

## Episode 2: Agent Orange's Wild Ride

The following recordings were recovered from a Tascam handheld recorder. Innocent voices have been altered and innocent names redacted. I will only interject when appropriate, friends. And I will see you round the bend.

TC

{Newscast ONE}

Tonight we come to you with the devastating news out of Blythe California where a catastrophic explosion has occurred downtown destroying countless homes and businesses in the heart of small town america. So far, there have been 202 reported deaths while hundreds still search frantically for their loved ones, . {trailing off} ... this comes on the heels of our most recent mass shooting where a man opened fire at a local Walmart, replenishing his ammo supply from the gun counter as needed.

ON:

Well it's finally happened. I've reached the bottom of the proverbial barrel. Down here scraping with the best of them. And since you're not here with me, again, allow me to explain the hell I have trapped myself in this time. It is somehow hotter in this motel room than it is outside and its a hundred and six here on a mild day, if that tells you anything. The room is decorated in a very specific brown and orange people seemed to like in the early 70s, you know the ones and it's all horribly checkered or houndstoothed, and in some cases, like the bedskirt, it's both. To end up in a place like this requires an exceedingly rare set of circumstances and a top tier fuck up, alot like myself.

(Sniffing) Focus orange. Get yourself together. They'll be here soon.

(Pencil jotting) continued case notes for missing individual REDACTED. Case number 420.  
Agent Russel Orange. August 28, 2021

Subject REDACTED. Age 33. Last seen pumping gas due north of Palo Verde 36 minutes after the explosion in downtown Blythe.

Between both the family and I, calling incessantly and sprinkling in references to obscure laws, law suits, and other legal chicanery, we were finally able to gather all the information about the subject and his last trip the delivery service was able to provide. This information is meager at

best and further lends to my theory that people are less employed these days and more, \*loosely affiliated.\*

The subject confirmed pickup of the package he was sent to retrieve at 7:46 PM. Less than three minutes later, his GPS signal dropped and has yet to register again in their system. We were further informed that the order must have been delivered intact and within the promised timeframe as no complaints have been filed and the order is closed in the system.

And finally, I was given the drop off address after having to call in several favors that maybe shouldn't have been called in at all, ever. But the money is good and work is slim these days as there is rarely a need for private investigators in the midst of the death throes of privacy.

{Interrupted by 2nd Newscast}

The blast seems to have originated from an abandoned lot at The corner of Lazarus and Nod just west of Main Street. Sheriff Varken of Riverside County will begin a press conference shortly. But first, let us take a moment to consider those who have been lost in this terrible tragedy in tonight's moment of silence, brought to you by the caring folks over at Mojave Logistics. When you need that heat, trust Mojave... (soft music and names trail off...)

ARO Investigations received the call from the subject's family just 48 hours after the event. I use the word event because no one seems to know what actually occurred here, at least no one beholden to public opinion, and now more than 2 days later I have made very little headway other than locating video footage from the subject's last known location. This was accomplished via the clearview facial recognition software the local police are only supposed to use during \*extreme threats to public safety.\* "Like a terrorism or something," the officer relayed as he balled up my \*rental fee\* and shoved it in his pocket. He then showed me how to use the program by searching the license photo of a, and I quote here, "stuck up piece of ass" he had pulled over earlier in the day. In an instant we had a collection of videos starring the woman who snubbed his mating calls during this earlier traffic stop. It was a moment that conjured the kind of deep existential fear that makes a person want to become a luddite. That specific sort of \*this was not a good idea and now its going to evolve and never go away,\* kind of dread. The way he was leering at the woman on screen did not help make the feeling any less intense. Clearview is a true technological marvel, and as is the case with all marvels, technological or otherwise, it'll likely be used to make rich men richer and do little else besides.

