

EPISODE 42: Absence makes the heart grow fond.

[Hey guys. Welcome to the midseason finale for season 4. I can't believe it's already here. Expect a goody next week and then we're right back into the season. By the way, the audioverse awards are happening right now and it would be so cool if you would vote for me at audioverseawards.net/vote. There are a bunch of different categories, so feel free to vote for me for whatever categories you think I did the best in. Speaking of things I do good: if you like the show and want to support it, patreon.com/woe_begone is where you can do that. Instrumentals, early episodes, soundtrack albums, if you're paying attention during this comment "potato" on the @WOEBEGONEPOD twitter account post for this episode, and so much more. Thanks to my 10 newest patrons: Indrid Cold, Broro, Tom P, Erin G, Sydney Pachtet, Dairy the AI Union Representative, Jessica Longaker, Morgan Jackson, Erinna, and hi blesties for supporting the show. Enjoy.]

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

[Cautiously.] H-Hello? Are we recording? Is there supposed to be a green light or something? I don't see anything. Normally when I do this at home, I can see the program--[Pause.] Oh, okay. And I just... talk now? Are the levels okay? Mic check. Spec, spec, spectacles. Tent, tent, tentacles. Test, test, testing, 123. We're good to go? Sorry, I just want this to go right. I really want this. This is important to me. I'm sure you understand. Thank you so much for this opportunity.

I know you told me what I can and can't say. I've got the whole list right here. You'll cut out the parts that I can't say, right? Like if I slip up, you'll still send it, with those parts cut out, right? [Pause.] Okay. I'll try. I didn't mean that I'm not going to try to stick to the talking points, I'm just scared that I'll say something wrong and you won't--Sorry, I'm grateful, I swear. I'll try. I'm overthinking things. Let's get started, shall we?

[Sniffle.] Hi, Edgar. It's me. It's Mikey. I love you and I miss you and I'm relatively safe. I wish I could hear you. Uh, I guess I need to prove that it's me. With the way technology is these days, someone could easily fake my voice, I'm sure. Hmm... I don't think anyone knows that I call you my little panther when we're alone. Nobody needs to know our cute, gross little nicknames for each other. Now you know it's me.

I am not being allowed to call you on the phone—"not yet," they are telling me, though that does not fill me with optimism for later. I don't know how long it has been for you or when you are going to be receiving this, but for me it has been so long. Months, at least, maybe half a year from my vantage point but there's a whole temporal reality superimposed over my vantage point that I have not been allowed to observe. We've may have been apart now for longer than we were ever together. That hurts to think about. I hope you haven't forgotten about me. I hope you haven't moved on. I guess I hope that. Honestly, I'm selfish and I hope that you are clinging to hope of finding me again. It's probably better for your mental and physical health if you aren't, though. I'm trying to stay alive enough to be found. It hasn't been easy.

[Laugh.] I sound like a soldier in an ancient war writing back to my betrothed that I met like 2 weeks before I got shipped off. "Dearest Edgar, I am afraid that I may not return from the front. I have sustained a small cut on my knee and since the only medicine in our time is whiskey, I am cursed to die of painful infection. Please leave my skateboard to my next of kin. Yours in death, Michael."

I am in some quite capable hands where I am now. How you want to interpret that is up to you, but I will say that they are proving themselves to be capable at the task of keeping Mike Walters alive, if nothing else. I've learned that is an especially difficult task, one of the world's greatest feats, if previous holders of that occupation are to be believed. I cannot tell you their names or the names of their organization. They won't even tell me the name of the organization, if there even is one. They act like there isn't a name for their organization, which cannot be true. Surely there must be one at some level. How else do you organize an office and schedule meetings? The mind boggles. But you can imagine the type of organization that might be interested in the Mike Walters Experience and under what conditions they might prefer to keep me under: lock and key. You would be entirely right in your line of thinking. I am doing some important work in our shared field of expertise. I am useful to them. That is both why they have me and why I am so far unable to leave.

They have granted me a decent amount of leniency in talking to you. I have been providing some excellent advice and fieldwork for them and this message is the first carrot that they have offered as a reward. The line of work provides enough sticks as it is. I have been promised even more upon completion of another set of tasks, though they are ramping up in difficulty considerably by nature of the work.

They are aware that I have told you some things about my profession. You, of course, picked up on important context to what I told you while you were working in Oldbrush Valley. They know that you are capable of piecing together many aspects of the situation and inferring the rest. They also know that you are difficult to get ahold of after a certain point in time. These are people who fancy themselves experts at contacting people across a wide range of temporalities, which indicates to them that your journey along this road is merely getting started, in which case, I beg you, Edgar: please stop. Please. If you are getting more involved in this, stop. If it is for my sake, especially: stop. It has turned me into a monster. It is not a transformation I will allow you to make. I don't recognize myself in the mirror anymore. It doesn't help that someone shaved my beard. Not the organization. They aren't monsters. I killed a pig a couple weeks ago and you know what I felt? Not nothing. I felt relief that I got to hit something with a ball-peen hammer. An actual pig, not metaphorical. No remorse or sorrow; relief that I could rend flesh and organs and violently destroy something. That is what I've come to, a monster. By the way, did you know that it is called a ball-peen hammer because the round end is for "peening" metal, which is when you strike it to make it stronger? We're in the wrong profession, Edgar. We could be peening for a living. We could be peening right now.

