Episode 252: Blake was arrested for pot cookies

Today's episode comes with a content warning for discussion of suicide.

There's a funny thing about being an American.

I've seen this with some people I know, as well as some of the guests here on the podcast. Living in the United States, it's easy to have the mindset that the way we do things is the way the rest of the world does things. Unless you travel to other countries regularly, and get exposed to other cultures, that's kind of the default thought for a lot of people.

An example of this is tipping. Here in the US, we tip service workers. In fact, I think the tipping culture has gotten way out of hand, but that's a different story. But in other places around the world, they don't expect a tip for good service. In fact, offering extra money for a job well done can be considered kind of an insult or even condescending.

My conversation today is with Blake. He's a US citizen, so he was accustomed to the American way of thinking about a lot of things. Like, the concept that marijuana is not serious drug. And the idea of being innocent until proven guilty.

But while he was in South Korea, he discovered that they think very differently about these things.

Scott
You're an American. Why were you living in South Korea?

Blake
It's a great question. I went to Emerson College for musical theater and, towards the end of my tenure there, I realized that I wasn't quite ready to move to New York City. I have sort of a multi-layered skillset that also includes music and songwriting and journalism. I had been bitten by the travel bug when I was 16 and was really interested in going to travel the world a little bit before I moved to New York to try acting. Four months before I graduated, I was working at Blue Man Group in Boston. My coworker, Marlin, she said, "Hey, I have this strange potential job opportunity in South Korea and wondered if you'd be interested in auditioning for this ESL Children's Theater Company." I thought that's kind of perfect because I can still do theater in a way and have the opportunity to travel places that I never would've gone otherwise. What was really wonderful about that job is I had a month of paid vacation and I had free health insurance and I didn't pay for housing, so it was kind of a perfect first job out of college.

So we auditioned and both got in and suddenly I was in South Korea working at what's called Paju English Village, which is now defunct, but it's basically a government-run theme park where Korean

kids practice their English in these fake “western towns”. So I was flown over to South Korea to develop children's musicals for the Korean government. That was my first job out of college, and that's how I wound up there, and it was the best job I ever had. Truly, such a wonderful, freeing moment in my life where I really got the opportunity to learn what life in the real world was like in an extreme situation

Scott
And still doing what you love.

Blake
And still doing what I love. Another benefit to all of this is I had been in a relationship in college with a gorgeous specimen named Nicholas John Casey, and young love is very intense, and I was basically fresh out of the closet. So that first relationship really meant a lot to me and was very important and I think it's one of those things that, when you're young, everything is very heightened and everything feels very important. So when we broke up at the end of college, it was an opportunity for me to really eject myself from that situation because it wasn't necessarily a good pairing at the time. We both suffered from mental health issues and it just wasn't a good match, but we remained really good friends, and that's important context for this story because it was truly the other reason I wound up going to Korea to kind of get myself away from that situation physically.

Scott
And how old were you at the time when you went to South Korea?

Blake
I graduated when I was 22. I turned 23 in October of 2010 after I had been there for a few months. So yeah, 22 to 23.

Scott
So you hadn't been there very long, but were you kind of– obviously, being in a completely foreign country, were you kind of homesick for “American things” like– what did you miss the most?

Blake
Chipotle and Gushers were my two big missings. I'm a simple gal from a suburban small town in Colorado, and never really realized how much I appreciated the corporate musings. Those were the kinds of things that I missed, those two in particular stick out to me, but I was so excited to be in a new place and develop a new way of seeing the world that it was actually more challenging to come back to the United States after being away for that year and readjusting to American life again, where I didn't have free health insurance and people didn't really follow the rules on the New York City subway the way that they do on the Seoul Metro, and it took me a lot longer, I think, to readjust to the American in me after coming back.

Scott

Okay. Well this all started on a Wednesday. Tell us what happened.

Blake
One of the many benefits of having so many lovely family and friends back in the States at this time is that people would send me care packages. After I got there, Nick and I stayed very much in touch and we talked often on Facebook Messenger. Towards Christmas time, he messaged me on Facebook to let me know that he had sent me a care package with what he said, “All of your favorites inside” I was so excited and I said, “Oh my gosh. Tell me what's in it.” And he said, “Nope, it's a surprise. It's just all of your favorite things.” So, I was so thrilled because I knew this package was coming. It wound up showing up about two weeks after Christmas, and I get a notification from the village that this package has arrived for me.

What's really interesting about this whole story is– just also for context, I'm an alcoholic in recovery and, at the time, I was kind of at the beginning of my rock bottom. For an alcoholic or an addict, getting to your rock bottom can often take years and years. For me, it took about three and I would say it really started when I was in South Korea. I had gotten drunk the night before. I went to go get the package and I wandered into the large building which looked like a giant city hall building to see if I could grab the package, having no clue what was about to go down. It always is amazing to me to think back to that moment and have such gratitude that there weren't security cameras because it would've made it look like I knew something was wrong and that something was about to happen, which I did not. Luckily, I had the Facebook conversation with Nick to back that up.

Scott
Let me just ask you. This building– was it something like what we would think of like a post office?