After this bit of early morning mindfuck, I gave the picture to the \*officer\* and watched as my subject's entire life popped up on the screen. Every social media post, every picture, and for my purposes, every second of security camera footage he'd been seen on for the last 90 days. Maybe more, mind you, the officer might have said 90 after seeing the horror on my face at the thought of this man in front of me having this kind of access to all of our lives. We were able to search by

date, time, and in some cases, expression, and we found footage showing the subject at a service station pumping gas at 8:22 PM the night of the Blythe incident, as I've taken to calling it. The footage was chaotic and frantic. People ran in and out of the frame, tripping over curbs, and spilling their sodas out in arced bursts onto the hot concrete. I pulled up a map on my phone and judging by the distance, I did not think the blast could have been seen from that location. But it may have been heard. The officer agreed and added that this was also 36 minutes later and that irritated me because I wanted no agreement with this reptilian fuck. But he did have a point, this was both too far away and the initial reaction to the incident would have calmed by then. The subject pulls up, calmly exits the vehicle, pays for gas, and leaves while people are going absolutely crazy all around him. He doesn't seem to notice them and if he does he does not react to them. Just pumps his gas, ten dollars if memory serves, and leaves. And that was the last time the subject was seen on camera. As I was leaving the officer asked if I wanted him to email the results from the search to me. I shakily agreed and he slapped his hands together and patted me on the shoulder as I walked out the door. Once a brother, always a brother, I suppose.

Speak of the devil.

{Newscast 3}

Now we go to a press conference with Sheriff Varken of Riverside County:

What we have witnessed here, what this community is going through, is unlike anything I have seen in all my years in law enforcement or prior to that in the military. It is so bad in fact, that we partnered with Small Town Strong, a new Mojave Logistics Initiative to send ground surveillance drones into the area. Based on the early footage coming out of there we regret to inform our community that if they had family located downtown at the time of the event then it does not look good. I want to temper expectations here: It Does Not Look Good. In addition, we have received reports of symptoms associated with radiation sickness from residents who were not immediately affected by the blast. Due to these factors we have requested the federal government send in a hazmat team before we can move forward with search and rescue operations.

Whatever happened to our town was a terrible tragedy and I will take down whoever or whatever is responsible. If it was some unknown natural occurrence then I will hunt down god himself and put his ass under the jail. You do not mess with my town, my people, my family. Do you understand me?

I'll take a few questions.

Sheriff Varken: there is a video circulating on Twitter showing two of your officers driving through a crowd of injured civilians. Do you have any comments sir?

No more questions, thank you.

As ex law enforcement I can say one thing with certainty: no amount of money, tools, or weaponry can make a person brave or repair their ruined morals. You cannot spend or train your way out of cowardice.

Having now run out of data points, the only thing to do is retrace his steps. Starting with downtown.

Knock at the door.

It's about goddamn time.

Tape clicks off.

I have seen some ruin in my time on this earth. As we all have if you are alive in this year of our lord but this is something different. This place is razed. There is no other way to describe it. I am as close as I can get to downtown and there is nothing. No cordons or cops, no churches or courthouses. Just a bombed out wasteland. On my right are the remains of a McDonald's, Golden Arches cooked to more of a burnt umber and it's just like, what a fucking way to die. Ringing up some entitled asshole practically yelling Big Mac no sauce and Sierra Mist at you.

It's silent outside.

The air is thick.

The energy is strange and oppressive..

Something unimaginable happened in this place.

Tape clicks off

On:

O: I know that night was chaotic but do you recall seeing this man here:

P1: You the cops?

O: Once upon a time but not anymore.

P1: Sorry sir, I wasn't here that night.

O: What about you?

P2: Nah man, I'm good.

O: So you don't recognize the man in this picture?

P2: I said I'm good.

O: His family has asked me to look for him and I don't want to cause any trouble. Just take a quick look please?

P2: Get that fucking picture away from me. If that is who I think it is I never wanna see that fucking face again. He was a whole wave of bad shit and man just get the fuck out of here now.

O: What happened here that night? Why was everyone running?

P1: Please leave sir. There's no more police to call. And we don't mind that too much. {gun clicks}

O: Okay. I get it guys. Thanks for your help.

Well that could've gone better.

Tape clicks off.

