



**Episode 46: The Christmas Boxes**  
**Air Date: September 23, 2020**

**Anna Marsy:** Hi, my name is Anna Marsy. The following podcast contains language that may not be appropriate for all listeners. Discretion is advised. [speaks in Icelandic]

**Nigel Poor:** You know what you're looking at here?

**Earlonne Woods:** What is all this junk, Nigel? [laughs]

**Nigel:** Okay, so...

**Earlonne:** I don't want to call your collection junk. [Nigel says quietly in the background, "you can call it junk"] But Nigel, what is all this junk?

**Nigel:** Okay. So, the other day, E, you drove over to my studio so I could show you this box of stuff that I've been collecting for I think almost a decade now.

**Earlonne:** Ten years of junk. [both laugh]

**Nigel:** Okay. So, this is from a project I'm working on about the San Quentin parking lot. And so, when I go to San Quentin, I always try to find something – some kind of object – that was left behind in the parking lot.

**Earlonne:** Damn.

**Nigel:** Yeah. So, what do you think is my prized possession here?

**Earlonne:** Oh, this right here.

**Nigel:** Can you describe what those are?

**Earlonne:** I think it's bra underwire.

**Nigel:** Yep, it's underwires from bras. So, I find these all the time in the parking lot. [underwire drop to the floor one by one making a soft "clank" sound each time] One, two, three, four, or five, six, seven, I don't know, I have almost twenty of them. [music comes in] Well, the first time I saw one, I thought someone was just like having crazy sex out there and somehow the underwire came out. [laughs] But then after I started finding more and more, I was like, *wait a minute, this is happening for a reason.*

**Earlonne:** For some strange reason, I think prison officials feel that men can make a weapon out of an underwire in a woman's bra. [Nigel affirms]

**Nigel:** And it turns out when the women go to visit, they get sent out. And so instead of losing their visit, they rip the wire out and then go back.

**Earlonne:** And was that your most prized possession?

**Nigel:** This is actually the thing I love the most. This is a little notebook you can hold in your hand. It's spiral bound. It's been run over so many times and obviously it's been rained on so that now it's kind of just a cluster of paper held together. And when I look at it, it seems like a little nest to me. So, it's a nest holding somebody's information that I will never be able to know because getting wet has welded all the pages together.

**Earlonne:** Nyge, [Nigel affirms] you had a lot of stuff in that box.

**Nigel:** Oh yeah.

**Earlonne:** I saw some lipstick, a kid's coloring book...

**Nigel:** That one really struck me because I just imagined that some kid made this drawing and they were so excited to bring it in to show it to their dad. And somehow it fell out of their car and just got left in the parking lot.

**Earlonne:** But Nyge, why are you so interested in this stuff? [Nigel laughs]

**Nigel:** Okay. Alright, well, I think, you know me well enough to know that I just— I love the stories behind things. So, all of these little mysteries are left on the ground. These objects are like breadcrumbs. And I feel like if I look at them long enough, whatever they have to tell me is going to be revealed. And, I also am so intrigued by the fact that they

were in somebody's hand. They meant something to somebody at some point. And then they got left behind. So, I wanna rescue them. I wanna rescue the stories behind them.

**Earlonne:** The mind of an artist.

**Nigel:** Or a snoop. [both laugh]

**Earlonne:** Okay. This is a lot of stuff here...

**Nigel:** It's a lot of stuff. So, one more thing I want to show you.

**Earlonne:** Ha-ha-ha-ha. [sarcastically]

**Nigel:** What are these?

**Earlonne:** Whew! Shit. Those are the clamps that held my probably six volumes of trial transcripts together. And when I was commuted, I quickly went up front and shredded all that shit. And being that I couldn't put them in a shredder, I just took them all out and when I came back, Nigel swiped them. [Nigel laughs]

**Nigel:** I still can't believe that you shredded it all. Weren't you worried that you still might need it at some point?

**Earlonne:** Hell no. Once they commuted it, [crosstalk]

**Nigel:** [crosstalk] There was no going back.

**Earlonne:** there was no going back. That was a wrap. That was over.

**Nigel:** So, what does it make you feel to see these?

**Earlonne:** You know, those are things that hold oppression together.

**Nigel:** Yeah. But they're also your history. Alright, so let me ask you this: how many hours do you think you spent going through that paperwork?

**Earlonne:** Shit, years.

**Nigel:** That makes these valuable to me. Even though they represent something that you hate, they also show another side which is you're not going to give up.

**Earlonne:** The tenacity.

**Nigel:** The tenacity of Earlonne. [theme music comes in]

**Earlonne:** Stuff. That's what we talking about on this episode.

**Nigel:** Okay, Earlonne. But it's not just stuff.

**Earlonne:** Objects.

**Nigel:** Exactly. And what they mean to us. I mean, especially in prison where you can't own a lot of stuff. [Earlonne affirms] Because you just don't have that much space.

**Earlonne:** Nah. You got six cubic feet per person. So, what do you keep? That shit's important.

**Nigel:** And then there's the stuff you can't have, those things that you owned before you were incarcerated. And while you're inside, that stuff becomes meaningful in a different way.

**Earlonne:** Yeah. And you keep thinking about it – the whoooooole time you're inside. I'm Earlonne Woods.

**Nigel:** I'm Nigel Poor. And this is Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia.

[in the field]

Can you describe your soothing tools that you had inside?

**Joseph Krauter:** Sure. I actually, [laughs] I still have it. I saw it today and I was like, *she's gonna want to look at it*. It has had the crap beat out of it since I've been out.

[to Earlonne]

**Nigel:** Do you remember Joseph from when you were in San Quentin?

**Earlonne:** Yup. We lived in the same building and he worked in the library with Mesro and he was part of that D&D group out there, the Dungeons and Dragons.

