

EPISODE 220 - THE WAY HE PUSHED ME

Original transcript edited by Spider and Karma and reviewed by Jenah

[BEGIN Episode 220.]

INTRO: Hey guys, quick plugs. 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. We smashed *Peggle Deluxe*, we smashed VVVVVV, and I had a really good round in *GeoGuessr* where I was, like, 1.2 kilometers away in Albania, so, with that out of the way, we're going to move on to spooky things. I haven't decided what that is yet, but I think it's probably going to be *Nancy Drew*, so check that out at twitch.tv/woebegonepod.

And if you'd like to support the show, you can do so on Patreon over on patreon.com/woe_begone, where you get early access to ad-free episodes, instrumentals, soundtrack albums, Q&As, director's commentaries, Movies with Michael, postcards, cork boards, and Mork boards. I just put up the September Q&A, so I answered a lot of fun questions. Those are always good Q&As because it was questions asked right around the time of the season finale. And that is for two-dollar-and-up patrons if you wanna go check that out at patreon.com/woe_begone.

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

[Warning: This episode contains alcohol and alcoholism, as well as some mouth sounds that I would like to be warned about ahead of time if I were me, and I am, so I did. Listener discretion is advised.]

[Opening theme plays.]

MIKE [narrating]: Tails. I lose. I watched as the files describing Edgar's Lost Year burned up unceremoniously in the fireplace. It felt like something that the universe should have stopped. I froze with the paper in my hands. Michael gently coaxed them away from me and steered me into the living room. He could tell that I had actually decided that I *didn't* want to leave things up to chance, which is what a coin flip is actually good for. You flip the coin, then, while it's still in the air, you think about how you wish it would land. And there's your answer, not the heads or tails on the coin. But I wasn't making this decision alone. Michael was there with me, to make sure that I made the *right* decision. And it was the right decision, of course it was. The coin flip pushed me into doing what I obviously should have done and would not have done on my own.

Tails, I lose. It was disappointing how it wasn't even a spectacle. It was just paper, after all. It didn't burst or crackle or change colors or make a satisfying noise. No future iteration blipped in to try to stop us or to tell us that we were doing the right thing, a nice pat on the back. No one outside of that room even noticed, just me and Michael and some combusting pieces of paper compiled by a dead man. They were unsalvageable in seconds and gone within the minute, the

ashes indistinguishable from the other ashes in the pile, maybe some of them from the Lost Year files. Dust to dust.

While they were burning, I remember remarking to Michael, "I don't think that I want to time travel again for a very, very long time." In that moment, I never wanted to time travel again, but for some reason I wanted to keep the door open, some ungodly reason.

Michael went home the next morning after clearing all semblances of time travel out of the house, which is what I asked for. He made sure that I knew how to get in contact with him without a Calculator, in case I, quote, *[Michael voice.]* "ever need anything." *[Normal voice.]* Out of all of the people who offered to help if I ever needed anything, Michael's the only one I believed. "If you need anything" is something you're supposed to say to someone who's grieving, and then they're supposed to pretend to believe you. The social contract insinuates that I'm not actually supposed to call up Cole in the middle of the night and ask him if he has any almond milk because I'm all out and I'm spiraling, even though he did tell me "if you ever need anything" and all of the stores are closed and I really am spiraling, but it's just not what you do.

Michael leaving marked the actual end of this chapter in my life. Everyone was back home, the funeral arrangements were complete, the final speed bump that kept my life crawling through these moments so slowly had been removed. Without anything impeding it any longer, time began to slide forward dizzyingly fast as though it were on an incline. The perception of the speed of time is based on many things, but unique experiences are among them, and every day blurred into each other, nothing to separate themselves from each other in my mind.

I spent the first few days trying to convince myself that I did the right thing. It was a *good* thing that we destroyed the Lost Year files. After all, there were surely things in my life that I wouldn't want poured over in graphic detail after my death. There were things that I'm glad that Edgar died not knowing about me. I'm sure that Edgar felt the same way about the Lost Year. He only left the files behind as a kindness for me, that I may disobey his wishes if I so desire, because he is dead and gone. He no longer exists, and his wishes don't mean anything unless I give them meaning. And I'm glad that I obeyed his wishes. It made me feel like I was holding on to him for a little bit longer. I read and reread the note to me that he left with the files, hoping that I could hold on to him that way, too.

