

MARIA: I'm Maria Maddox, and this is *Mouthful of Ghosts*, a podcast about ghosts, grief, and the things that haunt us. On this first episode, I talk to Blake Pfeil.

BLAKE: I live in upstate New York. I am a storyteller by trade, and that bleeds into multidisciplinary storytelling through audio, cinema, and stage, as well as music.

MARIA: He is the creator and the host of the award-winning *abandoned, the All American Ruins* podcast. If you haven't listened to it yet, do yourself a favor and go check it out. You will not regret it. It is quite the experience.

I should also disclose that Blake is a dear friend of mine.

Blake and I met when I was working at History Colorado and I was one of the producers of their documentary podcast, *Lost Highways*. Blake was invited to produce two episodes for our season five, our last season, and that is how we met.

During the day, Blake works for Radio Kingston, and earlier this year he invited me on as a guest for *The Pfeil File*. I'll play you a clip from our conversation.

BLAKE (The Pfeil File): I have this theory now that people who grew up with earthquakes as kind of a status quo, I think you're just more grounded people.

When I first met you, one of the first things I felt from you was just like a very, like, and maybe you don't feel this inside, but from the outside, there just felt like there was just very, like, I don't know, I don't want to say calm, but definitely like a person who knew the Earth and understood the Earth very well.

MARIA (The Pfeil File): Yeah, well, I will accept calm. I think you could describe me that way. But similarly, when I first met you, it was so easy to connect. And I also felt kind of like at ease within, I don't know, a few minutes of talking to you. You also have, like, I don't know, maybe anxious but also soothing energy. Is that a thing?

BLAKE (The Pfeil File): That's exactly, that's like what's on my birth certificate. Is anxious but soothing. I think I told you this when we first met...

MARIA: I'm so happy to start the season with him. And I hope you enjoy the show.

BLAKE: I liked the notion of things being pretty and making sure that my life was a fairytale and was a really good story and actually, you know, because of that, I lied a lot as a kid. I told the most inconsequential lies. I think I bring them up in one of the episodes from the upcoming season of *All American Ruins*, but I think because I was so almost addicted to things being perfect, picture perfect, and there being this beautiful fairy tale story, the opposite of that, there was this almost subconscious need to kind of rid myself of a lot of that thinking and abandon buildings.

There's nothing really, you know, first glance, there's nothing beautiful about them. But I think something that I was craving subconsciously as a child was, where's the mess? Where can we find the beauty in the mess? Of course, aesthetically speaking, you know, if you look at any of the images of an abandoned space, there is something very appealing about it.

There's something in the grotesqueness that is charming. And, and also, they're relics. They are representative of a history. And in, you know, history, the word story is built right into that word. I think from sun-up to sun-down, we are telling a story. Either to ourselves or to the rest of the world. And these places, man, they tell a story.

They tell, they tell a lot of stories. And I think that's why they're so beautiful.

MARIA: Blake grew up in Colorado Springs, Colorado, where there was this abandoned dairy farm that is the subject of his first episode, "Prologue, Anemoia."

BLAKE (All-American Ruins): At the mouth of that very suburban neighborhood where I took my first steps, there was an abandoned dairy farm. It looked haunted, but not in a bad way. The structure itself made up of a few stone buildings, a barn, and a brick silo, was inviting, at least to my six-year-old self. I was always drawn to this property by an unknown source.

I don't know if I would call it paranormal, though it did always feel like something ethereal. was calling out to me to come and explore the wondrous decay of it all.

BLAKE: The genesis of *All American Ruins* was when I was six years old, there was this abandoned dairy farm that I talk about ad nauseum, and the first time that I broke in, as a kid, I remember so clearly standing up in that space and instantly feeling like I know this place. I, I've never been here, but I, I know this.

(Clip: It was almost as though I knew it was gonna be around every corner.)

The word anemoia describes the sensation that you somehow know a time or a place that wasn't part of who you are, wasn't part of your history, but somehow feels very familiar to you. I think the feeling is just a, it's, it's sort of a grandiose extension of the power of our imagination to create story for us and to create understanding and to create meaning in things.

