



Episode 54: Hot Trash
Air Date: March 17, 2021

[music comes in]

Speaker 1: The following episode of *Ear Hustle* contains language that may not be suitable for all listeners. Discretion is advised.

[music fades out] [abstract industrial sound montage comes in as transition]

[to Vesta]

Nigel Poor: And how old is your daughter?

Vesta: She's four months

Nigel: Four months old. And what's her name?

Vesta: Alina.

[as narrator]

Nigel: This is Vesta. Her husband Ruben is incarcerated at California State Prison, Corcoran. And she hasn't seen him in a *year* – since the pandemic started.

Vesta: She and I are going to have a visit with her daddy this weekend. [Alina babbles in the background] It's going to be the first time her dad gets to meet her. I was telling her, 'You can even hear daddy this weekend. It's going to be so fun! You get to talk to him, and you get to see him.' And I'm so excited. And we just had this little celebratory moment to ourselves.

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: But because this is the time of COVID, this wasn't going to be a real in-person visit. [Nigel affirms] It's a visit with quotes around it. A *video* visit.

Nigel: Yeah. And it's no substitute for the real thing, but right now it's all families have.

[music comes in]

Vesta: I pictured... [chuckles softly] I picture us in my room... our room. And I would have her out of the frame and wait for him to kind of get settled. And I would probably like give him some air hugs and kiss the camera and tell him how much I love him so... much and how much I miss him. And instantly he'd be like, 'Where's my baby?' [laughs] And so, I'd be like, 'Wait. Okay. Okay. What about me? Me first!' [laughs] But I understand. So, I'd pick her up and bring over and introduce her, and tell her 'Alina, this is your daddy. It's Dada.' And just hold her up to the camera and let him see her then her, him. And cry, probably. Yeah. [Nigel affirms] [music fades out]

Earlonne: When you're incarcerated, Nyge, visits are everything. [Nigel affirms] They keep you going. It's family and friends acknowledging that you do exist. [Nigel affirms] At least for me that's what it was.

Nigel: Well, Earlonne you know I've actually never been in the visiting room as a visitor... [Earlonne affirms] because I always come in as a volunteer. But I have been in there and what I've noticed is it is a whole different place than the rest of the prison.

Earlonne: Oh yeah. The visiting room is a really special place. There are few distractions. And you know, it's just you and your visitor getting your vibe on – your visiting vibe. And sometimes it's hard. I mean, the visiting room is where you remember all the shit you missing out on. I mean, when you're in the cell or the yard inside prison, everyone else around you is in the same situation you're in. [Nigel affirms] So, you can

kind of forget that the outside world exists. [Nigel affirms] But in the visiting room – it's like a reminder of everything you're missing. It's in your face. [music comes in]

Nigel: The visiting room. That's what we're talking about today. I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlonne: And I'm Earlonne Woods. This is *Ear Hustle*, from PRX's Radiotopia. Drop that shit, Antwan. [theme comes in]

[theme fades out] [ambient sounds from inside San Quentin State Prison as Rahsaan "New York" Thomas records from the inside]

Rahsaan "New York" Thomas: This is Rahsaan "New York" Thomas on the yard at San Quentin State Prison. It's going down! It's going down! We back, Mortimer. We're back. [laughs] [voices chattering in the background]

[to Earlonne]

Nigel: It is so good to hear our inside co-host New York talking to guys back out on the yard. I– really makes me happy.

Earlonne: Oof [sigh of relief] ... Covid restrictions are easing up inside. So, I know New York and the guys are happy to be out there with that recorder just talking away.

Nigel: Yard Talk is back!

[ambient sounds back on the yard at San Quentin State Prison come in – voices chattering in the distance as New York interviews San Quentin residents]

New York: Tell me your name, how long you've been down and how do you get ready for a visit?

Michael: My name is Michael. I'm down 36 years. Shit, shave and shine, man. You know, it starts days in advance, though. I like to go out there and sharp. So, I iron all my clothes.

New York: Hold on, hold on. What is shit... [stammering] shit, shave and shine?

Michael: Shit, shave and shine, man.

New York: Why do you shine, bro?

Michael: Shine my shoes, man. [laughter in the background] Shine this bald head up a little bit too, you know what I mean?