Just located a vehicle. It's burned badly and covered in graffiti, but it's the same make and model the subject drove. I have marked the coordinates in GPS. It appears as though the car stopped abruptly and slid about thirty feet. The glass from the mirrors and windows gleam on the ground and follow along the tire marks at about the halfway point. So the windows must have broken during the time the car was sliding along the road to the edge. Only tiny drops of blood outside the driver door, nosebleed maybe. Not heavily injured though, at least not here. The smell of burned foam and plastic sits heavy in the air the closer I get, as though there are still a few things smoldering, but there's no smoke. No heat except that of the waning late afternoon sun. If there was anything left after the car was set alight then it's all been cleared out by the toy pool soaking meth head weirdos that live on the outskirts of every small desert town out here. Everything is flat dirt and desert scrub in every direction as far as I can see, creosote bushes and a few spiked torture devices masquerading as succulents. Way out to the west, in the direction of \*home,\* I can see a sand devil whipping itself up out of the primordial earth to begin a whirling and short lived dance on the horizon. If I were to break down here I would follow the road either back the

way I came or continue on in the other direction hoping I ran into a town or store or... I just don't understand why he did not use his phone? (Phone beeping in background) I have signal so I must be in the range of towers.

Why wouldn't that attendant look at the picture?

(Noise in the distance.)

What was that?!?

Tape clicks off.

ON

Orange screams off mic: Hey, don't walk away! Please. (Footsteps running in the sand) I'm looking for someone, please! Wait! (Footsteps picking up speed.)

Tape clicks off.

ON

I swore I saw a man out here. I heard a strange clacking noise, like gunshots in the distance. I started heading in that direction looking for the source and I saw this shadow in the distance, the shape of a man miraged in steam and shifting shadows. But I could make him out. I know he was there. I've never been in a place that felt darker than this. The sun began to go down about 20 minutes ago.

Tape clicks off.

ON

Orange sings the same song as earlier only this time you can hear the anxiety in his voice. Dirt and gravel crunches under slow footsteps. Orange breathes hard. LOUD SNAP. Other eerie noises in the background. NOISES BEGIN

Tape clicks off.

ON: TERRIBLE AND FRIGHTENING NOISES IN THE BACKGROUND

I do not know what is going on around here. This is a nightmare place. And to make things worse, My phone died a while back and I have completely lost my sense of direction. I have seen no further signs of the subject and was following a trail that was recently left by a couple sets of footprints but I lost that a while back too. It's just so fucking dark out here. I don't know if you can make it out but if you can... if you can hear that terrible noise in the background? Can you hear it? It's following me. It comes in close range and then fades back but it's everywhere. And

it's been with me awhile. The screen won't light up on this goddamn stupid smart watch and now I can't even see what fucking time it is.

NOISE GETS LOUDER AND MOVES AWAY AS HE SPEAKS.

I know something is close by. Whatever it is it's stalking me and I just wanna find my car and get the fuck out of here and report back to his family that if he ended up here, he's gone, that I'm not coming back out here to look for him. It seems like I have been wandering out here for hours but I feel like not even an hour ago the sun was still up.

NOISES GET LOUDER

I guess I maybe just need to stay where I am until the sun comes back. But it feels like this place has never been touched by the sunrays, or any other light for that matter. It's... HE TRIPS STUMBLES AND LANDS HARD ON THE GROUND AND AS HE DOES THE NOISE RUSHES IN TOWARDS HIM.

THEN SILENCE.

ORANGE WHIMPERS ON THE GROUND:

Sherpa: Would you like some help?

Orange: What the— who is that? Am I just hearing this? Are you—

S: No Agent Orange, you are not just hearing this. I am real, this place is real. I am offering you a chance to walk away. Let me help you up and then you turn and leave immediately and never come back. I might even turn the sun back on for you if you ask nice and sweet like.

O: Get the fuck back. Get away from me. What is happening here?

S: I \*am\* trying to get away from you.

A woman whimpers in the distance... She screams for help.

S: I am trying to give you the chance to get away from yourself. This place, it's a tiny hell. I love it but I am a man of a \*particular constitution.\* And I don't imagine you faring very well here at all. So again, I am offering you a deal. It's a one time only deal, taco tuesday, everything must go, and there are no negotiations. You leave, you live. Simple, cut, pasted and PDFed. Take it and go unaltered into the future. It's the only outcome in which you maintain that last bit of life and love you have left in you. That small sliver of soul somewhere in there.

O: Who is crying and... and why do I know that voice? I know I uh I have heard that voice before.

