. Before Ryan and I left the ice lair for the Latvia apartment, I planted a fake journal entry for Toph to find. I wrote about how I was going to attempt to use the giant machine in the ice lair, the one that Ryan was configuring for our mission, to escape while Toph was conducting some scheduled preparation for his mission to retrieve the Stinky Device from Base (not to be confused with *our* mission to retrieve the Stinky Device from Base). The journal entry was even more naive than I am. It didn't address the enormous flaw in my plan, namely that time travel made it so that Toph could leave on his reconnaissance mission and return to the ice lair without any time passing relative to the ice lair. It was an obvious and elementary mistake, but it was the kind of mistake that was expected of me due to my lack of knowledge about how time travel works. It might've been a mistake I could actually make if I were working alone, as Toph thought that I was. Toph thought that he was intercepting a one-man mutiny in progress. I was sitting at the machine when Toph arrived, looking at the indecipherable jargon on the small, ancient-looking screen that Ryan was currently transforming into useful material for our journey into Base. Toph approached me confidently, smugly, condescending, even. He was so distracted by shutting down my mutiny that he never saw Ryan coming. Ryan made it look easy. There was no hesitation in his movements. He struck quickly and violently, and it was completely over by the time I had registered it beginning. I don't think Toph ever had any idea what was going on or even who was attacking him. And even though Toph had been standing in-between me and freedom from his evil ice lair, the whole thing put a pit in my stomach. I thought that he and Ryan were friends.

"You had better remember better than 'just fine,'" 'cause this is all riding on you, kid," Ryan said. He slapped me on the back patronizingly. "You're going in there because I can't. I'm on the 'do not serve' list. Mike put my picture behind the bar, and new management probably didn't change that. And that's why you have to go in alone."

"Ryan, I'm— I'm nervous. What am I supposed to do? Impersonate someone—? What if someone asks who I am?" I asked.

"Um, lie, obviously?" Ryan smirked. "Just say you're Stinky or whatever. Unless Stinky asks who you are, then say you're Mikey or whatever. Actually, Stinky's not their best and brightest. Tell him whatever you want. Oh, uh, tell him you're a puppet that came to life because he believed in the power of friendship, he'll love that. Hell, tell him you're Stinky. I mean, you could be Stinky, right? I mean, that's what's so ironic about Toph's plan. He never thought that you could actually be Stinky."

I thought about this. "No, uh, I— I can't be Stinky, Ryan, because, uh, Stinky is Stinky. Uh— And I'm Mikey. Uh, Mikey is Mikey. Uh— I-It's— It's tautological."

"I know what this is. You can't get out of being Stinky just by breaking out multisyllabic words. 'Tautological,'" he scoffed. "Yeah, I'm sure it's a massive coincidence that both you and Stinky have specific memory problems."

"What? No, I'm different," I said. "Base sent me into Operose, and I got all my memories back. I— That's what they told me, anyway. A-And they weren't lying. They all seemed surprised about it. And I don't think Troy's smart enough to play along."

"And did Stinky get all of his memories back when he went into Operose?" Ryan asked.

"Uh, Stinky didn't go inside of Operose," I said. "I-It was me and Marissa."

"Interesting." Ryan typed away at the machine, and finished with a self-satisfied hard press of the enter key. "Well, you should try hard not to worry too much about what happens if Stinky goes inside of Operose and it's the exact same thing that happened to you. We don't have time to unpack that right now. You need to get in, get the gizmo, and get out. A-And don't worry, you can totally see yourself in the future. Like, it won't make the future one of you disappear or cross the time streams or whatever. I— You've seen Stinky before, so it's not a pressing issue. So, Mikey. Are you ready to finally do this thing, or should we sit around with our fingers up our asses for another hour?"