Blake
The post office was inside of this– I mean it looked like a giant city hall building and, inside that building towards the back, right there was this office that was the “post office”.

Scott
Okay. So that's where your package was.

Blake
Yeah. Whenever we got a package, we had to sign for it in this office. It's the middle of January, 2011, and I walk into this post office to sign for this package. As I'm signing for the package, the woman who worked at the counter who I had gotten very friendly with and we had gotten to know each other, she gave me this look as she handed me the package that felt off to me. As the package was landing in my hands, I suddenly had this moment where I thought, “Oh my God, I think Nick sent me drugs.” The reason that thought entered my head is because, before I had moved to South Korea, I had read up quite a bit about what the situation with drugs was in South Korea and marijuana is treated as a very serious narcotic. They see it as more dangerous than some of the club drugs that you might think of

when you think of really serious drugs, and I don't really know the reason that's true. Again, this is 2011, things may have changed.

At the time, Korea was in the beginning phases of really becoming a world cultural superpower. This is right before Gangnam Style hit the charts and K-pop got big. So I was really on the cutting edge of Korean culture, if I do say so myself. I think after the Korean conflict and after the country had to start over again, they very quickly developed this culture of no laziness. So suicide rates are extremely high in South Korea because people are overworked. I think marijuana is known as the lazy drug, so I think that's why it's treated as such. But regardless, I knew how serious drugs were and vowed that I wouldn't even touch anything while I was there, because I was still active at the time. But as she handed me this package, this thought dropped in my head and I could feel my stomach drop out.

I walked out of the post office. As I was walking towards the doors of this city hall building, two men truly out of nowhere came behind these pillars and stopped me. One of the two men said, “Are you Blake Pfeil?” I said yes, and I knew instantly what was about to happen even though I didn't know the full-fledge situation. He flashed his badge and told me he was with the National Korean Police Agency, and he took the package out of my hands and escorted me outside. This dark minivan pulled up and the door opened, and there were several officers inside. I was asked to get into the car, and we sat there in silence as I waited for my boss, Mickey, to come out of the main office, get in the front seat of the car, and he turned around and he said. Do you know what's in this package? And I said, “I don't, Mickey.” And he said, “Are you sure?” I said, “I'm positive.”

Scott
Obviously, you didn't want to mention the hunch that you had when you were handed the package.

Blake
Of course. No way. Because it was twofold. One, the package has drugs in it, but two, it is from an ex-boyfriend. My mind was spinning out of control with all of these robust what-if situations that really scared me because homosexuality in South Korea at the time - again, this might have changed - was treated as if it didn't even exist, almost worse than the hate I think a lot of people in other countries receive as a queer person there. It's almost like indifference. They just pretend it doesn't exist. So I had reason to be concerned for two very specific reasons. Mickey said, “Did you know that this package has cookies in it that are laced with marijuana?” I hadn't even opened it yet, and I said, “No, I did not know that.”

Scott
Of course, you couldn't know what was in it. You had not yet opened it. How did they know what was in it?

Blake
The National Korean police being the strict drug enforcers that they are, any package that comes into the country, they open it and they test it. They sniff it with dogs, and this package was no different. So

they had actually opened the package. What's interesting is, as I handed the package over to one of the officers, I could see that it had been sort of jimmy-rigged, taped in a different way than the original. I could see there were two different types of tape on the box, and I had no idea that was the case - that, in Korea, they open all of any package that comes in the country. So that's how they found out and that's how I found out. We all sort of found out. They knew before I did.

So we're sitting in this black van and I have no idea what's next, and Mickey was there to translate for everything. He said, “Okay, well they need to search your apartment.” I said, “That's totally fine. I had nothing to hide.” So we drove this black van up through the streets of Paju English Village and we got to my apartment. I think this was the moment where the story really took a turn because, up until that point, I had it in my head that this was going to be like a brokedown palace situation and that I was going to be thrown in prison for 50 years and it was going to be like a hole to do.

As I entered the apartment, I realized that this flock of 6 National Korean police was not behind me. I turned around and they were all standing on the precipice of my apartment and I said, “Mickey, are they going to come in?” And he said, “Well, they want to know if they should take their shoes off.” That always struck me because I was raised in a country where, if police search your home, there's no politeness to it, there's no manners to it. We come in, we ram our way in, we tear everything apart, and we don't even try to fix it. These men politely removed their shoes, proceeded to search my apartment, ceiling tiles, the whole– I mean, they really went through it all, but they put it all back together at the end. When they didn't find anything, they were all talking in Korean, of course, the whole time to Mickey, and he was responding back and forth and back and forth.

Finally, he said, “Okay, well, they need to take you down to the police station because they have a lot more questions.” And the jurisdiction that they had for me, being a resident alien, was such that they could hold me for up to three days without any question. That was their jurisdiction. I didn't know any of this at the time because I hadn't planned on getting arrested in South Korea. So they officially arrested me and they took me down to the van and, right before I left, I said to Mickey, “Can you ask them if I can grab a granola bar? Because I hadn't eaten that morning and I was hungover.” He asked them, and they responded and he said to me, “Oh no, they're going to take you for an early lunch.” Again, just the disbelief of how this was all unfolding in real time really kind of caught me off guard because I kept expecting the worst and my experience was just completely different than that.