Did you miss how I would riff to bring levity to a situation that absolutely did not call for it? I mean, that's why you married me, right? I think it says in my file that we're married. I don't know what that means. If we got married, I sure as hell don't remember it. They won't tell me why they thought that we are married. It gives me

hope that one day I am going to get out of here and find you and you'll be alive and you'll still want to be with me and we can *actually* run away and nothing will be there to stop us and we can move to a small town away from civilization and set up a metal shop and peen all day every day for the rest of our lives.

They have been putting me up to some pretty extreme tasks, though they have pointed out that it's nothing that I haven't been able to handle before. It's been rough, though. I might not come back to you in the same condition that I left in. Ownership of me changed hands for a few months and the new owner wasn't as responsive to my personal needs as the organization—no toys, no catnip, just a litter box if you catch my drift. I'm on the mend now, though. All I had to do was kill a man and frame another man for murder to earn my keep. I can say, that, right? That I completed the challenge and framed someone for murder? It's not like it happened anymore. Plus, you want me to ask-- [Pause.]

Noted. I'll keep that sort of stuff vague. Though, I do wonder what kind of condition I left in from your point of view, Edgar. I don't know what happened after I left. I don't know what O.V.E.R. told everyone about what I had done and where I had gone. I made a set of horrible decisions that played out in a way that left one less person in the world when I was done, but from the outside it might have looked like nothing at all. O.V.E.R. might have covered it up completely. To everyone except for the shadowiest figureheads at the center of the operation, it may appear that things went on as usual, sans Mike Walters. This could all be news to you. But I made a decision and that decision was made irreversible by the attack on 357A.

The only reason I suspect that you are not being held by O.V.E.R. or by someone else is that this organization is having me record this message to be sent to you. If you had been taken into custody after 357A, I doubt that they would think that this would reach you. When I left, our vacation was being viewed as highly suspect. I still don't know what that means. I don't know if it is the truth or not. Cause and effect have a way of not working temporally when I'm involved. If I led you into danger and don't know it yet, I'm sorry. I'm more sorry than I am capable of expressing or that you would feel comfortable receiving. If I led you out of trouble or danger and don't know it yet, you're welcome and I love you and you could never owe me anything, no matter what I've done for you. I'm sorry if that's squishy and cloying and gross. Absence makes the heart grow fond. And fond, as you well know, can be deglazed from a pan and used to make all kinds of delicious sauces and gravies, emphasis on "gravy" in my case.

As far as the checklist goes, I've got one more big thing I have to do for these guys. After that, I don't know what happens and I'm sure that they don't either. When I did this the first time, this point was where things started to get fuzzy, less regimented. I especially am unsure of what happens because of the state of O.V.E.R. when I left. What happened to me would not make sense to happen again. I don't suspect that I will be earning my freedom upon completion of the next task, but I do think that things will change. I can't see the light at the end of the tunnel, but I can begin to theorize that it might be there. We get married after all, right? That's what I keep telling myself. We get married. I'm not even thinking about that as a happy ending or the right thing for us to do as a relationship, but it's a thing that happens. I need to get back to things happening to me.

[Beat. Sigh.] So I think that I am getting toward the end of the time that I am allowed to speak semi-freely. As you might have figured out, they are not letting me send you this message out of the goodness of their hearts. There exists some goodness in some hearts around here, but I don't think that any of that goodness is the driving factor for the way things run around here. Even the reward aspect of this message is not fully altruistic. I will work harder because of this. I will do better what I am told and follow orders without asking questions. They are correct about this. I am not just saying this because they are listening. Sizeable, obtainable, considerate rewards are how you get a good performance out of your workers... or your captives... or your weird hybrid of the two with the perfect eyebrows. [Dampened] Maybe not as perfect as they used to be.

So: here is the call to action, Edgar. I have been told that this message will be delivered to you on a specific day, which is the day that the instructions are for. I'm going to sound clinical for awhile as I read off the instructions. Please bear with me. I'm sorry and I love you.