I think it is natural for our brains to feel this vicarious nostalgia. It's beautiful.

BLAKE (All-American Ruins): I don't remember the day the farm burned down. I must have blocked it out of my memory, but recently. I was reminded by my mother that we went as a family to watch it go up in flames.

Years later, I felt like someone had ripped my heart out of my chest when I returned once again to the site of the collapsing dairy farm and found it had been completely bulldozed over and revitalized by overpriced condos.

They're about a million bucks a piece now.

BLAKE: On the flip side, you have gated communities, and I grew up in those. That's my upbringing. Are these very privileged, you know, sort of locked places, but there's something very ominous about them. If you were to fly a drone over the neighborhood I grew up in and look at the sameness of every single house down the line and these HOAs and, you know, this, that, and the other thing, it's quite horrifying.

I think about people like Ahmaud Arbery, who was murdered running in a pretty, you know, well-kept, how-to-do neighborhood simply because of the color of his skin.

(Archival tape): *I'm sure you saw the news about Ahmaud Arbery.*

It looks like murder. The American public saw the video.

BLAKE: You know, growing up as a queer person in an incredibly conservative and closed-minded region of the country, I got really used to, I'm kind of actually making this connection live and in living color right now, I got used to that presentational aspect of life.

And it was challenging for me to know that behind the closed doors of my family, we were experiencing all of this trouble with my parents' marriage, and, you know, my brother and sister and I going through all of our various emotional, you know, capacities and struggles.

I don't find real life to be all that appealing, and so why not go play pretend a little bit, and, you know, play a little bit of this? Do it inside an abandoned building where life used to exist. And you know, the energy, if we're going to use that word, the ghosts, as it were, are still hanging out. And I just, I feel very connected to it.

Clip: *When something happens, it can leave a trace of itself behind. It's like, it's like if someone burns toast. Well, maybe things that happen leave other kind of traces behind. Not things that anyone can notice, but things that people who shine can see.*

MARIA: If you have any questions, comments, suggestions, please reach out, don't be shy. I would love to hear from you, seriously.

[Music]

MARIA: I was thinking that even when I wasn't consuming scary movies, I loved *The Shining*, and I've watched it so many times. It's been a while, but I watched it a lot of times, and I remember I loved watching it around Christmas time.

BLAKE: Ooh, interesting.

MARIA: When Colorado used to get a lot of snow, like some, a number of years ago, and I was like, yeah, this is the perfect movie to watch around Christmas time.

And I also felt like the movie was home in a way. I did feel that kinship with the movie and in your recent eulogy about Shelley Duvall.

BLAKE (All-American Ruins): I was in awe of this frail woman with big teeth and stringy black hair frantically scurrying around the dreamlike set of the Overlook Hotel. Waving a kitchen knife and sporting a periwinkle bathrobe that was almost identical to a bathrobe my mom wore when I was younger.

In fact, one time, I even made a side-by-side comparison video of the two, and sure as shit, their outfits and hair color look almost identical.

MARIA: Can you tell me more about that movie and your affinity to Shelley Duvall and scary movies in general?

BLAKE: Yeah, to start, I'm absolutely tickled by this notion that *The Shining* is a holiday film. I mean, that is just the most incredible thing. And I'm going to now make it a Christmas tradition to watch *The Shining*.

I mean, I watch *The Shining* probably 10 times a year. Actually, really interesting thing about *The Shining* and sound. So, last year, I got my boyfriend and I tickets to go see *The Shining* at the Metrograph, which is this really cool movie theater in New York City that only plays original 35mm prints. The sound in that movie, when you are in a theater, You really get to hear what Stanley Kubrick was doing with sound, and I think that there is a lot more there than most of us probably have been able to hear.

I don't know, there's just such a dreaminess to it. The whole thing feels like a long dream. I think dreams are pleasurable to us because they present an alternate reality where things are weird, and they are hard to understand, but they're, they break up the monotony of everyday life, and it's a, it's a singular experience.