**Nigel:** Exactly. He was always out in the yard with those guys, those D&D dudes.

**Earlonne:** And when you talked to him, he always had this little thingamajig [Nigel affirms] that he'd sorta be turning over in his hand.

**Nigel:** And that's what he called this soothing tool. And the one that he was showing us kind of looks like a little petit four, like a little layered cake, [Earlonne affirms] but the cube is made out of actually stacked thin pieces of wood. [Earlonne affirms] And then it's small enough so you can just hold it in your hand and sort of fidget with it.

[in the field, speaking to Joseph] So, what happens when you're touching it?

**Joseph:** When I'm touching my cube, it takes away my focus from like the world and what's going on around me. Like, the woman behind Earlonne, probably about fifteen to twenty feet away. Like, crunching wrappers and eating a candy bar. The gentlemen

walking behind you now as he scuffles. The cars, the vans, the lights winking off them. So, they become peripheral because my sense of touch is forcing me to focus on the cube in my hands.

[as narrator]

**Earlonne:** To understand Joseph's relationship to objects, you have to know a bit more about how his brain works.

**Nigel:** And some time ago when Joseph was still incarcerated at San Quentin, I asked him to come down the media lab so I could interview him. And I noticed that he looked just a little bit different.

[to Joseph] Your hair's longer.

**Joseph:** Yeah. Yeah. Whenever my hair gets too long or my fingernails get long, it triggers like an anger type of reaction within me. Like, I get very irritated and then like, I'll become snarly. That's the best I can put it.

**Nigel:** Wait, why do you think that is?

**Joseph:** I believe it's a part of my autism, but I truthfully don't know. It's been that way as long as I can remember. When my hair gets too long and my fingernails get long, I feel snarly, just like I snarl at people. [abstract sound effects come in] One of the symptoms of my autism is intrusive imagery. My imagination is hijacked by my unconscious and blasted with like images of brutality and violence. And this happens like pretty much every waking moment that I'm conscious.

**Nigel:** Like just collages of horrible images?

**Joseph:** Horrible stuff. Like, you know, I've probably seen like ten since I've been in this room.

**Nigel:** And do they feel real? Like it's actually happening, or you know...?

**Joseph:** Mmm, it's not like a hallucination. [Nigel affirms] It's just a powerful overriding of like the, you know, your inner eye, your imagination.

**Nigel:** Yeah.

**Joseph:** So...

**Nigel:** Can you give a real example of...?

**Joseph:** Sure. Um, like, you picked up that pen and stabbed him in the eye. And then broke the pen off. Like, they just, they're just random vomiting of like terrible stuff.

**Nigel:** Yeah. Did you think of anything when I pulled this paper out of the notebook?  
[Joseph affirms] So, there was— I like to pull things, so there's a spiral— I'll just explain it. So, there's a spiral notebook here [Joseph affirms] and when you move— when you pull paper out, some of the stuff gets left inside and I like to pull stuff out. Like, I like to pull stuff out of drains. [Joseph affirms] And I like to pull that out. What did you think about when I pulled that out?

**Joseph:** Uh... like a vein being pulled out of an arm. [transition]

**Earlonne:** Ooof.

**Nigel:** Yeah. Yeah. So, you can imagine that prison was a lot for Joseph to deal.

**Earlonne:** And the soothing tools were a big help.

**Joseph:** When I first got here, I knew that I needed something to fidget with just because this prison was so dank and dark and like, no fresh air and no nothing to distract from it. So, the very first cube I made was out of Scrabble tiles. [music comes in] I can squeeze it between my fingers. I can roll it in my hands. I can hold onto it. I can spin it. And all kinds of stuff like that. [Nigel affirms]

**Earlonne:** We'll circle back with Joseph in a minute.

**Nigel:** But first we're going to hear from an old Ear Hustle friend.

**John “Yahya” Johnson:** So, I remember that I had an ATM card from Wells Fargo bank, ironically, the bank that I robbed. [laughs] I had a student ID in there. I had a Medi-Cal card. I had a Kaiser Health benefits card in there. I had a phone book.

**Earlonne:** What kinda wallet is it?

**Yahya:** So, it's a brown vintage Louis Vuitton wallet.

**Nigel:** It's Yahya!

**Earlonne:** That's right. Ear Hustle producer, John "Yahya" Johnson. You've heard his name in the credits. He was released from San Quentin in April. And now he's working with us on the show *again*. [Nigel affirms] But this time from the outside.

**Nigel:** And we are so happy to have him back on the team.

**Earlonne:** Yup.

**Nigel:** Oh, it's great. And recently he told us a story about at wallet he had...

**Earlonne:** Back before he was incarcerated.

[to Yahya]

**Nigel:** Let me ask you this – is it a real Louis Vuitton or is it a knock-off?

**Yahya:** No, it's a real Louis Vuitton. When I got out, I was kind of excited because when I called my mother, she told me that she still had my wallet and that she had kept it for twenty-five years. And mind you, she had moved three different times and every time she moved, she took this wallet and she put it in her closet. And so, I kind of think, like, she held onto that wallet because it was an extension of me. [music comes in]

**Nigel:** So, tell me about the guy who carried this wallet.

**Yahya:** So, twenty-five years ago, the guy that carried that wallet was a person who, for all intents and purposes, who wanted to do the right thing. But didn't necessarily confront a lot of the issues in his past.

**Nigel:** And now who carries the wallet?

**Yahya:** And so, the person who carries that wallet now is a pro-social, law-abiding citizen, who is a person of integrity, a person that can be trusted to be anyone's neighbor, you know, and that's who it is.

**Earlone:** Trying to see what got you to that point, *shit*.

**Yahya:** What got me to that point is just my desire to change, really. Prison can consume people who don't want to change themselves and they can get caught up into a lot of different things in prison that they never change their lives. I was just tired of being a contradiction. You know, I've always had the desire to do the right things, but really didn't know how to articulate my frustrations. When pressure got on me, the only way I knew how to deal with it was to react and not respond. And so, for me I just made a decision to change. It was my second time ever being arrested. I was away from my family for a significant amount of time. I knew the damage that it caused them, but more importantly, I knew the damage that it caused me.

