

Fargo

Series Document

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Far·go (fär'gō)

1. A city of eastern North Dakota on the Red River east of Bismarck. Founded with the coming of the railroad in 1871, it is the largest city in the state. Population: 90,100.
2. A unique brand of true crime story, part tragedy, part farce, in which simple, good hearted people come face to face with something monstrous.

THIS IS THE STORY

of a CRIMINAL who meets a spineless insurance salesman and agrees to kill his bully, mostly because he wants to see how far he can push the insurance salesman before he snaps.

It's THE STORY of an INSURANCE SALESMAN who asks the Criminal to kill his bully, then beats his own wife to death, and lies, and cheats and steals to get away with it.

It's THE STORY of a young, FEMALE POLICE DEPUTY trying to figure out who killed the insurance salesman's wife, shot the police chief, stabbed a local trucking boss in a whorehouse, and who exactly is the dead naked guy in the woods.

It's THE STORY of a widowed STATE PATROLMAN who lets the Criminal escape, and then feels compelled to track him down.

It's THE STORY of the SUPERMARKET KING of Minnesota, a man with a secret, who hires the Criminal to figure out who's blackmailing him. Only to realize that that may have been a mistake.

It's THE STORY of a CRIME SYNDICATE in Fargo, North Dakota that sends TWO MEN — a stone-deaf killer, and his sign language interpreter — to Minnesota to figure out who killed the trucking boss. The two men find their way first to the insurance salesman, and then to the Criminal, with grisly results.

It's A STORY about CONSEQUENCES, about what happens when a civilized man puts on his muck-lucks and tromps out into the wilderness. And how the wilderness he brings back infects him and the world around him.

It's THE STORY of a PLACE, where the sedate innocence of unremarkable American life collides with the lawless frontier. Mall food and frozen tundra. Pee Wee hockey games on thin ice.

It's THE STORY of the PEOPLE we long to be (simple, kind, neighborly) versus the people we fear the most (hardened, vicious, unfeeling).

Yes, we have problems, in other words. But look who's solving them.

CHARACTERS

Note: Each season of the show is meant to be a self-contained “true crime” story from the Fargo Universe. Some characters may carry over to the following seasons, but not necessarily as the central point of the new story.

LORNE MALVO - Anarchist

LESTER NYGAARD - a mild-mannered Insurance salesman.

MOLLY SOLVERSON - A police detective in Saint Cloud, MN.

GUS GRIMLY - A State Patrolman stationed in Duluth, MN.

STAVROS MILOS - The Grocery Store King of Minnesota.

MR. WRENCH and MR. NUMBERS - Fargo hit man and his sign-language interpreter.

LOU SOLVERSON - Molly’s Father

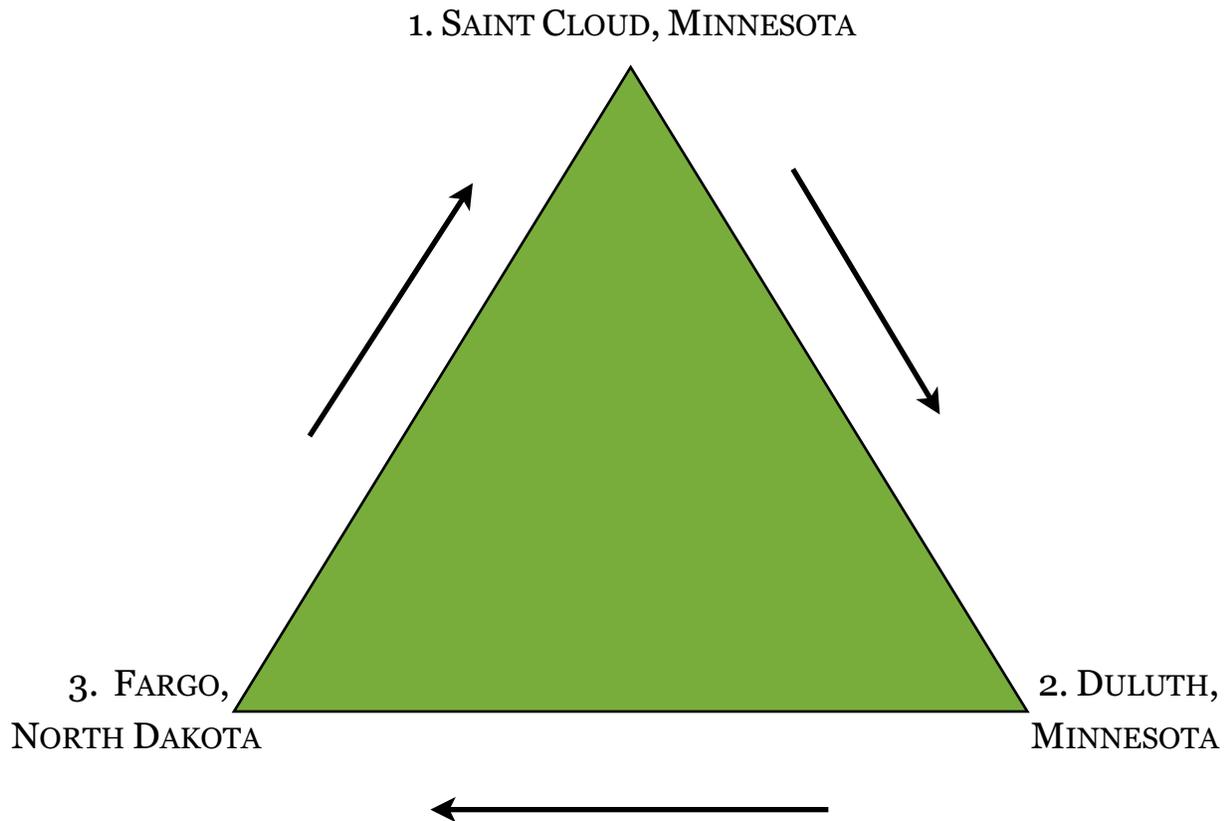
MICKEY AND MOE HESS (15) Twin sons of Sam Hess.