So we got into the car. We start driving down to what eventually is Incheon, which is where the National Korean Police headquarters is. As we were about to get on the Jayu-ro, which is the Freedom Highway, we pulled off at this restaurant and I went into this restaurant with these six national Korean police officers, and we proceeded to eat an entire Galbi meal in silence. Again, I couldn't figure out what was going on and I was asking myself, “Are they trying to get me to relax so they can get more information out of me? What is the tactic here?”

Scott

Right. Like an interrogator trying to establish rapport so that you kind of let your guard down and spill the whole story.

Blake
Yeah, exactly. And nobody spoke English, as far as I knew, so no words were said at that meal. We all ate in silence.

Scott
What was the total time you expected to be on this trip?

Blake
I didn't know. I knew that Incheon was sort of like a sister city to Seoul because it is where the national airport is, but it was about 90 minutes from where I was, so not too far away, but far enough to be really concerning.

Scott
Yeah. An hour and a half in on this drive, in addition to the time spent at the nice lunch, but you had some time to really think. What was your mental state as you were traveling?

Blake
Well, I couldn't stop thinking about my mom and trying to sort out in my head how I was going to go about this because I had no idea what to expect. I had absolutely no idea what they already knew, what they were going to figure out, how they were going to figure that out. All I knew is that I had this truth that was extremely true and if I told that truth that this was a care package that I had no information about from an ex-boyfriend, I could get in trouble anyway just for being a gay person in South Korea. It's not like it was illegal, but the way that they thought of it was scary. So, I was thinking about all kinds of things. Again, I would revert back to a brokedown palace scenario in my head. I think in those kinds of moments where the suspension of disbelief is actually the only thing that's cradling you through one point to another. That passageway is just like a big gray area. It was bleak, though.

Scott
Did you have any idea of the penalty if they decided you were guilty?

Blake
Not yet. I found out later when I was introduced to my translator, who wound up walking me through everything. But when we got to Incheon, it was a very gray and heavily guarded building as it would be, and my stomach dropped. Then, once I got inside and they did all the processing, I was introduced to my translator, Mr. Park, who became my best friend very quickly. Again, I couldn't fully trust him up until leaving because I had no idea how they went about this kind of situation. When we shook hands, I noticed something about him, and it was very clear to me that he was a closeted gay man, and I thought to myself, “Well, that's a big plus for me because we already are going to have a rapport and that's great.” How it went down is they would bring me into a room, they would interrogate me for a

couple hours, send me back, I would sleep, they would bring me back, I would be sent back to my room, I would sleep, et cetera, et cetera.

But before I started that process, I was put into this giant cell with a group of men, and one of the men came up and sat down next to me and sort of put his arm around me. I mean, I thought, “This is how I get shivved. I'm done for.” This is when I really learned that marijuana was treated the way that it's treated in that country because he started sort of miming to me - this one man in this larger cell - and what he was trying to get at was, “Why are you here?” He was miming punching, like, “Did you get in a fight? Did you get drunk?” I mimed smoking a pipe and his face went white and he immediately removed himself and went to the opposite corner of the room and stopped talking to me. So it was in that moment that I was aware and later reflected on, “Oh, this is really concerning for this population of people. They really find this drug to be the worst thing.” Because of that incident, they wound up moving me to a private cell, I think, especially because I was a white American in a Korean country.

Before the interrogation began, Mr. Park said something to me that kind of was, I guess, the linchpin for the whole situation. He said, “Just tell the truth. They're going to know if you lie.” I took a urine drug test. It was completely clean, and thus began this interrogation. The first interrogation that first day was all focused on the drugs. It was about four hours total, and they asked me all sorts of questions. Did I know marijuana was in the package? Did I pay for the marijuana? Why did Nick send it? Have I ever used marijuana in Korea before?

Scott
Was it the same interrogator the whole time?

Blake
There was Mr. Park who was my translator, and then there was Mr. Kim, who was the lead interrogator, a very stately man who looks like any really attractive South Korean daddy, I would say is the best way to describe it.

Scott
I'm sorry, but I have no picture of that in my head, but that's okay.

Blake
That's okay. Just google the father from Parasite and it'll give you a better idea. He was a very handsome man. They would also not just ask questions. Sometimes, they would just flat out accuse me and they would say, “I think you knew the marijuana was coming.” And I would respond, “I didn't know the marijuana was coming.” After four hours of this first interrogation, they wound up ordering me Chinese takeout. Again, I sat there and ate dinner in silence with these investigators. I was slowly but surely really disappearing from my body because I think I was really going into shock and dissociation because it was still completely unclear to me how this was going to go down.

Scott

I'm wondering if you were concerned– you're clearly a well-spoken person. You choose your words carefully. Did you have concern that perhaps Mr. Park wasn't translating with the exact meaning that you wanted to get across?

