



Episode 53: Sugarbutt's a Snail
Air Date: March 2, 2021

Nigel Poor: The following episode of *Ear Hustle* contains language that may not be appropriate for all listeners. Discretion is advised.

[theme music comes in]

Earlonne Woods: Well done, Nyge, well done. [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: I'm a little rusty, but we'll get there.

Earlonne: You did your shit. We are really happy to be back with a brand-new season for you all. But before we get to that, we're gonna start the same way we've started a bunch of episodes over the past year.

Nigel: Yup – with a quick update on the COVID pandemic in California prisons. [music fades out]

As we record this on February 22nd, 210 people incarcerated in California state prisons have died of COVID-19. And Earlonne, this shocked me. Over half the total incarcerated population has had COVID.

Earlonne: Mm. There are 850 active cases, which is bad, but way down from the peak two months ago where there were over ten thousand active cases in the prisons.

Nigel: And some positive news: the vaccine is getting inside. Close to 36,000 incarcerated people have received their first shot. [Earlonne says, 'Woo hoo!' in the background] Plus, around 25,000 staff.

Earlonne: Indeed.

[over the phone]

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas: What up, son?

Earlonne: Man, how you been?

New York: I'm alive, man. I'm still doing good for a guy in prison, n'mean?

Nigel: Hey New York!

New York: Hey! How you doing?

Nigel: I'm great! It's good to hear your voice.

New York: It's good to hear yours as well!

[as narrator]

Earlonne: We asked our guy inside, our colleague Rahsaan “New York” Thomas, what he was seeing in San Quentin.

Nigel: He said older guys in there – they were lining up to get the vaccine, including our friend Al King.

Earlonne: Al King! That's the chef right there. Chef Al King. He cook up some good shit.

Nigel: Yup. And he was in our episode...

Earlonne: “The Great Cookoff”!

Nigel: Yup. And New York told us Al King was *psyched* to get that vaccine.

New York: Oh, Al King was super excited to get the vaccine. He showed up on my gate doin’ the vaccine dance. He was singin’. He was at my gate singin’. [all laugh] ‘Got my shot, baby. I’m good now. I’m good to go’.

[as narrator]

Earlonne: But New York also says there’s a fair number of people who are wary of the vaccine.

New York: They don’t trust it. They thinkin’ of the Tuskegee Experiment... uh... the medical history of California prisons. But I’m like Chris Rock, man. If the rich people are taking it, it’s probably cool. [laughs]

Nigel: The rich people are definitely taking it, man. You know what I mean? They’re probably paying an extra to get it. [laughs] [New York affirms and laughs] Are you going to take it?

New York: Yeah. Then I’m definitely going to take it. My cellie’s fine and if I don’t take it, how are we ever going to get back to normal?

[as narrator]

Nigel: Guys are still spending tons of time in their cells. New York says he gets out for about 90 minutes every couple of days.

Earlonne: Other than that, he’s in his cell reading, writing, and working out.

[to New York]

Nigel: Last time we talked to you... didn’t you say you were, like, really working on your abs?

New York: Yeah, they won’t come. I’m trying! [Earlonne and Nigel laugh] I’m doing this ab stuff every day and nothing’s happened.

Earlonne: Bruh, bruh. Thanks, bruh. It just ain't me, huh? I think it's when we get to a certain age, bruh.

[as narrator]

Nigel: Things are slowly, slowly opening up in there.

Earlonne: Yup. It looks like we'll be hearing more from New York this season and definitely glad to have him back.

Nigel: Absolutely. In the meantime, let's get into the season. Which started off with a piece of mystery tape our producer dug up to play for us that we hadn't heard in a lonnnnggg, long time.

Earlonne: Long time.

[abstract industrial sounds come in as transition]

[Clip begins with montage – speakers share in quick succession: 'I did not realize that I could be potentially facing life in prison'. 'I'm gon' drag you through the four corners of this cell'. 'It's like, don't wanna be in prison, but I wanna know what it's like'.]

[to group of San Quentin resident]

Nigel: You really think people want to know what it's like in prison?

[men responding, crosstalk: 'Hell yeah!'... 'They do!'... 'Of course!']

[music comes in]

Earlonne: You got all these shows, TV shows, new programs, like, *Prison Break*...

Speaker 1: *Orange is the New Black, Locked Up.* [singing, *you won't let me out!*]

Earlonne: You know all the shows.

Speaker 1: But they all bullshit though. [music fades out]

Nigel: Why? Why are they bullshit? Is it–

[montage begins – speakers share in quick succession: ‘Cause ain’t none of them servin’ time’... ‘They ain’t never did no real time’... ‘They actin’... ‘Prison ain’t really like that. Nah man, we just livin’ life’... ‘Like everybody else’. [music comes in]

Nigel: Oh my God, Earlonne. We sound so young. We sound so naive. So ready for whatever's coming our way. [Earlonne laughs] It's delightful. Delightful.

Earlonne: Ahhh [says as if sighing] [Nigel laughs]. I'm sitting there, like, ‘I remember that’. I sounded about the same.

