

BLAKE (VO): Hi. My name is Blake, and I have just a quick note before we get started. Actually, it's more like a recommendation because this podcast is an immersive audio storytelling experience: part fact, part fantasy. It's best that you listen with headphones on, imagination on, and everything else turned off.

Welcome to *abandoned: The All-American Ruins Podcast*.

MUSIC: fade in, "Sun Ice Eye," By Lotus

Season 3, Episode 12: The People Who Used to Live Here, Part II, and if you haven't listened to Part I, go back to season 1, and listen to the finale. I would strongly recommend you do that first.

SFX: fade in, Hudson River, distant train, distant bridge traffic

NARRATOR (VO): In many ways, this is a true story. In other ways, I'll let you be the judge.

No matter what the word "truth" feels like to you in this particular situation, I want you to remember that the world can seem quite real inside the mind's eye of your imagination.

SFX: crossfade, giant, hidden house on the banks of the Hudson, summer, birds, distant bridge

So, allow me to show you a very real place: a giant beige house at the end of a very long driveway where I'll let my childlike fantasy about its ancient wreckage take over and guide us both.

As to whether or not you believe that this story about the very real giant beige house at the end of a very long driveway is real or not, well... I'll leave that up to you.

SFX: crossfade, house interior, ambiguous era, clock ticking and striking the quarter hour, dishes, moving furniture

TV ANNOUNCER: Do you ever think about getting old? Well, you are, whether you think about it or not. And that makes you part of the fastest growing minority in this country - because old age is a minority.

SFX: crossfade TV announcer who becomes part of the immersive scene as an ad on the television set

MUSIC: fade out

If you want to be able to use all of your experience and knowledge later on, you oughta start planning today. If you wanna go on being a productive, vital part of society when you get older, you should get involved. Now! Think about it. What will you want? What will you need?...

NARRATOR (VO): She was very old, but not for her age. As far as years are concerned, she was in her early-70s, elderly, I suppose, to some, but not to me. To me, she was young in spirit, certainly, but old in soul.

SFX: telephone, answering machine in the next room

She'd seen many things, had many lovers, fallen in and out of money, then further out of it until she fell back into it again.

MUSIC: fade in, "Satopanth," By Lotus

She had lived many places, heard many voices, tried out many ways to be free, but ultimately, her heart always belonged in the shadow of the Catskill Mountains.

SFX: crossfade, memory of the front of the house, the driveway, car approaches, man exits, enters house

Years ago, I was called upon, by my father, to drive him to see the old woman, in mid-August, when the leaves slowly begin to stir with the chilled anticipation of the oncoming autumn, which was full of color and light in the area commonly known, elusively, as Upstate New York.

I always loved summer and never liked winter, and the same was true for Ms. Rebecca, according to my dying father, the day he asked me to bring him to her. While I stayed put in the car, Papa, as I once called him, disappeared inside, for half an hour or so, and when he emerged, he held a map with him, a detailed plan that would carry the map-holder up rivers and through the fading towns of the northern parts of the Empire State, brushing up against the reservation of the Mohawk Traditional Government, full of charred and splintered buildings, brightly-lit casinos, desolate destruction, to a small, unknown bridge.

SFX: fade out

As I helped him back into my vehicle, I looked up at the second story and into the window where I saw the old woman, Ms. Rebecca, sitting there, watching us.

And... I could see tears in her eyes.

MUSIC: abruptly end on an echo

And I saw her mouth--

MS. REBECCA: -- it's you.

MUSIC: “Tend,” Trevor Kowalski

NARRATOR (VO): And as far as I knew, this was the first and the last time I saw her.

NEWS ANCHOR: ...now the search expands for a missing boy. The state *just* activated a missing child alert, here are two pictures of the little boy. He was last seen earlier this evening, a county sheriff telling people just moments ago...

NARRATOR (VO): The muggy summer of 2023 is charging forward in the middle of the ambiguous Hudson Valley, a geographical plot of land that’s the subject of intense debate among many New Yorkers. Some will say that “upstate” or the “Hudson Valley” starts in Yonkers, and they might be right. Others, however, would argue that it doesn’t start until Westchester ends. They too might be right, culturally speaking, anyway; the great divide between NYC, Long Island, and the rest of New York State is a long-standing, substantially political and expensive battle, a notorious animosity dating back a century, possibly longer. At the very least, to the signing of the State Constitution. All you have to do is read [State Senate Bill S3093](#), which, quote, “proposes a constitutional amendment to divide the state into three autonomous regions.”

