

EPISODE 46: Information sent backwards through time tends to propagate backwards through time.

[Hey guys. This is going to be a long announcement. There's a timestamp to skip it in the description. (1:37)]

If you're listening to this episode on release day, then tomorrow, November 18th, marks the 1 year anniversary of WOE.BEGONE. I had no idea that this podcast was going to be anything when I started writing it and it has evolved into more than I could have ever dreamed of. I'm so proud of my weird little podcast with its weird little community. I hope you've enjoyed the twist and turns the show has taken and are ready for it to take even more as season 4 draws to a close. I have no plans of stopping.

In other news, the reprise songs from last episode, episode 45, are now available to patrons at patreon.com/woe_begone and as a standalone EP on bandcamp, at woebegonepod.bandcamp.com, for \$2.50. It's a 4 song EP that reprises Oldbrush Valley, Painted Glass, GUIDE DOG, and Hallowed, as heard in episode 45. I had a lot of fun making it and it was a great way to reminisce about how important music has been for the series.

Finally, if you like the show you can become legally married to it on patreon at patreon.com/woe_begone. There, you can find early access to episodes, the Aliza Schultz podcast, instrumentals, soundtrack albums, cat clips, Q&As, director's commentaries, and more. That's patreon.com/woe_begone. Thanks to all of my patrons and to everyone who has been part of the WOE.BEGONE community over the past year. You give me the energy to keep doing this. Special thanks to my 10 newest patrons: Rat & Cameron, Nic Long, Bairon, Astrid, Mack Mercure, Ariel Diaz, Theo, Seoung Kim, Jeremy Cloutier, and Bertie Archer for supporting the show. Ben Rowe upped his pledge during recording. I see you, Ben. Enjoy.]

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

[Stretch and yawn sounds.] Ah, it feels good to have rested. That was all I could think of at the time. I had made it home and everything was alright for a moment. Sword of Damocles over my head be damned, I was able to live a few days of my life without life-or-death tension creeping into every single second. A few days passed with no conflict whatsoever. I woke up, went to work, made chitchat with coworkers, saw Edgar, went to bed, repeat. I didn't stay with Edgar all of the time. I needed his company but I also needed my space. I was able to be alone, unobserved as far as I knew, for the first time in months. I relished that. Not even that I was doing things that I wouldn't do otherwise. I was mostly just watching movies. I was simply soothed by the knowledge that nobody was watching me. Probably. I didn't have any evidence that anyone was watching me. That might be the most factual way of putting it. Who knows.

Mikey, the younger Mike Walters inhabiting this same time period, was still at Matt's house and would be for a few days. He had his little tantrum, ran off, and destroyed his phone when he got there. If anyone was trying to reach him, for instance his boyfriend who was still in the muck and mire of the Oldbrush Valley mystery, who in at least one iteration of these events would have found him missing without explanation, it was going straight to voicemail. That's good, though. I don't know how the cellphone company would treat two identical phones with identical SIM cards in two different countries. Charge me more, probably. But he was in Vancouver, probably high and probably on the same self-destructive streak that I had been on when the Flinchites kidnapped me. Widdle baby Mikey couldn't handle the consequences of his actions. That must be super fucking hard for him... Why am I always so mean to the younger Mikes?

It was on this day, several days after arriving back at O.V.E.R., while I was staying in Edgar's cabin for the night that the message arrived. I got up to use the restroom (in Matt's Pikachu boxers, no less) early in the morning, maybe around 4:30? It was so early that even early bird Edgar wasn't awake yet. If I hadn't needed to pee, there's no way that I would have seen the message before him. He would have woken up and listened to it long before I got out of bed. Maybe, just maybe... someone filled my bladder up for me so that I would wake up in time to see the message! You can't tell me that it's impossible. The technology exists. No one can say for sure where the pee came from. And that's the mystery that we are uncovering today. I'm Mike Walters, and this is WOE.PEEGONE [theme starts then abruptly stops.]