Nigel: No, you have this like, sort of sweet, like naivete to your voice.

Earlonne: What'chu sayin'? That disappeared? It's not sweet anymore? [Nigel laughs] It's bitter now?

Nigel: You're all jaded now, man. [laughs] It's like we had no idea what was coming our way. Anything was possible.

Earlonne: Yeah...

Nigel: It's a classic. You know, it also signifies that I really appreciate about *Ear Hustle*... [Earlonne affirms] ... is that we're always gonna be laughing.

Earlonne: Yeah. And I know a lot of people be like, ‘They don't laugh like that in prison’. Shit, if they don't. [Nigel laughs] Shiiit, laugh like everyone else laugh. It's funny moments in everything, every day. [music fades out]

Nigel: So, how many years ago was that? It feels like that was a decade ago.

Earlonne: It had to be 2016. It was from that little promo we sent Radiotopia back when we were trying to pitch them on the idea of picking up our prison-generated podcast.

Nigel: Exactly. Before *Ear Hustle* was even *Ear Hustle*. [Earlonne affirms] And now we've done six seasons, and Earlonne, we are on our seventh!

Earlonne: Six seasons, Nyge. [Nigel affirms] We've heard a lot of stories from a lot of people over that time.

Nigel: Oh yeah. And you know that we hear from listeners all the time.... *What happened to those people? What are they doing now? What has gone on in their lives since that story aired?*

Earlonne: So, today, we're gonna hear from three of 'em.

Nigel: And there are so many people we could have spoken to. [Earlonne affirms] But these three guys seemed like the perfect pick because they were really at a crossroad in their lives when they were first on the show. [Earlonne affirms] And so, we wanna know what's happened to them since we last put the mic in front of their faces.

[theme comes in]

Earlonne: I'm Earlonne Woods.

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

Earlonne: Season seven! Alright, here we go.

[theme fades out]

Earlonne: For this first update, we're going waaaayyyy back, to the third *Ear Hustle* episode ever.

Nigel: This one dropped in July of 2017. It was called "Looking Out", and it featured a guy who used to surround himself with a lot of... little friends inside.

[clip from "Looking Out" begins]

Rauch: Gophers, rabbits... I had four swallows, a toad, a praying mantis, twenty-one snails, frog, red breasted finch – his arm broke. Pigeons, I had a desert mole that was...]

[clips fades out]

Nigel: Old Rauchie, man. [Earlonne laughs] It's Rauch!

[clip continues]

Rauch: My name is Ronell Draper, but I go by Rauch. My relationship with people is pretty strained. I don't trust them. From early on, they have been a source of pain for me. [music comes in]

Rauch: [water dripping] When I was a child, before I was removed from the care of my mom's custody, she tried to drown me a couple times in the tub. [music comes in] And then, she stopped and she left the bathroom, and she was crying. I knew she was unhappy or sad at something I did. I wanted to actually comfort her, but I didn't know how to do it. I don't remember her face and I haven't seen her since.

[clip fades out]

Nigel: Earlonne, I've heard that tape I don't know how many times, and it always has the same effect. I mean, it is a tough thing to hear.

Earlonne: Yeah, it's a trip. You know a lot of individuals have a fucked-up beginning, you know?

Nigel: Yeah, and clearly, he was dealing with some heavy stuff. But here's the thing about Rauch, he also can be pretty funny and lighthearted. And you know, whenever I would see him at San Quentin, he would always wanna stop and chat and give me an update on what's going on in his life, like *always*. [Earlonne laughs]

Earlonne: Right. Rauch says after that episode aired, he got hundreds of letters from listeners. [music comes in] And one letter from a listener in Kansas, led to something a little more than just a pen pal.

[over the phone]

Rauch: I was hanging out at his cell one day and I got a letter from somebody and the first line was like, they heard me on *Ear Hustle* podcast. And they said that like they hadn't met me before. They didn't know me. And they felt a connection. We built some sort of a relationship. That person even came out here from Kansas to visit.

Nigel: What was that like?

Rauch: Very odd.

[as narrator]

Nigel: This is the first visit in *twenty-two years*. Take that in. Twenty-two years without a visit.

Earlonne: And that's aside from lawyers and stuff like that.

Nigel: Yeah, right, it was his first personal visit.

Earlonne: Yeah, and it was like a personal, *personal* visit. [music fades out]

Nigel: Mmhm.

[to Roach]

Nigel: How did you prepare for the visit?

Rauch: Uh...stress. I didn't do anything, really. The second day I did shave... to give two different ways I could look because I can look more presentable when I shave.

Nigel: Were you excited? Were you nervous? Were you angry? Anxious?

Rauch: I was really nervous. Because... interaction was hard because I'm not used to the interaction. It was weird for me. [Nigel affirms] It was weird as hell. It was odd because this is the first time you meet this person. And then, I gave this person a kiss. I was a little nervous, you know. Kissing to me is stupid... because... I don't know. I haven't done it in a thousand years.

Nigel: Why is kissing stupid?