MR. RUNDLE - The Crime broker

BILL OLSEN - Saint Cloud Interim Chief of Police

SEASON ONE IS A TRIANGLE

In which we track the crime spree of Lorne Malvo from Point 1 to Point 2 to Point 3, and then back to Point 1.¹



¹ Or wait. Maybe Season One is a circle. In that Malvo comes full circle. And yet his story has three main points, so that makes it a triangle, right? But what kind of triangle? Equilateral? Isosceles? Does it matter? Are there different kinds of circles? Clearly geometry isn't my strength. All I remember about my junior high geometry teacher is that she had a face like a frog and usually came to class drunk. So let's just say season one is a triangle and move on to other, less shape related, issues.

THE ARCS

LORNE MALVO

Picture this: you and your wife go to a party. There's a man there you've never seen before. He's charming. He tells great stories. When you talk to him you find yourself telling him things you wouldn't tell your closest friend. As does your wife. But on the way home you and your wife have a huge fight. In fact, after the party there are three divorces, one rape and a suicide.

Here's a word. Instigator. Here's another. Anarchist. If Malvo were a religious man, he would worshiped Loki, the god of mischief. He is the opposite of a brooding sociopath, a man capable of great charm. Malvo is what you might call a freelance criminal, a man you hire when you want something done that is not exactly legal. He has a broker, Mr. Rundle (who we met in the pilot), a broker who fields requests — figure out who robbed me, murder my business partner, etc — and sends Malvo around the country.

Malvo is a collector, not of things, but of moments — moments where otherwise moral people are pushed to do immoral things. Malvo chases these moments. He manufactures them. They are more important to him than sex or love or money. Which, as we saw in the pilot, means that

Basically, he really likes fucking with people.

And if you're a man who likes to push others to the breaking point, then Minnesota is a darn good place to be. Because polite societies like this one — societies where people repress bad feelings, where they bury them under a sweet red gelatin of Minnesota nice — are also the most violent. Put enough pressure on a man like Lester, as we saw, and he's going to snap.

After the events of the pilot and his run in with Patrolman GUS GRIMLY, Malvo arrives in beautiful downtown Duluth. He ditches Lester's car and reports for work. Work, in this case, being a freelance assignment: figure out who is blackmailing STAVROS MILOS, the Supermarket King of Minnesota. The blackmail note reads *I know about the money*.

But knows what? And who knows it? There's clearly a big secret there, but Stavros isn't talking.

So Malvo starts to dig². Is the blackmailer Stavros's head of security, former farm league hockey goon WALLY SEMENCHKO? Is it Stavros's simple son, DMITRI, or his bitter ex-wife, HELENA?

It's not until after Malvo finds Stavros's blackmailer (spoiler alert: Helena's Curves trainer, DON CHUMPH -- an orange spray-tanned buffoon) that we realize his real agenda. Because rather than put a stop to the plan, Malvo takes over the blackmail scheme. Why take a small fee, when you can have the whole pot? Besides, Stavros is rich, and rich men have secrets, and men with secrets are vulnerable. And Malvo, as we know, thrives on the vulnerability of others. How far can Malvo push him? How far can he push Chumph?