Blake
I certainly did. And, oftentimes, even reflecting on this story, 15 years later, I still wonder were there any discrepancies between what he was translating and what I was saying to them and what information was actually conveyed to them. I still don't know to this day

Scott
Because it seems like it would be so easy– even saying things like, “I know what's in the box or I knew what's in the box” just the tense of a word can kind of indicate guilt.

Blake
Yeah. I mean, Mr. Park– I think this is where the luck really came in. Had it been somebody else, I don't know. But I do think that he recognized me and I recognized him. This is a thing that queer people often experience in real life where there's just sort of a “you know”.

Scott
I've heard about this and I've always kind of wondered how that happens. It's interesting.

Blake
It's a vibration. It's a signal. There's really no way to describe it, but you just know the person. I just knew about this guy and so I had to trust. The whole time, anytime I ran up against, “Is he translating this correctly?”, I had to trust that he was. There was no other alternative. The alternative would've led to me really starting to stumble over my thoughts and my feelings, and I had to keep as clear a head as possible throughout all of this because there was no way I was going down without a fight. But that first day of questioning, it was all about the drugs.

At the conclusion, they asked me– they didn't ask me, they said, “We need all of the passwords to your social media accounts.” At the time, I was on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and I gave them all the passwords to those and my email account and my work email account, and had no idea what they were going to do with those passwords, but assumed that they were going to go in and find the conversation that I had with Nick that I told them about, where it was very clear that I did not know what was going on. They took hair samples. I had all my personal items removed. They took me to the cell. It had heated floors, there were blankets, there was water. It was very, I don't want to say nice, but it was certainly not what you think of when you think of Korean prison. This also was in prison. It was a jail cell, but I didn't sleep that night. My mind was in a constant obsessive loop of what is going to happen. I think, that night, I did ask myself over and over again, “What if something that I said was mistranslated”?

Scott

Were you alone in the cell overnight?

Blake
I was alone in the cell overnight. They had originally planned to put me in a cell with other people, and then they moved me because they didn't want any trouble. Over the course of that, leading up to the interrogation, they laid the ground rules for me, essentially, and told me that they had the jurisdiction to keep me for 72 hours, that I was going to be allowed to visit with the embassy the following morning, just sort of how the whole legal system worked. What's really key to note here is that, in the United States, we have this famous phrase “innocent until proven guilty”. It is flipped in South Korea. They assume you are guilty until you prove that you're innocent. So it's completely the other way around. I “woke up the following morning” not really and I was taken to a different room where I met with the United States Embassy in Korea.

Scott
Alright, so they brought you by van back to the main building. Is that right?

Blake
To the main building. I was brought into this room. I was sitting in the room and the embassy walked in. It was this man named Kevin. He sat down and I had this assumption that this was going to be my reassuring moment where everything was going to feel better. I was going to be with another American. They were going to tell me everything was going to be okay. Instead, he sort of flopped down on his chair and, in a very smarmy way, might I add, he says, “We're not really here to give you legal advice, not really here to tell you that everything is going to be cool. You could face an indefinite prison sentence. You could face deportation. We're just kind of here to walk you through what the process is as far as their legal system is concerned.” I was sort of dumbfounded by the attitude because I really had thought to myself, “This is going to be the moment where I can have some relief.” Instead, it only increased my anxiety.

Scott
They're supposed to be the heroes.

Blake
They're supposed to be our advocates. That's their job.

Scott
Yeah. Did you get the impression that they assumed also that you were guilty? Like, “Hey, this guy did something stupid. Sorry, you're on your own.”

Blake
I actually seemed to remember him saying something along the lines of, “We can't align ourselves with whether or not you're guilty or innocent.” I don't think that he said it outright, but he’s smarm was enough to lead me to believe, oh, they actually don't give a shit about me. So when he said what he

said, I said, “Well, if that's the only reason you're here, I guess you can go because they've already explained everything to me, quite frankly, better than you just did.” And he said, “Okay. Do you want us to call anybody?” That was the moment where I was like, “What is happening right now? How have they not already contacted my out-of-country emergency contacts? This is crazy.” And I said, “Yeah, if you could contact my parents, that would be awesome.”

I wound up finding out later that, when they called both of my parents, it was like 3 o'clock in the morning in the States, and they left a voicemail on my mom's phone. All they said was, “Hello, Ms. Ferguson, this is the Korean embassy and Seoul. We're calling about your son. We need you to call us back.” As a parent, I cannot fathom what my mother went through for the next 24 hours at that point. She said it was the most scared that she has ever been because she couldn't– when she called back, the embassy was closed because it was nighttime there and she couldn't get answers. I don't actually recall how she wound up figuring out what was going on, but she did, and she knew that I had been taken. So they left and, at that point, I thought, “Okay, my life is completely over.”

Well, we went back into interrogation mode and I was expecting that it was going to be the exact same situation where they were going to keep asking me questions or making statements about “You knew.” But they had gone through my social media and they had clearly found that conversation with Nick on Facebook messenger because, that second day of questioning, everything that I had anticipated was no longer true and all of the questions wound up surrounding my relationship with Nick because if you went back far enough in that Facebook conversation, it was very easy to find out that we had at one point been a couple and within 10 minutes of that second day of interrogation, I am convinced to this day that they knew that I was innocent. They had the proof that I proved my innocence after being guilty, and they were excessively curious about getting to hang out with a gay guy because that's not something that they realize they're ever doing.