S: Well Orange, you'd do well not to pay no mind to her. There ain't nothing good there. Nothing that leads to a happy, well adjusted future, that is.

O: But I...

S: Last time. Will you allow me to help you up so that you may leave? At a snail's pace or a scurry, don't matter too much as long as you get gone.

THE WOMAN CONTINUES SCREAMING. WE CAN HEAR ORANGE JUMPING TO HIS FEET AND RUNNING IN THE DIRECTION OF THE SCREAMING. SHERPA CALLS TO HIM.

S: You never know when to give up. Do ya, orange?

FOOTSTEPS BOUND AND THE WHIMPERING CRIES GET CLOSER.

O: Is it Anarcha, it can't be Anarcha.

CRIES GET LOUDER AND STOP SUDDENLY.

A NASTY SQUEAL (SQUEALS?)

O: Oh my god, what the fuck. What, what (he whispers horrified) what are you?

VISCOUS DRIPS OF FLUID FALL TO THE GROUND. YOU CAN HEAR THE \*SLIME.\*

Tape clicks off.

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Narrator: Now friends, I must interject here to describe what Mr. Orange sees before him cuz well, he can't. And while that is unfortunate, this is important so listen up.

HEARTBEAT

You see, well before any of us were here, way back in \*time immemorial\* you might say, this place was no more than a peaceful cage for the ancient heart of the universe. There existed no



reason to consider danger might arise. As danger was not a concept. Cuz Concepts had yet to be conceptualized. But slowly, and surely, all those horrific energies rose as energy tends to do and having no mechanism for control, no vent for dispersion, those energies solidified. Solidified and threatened to sit upon the throne of everything, bastard usurpers waiting and watching for the slip and fall, nothing more than fuzzy chaos in the peripheries, ever approaching. The closer this chaos came to organizing, to becoming something \*more,\* the deeper the heart yearned for security and protection. And this animal standing before Mr. Orange became the answer to that yearning. A blessing, if you will. But blessings can be trade-offs if you're not careful and that is exactly what this being became. A real eye for an eye situation and we all know how that goes. But that friends is for later and we are losing momentum so:

the creature flowing before Orange only had half a face, the other half of which could not be called a face by any conventional means of the word, but regardless, remained \*a face.\* As it had an eye, and more than a few mouths like infected sores with yellow curdled milk teeth frothing and contracting. A vile noise emanating from within as if a perpetually dying infant held residence there, wailing through the throes. The beast seemed to melt in place, a sickly wave coursing over the body from one side to the other like the way blood sloshes in a crab. It was smaller than he, and had it shown a few of its other faces, he might have even considered it adorable. Then again, if it showed him its real face then our Mr. Orange would be no more. Them's the brakes.

It seemed to roll across the desert floor, but left no disturbance in the places it moved. Almost like it was not really there but boy was it and when it moved toward him it sloshed and crashed like waves of an ocean littered with the detritus and decay of a thousand sunken ships.

It squealed at him, slamming down six feet from where he stood, the mouths biting at the air, trying to taste him. Tiny tongues lashing and whipping as it stretched itself above him as thin as a cord and slid upward, dangled there before him.

The atmosphere around Mr. Orange went still and from the string a small crystal drop formed. Pale pink lightning broke the air around it, sizzling and crackling like a tesla coil. In the translucent droplet he saw the face of the man who had offered to help him, growing larger as the tear forming from the string grew. When the cord had filled the crystal, it fell to the ground with a magnificent spray of light—

ON

S: I offered to let you leave. But Agent Orange just always has to be a hero, don't he? Even when, hell almost especially when, there is no one left to save. I see you there all dumbfounded and awed and it reminds me of when I first came to the ranch, in this current form, anyhow. How I long for the good ole days when men were men and monsters were monsters and that twain had

yet to meet. But the world is different now Agent Orange, for you anyhow. The life you knew, you won't remember for long, as you my boy, are now a ward of the wireland and it is time for us to do our little ritual.

O: I knew that voice. I know it. I've heard it. Tell me who it was.

S: That's right Agent Orange: latch onto a detail of the life you lived before now. Bring it back to the ranch with you for safekeeping and make it an altar for which to remember, if remembering suits you at all. Or you can shake that voice off now, never have to think of it again, molt on out of those traumas and leave them behind. For a host of new traumas await.