Speaker 2: You get this anxiety to make sure they're gon' come because sometimes you still don't know if they're going to show up or not, you know what I mean? And when they call your name, boy, your chest get pumped up. You walk out that cell like you Superman, you know what I mean? You feel good about yourself because you feel loved genuinely.

Speaker 3: I've been down since I was a teenager, going on 21 years, right? So, this is what I do: I wake up, I look in the mirror, turn the radio on before I even brush my teeth, you know, let the vibes and everything hit you. I wake up and do the shimmy, like Curry or somebody. And then I grab the toothpaste— I'm dancing and everything and I'm brushing back and forth. You know, I'm looking at my shirt. I got a button up shirt, creased up and everything. You feel me? So, every day it look like I'm going on a visit. So, I might get called on a Wednesday, you never know, right? So, every day, kid you not.

Speaker 4: When we leave our loved ones on the street, sometimes you never see them again. And your family get discouraged sometime. But they love you, so they stand in line for three, four hours just to see you. Now we only get 30 minutes once a month on the video. So, now you have to be selective about who you are able to see on that monitor.

New York: So, you got a choice between your girl, your wife or your moms – who do you pick?

Speaker 4: Mom's come first.

New York: Damn, ma, I owe you an apology. [Speaker 4 laughs]

New York: What's your most memorable visit? Best or worst visit.

Speaker 5: I had been down for like four years at the time, and when I left, my baby girl was one years old. So, she was five at the time. I went out to visit and I'm behind this glass and there's a phone out there and she wouldn't pick up the phone. So, I told her sister, 'Grab the phone.' And she grabbed it and I said, 'Put it to her ear.' I said, 'Baby, what's wrong?' And she was like, 'I hate you! I hate you!' I was like, man... I said, 'What I do?' She said, 'You left me out here all by myself!' That was my worst visit ever.

Speaker 6: The first time I saw my mom at juvenile after I committed this crime.

New York: Why was that your worst visit?

Speaker 6: Because all she did was cry and hug me. And she didn't believe the truth. And I didn't want to tell her the truth that I committed this crime.

Speaker 7: [sighs] I have a daughter that's... she was thirteen years old when she had a baby and now, she's fifteen. But her mom just passed away. And I really need to see my daughter 'cause my daughter is out there by herself now. You know what I mean? And I talked to her on the phone and she said, 'Dad, I wish I could talk to you more. I need to talk to you.' You know?

New York: That's what's up. [ambient noise from the yard at San Quentin fades out]

[to Theresa]

Nigel: Did you worry about him?

Theresa: Oh yeah! It was so massive. You know that place is huge. And then the guards were so intimidating. And... oh, the nights I cried... God store all your tears in a bottle. [Nigel affirms] Well, I have gallons up there. [Nigel affirms] This is my one and only, you know? Yeah.

[to Yahya]

Nigel: Hey *Ear Hustle* producer John "Yahya" Johnson, want to tell them who this is? [Nigel laughs]

John "Yahya" Johnson: That would be none other than my mom. She's talking about the first few times she came and visited me while I was in prison.

Nigel: Do you think she ever stopped worrying about you in there?

Yahya: Nah, I don't think there was a day that she didn't worry. But after a while, you do kinda settle into a routine, you know? [Nigel affirms] I was locked up for 25 years and she probably came and visited me several hundred times. I lost count; she came to visit me so much.

[music comes in]

Theresa: Now this one— hold that over there so she can see.

Nigel: Let me see it close...

Yahya: ...Oh, you gonna like who's on that picture.

[Theresa laughs]

[as narrator]

Nigel: Yahya's mom said that every time she came to visit him, they'd take a picture.

Earlonne: Hell yeah, photos is just as important as the visit.

Nigel: And of course, she still has them. Boxes of those photographs.

[to Theresa]

Nigel: I love that! I like how you're standing too. You know how to stand right in the picture.

Theresa: [laughs] All of the pictures look like that. I'm all that. [Nigel laughs] You know you comin' to visit, put on your best. Put your best foot forward that day. [Earlonne affirms] You know, a little makeup, comb your hair. Because this is a special day. You documenting it on pictures. As you can see here, we look good on all our pictures.

Earlonne: So, you're saying you all that and a bag of chips. That's that old school.

