

BLAKE (VO): Heads-up: this episode contains frank discussions of suicide, so take care of yourself if you need to.

Hey there. 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*.

[fade in: "Lay Down with Me" - HANNA LINDGREN]

Nick and the Assassination of JFK.

CRONKITE: ... this is from the United Press, Dallas. President Kennedy and Governor John Connally have cut down by assassin's bullets in Downtown Dallas...

ANCHOR: ... the George Washington Bridge has the unfortunate distinction for being a suicide destination. This year, there have already been thirteen suicides...

[fade in: EXT. field tape]

BLAKE (TAPE): Well, we are at the Irish Center of Pittsburgh, which is abandoned. We're not sure when it was abandoned, but it was...

BLAKE (VO): As it turns out, it's a bit taxing to tell a story about an abandoned Irish center in Pittsburgh that weaves through the deaths of JFK, an Irish Catholic from Massachusetts who was murdered; and my first love, Nick, my ex, an Irish Catholic from Connecticut who killed himself.

BLAKE (TAPE): ... and there is a dead groundhog that we've just walked by. And there's, like, all of this dilapidated concrete. How would you describe what we're seeing?

JULIE (TAPE): It looks like a-- definitely a disused building made of concrete. It's a bit stained on the outside.

BLAKE (TAPE): Yeah.

JULIE (TAPE): The roof is a bit dilapidated and--

BLAKE (TAPE): Is that door open?

[fade out: EXT. field tape]

JULIE (TAPE): Yeah, I think so. And the pool is empty, it's very overgrown. There's...

BLAKE (TAPE): Wow.

BLAKE (VO): But before we get to that: at the core of the story, of course, sits an abandoned building. At first glance, it looks like all cinder block buildings look: cold, commonplace, cost-effective. I realize that doesn't mean all cinder block buildings are cold, commonplace, and cost-effective; perhaps if I'd noticed the conspicuous, classy, capital letters plopped on the side of the building, "IRISH CENTRE," that first glance would've felt different.

Besides, when I finally do see the words "IRISH CENTRE," dark green, with a distinct, bold font, the Irish in my bones unfurls, having already been gently awakened by the dreamy, winding hillsides and 446 bridges that make up the City of Pittsburgh. It's dreary, which, in these particular circumstances, pleases my spirit because sometimes, these sorts of gray days can transform the ruins of America into a reverie, as if I'm navigating a

totally different dimension (or at the very least, a different planet). Every once in a while, I'll imagine an empty film set for an apocalyptic movie that was never released because the entire cast and crew just vanished. I do that sometimes, especially if I'm listening to a recording of a motion picture score like *Gone Girl* or *Blade Runner*.

I've said it ad nauseum: It's fun to play pretend. There are countless made-up scenarios to choose from.

CRONKITE: ... the shots were fired, the President, his limp body, carried in the arms of his wife Jacqueline, was rushed to Parkland Hospital. And if you'll excuse me...

[fade out: "Lay Down with Me"]

[fade in: car interior soundscape]

BLAKE (VO): Not that any of this matters at the moment; Julie and I don't have time to stop anyway. Our names are on a list for a hard-hat tour of the Carrie Blast Furnace, a once-abandoned, now-revitalized Pittsburgh Steel Boom icon, located in the Swissvale neighborhood, a "remnant of the once massive, legendary U.S. Homestead Steel Works... a vestige of Pittsburgh's 20th-century domination of the steel industry," to quote the Rivers of Steel homepage. We have a great time.

JULIE (TAPE): ... I'd much rather talk to a rock and probably get more interesting informat-- I won four dollars.

BLAKE (TAPE): Did you really?

JULIE (TAPE): Yeah.

BLAKE (VO): As we head back to our Airbnb from the Carrie Blast Furnace, I remain unconvinced that we should go poke about a boarded-up cinder block building. I don't even know that it's the Irish Centre of Pittsburgh — yet.

But this is why we're here: this trip is a small birthday gift I gave myself, to reconnect with this hobby for a moment. It's been a while. Not for any particular reason, just life-- got to life-ing again. We're not in a pandemic anymore, apparently.

BIDEN: ... the pandemic is over. We still have a problem with Covid. We're still doing a lot of work on it. But the pandemic is over...

[fade in: "Thyone" - BEN ELSON]

JULIE (TAPE): ... the water, if a kid roams... they don't want anyone to die.

BLAKE (tape): Drownny-drownerson!

BLAKE (VO): We ditch the car at a public park across the street and head out on foot, up a slight hill with no sidewalk, making sure to stay as far off the slim, twisted road as possible before we reach safety. Once we set foot on the property, something happens. A quick burst of wind grazes my face, wraps around my shoulders, and continues on, into the wiles of the building. It stuns me. I fall behind Julie for a moment.