There was no Calculator in the house. That meant that I couldn't be the future iteration to travel back and prevent us from throwing the files in the fire. Would they listen to me if I was? The disheveled iteration who was obviously from only a few days after it happened, hungover and with a noticeable pasta stain on my shirt. They'd look at me and know they did the right thing. So, they did do the right thing. We did the right thing. That guy cannot be allowed to have the files, that guy being me.

In the days that followed, the adrenaline wore off, and I found myself continually exhausted. The funeral was the dark reflection of a honeymoon, a period of excitement that gradually gives way

into the long forever of actual life. It'd all been unpleasantly exciting. Now everything was unpleasantly stagnant, a pond sitting still enough for bacteria to form and give it a foul stench.

I couldn't get started on anything. I became acutely aware of the way that he pushed me. I spent years believing that I was propelling myself with my own two feet, doing the things that I would do by my own agency, that my thoughts were my own, that I was exerting control over my own circumstances. None of which was true, because that was true now, and now that it was true, I was stagnating in my own filth, alone in my own house, unable to will myself to do anything. I was being pushed forward the entire time without realizing it, and now, without that force applied from behind, I was falling backwards. I didn't realize that I was leaning on him.

Each morning was the same. I'd wake up wherever I had fallen asleep the night before, usually the couch or my chair or Edgar's chair and very rarely the bed—sometimes hungover or drunk from the night before, sometimes not—my body stiff and aching from whatever awful position I had contorted into during the night, my body too old for a mind that felt this sorry for itself, all to start another day of absolutely no substance. I could feel myself caving in. I would make it through the day and into the evening, only to realize that I had been adrift the entire day, like I had never been conscious, like I was on autopilot or asleep until the moment that I had that realization that birthed me into existence again. I only felt corporeal so long that I was thinking about it, only to slip back into meaninglessness as soon as my mind wandered, which it did often.

I read somewhere once that, by some definitions, if we exist as a consciousness, then it is only while we are engaged with our thoughts, which means that we die every single time our minds wander to some other subject, and we're replaced with an entity that is continuous with us but not us. So, in a way, if you're reading this, then I am dead, and so are you.

It was beginning to get chilly in the evenings, so I started lighting the fireplace every night. The idea of doing this was daunting at first, but Michael made it look really easy, and it gave me something to focus on at night. It was something that I could think about that wasn't me and wasn't Edgar. Something that didn't need understanding, a force of pure consumptive power. I would write out my thoughts long into the night—dark thoughts too dark to mention here, bored thoughts, evil thoughts, fictional thoughts, absent-minded wonderings—and cast each page into the fire as I finished them, not giving the thoughts the honor of being read and invoked for a second time. It felt mildly liberatory, like having handcuffs removed even though you're still inside of a cage.

One morning, I was awoken from my stupor by an ungodly cacophonous rapping at my door. I groaned my way upright on the couch, having been fully dead to the world a second prior, my arms and legs still tingling from being slept on very incorrectly, my phone bleating out an overly optimistic alarm that I set every night and ignored every morning. A second knock followed, much to my chagrin, indicating that this person intended on speaking with me and was not, for instance, a delivery driver dropping off a package. The fireplace was still alive from the night before, a tiny trickle of smoke dancing upwards out of some mostly burned journal pages and

what one must assume, the smallest molecules remaining of the Lost Year files. I took a deep breath and could smell myself: fire and dirt and sweat and whiskey and shame, not too dissimilar from the smell of rot and death. The knocking continued. I brushed my beard down into a slightly less unkempt shape with my hands, stood up, and limped over on my still asleep feet towards the door and inched it open.