NEWS ANCHOR 2: The rift between upstate and downstate could finally divide the state.

PHONE INTERVIEWEE: We’re trying to somehow get folks to realize that New York is not the Empire State any longer, that we’ve lost our way.

NEWS ANCHOR 2: New York wouldn’t be three separate states, but rather, three autonomous regions, all independent of each other: the New York region, the Montauk region, and the New Amsterdam region, each with their own government and even their own...

NEW YORKER 1 (overlapping): I couldn't even tell you what's upstate and what's not upstate. It always confuses me, and I'm from here.

NEW YORKER 2 (overlapping): Upstate is all in the eye of the beholder. It's different for everyone, and there's nothing wrong with that.

NEW YORKER 3 (overlapping): Don't get it twisted: upstate is all things above the Bronx, easy...

SFX: fade in, car, interior, summer, parked at giant beige house, music on radio, engine idling, keys, backpack zipping, movement

MUSIC: end

NARRATOR (VO): I'm sitting in my car in front of a giant beige house at the end of the very long driveway, a roller coaster of pebbles and sharp rocks, a single-lane road that ends at the murky waters of the Hudson, with unmatched views of the Catskill Mountains, reflections cast across the river.

SFX: car window closes, car off, narrator exits and walks toward house across gravel, slowly

MUSIC: fade in, slowly, "Eyes Rest," By Lotus

Like a lighthouse, the house squints out across the narrow body of water. Unfortunately, I can't tell you the exact location of the space because I promised that I wouldn't, but I can tell you that it's beautiful, aristocratic, and invisible to the boats that make their passage up north to the industrial shores of Albany, or down south to the banks of Governor's Island, and ultimately, into the ancient waves of the Atlantic.

It is invisible to drones in the sky, covered by a canopy of Hudson Valley's black walnut and sugar maple and river birch.

SFX: fade out

It is invisible to most of the world, except for a select few, including the ghost of Rebecca, the old woman who used to live in this giant beige house at the end of the very long driveway, alone with her own ghosts, her own stories. She disappeared the same day my father died, and in his will, there were instructions for me to come to the house one last time, and I was encouraged to bring a friend.

I didn't think you'd mind coming along.

SFX: fade in, summer soundscape, birds, distant highway traffic across the street from the giant yellow house

VINTAGE DOCUMENTARY...and the whole thing is just an illusion. A product of the imagination. But then, so are you. Don't be offended. So are we, you understand...

MUSIC: fade out

NARRATOR (VO): When I was a child, my father, a cabbie, used to talk about a former client of his, people who used to live in a giant yellow house— on the opposite side of the river from the giant beige house at the end of the very long driveway.

MUSIC: fade in, "Namucuo" By Lotus

He described the giant yellow house as if it were out of a dream. He said it had two stories with lots of sunlight upstairs and little sunlight in a dark basement he'd never seen, and inside lived: *An old man*, a scoundrel and a cheat and a liar, and *his eldest granddaughter*, with whom he had no

qualms, and *his youngest granddaughter*, who was different from the rest of them.

My aging father said that, many moons ago, the youngest granddaughter went missing in the middle of the night, never to be seen again. Folks in town used to say that she'd probably run away across the border into Canada, passing through the Franklin County corridor of New York and into Quebec, though they could never prove it.

SFX: crossfade, St. Lawrence Seaway

From time to time, locals would take vacations up to the Thousand Islands and come back with reports, sightings of her standing on the opposite side of the St. Lawrence Seaway in Canada with a man in uniform and a young child, though, again, nobody ever brought evidence to substantiate their claims, only the stories of this ghost who up and vanished.

NEWS ANCHOR 3: A search for a missing woman continues after law enforcement discovered new evidence that could point to her whereabouts. She was last seen speaking with a local boatmaker, Christof, who has denied any allegations of...

MAN: I'm telling you -- I saw her. She was right there, just across the water.