**Nigel:** Okay. So, Earlone, I was so excited to see this wallet. [Earlone snickers] And you know me, right. [Earlone affirms] I am super impatient. So, I kept texting Yahya like, *when can we see the wallet? when can we see the wallet? Come on. When can I come over? I got to record you.*

**Earlone:** And then, we got a text from Yahya saying...

**Yahya:** I lost my freaking wallet. One day, I was bike riding. [sound of bike spokes turning] It was hot that day, so I chose to wear a gray pair of cargo shorts with Velcro pockets. [Nigel affirms] These Velcro pockets are secure. And so, I didn't think anything

of it. I grabbed my wallet, put it in my back pocket, secured it, rubbed the Velcro pocket, rode my mountain bike down to the lake.

**Earlonne:** A little while later, he gets back to the place where he's staying, sits down to take a nap, and when he gets up, he notices: the pocket is empty. The wallet is gone.

**Nigel:** And were you just heartbroken?

**Yahya:** Absolutely I was heartbroken because as Earlonne so eloquently put it...and I wanted to kick him in the ass. He say, "Man, your momma had that wallet for twenty-five years and you lost it in two months!" [Nigel laughs]

**Nigel:** Some people might've been down about that, especially with that little dig you got in, Earlonne. [both laugh]

**Earlonne:** I'm just saying.

**Nigel:** But Yahya was not gonna be defeated.

**Yahya:** And all of a sudden, I just had this overwhelming sense that my wallet will come back to me. For me, it was like the universe providing this message to me just to be still and that your possessions, your prized possessions will come back to you.

**Nigel:** That is so Yahya to think like that. [Earlonne laughs] He's so optimistic.

**Earlonne:** But you know, I was optimistic with him too.

**Nigel:** Really?

**Earlonne:** Because I know Lake Merritt. [Nigel affirms] And one side of Lake Merritt is hella bougie. [Nigel affirms] You know what I'm saying? Those people look like they all have jobs. So, I thought, *hey, if he loses his wallet on a bougie side, he'll get it back and it'll have money in it.* [Nigel laughs] You know what I'm saying? [Nigel affirms] Like, more money in it, probably even a credit card. Like, *hey, you might need this.*

**Nigel:** A gift or something? Well, what would you have done if you found his wallet?

**Earlonne:** Oh, I'd have definitely turned in all the paperwork. [Nigel affirms] As far as like, you know, the wallet itself, I think I'd have me a new Louie wallet. [both laugh]

**Nigel:** Okay. Well, a little while later, Yahya was at the gym and he got a text from his son and it said...

**Yahya:** That someone took the wallet and put it in a mailbox and mailed it back to me. They didn't even use the money that was in the wallet to mail it back. They mailed the wallet back at their own expense and they wrote a note on a sticky note and said, /



*found your wallet at the lake on the sidewalk. Have a good day. And they were anonymous.*

**Nigel:** So great.

**Yahya:** Yeah.

**Nigel:** That makes me really happy. [music comes in]

**LaVelma Byrd:** [over the phone] My name is LaVelma Byrd, B-Y-R-D. I've been incarcerated for twenty-six years and this is a list of everything I own in private prisons: my television, family pictures, crochet, and my hobby craft, my radio, my CD.

**Kerry Roberts:** [over the phone] My name is Kerry Roberts, currently incarcerated since 2007. I'm a Rastafarian, so I have what's called a Rastafarian crown. Think of a beanie with the colors green, yellow, and red.

**Speaker 1:** [over the phone] I have a photo album of my nieces and nephews growing up since I've been down fourteen years.

**Terry:** [over the phone] My favorite possession by far that I can't do without would be my Quran, book of the Muslim.

**Shawn:** [over the phone] My name is Shawn. I am in what's call the California Institution for Men or the CIM. We don't have washers and dryers and we wash our old clothes by hand. And as sick and as disgusting as this sounds, in a lot of prisons, we wash our clothes in the toilet. Not a very hygienic practice but it is what it is. [automated voice says, *this call and your telephone number we'll be monitored and recorded*] Well, I'm in a prison in which for a while we had buckets, five-gallon buckets. And every now and then, the officers will come by and confiscate the buckets. And it seems like such a petty thing. You know, what is the big deal? You lose the bucket, you replace it. But then you realize just how important that bucket is. You're in a cell that has no chair. You turn the bucket over upside down. You use it for a stool. You have no washer and dryer. You use the bucket to do your clothes. Now you don't have to wash them in the toilet anymore. It seems like such a trivial thing, but the smallest things in here can have the biggest impact upon the quote unquote "comfort" of life.

[walking to the car]

**Earlonne:** So... [crosstalk]

**Nigel:** [crosstalk] Don't know where you're taking me.

**Earlonne:** I am taking you to the trunk of my— first, I'mma take you to the back seat of my car.

**Nigel:** Okay. [giggles] So, after I showed you my box of prized found possessions from the San Quentin parking lot, you said you had something you wanted to show me too.

**Earlonne:** Yep. Something my father held onto while I was in prison. And I've been carrying in my car ever since he passed back in February. [Nigel quietly says, "describe them"] Okay. So, these are some lipstick red alligator dress shoes that I bought probably in 1997 or 1996. Me and my friends we had a R&B and hip-hop club. So, I used to dress up a lot. And I think I spent about 550 bucks or \$600 on these shoes.

**Nigel:** Oh my god, what year was that?

**Earlonne:** This was '97.

**Nigel:** These have to be described a little bit better. So, they are red alligator leather. There's red laces that have tassels on them with a little gold bead. So, I'm not going to say they're subtle.