I thought that I would recognize the person on the other side of the door that was so adamant on seeing me, that it would be Michael come to check on me or maybe someone from Base who needed something. Instead I saw a middle-aged stranger, maybe 50 years old, stout, wearing a dadly button-up shirt and jeans, and with trimmed and proper hair and beard, dark brown peppered with gray. He didn't give off the appearance of a time traveler, though it's impolite to assume such things. Though in my opinion it's more impolite to assume someone *does* look like a time traveler.

I started speaking before he could. "Edgar's dead, if that's why you're here. The— The funeral was two weeks ago. Go back then if you want to attend."

He gave me a slightly puzzled look that confirmed that I was right, he wasn't a time traveler. "You must be Mike," he said, sidestepping his own confusion. He had kind eyes. "I read about your husband in the paper. Uh, Edgar, right? My condolences. My name is Norm. I've lived next door for... geez, two years now? Maybe three? I-I met your brother a couple of weeks ago when everyone was over."

My eyes flashed with recognition and then embarrassment. "I'm so sorry about him. I was asleep or I would've told him not to bother you. He likes to dress up and play cowboy, i-it's a whole thing. You're here for your axe." I pulled the door even closer to closed, hoping that he wouldn't see the disrepair inside. "I'll go get that for you, just wait right here."

Norm smiled with his eyes. "Oh, t-the axe! I'd forgotten about that. Keep it. I've been seeing the smoke from your chimney at night. Looks like you're putting it to better use than I would. I'm here 'cause I noticed your lawn was getting overgrown." I looked out into the yard. He was understating the issue. "It doesn't bother me any, but the city will fine you if a city official on a power trip drives by and sees it. Hey, I just got this fancy lawnmower this summer, and I'm looking for any excuse to justify the purchase. I can get that done in 15 minutes. If you want, I mean."

I caught myself staring at him blankly, trying to figure out if there was something more behind his smile than neighborliness. There didn't seem to be.

"I'm— I'm really sorry about the lawn," I said after too long of a pause. "I'm probably dragging everyone's property values down."

"There's nothing to be sorry about, Mike," Norm said. "Consider it done. That's what neighbors are for, right?"

"Yeah. Thanks. T-Thank you. I-I'm— I'm sorry. I-I have to go." I shut the door. The lawn was mowed 30 minutes later.

Norm's hospitality didn't end with me awkwardly closing the door in his face. Over the next month, he started bringing me things, food, supplies. He fixed my screen door, which had been broken long before Edgar died. He cleaned the gutters, which had plants growing in them. Eventually, I cleaned up the front of the house enough that he could come inside and chat with me without me having to worry about what he would think about the disarray. The least I could do is be friendly and inviting, right? That's what neighbors are for? It pushed me out of my comfort zone, but being pushed made the days more memorable, which meant that they were longer, which meant that I was sliding into oblivion more slowly.

It was finally autumn. Norm was over. He knew a guy who had more firewood than he needed, and so I took a little for my meager fireplace. We chatted in between sips of apple cider. It was comfortable, suburban.

"What's that on the wall there?" he asked.

I raised an eyebrow, not sure what he meant.

"Oh, uh, it looks like something got *smeared* there, like a— like a bug, like a little spider, right?" He chuckled. "Heh. Sucks to be that guy, huh?"

I called Michael the next day and told him that I was ready to return to Satellite Base. Norm would never realize that I was gone. I would be back in his time period before he could perceive that anything had changed.

[Scene transition.]

[We hear ambient outside sounds of crickets and other buzzing insects. There's music coming from inside the Outpost Tavern.]

STOCK: *[Sighs.]* This was a really damn bad idea, Stock. What am I even gonna say to these folks? "Howdy Tex, it's 38 from up in Yellowknife." *[Clears his throat and shifts his pitch down, sounding more like 38.]* "It's, uh, 38 from up in Yellowknife. I was wonderin' if I could borrow ya Calculator. I know I ain't fond of 'em, and I— I sure as hell ain't gonna tell ya what I'm doin', but I-I got a reason." *[Clears his throat, huffs, and returns to his higher pitched cowboy voice.]* Damn it. They ain't gonna buy it. They ain't gonna buy that I'm 38! This is all a big mistake. Shoulda stayed at the farm and chopped wood the rest o' my life. I pushed it way too far, and all for nothin'! *[Grunts.]* Alright. I ain't Mike, I ain't Stock, I'm *[Pitches voice back down.]* 38. I can do this.