I noticed a padded envelope that wasn't on the coffee table when we had gone to bed. It didn't have an address on it, just "Edgar," so I knew it wasn't sent through the mail. I was entirely sure that it hadn't been there before. The bold, black sharpie writing against the pale yellow envelope was visible from some distance even in the dark. I would have remembered seeing it. He would have opened it when he got it. I immediately knew what it was. I was waiting for this sort of message, delivered in some non-traditional way, as this one seemingly was. I crept into the living room and opened the package quietly and carefully. Inside was a small USB drive, the kind that is basically the USB input and a tiny rectangle on top of it, extremely small. Continuing to sneak around, I picked up Edgar's laptop and headed back into the bathroom. I plugged in the USB drive, turned on the faucet so that the sound would be covered up, and opened up the drive. I didn't have headphones with me and Edgar's were on his bedside table and he would definitely wake up if I rummaged around right beside his head to retrieve them.

There were two files inside. An .mp3 titled "first" and a .jpeg titled "second." Neither the image file nor the audio file had thumbnails. I thought that the audio file must have been my message to Edgar. I wondered in what state it would reach him. I had been lied to about what it was for, so I wouldn't be surprised if they tampered with my words as well. They could make me say just about anything, considering how long my message was. I double-clicked on the .mp3.

I could tell from the first moment that something was terribly wrong. The recording began with an inhale before the speaking began. I have heard enough of my own voice to know what my breathing sounded like and it was patently not this. The breath was higher, shallower. It wasn't mine. I knew even before the speaking began that I was not going to hear my own voice. Did they change my voice like they said they did for the WOE.BEGONE phone call? That didn't make sense. I was talking to Edgar. He was supposed to know that it was me, that was part of the mission. These thoughts ricocheted, rapid-fired through my head, not having time to complete in these scant few seconds.

"Hello, Michael," a voice said, mildly distorted with some anonymizing filter but almost definitely female. "We are sorry to deceive you like this. It was necessary to disguise this package as the package that you expected to discover to ensure that you would find and understand it as soon as possible. It was also disguised to deceive others for strategic purposes we cannot disclose to you. We are glad to see that you are alive again. We have some urgent happenings that we need to discuss." The jig was up. Whoever sent me back from Riga was watching me and now were coming to collect what I owed them, whatever that was. This is WOE.BEGONE.

[INTRO THEME PLAYS.]

I sat, awe-struck, on the toilet seat in Edgar's bathroom, laptop perched in my lap, listening to a message that I was not prepared to receive through tinny laptop speakers. "The information that you are about to receive will be crucial. I apologize in advance that we cannot tell you everything that we know. Information sent backwards through time tends to propagate backwards through time. There is always a risk of information traveling backwards to a time that we cannot control. We have reason to believe that you are aware of an upcoming plot that involves you and your husband inside of a high-

security area at your place of work. Our understanding is that the plot will be initiated by a deceitful recording made by yourself and disseminated to all of the involved parties. Our apologies to you if these are not the facts as you have experienced them. This is not an accusation, merely the reality as we have observed it to happen. Getting this message to you at this moment was what could only be considered a mathematical feat that required considerable data, as well as trial and error. This message should be received by Michael Walters inside of Oldbrush Valley before the incident in question. If the recipient of this message is instead the husband of Michael Walters, Edgar, we are deeply sorry for your loss and you are free to end your listening here. The events described will play out differently for you. We apologize that we are not able to predict or elucidate further.”

“We are aware that your participation in this upcoming breach of the high security area of Oldbrush Valley Energy and Resources was not the result of any malice on your behalf, but rather something you were coerced into essentially at gunpoint. We do not at all find you liable for the consequences of that mission, though we are asking you now to help mitigate the effects. Though you do not gain anything by helping our organization, the consequences of that night will reverberate intensely throughout the rest of your life and you should be offered a chance to participate. Though I warn you that you are going to be upset at what you are about to see, please open the image file that came with this recording. It is only after viewing this image that you may understand the consequences.”