MUSIC: fade out

SFX: crossfade, summer soundscape, back of giant beige house, train in distance, crickets, bugs, narrator approaching cracked window

The giant beige house at the end of a very long driveway is swarmed by a thick summer haze, engulfed by the green woods that surround the estate which protects it from the world even when the trees are barren and the air is cold. It seems as if it's been empty and silent for years.

SFX: crossfade, climbing into the open window, empty house, light breeze, touching all sorts of objects all over the house

I find a hidden but open window on the backside of the main house, and due to my small stature, I manage to wiggle inside where I find pink walls and blue walls and cracked paint crumbling all around me. Every room boasts a medical pull-cord, an alert system that, at one time, could notify the house staff in a jiffy if something dire had happened to the old woman.

MS. REBECCA: In case I fall, or worse--

VINTAGE LIFEALERT AD: This is the inexpensive protector from LifeAlert. It's like having policemen, firemen, and your personal physician on alert in your home, 24 hours a day. Without picking up a phone, this device...

NARRATOR (VO): To be sure, she had a lot of money, though, based on the size of her property, one might already assume this. She was very quiet and kept to herself. As far as the folks in town could tell, she only ever spoke to the young boatmaker, Christof, who lived down the river and owned a small topography practice. Wandering through the empty house, I was able to confirm that, indeed, the two spoke, often, and my ailing father had reported secret dealings of a boat that she'd paid Christof to build for her, though he ever couldn't figure out why since she could barely walk, let alone have enough strength to row a boat and face the tides of the Hudson River.

MUSIC: fade in, "The Station Arrival," Trevor Kowalski

MS. REBECCA: I need a boat that will carry me very far. **(echoed fade)**

NARRATOR (VO): I remember the stories my sickly father told me about exploring the abandoned yellow mansion, on the other side of the river from

the giant beige house, where the old man, alongside his eldest and youngest granddaughters, lived in a county at the foot of the Catskills. Today, however, those stories are stuck in photographs and memory, for the house has been totally flipped, renovated by untrained millennials looking to make a quick buck. I don't trust their handiwork for a second. That house should've been condemned.

Then again, county governments can be confusing. Some might even say... dirty. I know my county government certainly has a reputation, of sorts.

But no matter how hard Ms. Rebecca tried, sometimes, the apple truly doesn't fall far from the tree. She, too, like her sneaky grandfather before her, utilized her ownership of the Hudson River-facing estate house as a tax write-off even though she swore she wasn't anything like them, her grandfather and sister, which is why she disappeared years ago. She'd run off to Canada, to meet the man of her dreams, who eventually left her and her unborn son penniless, nowhere left to go.

MS. REBECCA: Tom was a high-ranking officer in the Canadian Air Force. He helped me across the border at the start of the War of the States, the second American Civil War, to a new life in a land that was also on its way to their own civil war, but about 30 years behind.

NARRATOR (VO): Their love lasted, until they had a child.

MS. REBECCA: A boy. And suddenly, our love was redetermined.

NARRATOR (VO): Tom never wanted children--

MS. REBECCA: -- so he left.

NARRATOR (VO): Ms. Rebecca carried the baby to term.

MS. REBECCA: And when the war was over, I moved back across country lines to my homeland, in the shadow of the Catskills.

NARRATOR (VO): Upon reentering the newly formed United Republic of America following the second Civil War, she learned that her grandfather's second estate had been left in her name.

MS. REBECCA: My grandfather was friends with high-ranking officials on the winning side, and so, we were allowed to keep both properties.

NARRATOR (VO): The locals called her "The Mute," for when she and her son went into town, she spoke seldom, to anyone, except the boatmaker Christof. Then, on the eve of his third birthday, her child, much like his mother all those years ago, vanished, disappeared without a trace.

MUSIC: crossfade, "The Verdict," Trevor Kowalski

MS. REBECCA: The state police searched far and wide but never found my child. After a few years, they marked the case officially cold, and all investigations stopped.

NARRATOR (VO): Ms. Rebecca mourned heavily until her last breath, having been driven that much further into isolation due to the immense grief and suffering she experienced from his disappearance. Local legend states that, for years after her passing, townsfolk would swear that they'd seen Ms. Rebecca walking in and out of town, cloaked in black, but nobody ever took a photograph.