[We hear steps and the metallic ring of spurs as Stock walks up to the entrance.]

92: Welcome to poker night. What's your number, pard?

STOCK: Oh, y-you're talkin' to me? I-I'm just— I-I was— 'Cause, I-I'm just— I was gone for, uh...

92: As I live and breathe! Is that you, 29? I'd recognize that voice anywhere.

STOCK: I'm sorry, uh— do I know you?

92: Do you know me!? *[Chortles.]* Always kiddin', 29. That's why we're palindrome pals 29 and 92! Hey! Remember orange lightnin'?

STOCK: Uh, y-yeah, o' course I remember orange lightnin'.

92: Yeah, well, ya best not go sharin' orange lightnin' with your next palindrome pal, ya hear? You know everyone thinks you're worm food, right? Where the hell you been hidin', 29? Half the Numbers are gone, and ain't no one knows where they went, so we all figured you was gone with 'em.

STOCK: Whaddaya mean, half 'em's gone? Nah, I ain't heard about none 'o that. I was away on business. Don't know where no one else went.

92: You were gone for a damn long time, pard. Ya got folks worried aboutcha, ya know. Life's too damn cheap around here. If'n it ain't the pit, it's whatever this new thing Tex is cookin' up. I always assume the worst. *[Sniffs.]* Come 'ere, buddy. *[Brief chuckle.]*

[We hear them embrace.]

STOCK: Uh... y-yeah, uh... i-it's good to be back at the Outpost. I got all that personal stuff squared away, just... tryin' to get back into my groove, if'n ya know what I mean. Back to normal.

92: Hope ya ain't too set on normal, pard. 'Cause it ain't normal 'round here. Enjoy this while it lasts, 'cause we're changin' up soon. Won't be palindrome pals for long.

STOCK: Won't be palindrome pals? Why? What's happenin'?

92: Just given' ya fair warnin', pard. Tex's been extra ornery since the last time you was here. He lost his only meat leg 'n half his men, so now he's talkin' about shakin' things up big time. I'm talkin' rerackin' the whole set o' Numbers and startin' back from scratch.

STOCK: Now I ain't sure I understand, 92. Whaddaya mean, "rerackin'" the Numbers?

92: You know, pilgrim. Rerackin'. 'Cause there's so many empty spaces 'tween us. So if half of us is gone, then after the rerack you'd be the new... 14 or 15 or somethin'. And I'll prolly be what, 46? 47? Depends on who alive and who ain't.

STOCK: Ya cain't just make a new 47, pilgrim. There's a— a 47 out in Yellowknife. And I— I don't think he's gonna get the memo that he ain't 47 no more.

92: 47's still out there in Yellowknife? I reckoned someone woulda kilt them suckers a long time ago, with how they disrespect Tex. When I'm the new 47, I'll head out there myself, take care of 'em. If'n ya don't show up, then ya don't get a new number. And if ya ain't got a number, then you *ain't* a Number. No more stragglers out there in the wilderness gettin' free protection. It's gonna be excitin'. Don'tcha think, 29?

STOCK: I try not to think too much at all, 92.

92: *Attaboy.* Tex says he got plans to make a lot more Numbers, bigger and better than ever. I couldn't tell if he means metaphorically bigger or like Bluster bigger, but it's gonna be a blast. I just hope he don't forget us who been loyal to him this whole time.

STOCK: Nah, Tex won't forget about you, 92. He knows who's loyal.

92: He sure does, pard. Welp, I won't keep ya. I gotta keep mannin' the door, keepin' the ne'er-do-wells out. 'Sides the usual ones that are allowed in, I mean. There's beaucoup folks in there who are gonna be jazzed to see ya, buddy. *[Opens the door and calls into the bar.]* Hey, everyone! 29's here! *[We hear faint cheering from inside.]* He ain't dead!

[The door closes.]