It's something that we cannot convey to other people. It's impossible to convey the feeling of a dream. And I think *The Shining*, it felt like, it feels like *The Shining* is like, it's like a group dream. It's like a dream that we can all enjoy together. The way that the camera moves over the course of the film, the way that the story is told.

And then, as far as Shelley Duvall is concerned... I mean, what is there to say about originality more than the life and times of Shelley Duvall? There is a great podcast actually called *Texas Twiggy* that is about Shelley Duvall.

(Archive: Texas Twiggy): From 1970 into the early 2000s, Shelley was an actor, poet, model, producer, singer, CEO, screenwriter, recording artist, and fashion icon.

BLAKE: This is a woman who was chastised for the way that she looked, chastised for the way that she sounded, for the way that she dressed. Mama did not give a fuck. She did her thing, and she did it boldly and proudly and eventually, it did get the best of her. We watched the way that society beat her. From all angles into this mental illness that we all watched unfold with that horrific exploitation of her on the Dr. Phil show some years ago, but my god like, talk about a visionary this woman, the things that she did. She was just an extraordinary talent. Aside from fairy tale theater, her portrayal of Wendy Torrance, I mean, that is a mother who will do literally anything for her child.

(Shelley Duvall clip): You just had a bad dream. Everything's okay.

BLAKE: And I'm very close with my mother and I think that's the other piece of it is I just have this deep connection to my mom. And so, watching Shelley Duvall play this character of Wendy Torrance, I think that at its core, *The Shining* is a story about motherhood. And what one has to go through, what women have to go through, in order to just raise their children.

MARIA: ...prestigious cinema awards, whatever, they don't usually...

BLAKE: Ever.

MARIA: And I think, why not? These are some of the best actors and actresses and storylines...

BLAKE: I also, there's a part of me that's kind of like, I don't know, I kind of want to keep horror for us. You know, There's a great series on Shudder called *Queer for Fear*, and it is all about the history of horror and how it is.

It is integral to the queer history and queer experience all the way from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* up to the sequel to *The Exorcist* that was horrible.

(Clip): As queer people, we are considered outside of society, and I think horror is outside of society.

BLAKE: It's a four-part series on Shudder. That really just like opened my mind to understanding why I was so fucking fascinated with horror as a child and why I saw it was, and I think that's also part of the addict in me too, is just like seeking that thrill and like that, just that stimulation that is out of the ordinary from a regular day.

(Clip): It's a perfect night for mystery and horror. The air itself is filled with monsters.

MARIA: So, maybe horror is kind of like a pretty natural refuge for people who feel different.

BLAKE: Yeah, you know, also, I think it's kind of similar. I mean, horror and true crime are interchangeable, I think, in a lot of ways. Karen Kilgareff and Georgia Hardstark talk about this ad nauseam on their podcast, which is my favorite podcast called *My Favorite Murder*.

And they talk about how people growing up, they would be so obsessed with true crime and people would look at them like they were weird. They didn't want to talk about it at parties.

(My Favorite Murder clip): Yeah. I think the people who are into, into murder and into true crime are curious fucking people who want to, who want to know the dark side, even if they know that it's going to affect them and ruin them a little bit.

And some, some people are like, I just don't wanna know. Which completely makes sense, but I'm just, I've never been that.

BLAKE: And it helps them to continually be alert and present in the world 'cause there are a lot of monsters in the world. We are not the monsters. And so I think about that a lot too, just like the reason I engage with it so much is because it helps, it strangely helps quell my anxieties about being alive and being different.

(My Favorite Murder clip): And I think this in the exact same way that Karen and Georgia talk about true crime being a thing that they not only could quell their anxieties over, but then find community in.

I've always talked to my therapist, like how great it would be just to be like a bucking. I want to just live my life in suburbia and be unaware of all the awful things that can happen.

And I wish, I really truly wish I wanted to be that way. But you don't, but I'm so fucking happy I'm not. Me too. Cause then we get to do this. Yeah, we're dark, and it's okay.

(Clip): Too dark? No, no such thing as too dark.