Rauch: I guess the level of intimacy. It's so close. It's so close it's like somebody's inside your face, really. I don't know. It's like expectations are on top, on there. [Nigel affirms] Like, I kissed somebody and a tree's supposed to grow.

Earlonne: Like he kiss somebody and a tree's supposed to grow? [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: I don't know. All I can say is that is classic Rauch.

Earlonne: Indeed. And, after the kiss, Rauch fell in deep.

Rauch: And it was really crazy because experiencing it, it hurt all up in the body. That strong feeling of somebody loving me that way. The way I was taking it, it just hurt, even

when it felt good, it hurt. Oh my gosh. I'm like, *why do people want to fall in love? That's crazy!*

Nigel: OK E, I know you weren't inside then, but I remember seeing Rauch in the yard around this time and something had really changed in him. He was like this little giddy teenager. He was happy, and skipping, tra-la-laing around. It was like he was floating on a cloud. His whole body language was different. He was a different guy.

Earlonne: Mmm.

Nigel: But... then one day I saw him, and he was so angry. It was like this dark storm cloud was all around him. And all of that joy and love that he'd felt had just fallen apart. And he was devastated.

Earlonne: Right, and when I went back into San Quentin with you that one time [Nigel affirms] and I seen him, he was crushed. [music comes in] I'm like, 'Man, what's happenin' with you?' And he said, 'Man – she broke up with me.' And I'm like, 'huh?' It sounds like she told him that it was just too hard to date someone in prison. [Nigel affirms] That's how he made it sound. [Nigel affirms]

[to Rauch]

Nigel: How did you react? What did you do with the heartache?

Rauch: I cried. I cussed people out. I cut the hair off. It was too hard. I just cut it off. I just took the razor and just cut them off. They're gone. [laughs] Ended up cutting it off with a razor. Then I ended up giving it to people.

[to Earlonne]

Nigel: And those dreadlocks, Earlonne, you know they were a really important part of who Rauch was.

Earlonne: Hell yeah they was! We talked about it in the episode. [Nigel affirms] He put different oils on each one and he'd sit there smelling on each one of 'em. [Nigel affirms] You know what I'm sayin'? And those dreadlocks is what made him Jesus Christ!

Nigel: I mean, that's like a huge statement. It was his way of saying... *something's really wrong.*

[to Rauch]

I remember I saw you when you cut your hair. It was pretty shocking.

Rauch: Yeah...

Nigel: I mean it seemed... and you did it... I mean, as an observer, it looked like it was done out of anger. I mean, it was like...

Earlonne: ...Uneven.

Nigel: Yeah, like it was snatched off your head.

Rauch: It was anger. It was anger, to make a point. So many things were happening at the time, in my head. I was unhappy.

Nigel: So, where do you put your affection if you don't have a relationship? Where does that need for love and affection go?

Rauch: It doesn't go that deep anymore. I mean, I don't lose myself with somebody else anymore. I still got the animals.

Nigel: How many critters do you have now?

Rauch: I have Sugarbutt... and two slugs who go really fast. And... three centipedes. And I had one worm. Now, it's was like, I don't know how many. Every time I move the dirt around, a thousand worms jumpin' up at me. But that's pretty much it.

Earlonne: And let me say this, in prison when you call somebody 'Sugarbutt' – I think you need to clarify that, bruh.

Rauch: Man, I'm Rauch! It don't even matter. Sugarbutt's a snail!

Nigel: Is it fair to say that's where your love goes? To the little critters?

Rauch: Always! I mean, that just goes I mean, that's it. Shoot, I mean, that just goes without saying.

Earlonne: I'm gonna say a name. Tell me the first thing that come in your head. Uh... Michelle Barone.

Rauch: Michelle. Ha. Michelle cheated off me in English class in high school. So, somebody, I went to high school with. There's a lot of a history there.

[to Earlonne and Nigel]

Michelle: [laughing] I met Ronell in tenth grade English. Ronell tells the story that I used to cheat off of him in poetry or some crap.

[as narrator]

Nigel: This is, of course, Michelle. Rauch's friend from growing up.

Michelle: The first time I saw Ronell, he was wearing pink biker pants. Hot pink. When I say pink, I mean hot, hot pink. And like those colorful Mork and Mindy rainbow suspenders. That's how he used to come to school. He was just very different than everybody else. And he knew it. And everybody else knew it.

[as narrator]

Earlonne: Michelle is not into this nickname of his, 'Rauch'...

Michelle: I will not call him that [laughs]. Nope.

Earlonne: She calls him Ronell.

Nigel: This kind of blew my mind, Earlonne. After that episode aired, we got an email from Michelle about Rauch, AKA Ronell. In the episode, we had talked about how he lived up in rafters of somebody's house? Those were Michelle's rafters.

[to Michelle]

Earlonne: Do you remember him keeping any pets back then?

Michelle: I don't remember him keeping anything, but I always had dogs and cats. We had a cat that loved Ronell. He swore that the cat said his name. [laughs] The cat was in heat rubbing up on his leg and meowing, but he swore the cat was saying his name.

Earlonne: So, his meow was 'Ronell' [imitating a cat's meow]

Nigel: [laughs] Well, it could be.