STOCK: Thanks for warmin' 'em up for me, 92.

92: Anytime. And, h-hey! Tell 21 your first drink's on me. Orange lightnin', right?

STOCK: Yup. Orange lightnin'.

92: Plenty o' grease. You take care now, ya hear?

STOCK: Yeah, you too, 92.

[We hear steps and the clang of spurs as Stock heads towards the entrance.]

STOCK *[muttering to self]: [Sighs.]* I'm in way over my head. Shoulda stayed at the damn farm... drivin' them cattle. What the fuck's an "orange lightnin'?"

[The door swings open as Stock enters. "Hit My Hands" is being performed on stage while Stock walks over to the bar.]

I hit my hands

I hit my hands

I hit my hands with too many hammers

I used to push my chips in, but now I can't

I'm losing every single bet I wager

All 'cause I hit my hands

I hit my hands

I hit my hands with too many hammers

I used to push my chips in, but now I can't

I'm losing every single bet I wager

All 'cause I hit my hands

I hit my hands

I hit my hands with too many hammers

I used to push my chips in, but now I can't

I'm losing every single bet I wager

All 'cause I hit my hands

I hit my hands

[Crowd applauds and cheers.]

NUMBER *[on stage]*: Hey. That's our show for tonight. Tip Bluster: give 'im money, give 'im cash, give 'im bitcoin. We're out!

[Someone whistles. Crowd noises subside and give way to background chatter and the sounds of playing pool.]

STOCK: Excuse me, barkeep. Is Tex in the back there? I was hopin' to speak with him tonight.

21: Tex is busy, pilgrim. He stays busy. *[Pause.]* Hey... you're 29, ain'tcha? It's really you! I thought I heard tell you was here.

STOCK: That's me, pard. In the flesh. One and only. How ya holdin' up?

21: Cain't complain, cain't complain. Well, 'cept I can and I'm about to. It's been rough. Half of everyone gone missin'. Everyone's pullin' double duty. Startin' to get tired. I take it you heard about the rerack?

STOCK: 92 was tellin' me 'bout it at the door. How does a rerack work, exactly? We're all gettin' new numbers?

21: It works the same way it did last time, pilgrim. Were you not part of the team last time we did the rerack, 29? I coulda swore you were, but I gotta count on my fingers to do the math, and I don't got as many fingers as I did last time we did the rerack.

STOCK: You don't gotta count nothin', 21. I weren't part o' no rerack.

21: Damn. We must've been down to less people than I thought last time. Anyway, you heard that half o' everyone is missin'. Thought you was missin', too. Glad to have ya back. But between the ones what went missin' and the ones what get kilt in this here bar every weekend and those traitors livin' out in Yellowknife and elsewhere, *[Spits.]* we got us some big ol' gaps 'tween the numbers. And what's the point o' havin' a number system if only random Numbers are still alive? So, if'n we rerack, everyone who's still alive gets promoted. Makes room for new folks.

STOCK: And Tex ain't scared o' drawin' attention by iteratin' a bunch o' new folks? 'Cause I reckon there's a bunch o' folks out there who don't want us to grow our numbers.

21: Ain't no one gonna know. They ain't payin' that close attention. I think most of them city folk think that Tex already got a hundred Numbers workin' for 'im down here. Hell, I wish that were the case!

STOCK: I dunno, pard. Might be good reason out there to be careful. Bradford Beaumont seems like he cares an awful lot about how many iterations there are.

21: Then Bradford Beaumont can come down here and talk to me about it, if'n he cares so dang much. I got a strong right hook I been savin' for that leg-peddler. Maybe Tex could use 'im for his big project he's been braggin' to us about.

STOCK: Well what's he workin' on, pard? Is that what the rerack's about?

21: In due time, my numbered friend. Tex's got this whole warehouse set up. Says he's gonna unveil the whole thing soon. Says it'll make us stronger than any o' those organizations or anonymous councils or any o' that bull hockey. Some folks say that's how Bluster got made. Some folks say he's makin' giants in there.

STOCK: Now I ain't sure that's possible, 21. I think Bluster was just bornt that way, all big-like.