MARIA: Quick note: When Blake and I spoke, he said he had recently lost his best friend, Julie Novak. So, the conversation gets pretty emotional. In a good way, I think. But just so you know, listen with care.

BLAKE (All-American Ruins): I stare at this room full of ghosts, eating their boxed lunches and laughing, and I begin to feel warm on this blustery day...

... where I go In search of ghosts.

MARIA: Ghosts are regulars on your show, and I would love to hear: how would you define a ghost? Do you believe in them? Do you have any experiences? Or, what role do they play in your show?

BLAKE: Yeah, I mean, the whole show is about haunting. I'm, I mean, I'm fucking obsessed with ghosts. I think about them all the time. It's probably the thing I think about the most. And I just think it's such a beautiful concept.

I think buildings can be ghosts.

I think buildings can house ghosts.

I think that ghosts can be history.

I've actually been doing a lot of thinking about the word ghost recently because I just lost my best friend, Julie Novak, who was my main exploration buddy. We traveled all over the world. Exploring together, and not just abandoned spaces, but just being present in places where we didn't know, places that were unfamiliar to us.

And Julie, my god, since she died on August 31st, she is not being subtle about sticking around. When I was in Leicester, England, this past week... I was at the Festival of Media Stories at the University of Leicester, a different podcast that I work on. We were being honored there. Julie was a huge personality and she was on camera by spirit. She couldn't help herself. She loved not just being on camera, but she also loved being the person asking the questions, being in your role the way that you are right now. I was on

the red carpet as it were, and there was a camera and they were asking me questions, and then out of nowhere, we have this on tape, it's extraordinary, there was a door to my right and it just I mean, it swung open with a force that I cannot explain to you, and then the light in the room turned on.

It's one of those rooms where you walk in and the lights turn on. So the door swung open first, and then the light turned on. And I thought to myself, of course this is when Julie decides to haunt me today... she would, he would interrupt an interview to be like, 'Hey, I'm here, ask me questions too.'

But right now, for me, ghosts are memories.

Ghost is the attempt for the brain to hold onto the physical manifestation of the spirit of the person with whom we had some sort of attachment. My current reality, I'm being haunted every day by the, the spirit of my best friend, who again, is not being subtle. Whether or not these are instances of that are just flukes, it doesn't really matter.

But a ghost, to me, is a comfort.

And a ghost to me is, it's just a spirit that says you have to keep going. We get one shot as far as we know, in this life, and you have to keep going. And if it means that I'm gonna, you know, pop in every once in a while and make myself known, even though you can't see me... it's just gonna be the little like, 'Hi, I'm still here. Tap, tap, tap. I'm still here. And you have to keep doing what you're doing. And if you don't, then you're

doing a disservice to my memory and to my legacy as a friend of yours, or as a lover, or as a family member, or whatever. ‘

MARIA: I was just going to share the little research that I read like two days ago that I thought maybe you might appreciate . It's these college professors. They're teaching at nursing schools and socialwork, and they published a paper about paranormal experiences and bereavement, in Finland. And they found that something, something like 40 to 70 percent of people that had a strong attachment to a loved person who died experienced their presence.

But because there's so much stigma and people don't want to seem crazy, they don't talk about it. And their paper was kind of saying it's doing a disservice to people because it helps with the grieving process, and it's key to your well-being, actually.

And then, it also comes from attachment theory, and it poses that if you have a strong attachment to someone, it doesn't just stop. You continue to have an attachment and even your relationship can evolve over time.

BLAKE: I've been thinking about this a lot. I don't think I'm ever going to stop learning from Julie. I don't think that she's going to go away. And I think our relationship will continue to evolve in ways that are unimaginable and will happen of their own volition.

You know, she was, she was enigmatic, and deeply curious. Right before she died, Celeste Lecesne, who is a friend of ours, and he was in her room and asked her how she was feeling about her impending death. Because, you know, when you go on hospice, that is the signal 'Oh, yeah, you're going to die soon.' He asked her how she was feeling about, you know, what it was what it was going to happen...

And all she said was, 'Celeste, I'm really curious.'

And I just love that so much. It's so like indicative of who she was and who she continues to be.