**Earlonne:** I used to love to wear these, especially around a lot of my homeboys. 'Cause you know, my background was the Crips, which wear blue, you know what I'm saying? So, lipstick red is like the opposite. And I used to just have fun with that.

**Nigel:** Just to fuck with them?

**Earlonne:** Yeah. [Nigel laughs] Y'know what I mean, 'cause they used to be looking, "and what you gonna say? You ain't gonna say nothing to me." So, when I wore these, I always had lipstick red something else on usually. [Nigel affirms] Whether it was a mock neck sweater, I used to probably have a white suit with the red. I had all kinds of stuff. But I know these will stand out. [Nigel affirms]

**Nigel:** So, how'd you feel when you dressed up like this?

**Earlonne:** You feel Dapper Dan-ish! [Nigel laughs] You feel *sauvé*. You feel, you know, great.

**Nigel:** Imagine that for pretty much anyone who gets released from prison, Earlonne, that there's this moment where you get your stuff and it's gotta be like a time warp, like *who and what am I looking at?*

**Earlonne:** Absolutely. Because you're being confronted with your former self, you know, the person that you used to be.

**Nigel:** Yep. And Joseph, who we heard from earlier

**Earlonne:** The D&D guy

**Nigel:** He recently found himself in just that situation.

**Earlonne:** Joseph was released from San Quentin in December of 2019 after fifteen years of incarceration. Recently, we met him in a park near where he's living. [car traffic ambient noise]

**Nigel:** And he seems so different than the last time I saw him in San Quentin. I mean, did you notice that?

**Earlonne:** Yeah, I did.

**Nigel:** Like, he smiled, and he was making eye contact in a way that he just never seemed to be able to do inside.

**Earlonne:** Yeah. And he was definitely excited to start a new life on the outside. [Nigel affirms]

**Nigel:** But, to do that, there was something really important he needed to accomplish. He needed to get back some boxes of objects that his mom had been storing for him while he was in prison.

**Joseph:** They're ominously called "the Christmas boxes."

**Earlonne:** The Christmas boxes.

**Nigel:** That's right. They're boxes that were maybe designed to hold ornaments or something like that. [Earlonne affirms] But Joseph used them to hold all of his important personal belongings while he was in prison.

**Joseph:** So, in the Christmas boxes, there are three Zippo lighters, three hourglasses, there's a bunch of skeleton keys of different sizes. There's even a couple of like stainless-steel ball bearings. There's a giant green cat's-eye marble.

**Earlonne:** And I assume it's been fifteen years since you've seen those objects.

**Joseph:** Yep. Yep. The person that owned those is dead and gone.

**Nigel:** Joseph says there was this way he used to look at the world. He describes it as a hero complex.

**Joseph:** I would strive to quote unquote "rescue people" all the time to the point of self-destruction.

**Nigel:** Yeah.

**Joseph:** So, [Nigel affirms] and that was also a major causative factor of the commission of my crime. To be arrested and have my life destroyed trying to do what I believed was the right thing, the whole world turned inside out.

**Nigel:** We don't usually ask about crimes, but because you're describing it, how did that play into your crime?

**Joseph:** I was asked by one of my closer friends at the time to help him, uh, kill a rapist. [music comes in] I went to a town I've never been to kill a man I've never known to save a girl I'd never seen.

**Earlonne:** And did you know if the story was accurate or not?

**Joseph:** Nope. To this day, I still don't know whether or not he was an actual rapist.

**Earlonne:** And any— I don't know if you want to go— but any thoughts on that, like...?

**Joseph:** I regret it every waking moment of my life. [music fades out]

**Earlonne:** Joseph was sentenced to fifteen years to life for that crime.

**Nigel:** And, you hear this sometimes. He says being in prison really helped him. He got a lot of therapy, took advantage of programs that were offered to him, and he really worked hard to change himself. [music comes in]

**Earlonne:** And when those fifteen years were up, he was granted release at his first parole hearing.

**Nigel:** So, now that Joseph's out, he wants to get those Christmas boxes back.

So, Joseph wanted to get the things in those Christmas boxes.

**Earlonne:** His stuff from before he went to prison.

**Nigel:** And Earlonne, you had a question for him.

**Earlonne:** The person whose stuff that was, is no longer here. Why do you still want the stuff?

**Joseph:** I need to destroy it.

**Nigel:** That's what you're going to do with it?

**Joseph:** Yup. You know, it's a cleansing, it's a purging. [music comes in] You know, all the things I collected over my life in that course of time, they're all beautiful. They're all neat. They're all cool. But they're also bound up with a lot of angry demons and old memories. And striving to be this person, this protector, this good person, and failing continuously. [music fades out]

**Earlonne:** Joseph feels like until he gets those boxes back and reckons with what's in them, he can't really start his new life.

**Nigel:** The only problem is he's on parole, so he can't travel to get them.

**Earlonne:** So, we told Joseph that we'd go get his stuff and bring it to him.

**Joseph:** When you guys approached me for that and then offered to go get them, I was like, *yup, yup. It's time.* [music comes in] As soon as I get my hands on that stuff, that final piece is going to get laid to rest.

**Nigel:** Okay. But E, I got to say here, there seemed to be a part of you that was worried this quest might not be such a good idea. [Earlonne chuckles]

**Earlonne:** Hell yeah. I saw *Lord of the Rings*. [Nigel laughs] Like, once Joseph got his hands on his stuff, again, he wouldn't be able to let go of it. It would be too powerful.

**Nigel:** Like he might go back to being the person he used to be before he went to prison.

**Earlonne:** I don't think Sméagol's ever got over that ring.

**Nigel:** Oh my God, Earlonne's inner nerd is coming out. [music comes in]

**Earlonne:** All because Nigel wanted to go get this box, [Nigel laughs] this Pandora's box. [music fades out]

[to Tyra Woods]

**Nigel:** How do you feel about us asking you to do this?

**Tyra Woods:** It's very interesting. Like, I never thought you would ask me to do this. But I'm glad you're doing it with me 'cause I don't have to do it by myself.