Truth be told, I had already opened the image file. I had absentmindedly clicked on it while I was listening to her talk. I had been sitting in shock, unable to look away but desperately desiring to, while she prattled away about how hard it was to contact me and how the Flinchites had set me up or whatever pointless thing I already knew. On the screen was a photograph of Edgar, taken outside and at night, in a place that appeared to be in Tier 2, in one of those dark spots in-between buildings where I would often hide while I was waiting for guards to pass on their routes. No one else was in the picture. Edgar was on his back, splayed haphazardly, his eyes open but unfocused, gazing at nothing. Blood pooled around his head and neck, still half-bright as it began to darken on the ground. There was a thick, dark gash extending from one side of his neck to the other. The gash did not appear to be one clean swipe. Someone had cut Edgar’s throat. There was blood on his hands, Edgar having had enough time and awareness to try and keep the wound closed before the blood loss fatally weakened him. Hands that sat limp and unorganized across his torso. Gentle hands.

My time in Riga had been fast-paced and mission-driven. There wasn’t any time to talk about the myriad of things that must have happened between my experience and the experiences of the other Mikes. I had the chance to ask a few questions, but mostly relied on context clues to figure out what had happened in their lives. They told me that Edgar had ended up in the hospital as a result of the Flinchites’ deceit, but I was back in Oldbrush Valley to stop that. Edgar wasn’t going to die. They told me that Edgar was safe. They wouldn’t even let him come to Riga with them. He was safe. Michael had a wedding band on his finger. Edgar didn’t die. Edgar didn’t die. Edgar didn’t die. I closed out of the image. Edgar didn’t die. Who was this person talking to me? What was going on? What was she telling me? Edgar didn’t die.

There was a lull in the recording here, likely so that I could understand what I was seeing, uninterrupted. I could feel my cheeks flushing. She continued. “We found that image upsetting, as we imagine that you did, too, but we thought it necessary to show you the consequences of that mission in a way that would demonstrate that we are not deceiving you. You are going to learn soon that your husband’s participation in these events is not as avoidable as simply opting out, as you might have hoped. He is going to be inside of Tier 2 on that night. We do not foresee any way that you or he will be able to stop this from happening, even with full foreknowledge of it. However, we believe that with the correct preparedness, you should be able to obtain a more desirable outcome both for yourself and for us. Now that you see the incentive structures at work, I can begin to describe the necessary actions. These instructions should be followed immediately in order to ensure their efficacy. The longer the

time between you receiving this message and acting on it, the most unpredictable the situation becomes from our perspective and from a mathematical standpoint. Please prepare your usual items for accessing Tier 2 and proceed there without hesitation. Once you arrive at the keypad in 116E, you should begin the next part of the recording.”

What a morbid relief that the instructions were to act immediately. The message had caused my adrenaline to go haywire. If I had to sit and wait, I thought that I might jump out of my own skin. I opened up Dropbox in an Incognito tab, sent the audio file to my Dropbox, and ejected the drive from Edgar’s computer. I did not attach the image. I did not intend to ever see that image again, in person or otherwise. After making sure the file had transferred correctly and bringing it up on my phone, I then tossed the USB drive in the toilet and flushed... What? Yes, that is bad for the pipes and probably the environment but it’s tiny. It’s whatever. It’s just a little bit of metal and plastic. It’s not like I’m making a habit out of it. I’ve never had to do that with a USB drive before *or* since. You’ve probably flushed those “flushable wipes” before. Do you know how bad those are for the environment? Absolutely disgusting. So maybe consider the facts next time before you judge poor old Mike Walters who was already running around like a chicken with his head cut off. Imagined hypothetical critics, man, I swear. They never give me a break.