Theresa: That's it. That's how you supposed to think. If I don't think it, who else will, you know?

Nigel: Yes, that is the classic pose...

Theresa: You know!

Nigel: ...It's how you're supposed to look good in pictures, yep. [music fades out]

Yahya: So, my two favorite photos, um... definitely... I'm looking at one... and this is from '96, '97 and I'm at New Folsom State Prison with my mom and my grandmother. My grandmother really gave me a stern talking to the day we took this picture. She couldn't understand or reconcile in her mind how on the outside I appeared so successful, but on the inside, I was 'void' as she would say of 'any concern about them.' And to have my grandmother just say what she said really broke me. But it broke me in order to build me. And so, this is one of my favorite pictures. Three generations, me in the middle, my mother on my left my grandmother on my right. And I always kept this picture near and dear to me.

[music comes in]

I remember my mother coming to visit me in 2005. And we sat down, and she said, 'I have something to tell you.' And so, immediately my antennas go up. I'm alarmed. I'm thinking there's something wrong. Somebody passed away. So, I tense up, brace for it. And she say, 'You know you're going to be a granddaddy, right?' And I'm like, 'What?!' And she looked at me like, 'What? You surprised for your son was the same age that you were when you had him! Like father, like son.' Like three or four visits later, my mother comes up here unannounced and when I'm sitting out in the visiting room, I see her come in and she's carrying a car seat. And she sat the little girl on the table and said, 'Here's your granddaughter, Pawpaw.' And here's this cute little girl – smiling, with drool and I was conflicted with the idea of being a grandpa in prison, but at the same time falling in immense love with this little girl.

[music fades out]

Nigel: Yahya, obviously you're glad to be out of prison. [to Theresa] You're glad he's out. But is there anything that you miss about your visiting room experiences together?

Yahya: Me, what I would say I miss about the visiting room experiences is those deeply intense, personal conversations. Even though the visiting room is this huge room with a lot of people and there's a lot of noise, I kind of would zero in on my visit and cancel out all the noise and focus. I really missed my mom. And there was a lot of things that I wanted to share with her to try to give her an understanding about why I was in prison and how I contributed to her agony in being a delinquent. Over the years we really use the visiting room as a therapeutic place to process our relationship.

Growing up, she would tell me these things. And it would go in one ear and out the other ear, but when I finally had an opportunity to sit down in prison and really just reflect, it was like a role reversal. We would study together in a visiting room, read

scripture, have really deep, intense interpersonal communications about self-growth—where she feels she erred. We apologized. We just use that visit in time to really just seize the moment to grow closer, you know? I mean, now I'm on the go. She's always on the go. So, even though I'm here a lot, we don't really get an opportunity to talk like we did.

Theresa: We were able to talk. We were able to talk a lot. [music comes in]

[to Yahya]

This was another one. This was it. This was the last picture we took. This is the last, you know, this was the end. Just look at you— trying to hunch you down to be my size. I'm going, 'If you don't yourself up.' [pause] It's almost over. I felt it. Inside.

Yahya: What's really significant about this picture is what I can see is the light in both of our eyes. We are really in this real intimate embrace. And I'm holding her and she's holding me, like we can stay in this particular position forever. [music continues]

When I first came home, she had all of her visiting prison photos up around the house. And in the last ten months, they slowly been coming down. [to Theresa]
I would like to ask you now, why in the last ten months have you been taking the pictures down?

Theresa: Because that's behind us. That's the shut door. I don't want to revisit that. We got what we needed to get out of that. And so now, it's to evolve onto something bigger and better. I did. I just started taking them down one by one. Yeah. [music fades out]

[abstract industrial sound montage comes in as transition]

[to Bucci]

Nigel: Oh, I just saw something really sweet. You just rested your head on your friend. Why'd you do that?

Nicola Bucci: Because he's like my dad. I love him to death. [Frank laughs and says 'Definitely' in the background]

Nigel: This is probably a good time to ask who you're sitting next to, Bucci.

Bucci: So, I'm sitting next to my dear friend, best friend, mentor, father figure – Frank Jernigan.

[music comes in] [to Earlonne]

Nigel: Bucci – that guy we just heard, he was a real character inside San Quentin.