"Nick? "That you?"

"Hey, Beaux."

Beaux and Bello. That's what we called each other, me and Nick. I don't even know how we landed there, and it's a lil cringey. And also sweet. Young lovers are stupid. And also, sweet. The sound of traffic from

Interstate 376 hovers in the distance, and I stand still, listening for his voice.

Oh, Nick. It figures you would show up the day after my birthday, a couple weeks before your birthday, just over a month after the anniversary of the day you died.

[fade in: echoed Nick laughter]
[fade out: Pittsburgh soundscape]

I met Nick in an elevator bay, though I don't have much memory of it. Apparently our parents were staying at the same hotel during freshmen orientation week, and we were all leaving the hotel at the same time. Everybody introduced themselves, and I guess Nick and I shook hands. After he reminded me, the memory came slightly more into focus, but to this day, it still feels like a dream.

Then again, everything surrounding my relationship with Nick feels like a dream: our tumultuous but usually loving relationship, all the way up until January 2011 when I was taken into custody of the National Korean Police after Nick, unbeknownst to me, sent me a care package with weed cookies in it. (That's a much longer story for another time.)

When I got back to the States, I waited a few years to see Nick, and when I did, he apologized. We ate a nice lunch together on the Upper West Side, took a walk through Central Park. He told me about his life. That was the last time I saw him. It's strange to lose the first love of your life to suicide, but on Sept. 17, 2017, I got the phone call I somehow always knew I'd get.

[fade in: kitchen phone ringing]

BLAKE (tape): Hello? Hey. Y-yeah, I'm si-- this is about Nick, isn't it...

[fade out: “Thyone”]

[fade in: exterior Irish Centre - day]

JULIE (tape)

... I think this is open. Yes...

BLAKE (VO): Julie and I approach a side door where the urbex gods give us a wink (“urbex” meaning urban exploration).

JULIE (tape): Hello! Hello? K, I think we’re good.

BLAKE (VO): A key is, quite literally, in the door, which is ajar, so we waltz right in. Immediately, I’m silently praising Julie for insisting that we stop to scope it out. I didn’t think it would happen. That’s why it’s always important to investigate.

BLAKE (tape): ... Irish step dance... all these checks? Like, why would you keep a check from 1974? ...

BLAKE (VO): We stare down a hallway that seems to stretch on for centuries, tiled and cold, and I hear the leaky roof dripping above us. I immediately picture all the mold that could be floating all around us. I carelessly forgot to bring my mask. To our right is a bathroom with broken mirrors, clogged toilets, no lights, and a cart that’s weirdly chained up.

JULIE (TAPE): Alright, let me get my flashlight...

BLAKE (VO): We cross the hall to a utility closet. It’s packed to the brim with an assortment of chemicals, paper products, Christmas decorations, and milk cartons.

[fade in: “Dispersals” - HANNA LINDGREN]

As we continue down the hall, the Irish-ness of the place starts to become clearer and clearer. Framed photographs featuring years of volunteers, Gaelic painted up and down the corridor. As the main event hall comes into full view, we spot a giant Irish flag painted on the back wall. I start to hear ghostly echoes of Irish step dancing.

[fade in: Irish step dancing]

Julie makes an immediate right turn into a library that is filled with hundreds of books about Irish history, culture, politics. Awards for the step dance team, Pepsi cans from the '90s, magazines, and a plethora of photo albums documenting a lush and colorful history of the Centre.

BLAKE (TAPE): Ooh, a social security card.

JULIE (TAPE): For real?

BLAKE (TAPE): Yep.

JULIE (TAPE): What the fuck...

BLAKE: I pull a giant scrapbook off the wall and open it. Newspaper clippings about the assassination of JFK from *The Pittsburgh Press* are shoddily pasted inside, every article featuring a publication date between November 22 and November 25 (1963). I start to hear JFK's commanding, Massachusettsian voice booming throughout the Centre.

JFK: ... *his sense of the human tragedy fortified him against self-deception and easy consolation....*

BLAKE (VO): As Julie begins to tear through the library, examining each and every artifact, I hear a faint hum floating down the halls while JFK's voice fades into obscurity.

[fade in: “Greensleeves” humming]

JFK: *...because he understood the ordeal as well as the triumph of the human spirit, he gave his age strength with which to overcome despair...*

BLAKE (VO): “Greensleeves.” I love that song. “Nick?”

[fade out: “Greensleeves” humming]

[fade out: “Dispersals”]

I head to the great, vacant event hall, which is divided in half by a metal railing. The stage is prominently featured at the back of the room, and dust covers everything. There are piles of old paper scattered all over the floor, bank statements, purchase orders, invoices, checks, donation receipts, decades of logs tracking money going in and out of the Centre. I glance outside at the empty, deserted pool and think about Nick’s love of the ocean.