... And wait, I forgot what I was just going to say. Like this keeps happening where I, I think it's part of grief is I've, the idea is there and then an image of her flashes in my mind and it just completely takes over like consciousness that I had. And the one that came to mind. This notion of curiosity and curiosity as a practice of wellness.

When we were in Pittsburgh together last year, Julie and I, we went because we were going to the Carrie Blast Furnaces, and we passed by this building that all it said was Irish Center on it, and Julie was insistent that we go, and I was, for, which is unusual for me, I was very wary of going, I was like, I don't know, it's a little too exposed, whatever, this, that, and the other thing, and she was insistent. And so, I was like, 'Alright, fuck it, fine, like, we're not gonna be able to get in, but okay.'

And when we walked up to the building, there was a key. I have a photograph of it. There was a key literally in the door as if to say, 'Oh no, you must come in. You are very welcome here, and no one's going to get you in trouble.'

I'm really, I have a lot of gratitude for that moment.

I think I have, you know, for my whole life, I think I have wrestled a lot with people telling me that I'm too curious. And so I think there are often times where I psych myself out instead of going with my natural instinct. And that space, I connected to another person of mine who was very important to me who passed on, my ex Nick.

But that never would have happened had Julie not insisted that we go.

And some of the relics in that space, I mean, there were newspaper articles from the week after JFK died, the Pittsburgh Press, these old newspaper articles that are probably worth so much money. I mean, there were just so many relics in this space, and I was so grateful.

I've been thinking about that moment over and over again. Just Julie's insistence.

No, we have to go.

MARIA: If you don't mind talking more about Julie...

BLAKE: I don't mind at all.

MARIA: ... where you guys go to the racetrack for Greyhounds, and I love that you say like you're more introspective, and Julie is just completely gregarious, and she just loves people and you guys see these Couple in their 50s. And your first instinct is like, you don't want to engage with them, seems like, but Julie's like, come on, come on.

BLAKE: Oh, yeah, no, she... So we were, we had been separated in the space at that point, and I saw this couple coming, you know, I was in the top of the stadium at this abandoned greyhound track in Vermont, and I saw them, and I went to go find Julie to be like, we need to get out of here.

And then, I wish you met her.

I could hear her yelling at them to be like 'Hey! hey! we're here!

And I was like 'No, no, no, no, no.'

And she brought them to me. And she was like, 'So he makes a podcast. And I think, Blake, I think you should interview them because they have some really crazy shit. She didn't say this part, but she's like, they have some interesting things they want to talk about.'

And what's so unfortunate is that audio. I did record that interview with Dina, but the wind was so bad and I only had my iPhone that it's unusable audio, unfortunately. I

wanted to make that episode so badly, but it will never happen because the audio is so shitty, and I'm certainly not going to find out how to get in touch with her because, you know, I can only handle so much crazy in my own brain, let alone a conspiracy theorist who believes in some of the craziest shit I've ever heard. But then also, at the same time, it's kind of like, if Julie hadn't had that impetus to be herself, and not even it wasn't even an impetus, it just was, we I wouldn't have had that experience.

I think a ghost is just another way that humans are trying to figure out why we're here.

And what happens, you know, what's unknown is what happens after we die.

And we're just trying to subjugate that a little bit.

And ghosts are a perfect way to do it.

And it's also just like a really pleasing word in the mouth.

'Ghost,' like you're hitting that hard G and then that really nice round O, but that's not very glottal. And then the 'St.'

It's just, it's pleasing.

It's such a specific feeling.

Grief.

I'm trying to make friends with it.

It's really fucking hard.

[Music]

MARIA: This show was created and produced by me, Maria Maddox. You heard original music by Ryan Fiegl and Jared Saltiel.

If you know anyone in your life, a friend, a colleague, a neighbor, who might like this kind of thing, who's into ghosts or maybe grief and messy feelings, Please share. It is the best way you can support the show, by sharing with someone who you think might enjoy it.

I'm Maria Maddox, and this was *Mouthful of Ghosts*.

Thank you for listening.