Earlonne: Yeah... Bucci, Bucci... was a cool Italian. [Nigel laughs] Nicola Bucci. He was really active in a lot of the programs... [Nigel affirms] he was a runner with the prison running club.

Nigel: Oh yeah, he was always out there sweating in the yard.

Earlonne: Yeah. In Arts in Corrections.

Nigel: And long-time *Ear Hustle* listeners may even remember when we talked to him about his “Bucci bars”.

Earlonne: The Bucci bars [says in low, comical sultry voice]. [Nigel affirms] The soap bars that he'd mix with old, hard orange peels [Nigel affirms] and shit to make these fancy ass soap bars that would exfoliate your skin... [Nigel affirms] shinnin'.

Nigel: So, that's Bucci. And Frank Jernigan... Earlonne, you and I were just meeting him for the first time.

Earlonne: Right. [music fades out]

[to Bucci]

Nigel: How did you two meet?

Bucci: So, originally when I met Frank was in 2003 when I was a corporate chef for Google at the main headquarters.

Nigel: And Frank, what were you doing there?

Frank Jernigan: I was a software engineer at Google. I remember being introduced to Bucci and he just has this really warm, friendly smile. And I remember asking him practically every time, ‘Hey, what's good now?’ And he would say, ‘Oh, try these

spareribs. They're extraordinary today.' Or 'Oh, you want to try the haricot vert.' 'What's that?'

'Oh, you know, green beans.'

[Nigel laughs] [Frank laughs] Those were the kinds of conversations we had. That was it.

[as narrator]

Nigel: In 2005, Frank retired from Google. About a year later, he invited some old work friends over for a party.

Frank: And one of my friends came up and said, 'Hey, do you remember that chef named Bucci?' And I said, 'Yeah, I remember him.' And she said, 'Well, he just had a tragic automobile accident. And it looks like he's about to be arrested.'

Earlonne: Two people died as a result of the accident, and Bucci ended up being charged with murder.

[music comes in]

Frank: I was concerned. And I thought, 'Well, I'm retired. I don't have anything better to do with my time. I think I will see how this turns out.'

Nigel: Frank decided to sit in on Bucci's trial. And after Bucci was sentenced to 23 years in prison, Frank continued to write him letters.

Earlonne: You know, yeah... It's a big deal to hear from people. Especially in those early days...

Nigel: Oh, it's gotta be tough.

Earlonne: You feelin' like you been forgotten by everybody and life on the outside moves on without you. [Nigel affirms]

[music fades out] [ambient outdoor sounds come in – light chattering and birds chirping in the background]

Bucci: I was feeling abandoned... sad... angry... at— I just angry at myself. I was disappointed in myself because I made poor choices that brought me to that situation. And I expected that I was going to get this surge of support, but it didn't arrive. You know, you see movies, 'Oh, we're going to be there. We're going to be there.' And that didn't happen.

Nigel: But who did you expect would stand by?

Bucci: Who did I expect would stand by would be... my partner that I was with at the time.... wasn't there. And so, I was feeling rejected from her. And I imagined that my close friends would be there.

Nigel: Do you think it's fair to say that you felt isolated?

Bucci: I did feel isolated and that fueled the rejection, the abandonment, the disappointment, the anger, confusion...

Nigel: What does that kind of isolation and disappointment do to a person?

Bucci: It shatters... it shattered my self-esteem. It shattered my self-worth.

[as narrator]

Earlonne: In 2014, Bucci was transferred to San Quentin, not far from where Frank lives.

Nigel: And so, Frank drove out to see him.

[to Frank]

How did he seem to you?

Frank: He was just ecstatic and happier than I had possibly imagined that he would be. [music comes in] I didn't know what I was going to find. He was so overjoyed to see somebody from the outside.

Bucci: When Frank came to see me at San Quentin... it was like I was reconnecting with all of that part of my past. Like, having someone that I could hold and hug was important. I felt recharged. Relief. I just sat and hugged and cried on him and just let it out. Like, my body was just storing all of that. And he was like... he was... Frank was

the mechanism, the vehicle for that! There's someone that loves me... and it was just a demonstration and a manifestation of friendship and love when he came to see me.
[music fades out]

[as narrator]

Earlone: Frank told Bucci, 'I'll come see you next weekend.' And he kept coming pretty much every weekend for six years.