Michelle: He swore it was saying 'Ronell'. [imitating a cat's meow] [all laugh]

[music comes in]

You know he went to school for cosmetology?

Nigel: ...No.

Michelle: Yes, we both went to vo-tech school. I went for the nursing program and he went to the vo-tech school for cosmetology. He could do some hair.

Nigel: [hesitates] I'm a little speechless, sorry. I'm not sure how to react to that.
[Michelle and Nigel laugh]

Michelle: Yes, he did. He went for cosmetology. But I used to go get him because I was in the nursing program. I used to go get him out of class to do EKG's on him when we were learning EKGs because I wanted to see his chest. That's just being honest. [Nigel and Michelle laugh]

Nigel: And how was that chest?

Michelle: Very nice.

Nigel: Did you have a romance with him or were you friends?

Michelle: We were friends, but I always had a crush on him. [Nigel affirms] I always loved me some Ronell. You know, when Ronell gets out of jail, he always has a place to go. I've been married, I've been divorced. I've been around the block, but my heart's always been with Ronell.

Nigel: Do you, uh, do you imagine some future with him?

Michelle: Um... if he gets out, yeah.

[music comes in]

Earlone: The day after we talked to her, Michelle had her first video-visit with Rauch. It was the first time she'd seen his face in twenty-five years.

Nigel: Yeah, except she didn't really get to see his face because of COVID. He was wearing a mask. So, I don't know, man. Earlonne, I really hope next time they see each other, they actually, you know...

Earlonne: Really, *really* get to see each other!

Nigel: Exactly.

[abstract industrial sounds come in as transition]

Nigel: Okay, the next person we're gonna check in with was on an episode back in Season four. And Earlonne, remind me – wasn't there something kind of special about that season?

Earlonne: Hell yeah! It was a lot special, shit.

Nigel: Tell me about it.

Earlonne: Season four was my first season as an outside co-host. My first season not living in San Quentin.

Nigel: And it was so great. [music comes in]

[as narrator]

Earlonne: The first story I did from the outside was called "Kissing the Concrete". We followed two guys as they got out of San Quentin.

[to Nigel] You and New York, y'all interviewed them right before they stepped out of the gate. [Nigel affirms] And I met them on the other side of those gates. [Nigel affirms]

Nigel: Exactly. Here's a bit with one of those guys, Ronnie Young, the day before he got out.

[music fades out]

[to Ronnie]

Nigel: What are the three things that you're looking forward to the most after you get out?

Ronnie Young: [chuckles] Okay, three things I'm looking forward to. Showering alone. [laughs] Oh my God, that's so huge. [laughs] Um, being able to open a refrigerator door. Grab a pickle or something to drink. Ice cream. And then I gotta have milk on ice cream. [laughs]

Nigel: What flavor?

Ronnie: Oh God, it doesn't even matter to me. I just love ice cream.

Nigel: So, what're your concerns? When we asked you what's happening tomorrow, I could see your face get really excited, but I can also see a part of you that's wearing something heavy.

Ronnie: [inhales sharply] Because I don't know what I'm gonna do.

[as narrator]

Nigel: When we spoke with Ronnie, he was finishing a three-year sentence, but this was his sixth time being locked up.

[to Ronnie]

How old were you the first time you came to prison?

Ronnie: Twenty-two?

Nigel: And how old are you now?

Ronnie: I'm fifty.

Nigel: So, I'm gonna just ask you a blatant question. Why do you keep coming back to prison?

Ronnie: Drugs. Every time I get out of prison, I go right back to selling drugs and using drugs.

Nigel: And what's your drug of choice?

Ronnie: Methamphetamine.

Nigel: So where are you with your addiction right now?

Ronnie: [voice quivering] I don't know.

Nigel: Yeah.

Ronnie: I wanna say it's behind me, but it's not. I mean, it's right in my face.

[to Earlonne]

Nigel: Earlonne, that tape brings me right back to that conversation. And you know, we talk to a lot of guys who are just about to get out, and it's such a vulnerable moment, there's so much hope and expectation. And you really don't know how it's going to go for them.

Earlonne: Nah, you have it in your mind, but then when you get out... it's reality. [Nigel affirms] So, I end up meeting Ronnie at the gate.

[in the field]

Earlonne: How are you doin', man?

Ronnie: Good, and you?

Earlonne: I'm chillin man, kicking back. How's it feel? [voices chattering in the background]

Ronnie: Wonderful.

[as narrator]

Earlonne: Then, he headed a couple hours east to the county he paroled to.

Nigel: And we were gonna stay in touch, but... it didn't work out that way.

Earlonne: Nah, he stopped answering my calls. [music comes in] By the time I caught up with him again, he was back using. I've stayed in touch with him off and on over the past two years. And reached out again recently to see where he was at in life.

Nigel: We'll get to that, after a quick break. [music fades out]

[automated voice says, 'This is a prepaid collect call from... < Ronnie > [recording of Ronnie saying his own name] ...an inmate at Calaveras County Sheriff's office'.]