But Malvo has a problem (two problems, actually, but we'll get to the second in a minute). And his problem is Gus Grimly, the Duluth patrolman who pulled him over. Because Gus realizes he made a mistake when he let Malvo go. He becomes a fly, a mosquito, buzzing around, threatening to ruin everything Malvo is trying to accomplish.

And then there's Malvo's second problem. The actions he took with Lester are about to catch up with him. Because Lester has told the hired killers that it was Malvo, not him, who killed Hess. And just as Malvo is about to collect the blackmail money, he is ambushed by Mr. Wrench and Mr. Numbers.

It is the first time we see Malvo at a disadvantage, and he barely escapes with his life. Malvo abandons his blackmail scheme -- because money has never been his primary goal -- and goes after the men who sent Wrench and Numbers. And then, when he learns that it was Lester who gave the men his name, Malvo goes back to St. Cloud to get revenge.

What he doesn't realize though, is that the Lester he met is gone. In his place is a very different man, a man capable of anything.

LESTER NYGAARD

² Not realizing that as he digs St. Cloud Police Deputy Molly Solverson is on his trail, putting together the pieces of Lester and Malvo's crimes, first getting a photo of Malvo, then a name.

Think of Lester as Patient Zero and Lorne Malvo as the Plague. The two men meet by chance in a hospital waiting room. One is weak-willed, a harbinger of petty resentments and jealousies, tired of being pushed around by life. The other is a Biblical snake, cold blooded, manipulative, a being of pure id. In their accidental contact an infection is passed from snake to worm. As a result, all of Lester's *why me* resentments, his punching bag repressions, are switched from passive to active.

Then, when Malvo kills Hess — Lester's iconic childhood bully — a fuse is lit within Lester. He has spent his entire life believing his problems to be unsolvable. Now a single act of brutal violence shows him the truth. Any problem can be solved as long as you are willing to do what it takes. No one in this world is going to give you respect. You have to take it.

So Lester beats his wife to death and tries to frame Malvo for it, but everything goes to hell. So now here's Lester, new to sociopathy, trying to cover his ass and stay out of jail. In the days after his wife's death he is just getting the hang of it — the lying, the manipulation, the willingness to do whatever it takes to get your way.

The truth is, he feels bad about what happened to his wife. Still harbors some regrets over Hess. Don't worry. This will pass. If Lester had any doubts, the positive reinforcement he gets from his brother — showing up at the hospital, expressing concern, inviting Lester to stay with them — shows Lester that he has made the right choice. In his own twisted way he takes two separate things — his wife's murder and his brother's love — and conflates them. Killing his wife, in other words, rewarded Lester with brotherly love.

And that klieg light of unconditional love — a love he has never known before — is a light that, once felt, becomes addictive to Lester. He has killed his wife and aided in the death of two others, and as a result has secured a family. What wouldn't he do to keep that?

But living a lie isn't easy. And the deeper Lester gets, the more lies he finds himself telling. At first just to the police. But then two men show up in town, hired killers looking for Hess's murderer. And suddenly Lester finds himself being squeezed tighter and tighter. His desperation increases, the scale of lies he'll tell. Darker thoughts arise.

What will it take to make his problems disappear? A mob war? A dead cop? Maybe the answer is to stop defending and start attacking. To become less like Lester and more like Malvo. And it is from this notion that Lester will grow into true villainy.

It is a path that will put him on a collision course with the original source of his infection. Our true villain, Lorne Malvo. And in this way we will see if the student can surpass the master.

MOLLY SOLVERSON

There is a simplicity to life when you grow up in a small town. Simplicity to a place where the graduating high school class has less than a hundred people in it. A place where time is measured in generations. America is a big country, and Minnesota is a big state, especially in winter. But when you live in a small town like Saint Cloud it can feel as if you live on an island surrounded by endless snow. Like you live in a place the rest of the world can't touch.

Which is what Molly Solverson likes about Saint Cloud. She was never the girl who dreamed of moving to the big city. Molly is Scandinavian after all, and an Episcopalian to boot. Humble to a fault. Smart, but not a showoff. She likes her victories quiet, her progress slow.

Molly has no desire to make the Big Case that gets her into the FBI. Instead, she just wants everything in its right place. Which is why she became a law enforcement officer. Because crime is the antithesis of order. It's a B & E that leaves behind a broken home, except the home in this case is society. And so criminals have to be put in their right place, which is prison.

But then Lorne Malvo comes to town. And the rules of order and society go out the fucking window.

For Molly, emotionally, the first season will be about coming to terms with the fact that the frontier she polices is a feral and lawless place. And that when you get right down to it, some things — like Lorne Malvo — don't have a right place. The things Molly sees — violence, cruelty, senselessness — will make her question her role as a law officer, a job that exposes her to the worst of human nature.