"Ryan, tell me: am I— am I Stinky? Seriously, am I Stinky?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah, of course you're stinky. But, I mean, the front door of the ice lair has a really bad draft problem, and the cold air dampens a lot of the smell," he said. "You're standing pretty close to me, and I— I can barely smell you. Uh— You know we have showers, right? I don't know if Toph actually you a tour. They're all the way in the back. Maybe you should take one, like, after the mission. But, in order to take a shower after the mission, you need to *go* on the mission, so let's go, Mikey. Okay, countdown starts now! Remember to stay light on your feet, and maybe you won't fall over this time. Transporting to Base in three... two... one..."

As always, I wanted to interrupt Ryan and ask him if he seriously meant anything he's ever said. I wanted, if you will, to scrute him. I could never tell if he was serious. I needed someone serious to talk to. Would it make sense if I were Stinky? Did that line up? I didn't know enough about Stinky, or even myself, to answer that question. But w-who would be able to answer that question? W-Would— Would Base know? O-Or Mike? Or Stinky himself? Or... you know, how about you, Michael? Do you know?

I was so wrapped up in my inner monologue that I was blindsided by the transport. Maybe that was Ryan's intention? His own bizarre, ironic way of helping me? I transported into Base, less tense than I had been during previous transports. I kept light on my feet, and managed not to fall over this time. My inner ear took a couple of seconds to adjust, and then I was at Base, ready to retrieve the Stinky Device. Or "the gizmo," as Ryan called it.

The first thing I noticed was the heat. The Longyearbyen cold was mercifully gone, because I was inside of an honest-to-god house with real central heating. It felt... well, it felt hot, actually. Like someone had accidentally bumped the thermostat up all the way. I couldn't blame them for wanting to keep it warm in there. Chance had been taking them to a lot of cold destinations. I couldn't tell where I and Base were from looking out the window. It was completely dark out. Did Ryan send me here in the middle of the night?

I looked around. I was inside of Base, in the living room, entirely alone. This surprised me. Usually, there were people milling about. The house sounded entirely still. I couldn't hear anyone moving at all. Cautiously, I checked the adjoining rooms: the offices, the kitchen, the bedrooms. Base was completely empty. It hadn't been evacuated. They hadn't taken anything with them, not even valuables. There was a Calculator sitting on the coffee table in the living room. They wouldn't leave that behind. It was as though they had vanished.

"Nobody's here," I said into the earpiece.

"Oh, um." I heard furious typing. "We didn't prepare for that." Ryan had an odd quality to his voice. "Yeah, you're gonna have to kill him? Sorry, I know you're squeamish, but he's a loose cannon, and we already have a lot of cannons going off? So, just, you know. *[Throat slashing noise.]* And yes, he's one of you, so don't look him directly in the eye while you're killing him if that sort of thing still makes you uncomfortable. Just think of it as killing the parts of yourself that you hate the most. That's what I do."

I furrowed my brow in confusion and looked around again, thinking I must have missed something. "What are you talking about, Ryan? I said nobody's here. Everyone is gone. And... they aren't gone on a mission, either. At least, I don't think so. Missions have people back at Base running communications like we're doing. And, to reiterate, nobody's here at all. I think they're gone, gone." Chance would never leave Base completely unattended. Something happened. The air had a stagnant feel to it. It felt like I was the first person to have been inside of Base in ages.

"Oh, you mean it's empty. Uh, don't worry about the other stuff. Uh— You— You cut out or whate—I'm going through a tunnel," Ryan said. I did not appreciate his continued use of the phrase "or whatever." "So, is their stuff still in there, or...?"

"It looks like everything is here," I said. I pocketed the Calculator in the living room without telling him.

"Awesome. So, all you have to do is find our high-tech time-gizmo, and then I'll pull you out of there. It'll be even easier than we thought," he said.

"You're not, you know, concerned... about nobody being here?" I asked.

"No, not really," Ryan said. "I mean, it would be a crying shame if they're still alive somewhere out there. But, we'll deal with them *if* Papa Bear shows up and sees that Mikeylocks ate all the porridge. So, start looking."

So, I started looking.

[Scene transition.]