[over the phone]

Nigel: Hey, Ronnie. It's Nigel.

Ronnie: [chuckling] Hello, how are you?

Nigel: Good, man. It's been so long since I talked to you.

Ronnie: I know, huh.

Nigel: Yeah.

Ronnie: It's been a while.

[as narrator]

Earlonne: As listeners can probably tell, Ronnie is locked up again.

[automated voice and sound of numbers dialing on a phone in the background come in]

Nigel: Which is why every time we talked to him, we had to wait through this absurd series of automated prompts and messages from that goddam phone system. [Earlonne laughs]. It drove me nuts.

[automated voice continues, '...press. Thank you for using Securus. You may start the conversation now'.]

[to Ronnie, over the phone]

Earlonne: Hey bro, I got to go through an act of Congress to get you on the call.
[Ronnie laughs]

Nigel: That thing's crazy! It's like two minutes long. [Earlonne laughs]

Earlonne: It's like "press this", "press that."

Nigel: Ronnie, are you just sitting there waiting? Like, *when are they gonna pick up?*
This is taking forever.

Ronnie: Yeah. It goes through a little thing saying, 'wait, while your party is entering information to accept the call.'

Nigel: It's nuts.

[as narrator]

Earlonne: Ronnie has been back in jail for about a year.

Nigel: He got picked up after cops tried to pull him over and he bolted. And now, he's back in prison with a three-year sentence.

[to Ronnie, over the phone]

Nigel: And so, can I ask you, like, why did you run?

Ronnie: [hesitates] Um... I just got scared and I had a crank in my pocket... [Nigel affirms] and I was just spooked and ran from 'em. And I mean, [laughs] and it's crazy because if I would have pulled over, it probably wouldn't have been so bad. I think... I wasn't... I wasn't doing everything I should have been doing for one. [Nigel affirms] You know, I was still... I was still missing around and, you know, and I had some people in my corner helping me and... and I screwed that up.

Nigel: What if someone said to you, 'Ronnie, I'm going to do anything you need. Just tell me, what is it. What can I do to help you change this?' What would you say to them? What would you ask for?

Ronnie: [pauses] Oh, God. [pauses] You know... [chuckles] I don't know. Um...

[automated voice interrupts, 'You have one minute left'.]

Ronnie: Figures. Um... [hesitates]

Nigel: Will you think about that when we talk to you next time?

Ronnie: Yeah, absolutely.

Nigel: That'd be great.

Ronnie: Yeah, that's fine.

Nigel: OK. Alright. Um... [crosstalk]

Earlonne: [crosstalk] Alright, do you have any specific time? 'Cause I know, uh— that you can call tomorrow?

Nigel: Yeah, give us a time, Ronnie.

Ronnie: Um, so I'll probably have this by nine o'clock, but then they shut them off—

[Ronnie interrupted and cut off by automated voice, 'Thank you for using Securas. Goodbye.'] [Earlonne laughs]

Nigel: Oh, God damn it! Motherfucker! I hate this. [Earlonne continues laughing] I know, it makes you laugh Earlonne.

[as narrator]

Nigel: The next time we were able to get Ronnie on the phone, I asked him about some of the good things that had happened to him in the brief time he was out.

Ronnie: So, some of the best moments I had out there, I want to say were with my grandson. Yeah, going to the movies with my grandson, just hanging out with him. Looking out my bedroom window first thing in the morning when the sun's starting to come up and there's a deer right outside my bedroom window. And I have a really nice bike. You know, one that you pedal. [laughs] [Nigel laughs] And I love it. And I would just ride everywhere and look at the deer and look at the wildlife. It's beautiful up here. Your other question... I don't know what to say about that. I just don't know. What some could do to help me change. I think... you know, my mom is getting up in age and she's been having a hard time here lately and who knows? Maybe that might be a good thing for me to go back and take care of her. [music comes in] You know, when my kids were

alive and I would get out and I had good intentions of, of doing the right things and taking care of my children. And then I never did, you know....?

[automated voice interrupts and says, 'You have one minute left'.]

Ronnie: [quietly] Damn. But... so, that—

Nigel: —Wanna call back one more time after this?

Ronnie: Sure, absolutely.

Nigel: So, maybe when we get back on—

[automated voice interrupts and says, 'Thank you for using Securus. Goodbye'. And Nigel responds with 'Goodbye' while chuckling]

Nigel: Ronnie, what could you do for yourself? 'Cause I know a lot of people would say, *Well, really, you can only help yourself.* And I'm asking you what other people could do for you. But what could you do for yourself to change things?

Ronnie: I think if I were to stay busy... [Nigel affirms] and... for sure stay away from methamphetamine. [Nigel affirms]

Nigel: Is it possible to describe what it's like to constantly be driven back to it? 'Cause you always have good intentions. Every time we talk to you, you've got great intentions.

Ronnie: I don't know how... [hesitates] I don't even know how to answer your questions. Um...

Nigel: Yeah. Do you remember the first time that you did it?

Ronnie: Ooh. Um... yeah, I was probably... God, was probably like twelve or thirteen years old.