Frank: As he opened up to me, I opened up to him. And we decided, *hey, this is a perfectly safe place to share all of our all of our thoughts, all of our dreams, all of our experiences and hold nothing back.* What may not be apparent on the podcast is that I'm 75 years old and he's 48. He is the age of my two daughters. So, it's an unlikely friendship, you know? I'm also wealthy from Google and he's not. I've never been in prison and he's spent sixteen years there. I mean, there's so many differences between us. But there was some kind of bond that I think was almost spiritual from the very beginning. And I don't... I can't explain it. It's a mystical thing that happened. [Nigel affirms]

[as narrator]

Nigel: I'm guessing most people wouldn't associate the word "mystical" with prison...

Earlone: Yeah! But the visiting room is special. I mean, you heard Yahya and his moms.

Nigel: Oh yeah.

Earlone: It's a special place where people really connect with each other.

Nigel: But – for first timers like Frank, one thing that's really striking about prison is how much just red tape and bureaucracy there is. And if you're not used to that, it is daunting, Earlone. [Earlone laughs] And probably hard to get to the mystical part.

Earlone: True.

[music comes in]

Frank: First of all, to get the right to visit it takes two months. You send in an application. You don't know if anybody's going to reply. I didn't know to make an

appointment two weeks in advance at 7:00 p.m. on Sunday night. So, I get there and I'm at the end of a very long line. I wait for an hour or more to finally get to go through the first level of security. I might be wearing the wrong color pants. [chuckles] A couple of times I had to go change my pants because I had the wrong color plants on.

[music fades out] [as narrator]

Earlone: I think people like Frank seeing the prison system for the first time – they're like 'Oh, I'll just talk to them, just *reason* with them, and they'll make an exception' or whatever. But you learn quick – there are no exceptions in prison.

Nigel: Oh, totally. When a CO asks you to do something, you just do it.

Earlone: They got all the power.

[to Sergeant Cuevas]

What's the hardest part of your job?

Sergeant Cuevas: The hardest part... well, the hardest part I would say when I have to terminate somebody, kick somebody out because they're misbehaving.

[as narrator]

Nigel: This is Sergeant Cuevas. He's a correctional sergeant at San Quentin and E, we've had him on the show before.

Earlone: And, unlike a lot of COs, he actually doesn't mind talking to us.

[to Sergeant Cuevas]

Nigel: So, what's the bad behavior that you sometimes have to break up?

Sergeant Cuevas: Well, I will say... excessive touching, hugging, kissing. And I tell– 'Hey, you can't be doing it my visiting room.' And most of them understand, you know, 'Hey, yeah, I messed up.' You know, 'I'm sorry.' Well, I have to enforce the rules and you know kick them out.

Nigel: Ah yes, the kissing rules...

Earlonne: A hug and a kiss and some low key feels at the beginning of the visit. [Nigel laughs] a hug and a kiss and low key feels at the end. That's it!

Nigel: [laughs] Low key feels!

Earlonne: You gotta take something with you. You gotta take the feelings with you.

[to Sergeant Cuevas]

Nigel: What kind of kiss is acceptable? 'Cause they say kiss but what does that actually mean?

Sergeant Cuevas: It's an unwritten rule that say 20 second... 15-20 second kiss. But of course, there's no written rule. It just kinda like, 'Uh... okay. That's enough.'

Nigel: But it's more than just like a little [makes peck kiss sound]

Sergeant Cuevas: Uh... yes. Probably, yes. Like a little peck, yes.

Nigel: It's more than that... [crosstalk]

Sergeant Cuevas: Yeah, little more. Yeah

Earlonne: French kissin'? [Nigel affirms]

Sergeant Cuevas: Yeah, but you know, it can be that but don't extend it to— [crosstalk] a whole minute.

Nigel: [crosstalk] But 20 seconds— that's not bad, right? [Sergeant Cuevas affirms] [all laugh]

[music comes in]

Earlonne: The dress code. Can you talk about the rules of the dress code for the people coming in?

Sergeant Cuevas: You cannot wear no blue jeans. No short skirts or dresses or shower shoes. No see-through. Everybody has to wear undergarments which of course is sometimes hard to check, you know. Sometimes you can see the... uh... through the blouse... you know, they're not wearing a bra so [indistinguishable] send it back. Good

thing is there's a vending machine out here that they start selling them, like, sports bras now.