ORANGE'S BREATH IS HEAVY AND STRAINED BOTH IN AND OUT OF TIME. A HEARTBEAT STILL BEATS (THE WHOLE TIME FOR THIS PART.)

S: Yes, I wouldn't expect you'd have too much to say right about now. But that's okay, I'll explain it to you: There are people who live on the west coast of Africa, there in Gabon, in the crook of the bend. They follow a system of beliefs there that some call a hodge podge religion of animal spirits and ancestor veneration but I myself call it elevated and elegant. See, they use a sort of enlightenment cheat code called tabernanthe iboga. Now I won't go too far into detail on the experience but it basically shows you how fucked up you are and starts to heal those fucked up wounds. Like a soul bandaid I imagine. The ritual they perform is called breaking open the head. You see, the pull from reality associated with the root is so strong that you fare better, mentally speaking, waking up into it \*rather\* than just being jolted away to some foreign alien landscape. So after they take the substance, a Ng'ang'a—which by the way is one of the more fun varieties of shamans. They dress up scary and hold the local phone to the spirit world—anyway this guy grabs a stick and just whacks them in the head, knocking 'em out so they can wake up on the spirit plane.

O: I just wanna go now. Just let me go now. Please

S: Now there won't be no soul healing here, no sir, and I think you just about figured that out by now, but it is a road that's best traveled in the dark. And I do want you to know, Orange, this favor I'm about to do for you? Is the last goodwill you will ever know. And I know, It's a real fucking bummer but don't be born a tool if you aren't up to the task: LOUD WOOD CRACKING SOUND

THE THUMP OF A BODY FALLING ONTO THE GROUND:

Tape click off.

Now about this time, friends, Mr Orange was laying on the cool desert floor, blood forming a black pool for his swimming head to float in. His vision is blurry and wet but he could see the creature leering over him and from this angle it appeared the entire creature was made of the saliva dripping from those hundreds of mouths biting and licking at the air. The gaping holes with their jagged soft looking teeth just floating on the surface of this terrible and tiny ocean. It made him feel separate from himself, as if he were losing something vital just by bearing witness to this thing. But as he faded deep into the sweet void of a mind vacant of thought and reason, he chuckled to himself cuz he'd never seen such an ugly motherfucker.

And then nothing.

The salivating monster formed an arm made of mouths that held the lid of a tincture bottle between two sets of teeth that somehow managed to be both sharp and fuzzy simultaneously. It moved with precision and grace, not the splish splash filth show it put on for Mr Orange.

The last thing he saw was a silver bead form on the dropper that fell slow motion into his eye like a mercurial spore planting the first foundation of a mycorrhiza in his brain. But how long before the symbiote becomes a stranglehold? I dunno friends, I guess we find that out together.

There is one last thing friends, before I let you go. I found one more recording that seems pertinent to our ends here, that is, fully understanding the scope of the thing we are dealing with, because we will never understand that thing \*itself,\* only the way that it hangs over us like an ill begotten curse baselessly tinkering with the lives of you, me, and everyone we know. I will let this play us out. Thank you for coming to see us at wireland ranch and taking this trip with me round the bend. We will see you again soon, friends.

“Orange, this is Varken. I had a chance to look at the remaining footage following REDACTED out of town. Something wasn't sitting right with me so, well, I took a look from a few other angles. Traffic cameras and a drug store across the street and well Orange I can't quite explain this but it's like, well, it's like something was following him. Something was whipping up everything around him wherever he went. The trash in the streets would blow away. Lights in the buildings would dim and blink as he passed. If his car went down a street then the people on the sidewalks suddenly break out into a run or fall over. It almost looks like a wave, Orange. No other way to describe it. I ain't never seen anything like this. I don't know what you are involved in but you might want to be careful and leave this alone. I don't sense anything good coming from you being here or from me thinking about this anymore. My town is falling apart. Some delivery driver is sending waves of terror down my streets. I think I might be done with all this shit. I just can't explain it to myself anymore. None of it. This is too big for me. It's too big for you. Whatever was following him, Orange, I saw it. And it saw me. And now I can't see anything else.

{he breaks into sobs}

I can't see anything else.