MIKEY *[narrating]*: While there had been preparation for Ryan and I to infiltrate Base without Toph's involvement, I hadn't had much of a role in it. I was the greenhorn that didn't know what he was doing. My job was to take orders from Ryan and hope that he was taking the best course of action. I didn't trust Ryan. I could never figure out which angle he was coming from. I could not scrutinate him. But Ryan wasn't the one holding me captive in an ice lair like a Disney villain. Which would make me a Disney princess, but that's a story for a different time. If the plan fell apart after I retrieved the Stinky Device, I could deal with it. I would be the one holding the Stinky Device, after all. I was the one who was physically going into Base to retrieve it. Ryan would have to get it from me.

I knew a few things about the situation. I knew that Base didn't trust me after what happened in Operose. They would trust me even less if they knew that I was working with someone else to steal from them. They especially wouldn't trust me because Ryan had said that I had been "iterated"? Which meant that there was someone still locked up at Base who Base thought was me. Or, he was me, but I'm me? But it didn't seem like he or anybody else was in there right now, locked up or otherwise. It would be especially odd for Base to leave and take their prisoners with them, unless something had happened.

And I knew that I needed the Stinky Device, because *you* were on there, Michael. And that's what I really cared about. That's why I did this.

I showed up to Base prepared for a fight. Base thought that the Stinky Device was extremely powerful, and they weren't going to hand it over politely, and they certainly weren't going to hand it over to me. What I had been expecting to do was to sneak around, pretend to be Stinky if I had to, and then try to find the quietest way possible to sneak into Chance's office undetected, at which point I would also have to quietly go through his stuff without getting caught. I knew this came with the possibility of fighting and potentially killing members of Base, including members of Base who were "me" in some sense, and I was ready for that.

Base was my enemy, even if they didn't style themselves that way. They showed up to Sly's house to retrieve me, and they acted like they were carrying out a rescue mission, as though I was a long-lost comrade that they were bringing into the fold. I was supposed to want to be with them, but they were complete strangers to me. I didn't know any of them, even the ones that purported to literally be me. There was even supposedly a cowboy wandering around Base that was an iteration of me but that wasn't you. I don't think I ever saw him. If I did, nothing tipped me off that he was a cowboy. To me, Base was yet another captor who wanted something I could

offer them, and had no regard for my well-being, my happiness, or my camaraderie. Of course, there's a large conceptual gap between that relationship and killing them, but going on this mission meant that I was prepared to jump across that gap.

So, it was an enormous relief to learn that all of the murderous mental preparation was, in fact, for naught, because Base was entirely vacant. I wouldn't have to sneak around. I wouldn't have to ask myself "what would Stinky do?" in order to impersonate him, and I wouldn't have to worry about killing someone and what that would do to me. I could tear the place apart at my own discretion, and then Ryan would push a button, and I would be out of there.

Though I had a strong suspicion that the device would be in Chance's office, I did my due diligence and checked other rooms along the way. It was part curiosity and part a desire to make sure that I was truly alone at Base and that no one was going to jump out of a closet at me. Sure enough, the closets and the rooms that they were contained within were truly devoid of people. If there was anything of practical value other than the Calculator I found in the living room, I didn't recognize it. That Calculator being out in the open was against protocol. Even I knew that. So, the other Calculators were probably locked up somewhere more secure.

I paid close attention to Mike's bedroom in particular. Mike was the recently usurped leader of Base and the iteration of myself that had gotten closest to power, at least that I knew about. His bedroom didn't seem to have been touched since Chance locked him away. It was a snapshot of what could've been me, what I could've had, who I could've been. Someone on such an unfathomably different trajectory, even though that could've been me. That could've been my life. I didn't find any mysterious gizmos in his room. I'm sure that anything of that sort would have been removed by Chance when he assumed power. The only thing of note that I did find was a photograph on Mike's bedside table.