Nigel: Are you serious?

Sergeant Cuevas: Yes.

Nigel: In that vending machine out there?

Sergeant Cuevas: Right there.

[ambient sound comes in as Nigel, Earlonne and Sergeant Cuevas walk to vending machine – keys jangling]

Nigel: So, we're walking out of the office and we're walking over to what I've been told is a vending machine that has bras in it! Fruit of the Loom... I don't know what size they are though.

Sergeant Cuevas: One size fits all.

Nigel: One size fits all. [Sergeant Cuevas affirms] That is such a man thing to say. [all laugh] [Earlonne speaking the background] It's true it's not true. One size does not fit all.

Sergeant Cuevas: Well, that's what it says in there, you know. [Nigel laughs]

[as narrator]

Nigel: You gotta wear a bra in the visiting room. But it *cannot* be a bra with underwire.

Earlonne: Nyge, [chuckling] how many times have we talked about this *on Ear Hustle*? [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: Clearly I love to talk about it.

Earlonne: This is like your favorite subject.

Nigel: It is true. I'm kinda obsessed with this. Ever since I've been going into San Quentin, I've been collecting wires that I find in the parking lot. They're there because they have that rule: you cannot wear a bra with underwire into the prison. So, women

show up, they find out they can have underwires, and they pull them out and fling them onto the ground. And they're everywhere.

Earlonne: And if they don't take them out outside the prison, they take them out inside at security. They hand them to the guard who stashes them in a *secret* place.

[to Sergeant Cuevas]

Nigel: Can we see if this infamous drawer actually exists? [Earlonne and Sergeant Cuevas speaking in the background] Okay. [ambient sound of keys jangling as Sergeant Cuevas dials a security code]

Oh my goodness! It is a drawer of them. Oh my God!

Sergeant Cuevas: Yeah, so some of them they through them right away... some of them just... [crosstalk]

Nigel: [crosstalk] Oh wait! Why are you closing that drawer? I gotta look more.

Earlonne: She said, 'I gotta look more.'

Nigel: Can I touch what's in here? [Sergeant Cuevas affirms] I cannot believe it. Why are you guys saving them?

Sergeant Cuevas: Well... I sometimes don't want to throw them away cause they this will be considered like, "hot trash."

Nigel: Oh right.

Sergeant Cuevas: So, we have to throw them away somewhere else, yes.

[to Earlonne]

Nigel: Yeah, why don't you define hot trash.

Earlonne: Hot trash is what's considered contraband in the prison. So, when it's found or discovered, the officers confiscate it or take it and they put it in a place where incarcerated individuals can't get to it.

[in the field, to Sergeant Cuevas]

Nigel: Oh my God... I cannot believe it– I'm going to put it back. I'm just... [Sergeant Cuevas affirms] Are you allowed to give them away?

Sergeant Cuevas: We throw them away, you know, so...

Nigel: Can I throw them away for you? [laughs] This is what I've learned at prison, if you ask a question, someone just laughs – it means no. [laughs]

[music comes in]

So, what is the equivalent for guys visiting? Do they have to have on underwear? And how do you know– a guy, a man. When a man comes in to visit... what are the rules for him?

Sergeant Cuevas: Well, same as the female but of course I haven't seen no men coming in with no bras or anything...

Nigel: No, but what about underwear? What if they don't have underwear on?

Sergeant Cuevas: Well, again, that's something too very difficult to check.

Earlone: Whatchu gettin' at there, Nigel?

Nigel: Well, I'm just wondering that, you know, women have to go through... I think it's a little more humiliating than what men have to go through when they get checked for visiting. I'm just wondering what the equivalent is.

Earlone: Like, he wouldn't have drawers on?

Nigel: Yeah, but I don't know what else what else a guy could do that would break the rules except no underwear.

Sergeant Cuevas: Well, coming in with blue jeans...

Nigel: Oh, blue jeans. OK.

[as narrator]

After the break, Bucci gets back to cooking.

Earlone: ...in the visiting room.

Nigel: Despite all those hoops he had to jump through, Frank kept showing up to visit Bucci. Every weekend for six years.