**Nigel:** Yeah.

**Tyra:** I have looked at this bag and looked at the bag and said, *not today, not today.*

**Nigel:** So, E, want to tell us who this is?

**Earlonne:** This is my sister, Tyra. [Nigel affirms] And we talked to her in a previous episode, "Bittersweet."

**Nigel:** Right.

**Earlonne:** Tyra's son, Tyler, was my nephew. And when Tyler was a kid, both of his parents were incarcerated. So, he lived with my moms. And in 2013, when Tyler was nineteen and his parents were still locked up, he was killed by the police.

**Nigel:** When Tyra got out of prison, E, your mom gave her a bag of Tyler's belongings. [Earlonne affirms] And Tyra's been keeping it in her closet ever since, but she's never looked at it.

**Earlonne:** Nope. All the belongings were in a blue reusable shopping bag that she'd been keeping on the top shelf of a closet in her office.

[to Tyra]

What's in this bag.

**Tyra:** Um, your mom said it's all Tyler's things, like stuff that she found. Just all kinds of stuff that was near and dear to him. So, I just took the teddy bear out the bag 'cause it was on top. I sleep with it every night 'cause she said, *Tyler slept with this every night when he was, you know, after you gave it to him.*

**Earlonne:** This is a bear that you sent him when you were in prison?

**Tyra:** Yeah, we had first get on the bus where they had the mothers that get to see their children and they all day they do crafts. They do all kinds of stuff. And then we had a chance to make a bag for them. You put a teddy bear in there, you put a letter in there, you put just little things, just for them. And so, that's where the teddy bear came from. [music comes in]

**Nigel:** So, I wasn't with you and Tyra, but I was able to join you two over video.

**Earlonne:** Yeah. And how did she seem to you?

**Nigel:** Well, I remember thinking like, this seems like an okay thing for her, you know, like she was getting a chance to really think about her son and remember him. [Earlonne affirms] And that for the moment it felt good. It felt okay.

**Earlonne:** Right. Right, no, it did. [music fades out]

[to Tyra]

Alright, let's go.

**Tyra:** You ready? [opening bag] All his immunization record when he was little, when he was born, more baby pictures.

**Earlonne:** Hey, [inaudible] I remember that

**Tyra:** Remember that outfit? The star student report. Oh. Wow.

**Nigel:** How'd he do?

**Tyra:** He did excellent. [music comes in]

**Nigel:** And there was a note in there from one of Tyler's teachers.

**Tyra:** [reading] *He's a good writer and should be encouraged to pursue that talent. Tyler should get a math word problem practice book and be reading every day.* Yes, he should. Basketball trophy - second place, this is the second place.

**Earlonne:** There was a football jersey in there too.

[to Tyra]

**Nigel:** Can you describe what that is?

**Tyra:** It's a white and black "Woods" jersey. I get to smell him... [voice breaking] This is when all the real problems started. [sighs] [music fades out]

[to Nigel]

**Earlonne:** Yeah. I remember when Tyler started getting into trouble. I think he was about thirteen or fourteen.

**Nigel:** What, like, what did he do?

**Earlonne:** Uh, well, he had this little rebellious streak in him [Nigel affirms]. And he even tattooed it on his face.

**Nigel:** What rebellion?

**Earlonne:** "Rebellious."

**Nigel:** Oh, okay.

**Earlonne:** And I remember one of the first things he did was he took my mother car and he drove it to Inglewood, which is like maybe fifty, sixty miles away.

**Nigel:** Woah.

**Earlonne:** And after that, it was just one thing after another.

**Tyra:** Good Lord. He had a disciplinary history. [reading] Nineteen suspensions; nine physical violence; acts of defiance, twenty-seven; tardy, twenty-four; unexcused period... oh, Lord, thirty. [Earlonne laughs]

**Earlonne:** He was acting out.

**Tyra:** This is a letter from me. You want me to read it?

**Nigel:** So, this is a letter Tyra sent her son from inside prison. She tells him that she's been trying to get in touch with him because she's worried about him.

**Tyra:** [reading] *Baby, please listen to what I'm saying. It's all out of love. You are all that I have and God gave you to me. And I don't want to lose you, in any way. I'll try and call you on Thanksgiving. I love you. And miss you tremendously. Write me back. Let me know how you feel about what I said. I'll be waiting. Talk to you soon. Love always, Mom.*

**Earlonne:** There was another letter in the bag too, a letter Tyler had written to his mom but never sent.

**Tyra:** [reading] *You're a good mama, never gave up on me a day in your life. You're the woman of my dreams. I think about every day and night. [voice breaks] Can't let go of your love as a mother because it seems so much to me. Can't wait 'til you come home so we can laugh and cry about all our past memories. [Earlonne affirms]*

And this is a picture of me and him. I'm in prison, but he's like looking at me. Oh man. I can't do it.

**Earlonne:** Yeah, I hear you. We can move on. We can move on.

**Tyra:** More pictures. OH! [shocked]

**Earlonne:** Oh yeah. Let me, let me, let me that. [Tyra sobbing] Sorry about that.

**Nigel:** Hmmf [sounding pained]. That was a really tough moment.

**Earlonne:** Yeah. It sure was. Um, there was a photo in that bag and if I had seen it earlier, I would have *definitely* removed it so Tyra didn't have to see it.

**Tyra:** Earl, you gotta go through those pictures

**Earlonne:** I'm going through them now.

**Tyra:** 'Cause I can't go through. 'Cause I can't, I can't do that. I can't see him like that.

[transition]

**Carmela Frank:** My name is Carmela Frank. I am Joseph Krauter's mother. [birds tweeting in the background]

**Nigel:** And we're sitting in your carport

**Carmela:** In the carport. It's really shady and cool. [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: Okay, so, E, you and I went on a quest.