The picture was of Mike and Edgar. I recognized Edgar from preparations for the mission inside of Operose. Mike and Edgar were outside on a beautiful autumn day, after the leaves had changed color, smiling for the camera. They were with another couple, an iteration that looked younger than Mike and an iteration of Edgar that looked younger than him. And behind them was a third couple. One of them was Sylvester August Baxter—I would recognize that handlebar mustache anywhere. And with him was another cowboy. Was that you, Michael? What was this picture, Michael? When was it taken? I carefully removed the photo from its frame, and placed it in my inside jacket pocket, hoping not to crease it.

[Radio distortion effect starts.] "You find anything interesting in there, Mikey?" [Radio distortion effect ends. For the rest of this scene at Base, the effect is applied when Mikey narrates as Ryan.] Ryan's voice over the earpiece sounded like getting stabbed in the eardrum. I hid the picture frame out of sight and hurried out of the room, even though Ryan couldn't see me. At least, I don't think he could.

"Just checking the bedrooms. I haven't seen the Stinky Device, or anything else important, for that matter. It's all gotta be locked away somewhere," I said.

"We wouldn't be so *lucky*, would we? Like Lucky, the polar bear? Remember, Mikey?" Ryan asked.

"Uh... yeah?" I didn't understand why he would bring up Lucky the Polar Bear right now. "I'm guessing that the Stinky Device is in Chance's desk somewhere? I think that's where he keeps his important stuff; I'm heading there now."

"And Chris isn't there, right?" Ryan asked.

"Huh? Uh— No, I told you, it's— it's totally empty. There's no one anywhere," I said. What was he getting at?

"Okay, great. Uh, just making sure that the three bears haven't come home. Hurry up and find the gizmo. And if he shows up, just yell "CHRIS IS HERE," and I'll start the extraction procedures," Ryan said.

"Y-Yeah," I said. It was hard to focus on what he was trying to relay to me. I was, in fact, worried about what would happen if Chance came back, but, more importantly, I was sweating bullets. It was much too hot inside of Base. The longer I stayed inside, the less it felt like a deliberate choice for the house to be this warm. Maybe there had been a confusion of Celsius and Fahrenheit? Maybe the thermostat was set to 70 degrees Celsius? I'd believe it, but I never saw a thermostat. I made my way into Chance's office.

Nothing in Chance's office was out of the ordinary. I had seen it before, and little had changed. It was still the same minimal, no-nonsense office you would expect a guy like him to have. I made my way behind his desk. His laptop was still there, sitting closed on top of the desk.

"Hey, uh, Chance's laptop is here. Do you want me to take that, too? It could have something useful on it," I asked.

There was a long pause before Ryan answered. "Sure, if it doesn't take any time," he finally said. "You don't want *Chris*... showing up unexpectedly— Hey, I didn't—" his voice in the earpiece cut out. What was going on back there? Why was he trying to correct me about Chance's name? That seemed so unimportant.

There was a drawer attached to Chance's desk. I pulled on it, and... locked. I knew that it would be. Something metallic rattled inside when I shook the drawer. It had to be the Stinky Device. I kicked the side of the drawer as hard as I could. The metal deformed around my shoe. It didn't appear to be very thick. It would only take a few more kicks and it would start to tear apart, and then I could get the Stinky Device. Assuming that that is what was in there.

I kicked the drawer two more times, making progress each time, then took a second to regroup for round two. It was deliriously hot, and I could feel myself losing energy and focus. I sat down

on the carpet next to the desk, staring up at Chance's knickknacks: one of those clacking balls on strings things that CEOs have, a bronze miniature cowboy hat with a plaque that read "BBQ Rodeo Champion" on it, and a picture of himself and a guy that I didn't recognize. My focus softened, and my breathing was heavy. I tried to wipe the sweat off of my face onto my jacket, but my jacket was wet with sweat. It was hot inside of Base. I hoped I wasn't ruining the photograph.

The door to Chance's office snapped shut, bringing me back to full attention. "Hey, uh. Is someone there?" I asked. "Uh, it's me! It's— It's— It's Stinky. I was just..." I trailed off. I didn't see or hear anyone. I didn't want to go investigate, I wanted to get the Stinky Device and get the hell out of there.