Scott
And they could do it under the pretense of work.

Blake
That's exactly right. The questions had nothing to do with the case. More so, they would ask me questions like– this is a real question. I was asked, “Well, who is man? And who is woman?” and all of the questions surrounded this. In fact, as the interrogation went on, more and more investigators came into the room and sort of huddled around me answering all of these questions about my relationship with this man and what homosexuality was like in the United States.

Scott
Did you feel some kind of a medical oddity or something that they were just probing?

Blake
I think all I felt was gratitude because there was no sense of danger. At first, it was concerning, but I started to realize that they were just extremely curious because they had no information. They had

never been exposed to something like that before. Of course, Mr. Park is sitting there this whole time translating everything. They wrap up this second interrogation. It's probably another 4 to 6 hours, I can't quite remember, but it was the late afternoon when that interrogation ended. I said to Mr. Park, “I need to go use the bathroom.” He said okay, signaled to two of the police officers. The three of them escorted me down to the bathroom. As we were walking down this hallway, I could see that Mr. Park was really deep in thought, and he said to me, “I have never seen a case like this. I think they're going to let you go.” It was in that moment where I was like, “I think he's right. I think they're going to let me go.” He later told me when he was walking me out that he had been working as a translator in this particular unit at the National Korean Police for over a decade at that point, and he had never once seen somebody acquitted.

Scott
Wow. Because it's difficult to prove your innocence sometimes

Blake
If you don't have hard proof, there's no way that they can expect– you have to have hard evidence. So we go back into the room and sitting on the desk is the Tupperware container of these marijuana cookies. Keep in mind, Mr. Kim, the lead investigator, the whole time, he has only spoken in Korean and he's sort of looking out of his window over the city of Incheon, very cinematic. He turned as we walked in, and he looked at me and then he looked at the Tupperware and then he looked back at me and he said, “Do you want one?” in plain English.

It was this moment of, like, “These motherf-ers. They sneaky little bitches.” And brilliant to volley that way because it does create a sense of trust between the translator and the interrogated. Just unbelievable. I could tell this guy had a sense of humor and I said, “No, I'm all set, but you could take some home to your wife and children.” And there was this tiny little– just the slightest corner of his mouth went upwards and I could see that he wanted to laugh, but he had to keep it serious. He looked at me and then he looked back at his desk and then he said okay, and he walked out. That was the last time I saw him. I'm sitting in this chair and Mr. Park said, “Your case is dismissed and I'm going to take you home.”

Scott
Did you take the Tupperware with you?

Blake
No. I'm sure that's in an evidence locker somewhere deep in the bowels of the National Korean Police International Drug Trafficking Unit building. Mr. Park offered to drive me home and I said, “I'm actually all set” because I didn't want to be around any of them. I needed to be by myself. And so he wound up driving me to the train station. I took the train station back into Seoul and then took the bus back to Paju.

Scott

You needed some alone time there.

Blake
I needed some alone time. I did wind up actually going to the apartment of the guy that I was seeing while I was over there, but then wound up eventually going back to my apartment, but it was late when I got home.

Scott
When you hear the words “You're free to go”, that just had to be the best feeling of relief ever.

Blake
It was. Oh, and actually on that drive, Mr. Park told me that another foreigner that day who had a similar case went to prison and wound up paying, like, $30,000 for a lawyer, and that was really truly the moment where I was like, “I could have lost everything. This could have been really bad.” Sort of the bright spot in all of this is I made this new friend in Mr. Park and he wound up friending me on Facebook and my suspicions were confirmed because, once a quarter, when we had a new musical that we mounted at this theater company, he and his very special friend would come visit and come see the show, and then we would go out afterwards for a meal. It was never truly confirmed, but I knew exactly what was going on.

I deleted my Facebook at the top of 2025 and it was 20 years of my life that was on that platform, just gone, and he's one of those people that, after I deleted it, I thought, “Ah, shit, I should have let him know where I'm going because I would love to keep in touch with him.” But maybe it's for the best that he sort of sallied off into the digital ether and I just have a lot of gratitude for him. I really do think that I am actually positive that he had my best interest in mind that entire time and that it wouldn't have gone as smoothly had he not been the translator I wound up with. So, Mr. Park, if you are somehow listening to this, I cannot express to you my gratitude because you certainly are the reason that I was released.

Scott
That's awesome. I am positive I have some listeners in South Korea.

Blake
Excellent. Maybe this will get back to get him

Scott
Or somebody he knows, maybe. Did you continue staying in South Korea after this happened?

Blake
I did. Initially, the village threatened to fire me anyway because they wanted to make an example out of me and I said to them, “That's going to be a really silly image that you're presenting to people that,

even though I was innocent, you fired me anyway. That doesn't make a lot of sense and that's going to create a lot of distrust among your employees actually."

Scott
Future prospective employees who would want to work there. Right?