I got dressed as quickly and quietly as possible and sprinted at full speed to my cabin. She hadn’t said specified what I needed, but I did need canned air to trick the outer lock of 116E. I could grab some headphones while I was there as well. It was several minutes of running in the dark, but it was very late (or early) and there was almost no one to witness me. I arrived at my cabin, panting, grabbed the canned air, a bag, a knife, my headlamp, and my O.V.E.R. issued pistol for good measure. I didn’t know what was considered to be my usual tools for entering Tier 2. I didn’t know if they were certain, either. I grabbed some earbuds and put them in as I ran out the door, again sprinting, my pace ever slowing as I began to wear out. Being out of breath wasn’t the worst of it. My ankle throbbed from when it has broken and healed, my back hurt from the several types of injuries it had sustained, and my heart was racing from adrenaline and from being out of shape from my time in captivity. Recounting it with a clear mind, it is obviously a better idea to mete out your stamina so that you still have some when it comes time to actually do the thing that you have set out to do, but I can say with confidence that I was never going to do that. I was much more likely to have a heart attack trying to get through the doors at 116E.

Many aching minutes passed before I made it to the front doors of 116E. I knew that Marissa saw me in her patrol cart as I made my way to the entrance. I didn’t care. Thank god it was her. It must have been near the end of her night shift. I could hear her yelling to me from a significant distance away. “Hey, Mikey! ...Mike? You’re going in? This late? Hello...? Did you find something--” The door shut behind me and I could no longer hear her. The earbud was already in my ear. I hit play on the recording.

“You should be inside of 116E at this stage of the instructions. Please enter 3852911 on the keypad and proceed to the back.” I hit the numbers as fast as I could while she said this. “If you did not bring a bludgeoning item, please grab one from the warehouse. There should be hammers there and even sledgehammers depending on if they have recently been in use.” I turned on the headlamp as I entered the portion of the building without windows. It took a few minutes of searching, but I did manage to figure out where the warehouse kept the hammers. I had to pause the recording in order to keep it from proceeding to the next step, which began to play before I was ready for it. I hoped that didn’t mean that I was falling behind schedule.

“Once you are ready, make your way to the boulders on the border of Tiers 1 and 2. As always, do not allow yourself to be seen.” I complied. What was it about these boulders? So much seemed wrapped up inside of whatever they were, but as far as I could tell they were just rocks. Rocks that were important enough that the Flinchite boots drove a knife through my hand, that they attacked my friends in order to find the device to “use” them, a device that I never had and that no one else they

interrogated were even aware of. I didn't have a device this time either. Was I supposed to already have this device? It wouldn't be the first time that someone had falsely assumed that I knew its whereabouts and had access to it. If it was in the warehouse, I hadn't been instructed to retrieve it. Was I going to have to shock myself again? The recording sat silent, predetermined, unable to answer me. There was nothing that I could do but run through Tier 2 to the next location.

I made it to the boulders. I was entirely out of breath. The recording resumed right on time. Maybe I wasn't running late after all. I could feel my heartbeat throbbing in my ears. I could hear the blood pulsing with each beat. The pulsing rivaled the instructions in its volume. I turned the volume up.

"In the lot with the boulders, you will find an input port for an electronic device. Locate this input port now." I found it immediately, because I knew where it was from before I knew what it was for. The recording remained silent, as if she didn't expect me to find it so fast. I hit the "forward 15 seconds button" to get to the next instructions but overshot my mark and ended up having to hit the "back 15 seconds button" but my hands were shaking and I hit the "back 15 seconds button" twice by accident, at which point I just waited the 30 seconds out of fear that intervening further would make the next instructions take even longer.

"Your task is simple," the voice finally said. "You are to destroy this port and the power box beside it. Using whatever bludgeoning weapon you found in the warehouse, first destroy the port, then the metal box beside the port. This box is essentially a power supply. Exercise caution: both of these objects have been known to generate a lethal amount of electricity and have been known to be extremely volatile." I simply ignored the warning. What was I supposed to do with that warning? I was supposed to hit this shit with the hammer and no amount of knowing that I was going to get shocked would ever change that. I guess what it did do was prepare me for a dangerous amount of electricity to flow through my body when I struck the device port, which it enthusiastically did. The rubber on the end of the hammer did not protect me from what must have been an enormous amount of electric current. Upon me striking it, a large amount of electricity visibly arced and made contact with both of my hands, even though my hands were a hammers'-length away. My already pounding heart pounded even harder. I hunched over in pain, afraid that I might have just electrocuted myself. I hit it 5 times before I physically couldn't stand the electricity any longer. I looked at the device port. It looked mangled. What was once rectangular was of no discernible shape. Any key that fit into that lock was now entirely useless.