[fade in: SFX, Long Island Sound]

His body was buried on the shores of the Long Island Sound, in Connecticut, in his hometown. I glance down at the floor and staring back at me is a heads-up penny.

[fade in: “Arc of Transcendence” - LAMA HOUSE]

A chill rushes up and over my shoulders. If I didn’t know it before, I can confirm it now: Nick’s here.

[fade out: Long Island Sound SFX]

[fade in: NYC soundscape]

The last time I saw Nick, he walked me to my part-time job as a box office clerk in a theater on 42nd Street. As we navigated Times Square, I kept

thinking about all the heads-up pennies that he'd saved for me over the years. It was our little game: every heads-up penny I found, I gave to him.

"For good luck, or whatever," I giggled the first time.

At the end of college, Nick surprised me with a bag of heads-up pennies that he'd collected over the years. Each coin was laminated into a small piece of paper that had the date, time, and location it was discovered. It was the most romantic gift I ever got. In college, Nick was constantly compared to Penn Badgley, the teenage heartthrob from the original *Gossip Girl* series. One time, he even changed his Facebook profile pic to a photo of Penn Badgley, and nobody noticed.

After he died, I started to see heads-up pennies, everywhere. At first, I convinced myself that it was my way of grieving, that this is how my brain was trying to cope with the loss. And maybe that's true.

But then this one time, on the one-year anniversary of Nick's death, I was meeting a friend, Isabel, who you met last season, for lunch at a cafe in upstate NY. When she walked in, a very handsome man in a baseball cap and sunglasses followed behind her. He sat down at the table next to us. I mouthed the words "Holy shit, he's hot" to Isabel, but she became noticeably uncomfortable, so I dropped it.

At the end of the meal, as we left the cafe, I opened the door to the street and almost stepped on a heads-up penny. As I knelt down to pick it up, I asked Isabel why she got so uncomfy.

"Oh, I just hate to bother celebrities when they're out in the world," she said.

"Celebrities? Who was that?"

“Blake, that was Penn Badgley.”

That story was not in my imagination. That story is 100% true.

[fade out: “Arc of Transcendence”]

[fade in: Irish Centre soundscape]

As the memories of my last walk with Nick and the all-too-coincidental Penn Badgley incident rush through me, I grab the coin on the ground of the main hall in the Irish Centre and pocket it as I make my way onto the stage. As I walk up, I find another heads-up coin. A dime.

“Okay, Nick. I get it. Hi.”

I stand on the stage of this abandoned cinder block Irish community center. The floorboards make a noise, like ghosts trying to tiptoe. Nick wanted to live up here, onstage. In college, he expressed how badly he wanted to be an actor like me. It put a strain on our relationship as did many other things. Young love. I stare out at the empty audience and picture it packed to the brim with Irish people, clapping and stomping along with the dancers.

I smile. In the reverb of the room, I sing, to Nick:

BLAKE (tape)

*Alas, my love, you do me wrong
To cast me off discourteously
And I have loved you, oh so long
Delighting in your company
Greensleeves was my delight
Greensleeves, my heart of gold
Greensleeves was my heart of joy
And who but my lover, Greensleeves?*

[fade in: "Moon Rain" - ELFL]

BLAKE (VO): After I finish singing, I sit and stare into the audience. Nick's there. He's smiling. "Hi, Bello," he whispers, though it sounds like he's right next to me. "I miss you," I whisper back. "I'm proud of you," he responds.

[fade in: Boston nighttime soundscape]

I close my eyes and picture his big, strong arms wrapped around me, those summer days in Boston when everything felt free and easy, the nights under the stars as we'd stroll the streets of Cambridge until 3:00 in the morning, laughing, talking, loving each other. In the silence of this cinder block building, I open my eyes again. Nick's gone.

[fade out: Boston nighttime soundscape]

I pull the penny out of my pocket. The stillness is undercut by the faint sound of traffic that continues to roar from the distant bridge, the rambunctious ruffling of Julie pouring through the objects left behind in the library. It's these kinds of moments where I feel the most alive, the most centered, the most at home in these sanctuaries of forgotten memory.

"Goodbye, Nick," I whisper into the air, as I place the penny back into my pocket.

NICK: Hey, let's watch ourselves... **(echoed)**

NICK: No, the green light's always there... **(echoed)**

[fade in, out: echoed Nick laughter]

If you're just tuning in, welcome to the third season of *abandoned: The All-American Ruins Podcast*. Join me every other week 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.

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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. Special thanks to Steph Bechler who gave me the greatest gift of old videos of Nick and I together, a couple pieces which I integrated into this story. 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.

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