Blake
Exactly. But they really wanted me to somehow be punished still, and they couldn't figure out what to do, and I said, "You know what, guys? Why don't we get the whole group? Let's get the entire staff together? The teachers, the edutainers, which is what we were called, the actual planning staff - why don't we all get together and I will present a session about why it is bad to ever think that you could bring drugs into this country and you can film it. And if you want to offer it to future employees, you can do that because I'm a case study as it were." And they really liked that idea, so I had to give this seminar essentially to the entire staff about why bringing drugs into South Korea was a bad thing. I was happy to do that because I certainly was not interested in losing my job for nothing. But after that, I mean, a week later, I was in Hong Kong with my friends. Really, it was almost as if nothing had ever happened, but everything had happened.

Scott
I'm curious what Nick had to say about this because, obviously, he didn't send this to you intentionally to get you in trouble.

Blake
No, he did not. No. One of the things that I so appreciate about my relationship with Nick before and after all of this happened was that we never ever had ill intent towards one another, but this situation was so precarious and really could have put me in a lot of danger and, truth be told, it was a very stupid thing to do. I got on Facebook and I messaged him and I said, "I really need you to read this, and I really need you to listen to this. If you care about me the way that I know that you do, we have to cease communication here and now." And I gave him sort of the summary of what had happened, and he honored my request. He did not respond. After I got back to the States, I waited a couple of years before I contacted him again. I had heard through friends that he was so distraught that this had happened and it really impacted him too, and I believe that, and I believe that he has every right he had every right to feel the way that he felt about that because he was just trying to do a lovely thing and it was just a really stupid way to go about it. He knew that.

I did wind up contacting him a couple years later because I missed him. I missed my friend because, despite our relationship not working out, he was my first love and he was very dear to me and I adore him. So he met me in New York City. He apologized and expressed to me there was no way he was ever going to be able to go back and change what he did but, moving forward, he'd like to start fresh. What was so beautiful is, at that point, we had both gotten sober and I didn't know that about him and he didn't know that about me. We found out at that lunch that we had both gone into recovery. There was something so beautiful about that because it really just felt like that connection was real. We

walked through Central Park afterwards and talked about his sobriety, talked about my sobriety and that journey, and then he took me downtown to my job at a box office on 42nd Street and dropped me off, and that was the last time that I saw him that I remember.

I know there was another time, maybe a year later, where I saw him briefly in Connecticut, but it wasn't like a long visit. So that was the last time that he and I spent time together because, in the fall of 2017 - this is September 16th, 2017 - I had left New York City and I had moved upstate to go to grad school. After my first day of classes, I was home and my phone rang and it was my friend Steph, who is Nick's best friend. I hadn't spoken to Steph since we graduated, except for when she let me know that Nick felt really guilty before he and I reconnected. When I saw her name pop up on my phone, I knew something was wrong and I answered the phone and without even a greeting, I said, “What happened to Nick?” She let me know that he had died by suicide. It was such an interesting thing because, not only was it my first day of grad school and starting a new life for myself, but it was also my sobriety date. So it's an interesting thing that my sobriety date is also the day that Nick died by suicide.

When he and I were in college, we started giving each other head-up pennies that we would find on the street, sort of as a way of saying, like, “I was thinking about you today. Here's the proof of concept.” And at the end of college, before I moved to South Korea, he gave me a giant bag of head-up coins that he had, like, laminated into paper and, on each and every single piece of paper that had been laminated to this coin, he wrote the date and the time and the location where he got that head-up coin and he gave me a full bag of them. I still have one. I left the rest of them in South Korea, but I have one left and it's framed on my piano.

On the one year anniversary of his passing, I went out to lunch with a friend of mine in New Paltz, New York, because I was celebrating my sobriety. Just for context also, in college, Nick, he looked a lot like the actor, Penn Badgley, who, if folks are listening, might know him from Smallville. He's now on a show called “You”, I think. Anyway, he has his own podcast too that's done pretty well. But Nick and Penn Badgley look very similar. There was actually a point in college where Nick changed his Facebook profile picture to a picture of Penn Badgley and nobody noticed. This was sort of like a funny little known fact about Nick that everyone joked about.

I was waiting for my friend at this cafe and I was thinking about Nick and she showed up. Behind her, when she walked into the cafe, this just incredibly attractive man walked in behind her. It was the end of September, she had a baseball cap and sunglasses on, and I mouthed to her like, “Holy shit, that guy's hot.” And she got really weird, so I let it go. After she and I finished our meal, I opened the door to the street. As I was walking outside, I looked down and almost stepped on a head-up penny. As I bent down to pick it up, obviously, immediately saying hello to Nicholas in my head, I said to Isabelle, “I'm so sorry that I made you so uncomfortable. I was just noting that guy was really attractive.” And Isabelle said, “Oh, I know. I really don't like to bother celebrities when they're in public.” And I said, “Who was that?” And she said, “Oh, that was Penn Badgley.” Scott, I don't believe in ghosts but, boy, did that get me one step closer to believing in something.