**Earlonne:** That's right. Joseph, who we heard from earlier needed to get his Christmas boxes back.

**Nigel:** But because of his parole conditions, he couldn't travel to go pick them up. So, we drove down to do that for him.

**Earlonne:** And to sit with his mom.

**Nigel:** And a whole bunch of really chatty birds. [music fades out]

[to Carmela]

What did you bring out to show us? What's there?

**Carmela:** I brought Joseph's baby books. So, you could see some of the pictures and how he grew into such a different person once he started having issues mentally that were not identified when he was young.

**Nigel:** Did you see anything?

**Carmela:** I did. I insisted with the pediatrician that something was wrong because nursing, he pulled away, and we were done and that was starting at four months. And he just didn't want to hug. He didn't want anybody to hold him. He wanted to be loved, but he loved being loved from a distance. [music comes in]

**Nigel:** Carmela kept trying to find a diagnosis for her son. And she wondered about autism. But she says doctors told her that Joseph was too high functioning for that. This was back in the early eighties.

**Carmela:** It was dismissed. They thought I was crazy. Overbearing.

**Nigel:** Carmela said that what gave Joseph comfort was being alone with his stuff, you know, like little objects that he could hold and touch. [music fades out]

**Carmela:** I built him tents, lots of tents, and where he could, you know, just hide out and he was happy there. Solitude. With his belongings. [chuckles]

**Nigel:** Did you ever imagine he would end up in prison?

**Carmela:** Never, never, ever, never, ne-ver. I mean, I was watching the evening news when I saw my son's picture on the television. And his two friends and – “three Bakersville men arrested for murder, a gang hit.” And I knew he wasn't– I knew none of them were. [music comes in] They were the three nerdiest guys you've ever met. I just screamed and screamed, and I couldn't believe it.

**Earlonne:** Joseph was in his early twenties. He was convicted and sent to prison.

**Carmela:** And Carmela was left with boxes of his stuff. [music fades out]

**Nigel:** What was it like having his things around you when he went off to prison?

**Carmela:** It was like a death. It was like a death to me because he was gone and then once he was sentenced to fifteen years or life, then I mourned his loss. [music comes in]

**Earlonne:** Looking at them did anything remind you, like the smells, did it smell like him?

**Carmela:** Definitely. [laughs] It did smell like him. He always reminds me of a fresh loaf of bread that's just been baked, you know, like a good nut bread. [laughs] Sweet nut bread.

**Nigel:** Once you had the boxes and he was in prison, did you go through them at all or were they just sealed?

**Carmela:** Once I packed him, they were in the back in the garage. Every one of them has his name on it. And when I needed to access that area and I saw them, I cry. I'd cry and it was hard. It was very hard for me.

**Nigel:** Was there ever a day that you forgot that he was in prison?

**Carmela:** No, I never forgot. I never forgot that he was there. I felt like he was saved and this is a test that he's going through right now. And he's being tested to stay strong, stay— *change your life change and make it a better life*. The fact that there's a mother out there without a son is my nightmare. And I just thank God that Joseph was able to survive the prison time. But I keep reminding him, she doesn't have her son back. I have you, but she doesn't. That's my nightmare. That woman lost her son. [Nigel affirms]

**Earlonne:** What would your thoughts be if Joseph wanted these boxes just to destroy his past?

**Carmela:** What would be my thought? *Go for it! Go for it and start over*. That's what he has right here in his hands. He has the opportunity to start over. Get rid of the crap! Just start over. He's got it in his hands. [music fades out]

When I got a divorce, I had a bonfire. Best thing I did. It just cleansed me. [laughs] So... but it was my bonfire. You know, I did it. I made the choice of what to get rid of. And so... [Nigel affirms] it was great.

**Nigel:** It sounds like you had a ritual, you made a ritual for yourself.

**Carmela:** Yeah! A little wine. [laughs] [music fades out] [transition]

**Nigel:** What do we have here?

**Yahya:** So, right now you're holding my Louis Vuitton wallet from twenty-five years ago. California driver's license from twenty-five years ago when I was a young man wearing [Nigel says, "oh my god!"] the corn rows and a goatee.

**Earlonne:** So, after that good Samaritan at Lake Merritt – I'm sure on the bougie side – [Nigel affirms] sent Yahya back his wallet, we finally got to take a look at it.

**Nigel:** And, you know, I made him open it up and show us everything that was inside. [music comes in]

**Yahya:** First thing that I noticed when I opened this wallet is there's a prison made phone book.

**Earlonne:** So, of course, when you're in prison you need something to put your numbers, [Nigel affirms] you need something, and you don't have a phone book. So, what people do in prison is they make them. [Nigel affirms] You know, you would get like a bunch of paper, either staple them together, tape them together, with whatever you got, and you might want to decorate it with a picture of a family member or football team.

**Nigel:** Personalize it.

**Earlonne:** Yeah, exactly.

**Nigel:** And Yahya's, it was white. And on the front and written in script, it said "J. Johnson" with little sparkly stars on it. [Earlonne laughs] It was cute. [music fades out]

[to Yahya]

I'm just going to give you a few names and just give me one word to describe them:  
[Yahya affirms]

Sandra

**Earlonne:** Sandra is my cousin. I love her. She's in Sacramento now.

**Nigel:** Lucy May

**Yahya:** Lucy May is my beloved grandmother who passed in 2002.

**Nigel:** Pookie

**Yahya:** Pookie is a cousin who's also beloved.

This is a rhyme that I wrote from 1995. *Everyday in my hood seems like 4th of July. Sparks from gats light the sky. Brothers die. I asked a question, why are mortuaries*

*filled up with Black folks, a lucrative business center, right in our ghettos. Every day, there's a funeral.*