In order for the plan to go off without a hitch, we will have to be in sync with you. These instructions are designed to give you plenty of time to get the steps done in time to do the final step within a precise time window, even if there is an unforeseen circumstance or person that presents itself during the process. Because of the potential of security interference in our mission, it will have to begin under cover of night. You will need to access 116E after hours, which will be trivial for you, I'm sure. You should enter 116E via the front door at exactly 11pm and 0 minutes. The plan is to enter Tier 2, but first it is important that you make a trip to the warehouse in the back of 116E. It is urgently important that you be alone inside of the warehouse. Please bring a strong flashlight to ensure that you will be able to check your surroundings, as well as a sharp knife for accessing sealed boxes in the warehouse.

As you are likely aware, there are a plethora of boxes across many bays in the 116E warehouse. You are going to be looking for a box in position 65N. This bay might take some climbing to reach, which shouldn't be a problem for you. Obtain the device from the box in bay 65N and put it in your bag. Using your flashlight, check again to make sure that you have not been spotted. If you are spotted and positively identified—

[Pause] wait, what!? I never agreed to this. I'm not going to tell him this. This is what I get for agreeing to something without reading the whole thing first. You didn't think I would object to this? That whole "devaluing my life" thing that I do sometimes—it's not a shaggy dog thing, it's not an act. I really would rather suffer death or grievous injury than tell Edgar to do that. I'm not joking. I'm calling this off. This was supposed to be my reward, not another instance of pointless suffering for Mike Walters. I'm opting out. Shut it down. I'm not going to tell him to do that. You didn't tell me it was that dangerous. Fuck. Edgar, I wanted you to hear me, but not like this. Not if you're going to be asked to get in the line of fire. Edgar, you're never going to hear this but I love you. I love you. I miss you, Edgar. I love—[abrupt cut.]

[Shakier.] If you are spotted and positively identified... it is important that you have your knife ready in order to respond to any witnesses with lethal force. Even if they are unarmed, remember: a positive identification of you and what you

are doing will be lethal for both yourself and me. You will be acting to ensure my safety. Once everything in the warehouse is taken care of, exit the warehouse into Tier 2. This should happen at exactly 11:19pm. Please wait until exactly this time to exit. This should afford you more than enough time to fulfill your tasks. You should turn your flashlight off and put it into your bag as you enter Tier 2.

From there, you will take the device to... [pause.] No, he won't know what that means. They want you to take it to the boulders, the ones that you can see if you walk along Marissa's route. There's a formal name for it, apparently, but I've never seen it anywhere. I don't think it's written anywhere in that lot. It's supposed to be unassuming, like there isn't anything to do there. You know where I'm talking about. You've seen it a thousand times. That's where you're going. And... no, goddammit. These instruct—[abrupt cut.]

It should be exactly 11:26 as you enter the site from the Tier 2 entrance. Once you are at the site, there is a high likelihood that you will see someone else already interacting with the site in an obvious way, maybe entering a code or entering a device into the slot. This is expected and has been factored in as part of your duties in order to help... me. As with any potential witnesses in the warehouse, the other person or people interacting with this site at the time that you are scheduled to be there pose a lethal risk both to yourself and to me, along with posing the added risk of jeopardizing the mission. The consequences would be quite negative for everyone involved. Please dispatch with them immediately. [Under breath] I'm so sorry, please don't do—[abrupt cut.]

Once you are alone at the site, find a rectangular panel. It should look indented, as though it takes some sort of rectangular key. You do not have this rectangular key, but we will be using the device that you took from 116E to interact with it in a different way. Take the device out of your bag and set it on the ground in front of this rectangular lock. Attached to the device, you will see an antenna and two wires. Extend the antenna as far as it will go and angle it such that it points towards the center of Tier 3, which will be roughly somewhere behind your right shoulder as you do this. Then, take the wires and attach them to the left and right sides of the metal rectangular lock using the clamps provided at the end of each wire. When you have done both of these steps, double check your work and then push the power button on the device. It should be the only physical button on the entire device. You should press this button at exactly 11:45pm and 0 seconds. It should power on, making a slight whirring noise of mechanical parts moving, as well as a light. Please wait for the light to turn from yellow to green and then from solid green to quick, erratic blinking. Like a modem, this signifies that data is being transmitted from the device. Once you are sure that data is being transmitted, congratulations: the task has been completed. You should then make your way as quickly as possible into 116E and then out the front. Avoid all contact with people and being spotted during this time. It is not as important as when you had the device, but it is still an extreme liability. You will have no need nor any way to contact us after you have completed the task. The transmission of data should alert us nearly immediately that you have succeeded and the data provided will go a long way to securing the operations that I am a part of. Thank you for... I didn't write this, Edgar... Thank you for being such a supportive and loving husband. You know I

would do anything for you and I intend to, as soon as I have completed my important work here. I love you, honey bear. [Aside] that is not my nickname for him. The organization will let me see you as soon as I complete my important work.

...and that's where the instructions stop. Can I get a little more time for some last words... you know, that are actually mine?