Incidentally, about a year and a half later, I told that story of the heads-up penny at this storytelling workshop, and there was a performance that accompanied the end of it. Isabelle, my friend, who was with me at the cafe, was supposed to come and she wound up not being able to go, but she left me a voicemail that I didn't get until I was walking into the performance where she said, “Sorry, honey, I'm not going to be able to make it, but you're never going to guess who I just saw at the grocery store.” And once again, she had seen Penn Badgley.

So I have a lot of gratitude for Nick because despite all of the crazy that happened, he was the first person who really saw all of me and loved every single part of it, and that's a special person to have in one's life. So we're coming up on– I guess this will be the ninth anniversary of his passing, in September, and I'm just really grateful for him. The past five years, I really got my shit together and I lead a beautiful life. I think a big part of that is knowing that I would've made him really proud and I'm just so glad that he is always just a heads-up penny away. I'm just very grateful for it.

Scott
A lot of times, people talk about loved ones who pass and they think about that person reappearing in their life in some way, and it seems like it's always– for most people, it's a butterfly that lands on your shoulder or something and that's that person. For you, if Penn Badgley walks in the room.

Blake
Well, what's hilarious about all of this is, today, I got an email from Podcast Movement Evolutions that Penn is headlining that conference coming up here soon, which you are attending actually.

Scott
Yeah, I got the same email,

Blake
So you should go ahead and go see him. And if he takes questions, let him know. No, don't, do that. That would be great.

Scott
No, I won't “Hey, guess what? You're a big part of this other guy's story and you should listen to my episode.” Yeah, let's talk about this. Your podcast– I mean, 15 years later, you have an award-winning podcast. It's called abandoned: The All-American Ruins Podcast. By award-winning, I just saw in the news a day or two ago that the American Writing Awards just announced your show as podcast of the year. So congratulations on that. Tell us about your show.

Blake
Well, thank you. First of all, that was a big surprise. I host a show called Abandoned, like you just said, and the show is an audio travel log that documents my time exploring abandoned buildings all over the world. From a very young age, I have been deeply obsessed with abandoned spaces and it's inside abandoned spaces where I learned the power of the human imagination as a tool for healing and

mental wellness, and I sort of reconnected with the hobby– not sort of. I fully reconnected with the hobby when COVID started, and it's a much longer story.

Essentially I had this dream. The story goes about this abandoned dairy farm that I frequented as a child in the mountains of Colorado where I grew up. I wondered if there were abandoned spaces around me because there was really nothing else to do, and I was too afraid to even go on the trails up near the Catskills where I live because there were so many people coming up from the city, and it was just such a mess, and I'm such a germophobe. Anyway, abandoned spaces sort of became this refuge for me and wound up becoming these very kooky sanctuaries where I found a lot of solace and reconnected with my childhood self, which was the piece that was missing from my life. So the second I stepped into my first abandoned space, reconnecting with this hobby, immediately my imagination started spinning the exact same way that it did when I was a child. My imagination became a portal into time travel and these abandoned spaces started becoming not just interesting, historical, architectural relics, but they also started becoming mirrors to what I was watching happening in American culture and really became symbols of how I learned to understand what is happening to this country and how they represent the underbelly of America's past, present, and future, and tell a very different story about the roadmap to what we have all called 250 years of our independence.

So the show is– yes, I certainly dive into the history behind these spaces but, more so, I am interested in the cultural implications and how they relate to what's happening in real time. They're also reflections of me because I found deep sanctuary and these spaces over the course of the pandemic where I was really able to sort the last remaining pieces of my life out that hadn't quite clicked yet. The biggest one of those was a return to the childhood me where I felt fully comfortable as a 38-year-old man now having this huge imagination. So, every episode, I weave folks not just through the space itself, its history and its cultural implications, but I'm actually bringing folks into my imagination as I do it. So there are imaginary characters that come in and out. It's very esoteric experience and it's an immersive experience and it's not something that's a passive listen. I was very clear at the beginning of each episode, “If you're going to listen to this, it’s not something that can be done while you’re vacuuming or cooking. It needs to be done with headphones and you need to be sitting because I'm about to take you on a 20-minute journey that is going to offer you some reprieve from the big bad world outside.”

The reason that I resorted to doing it with audio is because I believe nothing in the whole wide world, I think, insights the human imagination better than sonic storytelling, and there's a lot of research to suggest why that's true. It allows folks the opportunity to take a little trip into a time warp and go see places that they wouldn't otherwise get to see, and then afterwards go to the blog and see if what they imagined matches up with the actual space.

Scott
Well, it's the whole theater of the mind.

Blake

That's exactly right.

Scott
Yeah, that's why I love audio as well. Blake, I appreciate you coming on here. Thanks for sharing your story.

Blake
Thanks so much for having me, Scott. It's a pleasure.

Scott
As you heard in our conversation, Blake's podcast is called Abandoned: the All-American Ruins podcast. And I love the concept of this show – finding a place that people used to be in, but aren't any more, and creating a story around that place. It's not a surprise that this podcast has won awards.

And if you want to learn more about Blake's former partner, Nick, he did a whole episode you can listen to. It's in season 3, in February 2025, titled Nick and the Assassination of JFK.