There was still the power supply to destroy. There was no way that I could hit it with the hammer, not if it would also produce this amount of electricity. I knew what I was feeling. This was the feeling I often felt where I eventually learn that I had died then and there and someone had done the thankless job of unkillling me and were likely chastising me for getting into that position in the first place. This felt like a mission where it was very important that I not die in the middle of it. I wasn't sure that there was still anyone out there with both the ability and desire to unkill me. Still, I needed to destroy the power supply. I pulled out my pistol, stood close enough that I could hit the box with my poor aim, made poorer by my shaky hands, and fired at the box. I fired a second time. I fired a third time. I fired a fourth time. I was prepared to fire as many bullets as I had. I fired a fifth time. The fifth bullet ricocheted off the mangled metal box and embedded into my left arm. I winced in pain but somehow kept myself from crying out. I looked at the box. The exterior and its electronic components within were shot. They were literally shot. They were irreparably damaged.

The instructions in my ear were telling me to go back the way that I came from, back into 116E, but I thought that I had made enough noise that I faced significant risk of capture going that way. If the patrols were anywhere near me, they would be heading toward me as quickly as they could manage. I rushed to the fence between Tiers 1 and 2. Using the claw end of the clawhammer, I frantically dug in the ground. When I could barely squeeze under the fence, I shoved my body under with significant force. I could feel the ends of the wires of the fence dig first through my shirt and then into the flesh of my back. I squeezed under the fence like a rat. I could actually feel my chest compress as I scrambled

under. My ribs reported a dull pain. Marissa could probably see me. I couldn't see her, but I could see the light from her cart. While my face was pressed into the dirt, scrambling to get back to my side of the fence, wires tearing at my back, I saw an object in the dirt, right in front of my nose. I had to cross my eyes in order to see it properly. It was the button, still there from the last time I had to scurry under this very fence, dead and silent, stained brown from months of being covered in dirt, a relic from a similarly brutal time. I grabbed it as I made my way out from under the fence. Might as well destroy some evidence of old crimes while I was at it. I ran back out to the main road and then proceeded to walk as calmly as I could manage the rest of the way home so as to not draw suspicion. Marissa definitely saw me but she did not approach. I could only see the lights from the cart. I did not know what she saw or heard and could only hope that whatever it was, she would let me get away. If I knew her, she wanted some of these answers as badly as I did.

It was civil twilight by the time that I got home, the sun not visible yet but its light beginning to become visible. I had made it most of the way home when the instructions stopped explaining on how best to get out of Tier 2. The way I had chosen was much faster and safer. After instructing me to exit 116E and begin walking to my cabin, it left me with one final message. "This concludes your instructions. Thank you again for your cooperation. We again apologize for not being able to send back more information to explain why it was necessary to do what you did. If that information somehow made its way further back in time than you are now, it could undo all of our efforts. Upon entering your cabin, you should receive a message confirming that this incident has been altered to your benefit. Thanks, Michael. Have a good morning." The message ended there. I picked up my pace to make it back to my cabin.

I burst into the cabin and looked around. On my kitchen table was an envelope, the same size, shape, and color as Edgar's envelope, with the same handwriting, "Mike" written on it in bold black letters. I tore open the envelope. Inside was a single piece of paper with a sentence written on it: "Hoping to redeem my prize." I stared at it, puzzled. Prize? My phone buzzed, a text message. I unlocked it and checked the message. "Breakfast?" It was from Anne.

[OUTTRO THEME PLAYS.]