MS. REBECCA: I had all of the belongings in my house tucked away in the adjoining maid's cottage, in the woods behind the main house.

NARRATOR (VO): She grew old there, watching, always watching. Her ghost often wandered the property, as her beloved home slowly crumbled in on itself, another modern ruin tucked away from the tyranny of time,

hidden in plain sight but sun up to sun down under the eagle eye of the old woman.

MS. REBECCA: There are the explorers, the searchers, the mischief makers who find the treasure among the trash, beauty among forlorn and forgotten structures; thousands of raptured buildings around the world, that, like the giant beige house from my adulthood or the giant yellow house from my childhood, have also been tucked away from the tyranny of time, little Hamlets in their own minds, seeking revenge on society by outliving the human species, as if there were no trace of the people who used to live there at all.

NARRATOR (VO): The wanderers like me who seek these vacant and decrepit spaces choose an alternative approach to life, a slanted view of how things are, and they aim to make meaning of something forgotten.

MS. REBECCA: I watch over these architectural bandits as they break into the window in one of the downstairs bedrooms.

SFX: fade in, breaking into the house, wandering around

NARRATOR (VO): -- the same window through which I just entered the house.

MS. REBECCA: I don't mind guests.

NARRATOR (VO): I can imagine that's especially true for me, seeing as how... she seemed to know me. She gave me that look of familiarity from her upstairs window.

MS. REBECCA: Why should I be angry at the curious ones? Most of them are simply trying to figure out the people who used to live here.

NEWS ANCHOR 4: After years of high hopes, investigators have called off the search for a missing boy who disappeared three years ago, seen here...

MUSIC: fade out

SFX: crossfade, wandering into kitchen, echoes of imaginary radio playing ads about convection ovens

NARRATOR (VO): I wander through the dusty hallways, tracing Ms. Rebecca's phantom steps into a kitchen filled with empty pink cabinets, ornate tiled backsplashes, and a wrap-around bench that faces the Chambers Oven and imprinted list of recommended cooking temperatures: for beef, ham, veal, lamb between 300–325 degrees. Biscuits? Between 425–475, and-- so on. I stare up at the speakers in many corners of the house and imagine her calling out to her staff for assistance with any number of chores.

SFX: crossfade, exploring entire house

I pass by yellow bathrooms with more tiled wall fixtures. In a cream-colored study, I discover piles of photographs of a young Ms. Rebecca and her infant son, his light blue eyes and his pale skin staring wistfully at the camera. It feels like he's staring right into my soul.

MUSIC: fade in, "Pyrite," Harbours & Oceans

MS. REBECCA: He looks a bit like you, doesn't he? **(echoed fade out)**

NARRATOR (VO): I head to the top floor where I enter a blue bedroom with a perfect view of the river. I stare at the in-room sink and open up the cabinet above it, and inside, I find an envelope with a birth certificate. It belonged to her missing son.

MS. REBECCA: His name is Peter, born in 1987.

NARRATOR (VO): The same year I was born.

In the attached bathroom, I find burner cell phone refill cards, an untouched bar of soap, and an old bottle of aspirin. I scour the shelves in the hallway and find blueprints for a boat. It's a small boat, and there's a note on the bottom of the document. All it says is:

MS. REBECCA: "Make sure this boat can sail far..." **(echoed fade out)**

NARRATOR (VO): I begin to saunter back down to the first floor, but at the top of the stairs, I notice a cassette, covered in dust on the top of the built-in shelving that's juttred between the bathroom and bedroom. It's labeled, "For Peter," and though I don't have a tape player, I grab it anyway.

I want to know what's on it.

SFX: fade out

I remember the day Ms. Rebecca vanished. It was at the end of summer, the same day my father died. As he took his final breaths, my father told me the news before I could read about it in the newspaper or hear the locals gossip. She was a well-known crone, and it came as a shock to the community. Rumors that the boatmaker Christof had killed her came and went like the Hudson River tides, and he declared his innocence the entire time.