I love the discussion happening in our Facebook group this week. On Tuesday, the question we asked was "What's a book you read as a child and still think about today?". This brings back some memories for me. Do you have a book that impacted you as a child, and still does? Come on over and tell us about it – WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook

Graphics for this episode were created by Bob Bretz. Full episode transcription was created by James Lai.

And now it's Listener Story time. We all love personal stories, and that's how we end every regular episode here – with an audio story that was sent in by a listener. And you can send in your own story – just record it on your phone – make it around 5-10 minutes - and email it to Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com.

This listener talks about getting in trouble in school – as an adult.

Stay safe, and we'll see you next time.

(Listener story)

My identity in school all the way up through my master's program has been the goodie two-shoes, teacher's pet, straight A, good girl identity, but I had one professor in college my sophomore year that just was not having it with me, and it just jolted with my reality. Here are some examples of what would

happen in his class, totally none of which is my fault. One time, he is lecturing - yada, yada, that's basically what I heard - and he turns and he says to me, “Maggie, like, you are not listening to me. Can you even answer the question?” I just stated, as a good student and an honest person, I did not do anything fake. I was like, “No, I'm sorry. I was not listening. I cannot answer your question.” But then I said, “Because she–” - and I pointed in front of me - “–has something in her backpack.”

I've been sitting there trying to listen and be a good student as I was and this girl in front of me, I could see her backpack moving. It was very subtle, and I would stare at it for several minutes and it would not move, and then it would move and her hand would go in there. I was like, “What could possibly be in there? Nothing made sense.” I was like, “You can't put a puppy in there.” She thankfully didn't throw me under the bus. She unzips her backpack and out comes two sugar gliders, which I really didn't even know. I mean, I think everybody in the class was like, “Are those monkeys? They're not. They're marsupials. But I was like, “Oh, phew. I'm vindicated here. Surely, he'll realize I'm a good person, I'm a good student, always concentrating. We'll be all good.

Well then, some times goes by, he starts lecturing about his major pet peeve. He hates cell phones. At this time, this would've been like 2002 or so, he was like, “Cell phones are from the devil. Cell phones are the worst thing ever and people have immediately become addicted to them.” At this time, I would say I had a cell phone - and maybe one or two of my friends. Like, they were very new. So, he said to the class, which was maybe 10 people - it was a small class - he said, “I'm not going to name names, but there's a girl in this class.” Okay, so now we're down to five or six people. “There's a girl in this class who is so addicted to her cell phone that every time she leaves class, she's got it plastered to her ear before she even reaches the door.” And he starts going on, “It is the problem. It is an addiction.” And I was like, “Hold on.” Because I was just like, “This is silly.”

I said, “Everybody in here knows who you're talking about. You're talking about me.” Because I was probably the only person with a cell phone in that class, maybe one other person. But yes, I always had my cell phone plastered to my ear and I said, “My cell phone is out because I call my grandma at the same time every day to ask her how her mass was and what is she having for lunch because my grandma, as a good Catholic, always watched her– she would get her VHS out and tape mass every day and watch it every morning. As a good girl, good granddaughter, I wanted to keep in touch with my grandma when I was away at college. So, yeah, I would call her every day as the horrible evil addicted cell phone person that I was, and be like, “Hey, how was TV mass?” Because she always had an opinion on which priest it was and whether his sermon was good or not, and what was she having for lunch. What else are you going to ask your grandma about?

He didn't apologize. He didn't seem to suddenly rethink how he felt about cell phones, but I was like, “Okay. Surely though, I must be back on his good list” because I want teachers to think I'm just a delight. So, I didn't like that he kept having issues, but yet it strikes again. It strikes a third time. He calls me out, “Maggie, I see you writing furiously in your notebook, but you're writing way too much. You can't possibly be taking notes. Tell me, are you really taking notes there or is this related to class?” And again, being honest as I was, I said, “No, what I'm writing in my notebook is not related to class.” And then he proceeded to go in this big lecture in front of everybody about dedication to your

college education and blah, blah, blah. He never asked what I was writing about because the truth was, I had been through a very traumatizing experience either the night before or possibly the weekend before. I had two options in my mind. I could stay in my dorm room and cry into my pillow all day, or I could go through the motions, get myself showered and dressed, go to class, and just absorb as much as I was able to. What I ended up sort of doing– I don't even think I knew the word, but stream of consciousness journaling just naturally came to me as the thing I needed to do to sort through my feelings and what had happened to me.

To me, I was being like a really good student. I mean, I had been through something and yet I was showing up. I didn't miss a day of class. I had to kind of journal my feelings, but I really thought that was not disruptive, but this guy had it all for me. So that's my story. I think three times in my entire life, up through grad school, I got yelled at by a teacher and it was all the same professor. I think, if anything, it's just a lesson to maybe keep your eyes out for your pet peeves and realize that might make you make some pretty wide judgements about people that maybe is not fair and maybe you should be aware of that. I would be curious, honestly– I would so love it if somebody could tell me if that professor had a cell phone. I mean, did he have a cell phone later that year, even? Because everybody has a cell phone.