Nigel: When you're doing it, do you, at the moment, do you feel better? Is there like a momentary part where you're like, 'Okay. I feel alright now.'

Ronnie: ...Maybe at first... but... um... [loud grating sound of plastic against a hard surface in the background]

Earlonne: Hey, man, whatchu doin'?

Ronnie: Huh?

Earlonne: What you over there doin'? All I hear is *r-r-r-r-r* [trilling, imitating grating sound]

Nigel: Yeah, a weird noise. [chuckling]

Ronnie: Oh, I guess that's my– I'm squeezing the tablet. You guys hear that, huh?

Earlonne: Oh. Why are you over there tryin' to break the tablet?

Nigel: Oh no! Are we making you nervous? I'm sorry. [all laugh]

Ronnie: There's this little rubber grommet around the tablet and I'm squeezin' it. [laughs]

[automated voice comes in, 'You have one minute left'.]

Earlonne: Well, you have a good night, bro. And hold on, man. And keep ya head up.

Nigel: Yeah. Thank you– it's good to talk to you.

Ronnie: Good to talkin' to you to, Nigel. Alright.

Nigel: OK. Take care.

Ronnie: OK. OK.

[automated voice comes in, 'Thank you for using Securus. Goodbye'.]

[music comes in]

Earlonne: I'mma keep checkin' in with Ronnie, long as he continue to keep calling me.

Nigel: Well, you know he's going to keep calling you.

Earlonne: Yeah, it's all good. I hope so. I hope he do. I hope he do!

[abstract industrial sounds come in as transition]

[music comes in]

Curtis Roberts: The crime I committed was I walked into a liquor store, I snatched two \$20 bills out of the cash register... I pled guilty to burglary robbery. And they gave me fifty years to life. Currently I'm on my twenty-third year. The first time I'm eligible for parole is 2044.

[as narrator]

Nigel: Curtis Roberts appeared on our show back at the end of our first season, in an episode called "Left Behind". [music fades out]

Earlonne: Curtis was sentenced under California's Three-strikes law.

Nigel: Fifty years to life for stealing \$40.

Earlonne: That's fucked up, real talk.

Nigel: Oh, God, Earlonne. I think that sentence is one of the reasons Curtis's story really stuck with us and with a lot of listeners. [music comes in]

Earlonne: In that episode Curtis talked about how his crime and the sentence he received had really devastated his relationship with his family.

Curtis: My wife divorced me the same week I got the fifty years. We made an agreement: my pleading guilty, she was going to get the house. She got 100% care of our child and all the money we had in our savings account. And, in exchange, I was gonna be able to see my daughter for at least once a year, no matter where I was. Well, next thing I know, our house was sold, and she had vanished. Here I am on my twenty-third year and I haven't seen my daughter yet. [music fades out]

[as narrator]

Earlonne: By the end of that episode, the two of them were startin' to talk. But it was still pretty rocky.

Nigel: Then, a year after that story aired, Curtis got some good news. California Governor Jerry Brown commuted his sentence, which was originally gonna keep him in prison until 2044. Instead, he got out of prison at the end of 2018.

Earlone: One month after I did.

Nigel: Yup! We've checked in on Curtis a few times since he got out of prison. And E, it was clear from the start that Curtis was really focused on building his relationship back up with his daughter.

Earlone: Yup. I remember that first time we saw him, it was just a couple months after he'd gotten out. I asked him how things were going with her, and he got this big smile on his face and pulled his phone out.

[music comes in]

[to Curtis, in the field]

So, he's scrolling. So, that means they've been having some *live* interactions. [Curtis laughs]

Curtis: Wait, lemme show you the latest picture she sent me. [pauses] I just got that just like two days ago...

Earlone: OK.

Curtis: ...from her.

Earlone: And them your grandkids?

Curtis: Yup, those are my grandkids.

[as narrator]

Earlone: Curtis's daughter Christiana lives in another state, but they've been having a gang of back and forth's. And they talked about some real shit. [music fades out]

Curtis: So, she asked me the question and it was, 'Dad, was I that bad of a little girl that you had to use drugs?' *Hooooo...* I thought how sad that she's carried for twenty-five

years, that question, that 'am I that bad that my dad has to run off and he use drugs?' And I am really glad that I was there to answer it and let her know.

Earlone: Why you just never hit the button to call. There's a button on there where you can call.

Curtis: Because...

Earlone: There's a button on there where you can FaceTime.

Curtis: ...I wanna... See! There you go with that FaceTime stuff. I want to... um... I want to honor her– I don't want to chase her away.

[as narrator]

Nigel: That conversation was a couple years ago.

Earlone: It's about time for an update.

Nigel: So, not long ago, we met up with Curtis outside his apartment building just north of San Francisco. [Earlone affirms] And we're still doing all of our interviews outside because of frickin' COVID. And E, it was so windy that day, because you know... [Earlone affirms] it's Northern California.

Earlone: And for an audio person you're like, 'ahhhh this is gon' to hurt!' [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: Exactly, so that is why you hear that rustling in the background.

[ambient noise comes in – light wind whistles in the background]

Earlone: We asked him how things were going with his daughter.