**Earlonne:** You know how I knew that was old?

**Nigel:** How?

**Earlonne:** You referred to a gun as a gat. [Nigel affirms]

**Yahya:** Of course. Of course. So that's a period piece. [Earlonne laughs] [music comes in]

**Nigel:** I definitely wanted Yahya to show me that twenty-five year old driver's license.

**Earlonne:** Yeah. And I remember you asked him what he saw when he lifted that old photo twenty five years ago. [music fades out]

**Yahya:** The first time I looked at it I thought, *man, this was a handsome guy*. But more importantly, I thought that this was a troubled guy. You know, this was a guy that had a lot of different things that he had to learn to grow up. And so, through that twenty-five years of being in the fire, you know, I guess that purified me. And now I can just look back at this person and just have a lot of compassion for him. [transition]

[to Joseph]

**Nigel:** How does it feel seeing them?

**Joseph:** As soon as I saw them, I was just like, *oh my god*. Feels like you got like that salmonella cramp before you crap your guts out. That's what it feels like. [music comes in]

**Earlonne:** Nigel, [Nigel affirms] the culmination of our quest has arrived.

**Nigel:** That's right. You, and Joseph, and our sound designer, Antwan Williams, and I all met in a parking lot outside my studio.

**Earlonne:** We opened the trunk of my car and pulled out those Christmas boxes we had picked up from Joseph's mom. [music fades out]

[to Joseph]

**Nigel:** Are you ready to open them or is it going to be too much?

**Joseph:** No. That's what I'm here for. Because I'm going to systematically execute everything in those boxes.

**Nigel:** What tool are you going to use to do that?

**Joseph:** Um, pry bar and a sledgehammer.

**Nigel:** Okay.

**Earlone:** You had him on parole? No, I'm just messing with you.

**Joseph:** Yes, I got permission. [Nigel laughs]

**Nigel:** Can we look at what's in there or are you just want to go right to destroying?

**Joseph:** No, I'll show you.

**Nigel:** Okay.

**Joseph:** There are four candles, five candles– six candles, excuse me. [music comes in] Each of these were made by hand by the love of my life at the time. She made these for me.

**Nigel:** The smell when you opened the box, it's so intense. It's a very sweet kind of earthy smell. UNJ I'm amazed how potent that is. [music fades out] UNJ What kind of memories does that smell bring back for you?

**Joseph:** The first word that comes to mind is hate.

**Earlone:** Why hate?

**Joseph:** Because I hate what I became as I collected these things. I hate what I allowed myself to become.

**Earlone:** Which is?

**Joseph:** I thought I was becoming a hero but I ended up becoming a

**Earlone:** monster.

**Joseph:** [music comes in] So,

**Earlone:** the next

**Joseph:** I'm pulling out

**Earlone:** three hourglasses. I

**Joseph:** found this stone at the **Kern River**. This was a cork from a Hennessy bottle. Anybody want to Snoop Dogg CD? Some old bills from before I got arrested.

**Earlone:** Might be a check in there somewhere.

**Joseph:** Nah.

**Nigel:** What's that?

**Joseph:** That is one of the original, like original, original gangster fidget tools.

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** Okay. So, this original gangster fidget tool is this bracelet made out of like braided rope and on it is this little bead that you can spin. So, as he was talking about it, Joseph put it on.

**Earlonne:** And when he did that, he just like, ergh.

**Nigel:** Oh yeah, he just shuttered.

**Earlonne:** He had this physical reaction to it you could see.

**Joseph:** That felt gross. I'm not doing that again.

**Earlonne:** Seems like it just irritated you putting it on.

**Joseph:** Yeah. Yeah. That triggered some good memories and by good, I mean, shitty.  
[transition]

**Nigel:** A crowbar, a five pound— is it a five pound sledgehammer?

**Joseph:** Four pound.

**Nigel:** Four pound sledgehammer. And what do you call that? Not a ratchet...

**Joseph:** Channellock Pliers.

**Nigel:** Everyone has eye covering. Antwan does not. [to Antwan] You better step back.

**Joseph:** Yeah, you guys be careful.

**Earlonne:** And out of all that stuff, Nyge [Nigel affirms] , there was one thing that was the most powerful object in the whole box.

**Nigel:** That's right. The marble.

**Earlonne:** The marble.

**Nigel:** So, it was large, kind of the size of a plum. It's green. And it had all these swirls in it. And it was actually a really beguiling object.

**Earlonne:** And that marble was the most important thing to be destroyed because out of all of this stuff, it was the thing that reminded Joseph most about the person he was before he went to prison. [music fades out]

In my angriest and bitterest times I would sit there and just brood over this thing. Just like, *hmm*, just like stare at all the time. Like it was trying to give me an answer and it never did. And it just made me even more angry.

**Nigel:** I remember thinking on the one hand he knows this is just stuff, but he also didn't want to take any chances. This stuff was too infused with his memory in a place he just didn't want to be anymore. So, he needed to physically destroy it.

**Earlonne:** Catharsis.

[sounds of breaking objects]

**Joseph:** Reverence will give a power. I don't want to give it power back. I don't want this crap setting up shop in my house again. Yup. Everything that has been broken has been broken.

**Earlonne:** Alright, let us see that marble again.

**Joseph:** This is the last piece of a dead man's bones.

[to Joseph]

**Nigel:** But I'm kind of curious, like we went through this whole thing today that was very emotional. I didn't see you pull out your soothing tool until right now when it's all over.

**Joseph:** Because now I'm scared.

**Nigel:** Of what?

**Joseph:** Once again, like I'm stepping forward one foot forward into an unknown. This is a goodbye. a farewell, a fuck you. And like the proof that I'm never going backwards. I can't even look over my shoulder anymore because there's nothing to look at. [music comes in]

**Nigel:** I'm sure a lot of people didn't think you were going to survive prison and you maybe didn't even think you were, and you actually did. And you actually thrived in some ways.