If it was a person, why didn't they say something? Why didn't they actually come into Chance's office and interrogate me? It was probably another effect of the heat. Air currents drifting around the house creating pressure vacuums. The door pulled itself shut. I didn't have anything to worry about.

And, if I did have something to worry about, I wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. I kicked the drawer again, more frantically this time. *Kick, kick, kick, kick, kick.* The side of the drawer finally ruptured into inky blackness, enough to get my fingers inside. I started pulling at the edges. The drawer was sharp and tore up my hands, but I was in a hurry. My sweaty hands kept slipping off the metal, and I had to grip it all over again, but I was making progress, tearing animalistically at the side of the drawer.

Then, I heard... laughter. I knew it was laughter. From the other side of the door. Derisive laughter, mocking, condescending.

"Is— Is someone there?" I asked. I didn't have a gameplan if there was an answer. I heard the laughter again, further away this time. I thought I recognized the voice, but I wasn't sure.

"Troy?" I called out meekly. "Troy, is that you? [*Stammers.*] It's— It's Mikey?"

I thought I heard the laughter again, even further away. Was I imagining things? Troy was an Empty Head. The laughter was frightening; it didn't feel like him. It was not the laughter of someone who isn't a serial killer. At least, that's what I thought, alone, about to have a heat stroke, hands raw from clawing open a metal drawer. I was not in a good mental state.

I continued my frenzied clawing. I finally got my full arm in. I felt around in the dark. Something sharp poked me, but eventually I felt what I was looking for. I pulled it out. The Stinky Device. It was really here. You were really here, Michael. In my hands. I really found it. This was really happening.

"I've got it. Pull me out, Ryan," I said.

There was a long pause.

"Hello? Uh— Ryan? I-I'm ready to go. I have the Stinky Device— I— the gizmo, whatever."

There was another long pause. Ryan didn't answer.

"Ryan, could you just hurry? I thought I heard something, and it sounded like Tro—"

I was suddenly and unexpectedly transported. I landed back in the ice lair with a thud, not on my feet this time. The cool air felt like a relief.

"Hand it over, or I'll kill you," a voice said. I looked up blearily. Toph?

"Hand it over, or I'll kill you," he repeated. I noticed that a shotgun was pointed at my face.

"Uh— Ryan?" I called out. I looked over to him. Ryan had his hands up, showing that he was not resisting.

"Just do it, Mikey," Ryan said. All of the snark was gone from his voice. I could finally scute him, and I did not like what I scuted.

Reluctantly, I handed the Stinky Device to Toph. He ripped it from my hands greedily, as though he expected me to resist giving it to him, despite my outstretched arm.

"But, uh, we killed you," I said.

"You didn't kill me. Project Cannon has a lot of members." Toph smiled. I don't know if I had ever seen him smile.

"Well, Toph, you've got your toy back," Ryan said. "So, me and Mikey here can go back to taking orders from you now. Sorry for the insurrection."

Toph laughed. He was operating the Stinky Device with one hand, and keeping the shotgun trained on my with the other. "No. I think I'm done with the two of you, after that little stunt. I think we need to head to Jūrmala."

"But— Michael's on there!" I blurted out. I could see you slipping away from me again.

"Don't worry. You will be, too," Toph said. His smile widened, he pushed a button on the Stinky Device, and the world went dark.

[Closing theme plays.]

[I've Got It All plays.]

*Lost my brain cells in an experiment
You think i'd regret it
But I can't remember because
I've got it all
Lost my train of thought by accident
now I can't assure myself that I exist
But I've got got it all*

*Fiction can
Slap the hands of providence
Leave me wanting what i have and more
Function
Orders every element
Vacuum of the evidence
Abhorred*

*Found an easy way to distract
Until the me that is that train of thought is dead
I've got it all
He had it all
Researching myself on the internet
Learned that I might be eating when I don't know that I am
I've got it all*

*Consumed
What was put in front of me
Like scarcity is someone else's chore
Exhumed
Markers for uncertainty
The fire of stochasticity
Will keep me warm*

[END Episode 191.]