Curtis: Um... we text. I think we spoke on the phone twice. Sometimes it takes a while for her to respond to my texts.

[to Curtis]

Nigel: But maybe that's a safe way to be in touch? Doesn't require too much but you can also still show up?

Curtis: I think so.

[as narrator]

Nigel: Earlonne, it seems like there's still clearly some distance between him and his daughter.

Earlonne: Yes. You know, sometime... you gotta think, she was five years old! [Nigel affirms] You know, sometimes it's a long time to be in that relationship 'cause he's like a stranger in a way.

Nigel: I know, I know it's tough. But something *had* changed in the way he talked about his daughter. He's speaking up for himself more... and letting her know what *he* wants from their relationship

Curtis: Finally, I just I wrote her a letter and I said, you know, "This this is not working for me". I said, "I was closer to you when I was in prison!" I said, "I'm out here..." I said, "You don't care to have nothing to do with me". I said, "If we're going to be father-daughter or in a relationship, then let's do it. If not, then fine. Let me know". And man, I think it shocked her into, *Wow. He's willing to fight for this.* And she responded.

Nigel: What was the response?

Curtis: She started opening up and telling me about her life. Tellin' me about her husband, tellin' me about the kids... um, tellin' me about her mother which is, you know, huge issue.

Nigel: Yeah. And then... but things fell apart? Or...?

Curtis: You know, life showed up on her end. She has three kids to take care of and she's a single mom now.

Nigel: So, did you ever see her? Have you...? No.

Curtis: No, it's been twenty-seven years.

Nigel: Yeah. So, what do you think is going to happen there?

Curtis: I don't know. I think, um... in time. Just give her time. You know, she's learning lots about me, still.

[music comes in] [as narrator]

Earlonne: There was something else we wanted to talk to Curtis about... his love life.

Nigel: Oh yeah. Listeners might remember that in Season four we told you about how when Curtis got out of prison, he was very eager to start dating, but a little uncertain about how it was supposed to work.

Earlonne: I remember the time he told us about a woman who dropped off some stuff at his house, and he helped her carry the boxes.

Nigel: Oh yeah, I remember that. [music fades out]

Curtis: And so, the girl jumped off the back of the truck just to give me a hug for helping them. And man, I talked about that hug for three days. [laughs] [music comes in] 'Cause she didn't hug nobody else, but she hugged me. And I thought it meant something, you know, but I guess it was just a hug.

[to Earlonne]

Nigel: OK. [laughs] Earlonne I think you're right, clueless.

Earlonne: That's Curtis!

Nigel: So, Curtis went from being clueless about dating, to being married...

[clip from Curtis' wedding begins – officiant says, 'And so, Laura and Curtis have openly declared...']

Nigel: ...in the space of a few months.

[officiant continues, '...their wish to be united before these witnesses. Therefore, they now have become husband and wife. You may kiss the bride'. Guests cheer and clap.]

[music comes in]

Earlonne: And Nyge, you had some doubts about this wedding.

Nigel: Yeah, OK. I did. You know, what can I say? It seemed so rushed. I mean, what was the hurry? I was just, I was a bit worried about it.

[music fades out] [as narrator]

Well, it's been nearly two years since that wedding.

Earlone: And we've got an update.

[to Curtis, in the field]

What has been the most...uh... delightful thing that has happened to you since you got out of prison?

Curtis: Getting married. Getting married. I didn't realize what a gift Laura really is. You know, you get a gift and you don't really realize how awesome the gift is until maybe somewhere down the road. [Nigel affirms] That's Laura. Amazing gift.

Nigel: Wow.

[as narrator]

Curtis and Laura are still happily married. They live in this nice apartment complex with a swimming pool and beautiful landscaping. And Earlone, as you know, they have a cat and three dogs.

Earlone: And not long ago the two of them flew back to Chicago to spend some time with Laura's kids.

[music comes in]

Curtis: I got to see Laura as a mom. And I got to see a mother's heart. And it was a love that I never knew. Man, that girl loves her kids. And I remember the last day we were there, one of her kids, she just wrapped her arms around Laura and wouldn't let go. Man, it just bursted me into tears.

Nigel: How did it make you think about your own relationship with your mom?

Curtis: It was two-fold because I was really happy to learn this about Laura, but it was really sad to realize that I never knew that type of love. [Nigel affirms]

Nigel: Is your mother still alive?

Curtis: I have no idea.

Nigel: You have no contact with her.

Curtis: [negating] Uh-uh. I haven't spoken to her since probably the early '80s. And my dad was before that.

[as narrator] [music fades out]

Earlone: So, some of Curtis' relationships are definitely not where he wants them to be, but in general, I think he's in a better place.

Nigel: Oh definitely. It's so clear to me, Earlone. Emotionally, he just like takes up more space. And it's really interesting. He projects out into the world in a very different way.

Earlone: Well, I mean, he's speaking up for himself now. [Nigel affirms] He's confident in that part, I think.