SFX: fade in, master bedroom, finding stereo, inserting tape into deck

As I walk into the master bedroom, I'm flabbergasted by the sight of a small stereo unit sitting in the center of the room. It's battery powered—and it still works. I stare at the tape in my hands, and then slowly, insert it into the deck, and press play.

MS. REBECCA (TAPE): *Peter.*

You don't know me, and I really don't know you—

—though, in my dreams, it feels like I do. I knew someday you'd find me.

The first thing I think about when I imagine you are your small hands. I picture that they're much bigger now though maybe not.

Tape of Ms. Rebecca crossfades out of cassette into VO; SFX fade out

MUSIC: fade in, "Namucuo" By Lotus

My father was short although I barely remember him at this point. He had small hands. Maybe you do too, but I have this feeling that you don't. I have a feeling you have strong hands, hands that operate heavy machinery like your father operated his car, hands that mean what they say and say what they mean.

But these are just moments in my dreams. They come and go like wildfire in the Canadian summer.

I have to keep this brief because I don't have much time. What I want to say: I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for letting you down. I'm sorry that I couldn't share my life with you. I was too young and foolish and had no choice but to abandon you. People may say things and think things about my choice, but it was the best choice—for both of us.

I know you might've wondered about me. Maybe you didn't. What can I tell you? Well. My name is Rebecca. I am the missing granddaughter of the missing criminal Cade Lotus, only they never found my body floating up the St. Lawrence Seaway the way they found his and my eldest sister's. I married a man in the Canadian military, but we fought, and I wasn't cut out for motherhood, the way he wasn't cut out for fatherhood, so I left you in good care, with people who could raise you and teach you.

But the man I married—he was not your father. The man you grew up with was your real father, the man who helped me escape. I am your mother.

I could never have predicted any of this. I wish I could say that I love you, but that would be unfair—just know, I feel like I could, but that would be up to your discretion. Not that it matters anymore. I’m about to board a boat on the river, at the end of the dock, nestled up to the giant beige house at the end of a very long driveway, and I’m about to cross over. I’ve been sick for quite some time, and the boatmaker has prepared me for my journey.

The house is yours, if you want it, though if I were you, I’d leave it and let nature take it back.

Ms. Rebecca’s voice crossfades back into soundscape, cassette tape

If you think about it that way, the land, the property we may call ours in life never really belongs to us in the end.

I wish you all the happiness in the world.

SFX: stop tape, crossfade, summer day exterior of giant beige house

MUSIC: fade out

SFX: crossfade, summer day interior, inside the house

NARRATOR (VO): All these years, and this was the truth my father kept from me.

I stare out the window and wonder how small I look in its frame, just a passing glance inside the giant beige house at the end of a very long driveway.

And I myself wonder, “How much of this story is true?”

MUSIC: “Tend,” reprise, Trevor Kowalski

SFX: fade out

How much of this story is made up?” But it doesn’t matter because I feel happy. I feel safe inside this abandoned sanctuary.

And I look out across the water, and I see America.

I love my country, but inside these crumbling walls, I think for the first time,
I'm truly able to see it in a new light.

BLAKE (VO): If you're just tuning in, welcome to the third season of *abandoned: The All-American Ruins Podcast*. Join me as I take you on an immersive sonic journey, recounting my expeditions of abandoned spaces across the United States which I transform into fantastical audio experiences that allow you, dear listener, to dive into my imagination with me-- or, maybe inspire you to go out and use your own.

And that's a wrap for season 3! I have a small favor to ask you: please tell your friends about this show. Subscribe on Apple Podcasts, on Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts -- and don't forget to rate and review the show. Also, if you like to read or enjoy amateur photography, just know that each episode this season is adapted from the original *All-American Ruins* blog where you can catch up on more of my adventures. Just visit: allamericanruins.com, or follow me on Instagram at [@allamericanruins](https://www.instagram.com/allamericanruins).

abandoned: The All-American Ruins Podcast is hosted, written, edited, and produced by me, Blake Pfeil, with studio space courtesy of Radio Kingston, WKNY, AM 1490, FM 107.9 in Kingston, NY. Also, a huge shoutout to my big brother Ryan who provided very valuable feedback on every script for every episode this season.

And thank you, my friend, for taking time to explore these abandoned spaces with me.

MUSIC: out

#####

END