**Joseph:** It's God's grace and dumb luck.

**Nigel:** Can you take some responsibility for it?

**Joseph:** Probably the dumb luck part. [Nigel laughs]

**Nigel:** I don't know. I'm curious. I mean, I see such a difference in you. I've said this to you before, since you've gotten out of prison. So, it seems like you've already made these huge steps forward. So I got a lot of faith in you. [music fades out]

**Joseph:** Thank you. [Nigel affirms]

**Nigel:** So Earlonne, did you have anything you wanted to destroy when you got out? I mean, did you have anything that you felt was weighing you down?

**Earlonne:** [sighs deeply] Probably old friends.

**Nigel:** Oh, wow. [Earlonne laughs]

**Earlonne:** Nah, I think, you know, twenty years, it changes people. Changes a lot. Changes trajectories. [Nigel affirms] And it's not like people are less friends or no longer friends. They are, [Nigel affirms] but we're just in different phases of our lives. [Nigel affirms] It's just, I don't associate with a lot of people in my past. I do, but I don't.

**Nigel:** So, there's no object that your mom could pull out of storage that you would look at and go, *oh shit*.

**Earlonne:** Only pictures, only pictures. And she got a million of them. Like, that's— the pictures will stop me for hours because I'll go through them. But objects... no. I guess it's 'cause that life is gone. It's over, you know, it's like, I'm not trying to relive that shit. [music fades out]

Nyge.

**Nigel:** Yes.

**Earlonne:** We would be remiss if we did not hear from our co-host inside San Quentin, the honorable Rahsaan "New York" Thomas.

**Nigel:** That's right.

[over the phone to New York] Hey

**New York:** [over the phone] Hey, what's up, Nyge?

**Nigel:** Hey. Hey, my friend. Good to hear your voice.

**New York:** I'm good. I'm good.

[as narrator]



**Nigel:** And so, we asked him, “What do you have in your cell right now that you couldn't get by without?”

**New York:** My most important possession in my cell right now is my typewriter. Because my typewriter keeps my voice free. I've been down with this thing like sixteen years, and right now, I'm using it more than ever.

**Nigel:** What does it look like?

**New York:** It's, uh, it's huge. It's the size of like ten keyboards. It's so old that the memory don't work, it keeps forgetting what we talked about. It's killing me too because you get twenty-five pages per one typewriter cartridge. And a typewriter cartridge cost \$13. I'll write it out by hand first. I get it all perfect and rewrite it and rewrite it and rewrite it 'til I'm finally happy. And I try to type it in one take, you know what I mean? But it does definitely make *t-t-t-t-t*. And when I'm in a flow and I'm really in the zone, I just gotta hope my cellie doesn't have to use the bathroom. [both laugh]

**Nigel:** Okay. Let me ask you this, New York: New York, you've got enough to write an article or a love letter, which are you going to do?

**New York:** So, a love letter should be written by hand, Nigel. Real love. [Nigel laughs]

**Earlonne:** Gotcha on that one, Nyge.

**Nigel:** That's a perfect answer. [both laugh] Spoken like a true romantic. [both New York and Nigel laugh hysterically]

**Earlonne:** Spoken like a man that don't wanna spend \$25 on that letter.

**Carmela:** Thanks to Joseph Krauter, Carmela Frank, and Tyra Woods for sharing their stories with us. Thanks also Andrea Barden and Tom Frank.

**Tyra:** Ear Hustle was produced by Nigel Poor, Earlonne Woods, Rahsaan “New York” Thomas, John “Yahya” Johnson, and Bruce Wallace.

**Carmela:** This episode was sound designed and engineered by Antwan Williams.

**Tyra:** With music by Antwan and David Jassy. Amy Standen edits the show.

**Carmela:** And Julie Shapiro is the Executive Producer for Radiotopia.

**Tyra:** Ear Hustle would like to thank acting warden, Ron Broomfield. And as you know, every episode of Ear Hustle has to be approved by this guy here. [music fades out]

**Lieutenant Sam Robinson:** So, this is Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the Public Information Officer at San Quentin State Prison.

For those of you out there, remember it's election time. So, make sure you really registered and get out to vote. And otherwise, I will say that I approve this episode.  
[music comes in]

**Tyra:** This podcast is made possible with support from the Chan Zuckerberg initiative, working to redesign the justice system by building power and opportunity for communities impacted by incarceration.

**Earlone:** Thanks for that, Carmela and Tyra.

**Nigel:** Ear Hustle is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX

**Earlone:** A collection of the best podcast around.

**Nigel:** You can hear more at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm). Now, before we go, we have a few more folks we wanted to give a shout out to him.

**Earlone:** Right. These are a few of our loyal listeners who donated during Ear Hustle's recent fundraiser.

**Nigel:** Thanks to David Arden

**Earlone:** Amanda Aronoff

**Nigel:** Philippe Audi

**Earlone:** Julia Bator.

**Nigel:** Laura Belzer

**Earlone:** Nadia Bolz-Weber...

**Nigel:** Earlone, you know, we've got so many people to thank. And honest to God, I think we can do better than just saying their names.

**Earlone:** Nyge

**Nigel:** Yes?

**Earlone:** I have an idea.

**Nigel:** Lay it on me, my friend.

**Earlone:** How about we loop our musical wizard, Antwan Williams in and make a song? [Nigel affirms]

**Nigel:** I love that idea. Okay. I'm Nigel Poor.

**Earlone:** And I'm Earlone Woods.

**Nigel and Earlone:** [in tandem] Thanks for listening. [music fades out]

**Earlone:** I remember the one comment I got from this older lady, she said, "Brother, I don't see too many men wearing black and red, and you make it look good." [Nigel laughs] And I was like, "Really? Really?"

**END OF EPISODE.**