[We hear the door open and close. There's a ruckus in the background as Numbers chat, whoop, and holler over something.]

21: Yeah. Bluster proolly was bornt all big-like, but that don't stop folks from talkin'.

STOCK: Hey, uh, what's goin' on back there? Seems like somethin's happenin'.

29: 21, you ol' sack of shit! How you been?

[29 and 21 do an elaborate handshake, and 29 clicks his tongue.]

21: Looks like we got us a problem here. You wanna introduce yourself to this fella here at the bar?

29: Well I sure can! Name's 29. I ain't been gone that long, have I? Folks already forgettin' me? Threw out my back haulin' hay last year, so I just took this year off. I been in the dang Bahamas, pard! Orange lightnin', am I right?

21: Orange lightnin', plenty o' grease.

29: I'm back 'cause a little birdy told me there's about to be another rerack! Don't wanna lose my spot! So who's this here?

21: Funny you should ask that, 29. 'Cause this here varmint's been tellin' me that *he's* 29. He knew your catchphrase and everything.

29: Heh! Is that so? Who are ya really, varmint?

STOCK *[cowboy voice slipping]:* Look, I'm— There's— There's been a misunderstanding—

21: Nah I don't reckon there has been. We got us an interloper, 29.

29: Hoh boy! Whaddaya reckon Tex is gonna do with 'im?

21: Skin 'im alive, for starters. We don't take kindly to liars around here, 'cept for our pre-approved list o' liars.

STOCK: Look, I didn't mean no harm, I just— I just need to—

[We hear a gun cock. Stock takes a sharp inhale.]

21: You stay right where ya are, stranger, 'less you wanna be a puddle on the floor. *[Calling to the back.]* Hey, Tex! Come out here! Need ya for a minute.

[A door opens, and we hear Tex's metal legs as he enters the room.]

TEX: This'd better be good, 21. I'm doin' business back there, ya know.

21: Just wanted to let you know we gotta schedule a pit pickup for this pretender. Waltzed right in claimin' to be 29.

TEX: 21, I told y'all, we ain't doin' the pit no more, 'specially since this fella ain't even dead. Give 'im to me. I'll put 'im to use. *[Takes a step.]*

[Mike (previously Stock) stops talking with a cowboy accent.]

MIKE: T-TEX, it's me. It's Mike! I did what you said! I went to Yellowknife! They took me captive for a year!

TEX: I don't remember nothin' 'bout tellin' no Mike to go to no Yellowknife. Them folks don't even want nothin' to do with us. We got nothin' to do with them.

MIKE: What do you mean, you sent them an invite to poker night!

TEX: I did no such thing, stranger. Thanks for catchin' this malefactor, 21. I'll be takin' him to the warehouse. You ain't gotta worry 'bout 'im.

21: Hah! Ya hear that, fake Mike? You're goin' to the warehouse!

29: Folks don't come back from there.

TEX: I'll take it from here, y'all. *[Snaps twice.]* Bluster! Cuff 'im! *[Bluster neighs.]* We'll get this all squared away in time for poker night. Nothin' to see here.

[Bluster walks forward.]

MIKE: Wait, uh— Tex, seriously? You can't— You can't do this, *[Bluster neighs.]* I talked to— hey—! stop—! quit—! tha—! *[Struggles.]*

[The cuffs close.]

MIKE: That was you that put the cuffs on me, 21! I saw it!

21: You ain't seen shit!

[Closing theme plays.]

[Brief start-stop of the closing theme.]

BLOOPER (MIKE): I raised an eyebrow, not sure what he meant. I did the DreamWorks face. *[In a silly voice.]* "HUH? *[Babbles.]* —what?" *[Laughs.]* "*[Babbles.]* —what? What— What is that?" Mm— *[Laughs.]*

[Brief start-stop of the closing theme.]

BLOOPER (DYLAN): I spit all over myself for that take where he spits after describing the farm in Yellowknife, and it's so gross, and I'm gonna have to put a content warning for it, so it better be worth it.

[Brief start-stop of the closing theme.]

[END Episode 220.]