But luckily she won't be alone in her journey. Her father, Lou, is by her side, a quiet, comforting presence. And along the way Molly will meet the man she's going to marry, Gus Grimly. The Norm to her Marge. And with these two at her side, Molly can face anything.

GUS GRIMLY

A Man-Boy's wife dies and leaves him with a little boy to raise. The man-boy isn't a slacker so much as a half-grown man who hasn't yet decided if he has a purpose. But now, a single parent, he must focus. So the man-boy gets his hair cut and learns how to change a diaper. He looks around for a job that pays well and offers good benefits, but one with flexible shifts, so that he can spend time with his boy. In this way he becomes a state cop. In this way he becomes a man. He realizes he likes the structure of it, the hierarchy of the force and the rules it offers. Gus has always benefited from structure. Something that keeps him from drifting.

Over time, Gus's son grows out of diapers and learns to read. He watches Star Wars for the first time and wears a plastic fireman's hat for 363 days straight. He goes to elementary school and then middle school. His dad is his best friend.

The two live next door to an orthodox Jewish family. Because their houses are side by side, Gus and his son can see into their neighbor's home. On Friday nights and high holidays they watch the family — father, mother and two daughters — observe the seder. It is fascinating peak into another world.

One night, the woman of the house undresses in front of her bedroom window. Gus is alone in his room. He sees her nakedness and looks away. But the next night she does the same thing, and this ritual is repeated night after night. The highly religious woman turns on the lights of the bedroom, removes her wig, then her clothes, never pulling the shades, never looking out the window. And yet it's clear she is showing herself to Gus.

When Gus tries to talk to her outside the house the woman ignores him. She is not interested in an affair. For her the transgression of revealing herself to him is enough.

This is just one of the ways in which life is strange³ in the Fargo Universe.

³ For more, see *Who and or What is our Mike Yanagita?*

But listen, Gus Grimly didn't get into law enforcement because he was a law and order guy. He doesn't suffer from a need to seem tough, doesn't get off on power. He's scared a lot of the time at work, because fighting crime is scary. And because the stakes for survival are too high. The boy has no one but him. So Gus can't afford to get himself killed.

Which is why one snowy night he lets a psychopath drive away from a routine traffic stop. And yet, Gus has been a police officer by this point for 10 years. He has developed a strong sense of right and wrong, a strong sense of responsibility. Which is why that night he wakes knowing he made a mistake.

And so Gus sets off to find the man he let go, Lorne Malvo. But by pursuing Malvo, Gus puts himself (and his son) at risk. Was he right to walk away from death the first time? Or right now in pursuing it? Was saving his own life for the sake of his son a coward's act, or a hero's? And will he survive the pursuit?

WHO AND OR WHAT IS OUR MIKE YANAGITA?

Fargo, the film, is a true crime story that isn't true. Or — that is to say — somewhere, sometime, a man may have paid other men to kidnap his wife, but Fargo is not a fact by fact reenactment of that crime. And yet the events and characters of the film — though mostly invented — are portrayed as real, in a *truth is stranger than fiction* manner.

Because, as we know, real life doesn't unfold along conveniently linear plot lines. It is filled with dead ends and random non sequiturs. To make the events of the film feel truer, the Coens have added narrative elements that detour from the central story. The biggest of these is Mike Yanagita.

In the film, Marge is asleep when the phone rings. The caller is Mike Yanagita, an old high school acquaintance. It takes her a while to figure this out. Later, she agrees to meet him for lunch in the Twin Cities. There, he tells her he married another classmate of theirs, but that she died. Mike Yanagita breaks down and tries to sit next to her. *I'm just so lonely*, he says.

Later, Marge is talking to an old friend on the phone. When she mentions Mike and the tragedy he's suffered, the friend tells Marge it isn't true. The woman in question is very much alive, and not only didn't she marry Mike, she took out a restraining order against him. The whole story has a *you can't make this stuff up* quality to it. Which is why, when it's added to a true crime story, it makes the crime elements seem truer.

So the question for us in translating the film to series is *who or what is our Mike Yanagita?* And because the season evolves over 13 episodes and follows multiple characters, my instinct is that, rather than create a single narrative detour, we must spread “real life” characters and moments throughout the story in unexpected ways. Like the naked man in the trunk or Gus Grimly's Jewish neighbors, or the *Be the One* poster, or the group of Sudanese Lost Boys who moved to Saint Cloud five years earlier and pop up in our story from time to time, etc.

Accidents happen in the Fargo universe. Randomness is ever present. The point is not to create meaninglessness. It's to show that meaning in the universe is open to interpretation. As Larry Gopnik is told in *A Serious Man* when he tries to make sense of the strange twist of events that has become his life:

Accept the mystery.