Nigel: Definitely, even the way he looked seemed kind of different

[to Curtis, in the field]

Well, I have to say, you look a lot less boyish than you did when you were inside prison. You always were very youthful, but you seem like you take up a little more space now, which... that's a good thing.

Curtis: Yeah! I think 'cause I'm finding myself. [Nigel affirms] I'm more stable. In there, man, I took so much... and I had cellies just beat the hell out of me. [Nigel affirms] And I'm not saying physically, I mean, that did happen; but it was emotionally and just constant. And I just became smaller and smaller and smaller and smaller [Nigel affirms] inside the prison. And it was... it took its toll.

[music comes in] [as narrator]

Earlone: Part of what Curtis is talking about there is something that came up in that first episode with him. He was raped while he was in prison.

Nigel: And he told us that he still struggles with the trauma that caused.

[to Curtis, in the field]

What was it like the first time you jumped into this pool?

Curtis: First time I swam in... jeez, decades. [Nigel laughs] It was actually pretty nerve wracking [Nigel says, 'Why?' in the background.] Because to go under water, you know, I still don't trust my surroundings. So, it was hard to close my eyes and... yeah... the trauma from prison! And I discovered being out here that while I was in prison, I didn't get to heal properly. You don't have a chance. You know, you gotta face the day and lock downs and all that stuff. And you learn that when you're out here. And the fact is it still comes. [Nigel affirms] You know, you still go to those dark places. Laura now sees it in me. And you know what Laura will say? 'Curtis, use your voice. Use your voice'. You know it's pretty... it's pretty amazing.

[in the field, speaking to a congregation]

Church member: It is now time for Curtis to come with his exposition on Ephesians chapter two, verses one through ten.

[as narrator]

Nigel: Recently, Curtis found a new forum for that voice he's finding.

Earlonne: Back at that same church he got married at.

Nigel: That's right. He's started preaching there, and soon he and Laura are going to be moving into a house on its property, and Curtis is going to take on a bigger role in the church.

[ambient sound comes in - Curtis preaching in front of congregation]

Earlonne: A few Sundays ago, there he was: standing in front of the congregation, giving a talk.

Curtis: [to congregation] So, we know this is a letter from Paul. The apostle Paul and I have something in common. And that is, the apostle Paul wrote this letter from prison.

And though I didn't write no letters, I was incarcerated like he. So, I understand a little bit about how God deals with the incarcerated, as Paul does.

[music comes in] [as narrator]

Nigel: It is really nice to see Curtis out, building a new life, and just smiling a lot.

Earlonne: Right. He's one of a bunch of folks who we first talked to inside San Quentin – and now we get to hang out with them on the streets in this free world. [Nigel affirms] Including, of course, our colleagues Yahya *and* Antwan.

Nigel: Exactly. Hey, do you remember that time when you and me and Antwan were out having dinner and we ran into A.R. from Season one – remember him? A.R. and Drew? [Earlonne affirms]

Earlonne: Yup. From “Unwritten”. Yup.

Nigel: Exactly. And he was just out there, celebrating a birthday with his wife. And we all got to sit down and enjoy dinner together.

Earlonne: Right. We see Maserati E. [Nigel affirms] I also see, like, Gator... Sha, Dante... And guys are out here doing hella good!

Nigel: Earlonne, it's wonderful. And it makes me so happy. [Earlonne affirms] But there are definitely some people like Ronnie, too. Folks who struggle to get free and stay free.

Earlonne: Definitely. And there's also plenty of people like Rauch, still inside, trying to build a life.

Nigel: Yeah, there are. Earlonne, I have to say, I'm really excited to be back.

Earlonne: Hell yeah, Season seven.

Nigel: Yeah, looking forward to it. [music fades out]

[music comes in]

Speaker 1: Thanks to Tammy for her help with this episode. *Ear Hustle* is produced by Nigel Poor, Earlonne Woods, Rahsaan “New York” Thomas, John “Yahya” Johnson, and Bruce Wallace.

This episode was sound designed and engineered by Antwan Williams, with music by Antwan and David Jazzy. Amy Standen edits the show, Shabnam Sigman is our digital producer, and Julie Shapiro is the executive producer for Radiotopia. *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: This is Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the public information officer at San Quentin state prison. I listened to this episode. It was nice to hear from the guys again and catching up with those who are no longer here, even though, you know, there are challenges. And that's what incarceration is about. It's more than just engaging the guy on the day that, you know, you engage with them. There is a life story. There's baggage. There's everything else that's surrounding the individual. And that's, I guess, that's one of the reasons I do appreciate *Ear Hustle*. 'Cause it invites the world in to listen the complexities of incarceration. So, with that, I know it's long, but it's the beginning of a new season. It's been a while since I've had the opportunity to speak. So, with that, I will say I approve this episode.

[music comes in]

Earlonne: This podcast was 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.

Nigel: *Ear Hustle* is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of the best podcasts around. Hear more at radiotopia.fm.

I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlonne: And I'm Earlonne Woods

Nigel and Earlonne: [simultaneously] Peace. [music fades out]

[automated voice comes in, 'Thank you for using Securus. Goodbye'.]

END OF EPISODE.