I don't actually know what they are asking you to do, as far as what doing that will accomplish. This is not my set of instructions. This is their plan. They are telling me that it will help me, but they are not going to tell me any of the details. As you might imagine, there are several different groups at various levels of organization that are all competing for similar and limited resources. Your actions tonight will give us crucial insight into the actions of those groups and their intersection with the attack on 357A. It will also allow the organization I am working with to access material that they have not been able to access before, information that they had attempted to get from me while I was working at O.V.E.R. but that I was unable to provide for them at the time. That's what they keep telling me. And I want to get the hell out of here and I'm hoping that if I continue to do as they say and perform well while doing it, they will let me the hell out of here one day.

I'm sorry to ask you to do all of that for my sake. I'm sorry because I know that you are going to do it and that you didn't think twice before deciding to do it. I know that you are going to do it unhesitatingly because you love me and that's what I hate most of all. I don't deserve that and I don't deserve you and I'm dragging you down into the depths of hell with me and yadda yadda yadda I just want to lie in bed and watch a fucking movie with you, Edgar. I'm so goddamn lonely. There are people here, but they only talk to me when they need me to do something for their operation. Most of the time I am alone in a room that I am not allowed to leave. It's not any different than when I was taken hostage except I can lie in bed all day if I want to. Most days I want to. This whole situation is upsetting but it also sucks in a very boring way. That somehow makes it even bleaker. This is what suffering looks like: sitting around all day, wasting my whole life, everything I ever knew slowly getting memory-holed as I commit violence for the sake of an organization that keeps telling me that they didn't kidnap me but have failed to convince me of the distinction.

Anyway, I love you, fuck everything, fuck the world, burn it down and start over, I love you even more than I did when I started this message, I would kill *or* die for you, I'm tired of worrying that I'm being too precious when I talk about you, I love you, I'm going to rend the world in twain with the magnitude of what I am ready to do, I'm the world's most tired man and I am going to expend every single last modicum of energy into complete upheaval of the earth and its parts, I'm going to get out of this one day, fuck the world, and... I love you. я рада, что ты не плаваешь в тихом океане. That's all the time that they are going to give me, I think. I love you. Will we talk soon, actually talk, actually soon. I love you, Edgar. Bye.

[Pause.]

...How was that? Do you think they'll buy it? Surely between that and the surveillance info we got from CANNONBALL's account of being stalked, you should be able to get them under your thumb. I mean, how could they resist acting on this intelligence that they intercepted? It sure sounds like I've asked him to do something vitally important. Something worth killing over. I'm sure that they won't even notice how suspiciously easy it was to pick up on this information before it could be put to use. And you have them exactly where you want them, exactly when you want them. Maybe you'll actually get some info this time, as opposed to when your boots roughed me up for no reason and got nothing out of it. I'm still waiting for you guys to have a physical therapist look at my hand. You owe me that.

The acting like I was refusing to read those parts of the script sold the performance, in my opinion. It makes it feel like it wasn't planted, like it was done by a real hostage really being force fed lines. I did it with the cops, too, when they asked me to prepare a statement about the third challenge and they were getting just a little too hip to the fact that that I wasn't Donny Evans. An emotional performance can buy you a lot of time because the emotion makes it feel impolite to question whether or not the words behind the emotion are real.

I find they key to acting is to internalize the fact that you truly miss your boyfriend and are abjectly lonely in his absence because you're being held prisoner by a powerful organization. Sorry, truth hurts, though it doesn't hurt you as much as it hurts me. Though you should take note that the emotion behind my performance is not fake. I really would burn it all down if you asked me to put him in danger. The difference being that you wouldn't be able to corral me back into the recording room. My cooperation would be permanently over.

You better give me one hell of a real phone call after I [throat cutting sound] CANNONBALL. You'll have to let me know where we have gotten as far as tracking him down in the morning. I'm too tired to pour over it tonight. That took a lot out of me. [Sigh.] You know that's cruel, right? You know that you have done me a cruelty, making me dig down into that real place and scrape the sadness up and out for your benefit. I don't feel okay about this. I feel awful. I want to lie in bed and cry for awhile and then fall asleep and I plan to do that, assuming you don't have anything else you want to force out of me.

Sorry for getting a bit riled up, but you intentionally brought it out of me. So: fuck you all, fuck your stupid little project, fuck you for not saving me from CANNONBALL because it was "better for the intel" that way, fuck you for making me limp around this huge fucking complex without anyone trying to help me, fuck you for not giving me a real phone call with Edgar, fuck you for not tracking CANNONBALL down yet, and fuck you all in general for basically everything. A double fuck you goes out to Ty if he's behind the 2 way mirror tonight for being so nice about how awful this has been for me. That actually makes it worse. [Choked up.] Fuck all of you. I'm limping out of here and going the fuck to bed. Thank you for attending Inside the Actor's Studio. Goodnight.

[Door slams.]

[END THEME PLAYS.]