Bucci: Maybe like the twelfth time, I said, 'Frank, why don't we just call these lunches at SQ?' And so lunch at SQ was a place for... where Frank and I could share each other's intimate secrets, we can hold a safe space for each other. Everything would shut off, like, all the noise in the visiting room. And Frank and I would just sit in visit.

[music comes in] [to Earlone]

Nigel: That's kind of what people do in the visiting room, right? Talk and eat.

Earlone: I mean, that's kind of all you *can* do in a visiting room... at least officially. [Earlone and Nigel laugh] But yeah, food is a big part of it. People come together and they eat with their families and chop it up.

Nigel: At most prisons, visitors can't bring their own food in. [Earlone agrees] So, everything has to come from the vending machines.

Earlone: Right. There's a row of 'em. You have the frozen food machine, then the soda machine, the coffee machine, like a bunch of things. And occasionally there's fresh fruit or veggies.

Nigel: Yeah, if you're lucky, right?

Earlone: Yup. Most of the vending-machine food is pretty shitty.

Nigel: And Bucci was a chef, right? [Earlone affirms] So, he was gonna have to take all that vending-machine food, and Bucci it up.

[music fades out]

Bucci: My culinary mind started to, to start back up. I just started to think, *okay, I can use some of these ingredients to dial it up and put my foot in it.*

Nigel: So, what'd you do?

Bucci: Usually we would just stick with our staple. We would do Big AZ cheeseburger.

[music comes in] [to Earlonne]

Nigel: Oh my God. I cannot believe he's talking about that damn Big AZ burger!

Earlonne: And that's spelled B-I-G A-Z.

Nigel: They're kind of sad. They're like a plastic wrapped burger that you heat up in the microwave and I'm not going to say it's the worst... but it's not great.

Earlonne: You got a street palette, Nigel. [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: You have a street palette now too!

Earlonne: I'll still eat one because it was good when I was in the trenches, Nigel. When I was in the trenches, it was great.

[music fades out]

[to Frank]

Nigel: So, we've heard a lot of conversation about this Big AZ burger. It was Earlonne's favorite inside, right?

Earlonne: That was the best thing in the vending machine.

Frank: It really was. I... in fact, those hamburgers were better than most hamburgers I've gotten at a fast-food place.

Nigel: I'm just not going to believe it. I'm sorry. [Frank laughs] Was it good because Bucci did something to it or you really think out of the vending machine?

Frank: Well, he just knew how to make it perfect, I think.

Bucci: Yes.

Frank: And he might... we might get a salad that might have some onions on it, he put the onions on the burger. [Nigel affirms] He might get an avocado. He might smear avocado on the burger. [Nigel affirms] Or he would turn the avocado into guacamole.

And... [laughs] somehow knew how to just... make the most of mayonnaise and ketchup and mustard [laughs] that was available and whatever else we could buy in the vending machine.

[abstract industrial sound montage comes in as transition] [to Hatch]

Nigel: Can you describe what the visiting room is like for you? Like, what does it feel like? What's it smell like? What are the sounds?

Michael Hatch: The really busy ones are very noisy, very crowded. The only thing I can think of is it smells often like food being microwaved.

[music comes in] [to Earlonne]

Nigel: I guess I thought that between the two of us, we knew pretty much everything there is to know about prisons.

Earlonne: Eh... we sorta do!

Nigel: But not long ago, we got an email from a guy named Michael Hatch. He is a vending machine operator at a couple of California prisons. And he told us something we'd never heard.

[music fades out] [to Hatch]

Nigel: Is it true that almost every prison in California has vending machines maintained by people who are blind?

Hatch: As far as I know the only two adult institutions that don't have a blind vendor operating vending machines is Pelican Bay. [Nigel affirms] And I believe there's one in California City.

Earlonne: I was curious... you said, 'we the blind', so, you are... you are blind?

Hatch: I'm blind. I'm legally blind and there's the distinction. I'm not a totally blind person, but I'm considered legally blind. I don't drive a car. I can't read a newspaper without magnification, you know.

Earlonne: Got you.

Nigel: Is it right to say blind person? Is that offensive to say blind person?

Hatch: There's nothing that you can say about blindness that would offend me. [laughs]
[Nigel laughs]

Nigel: What about offending other people?

Earlone: Yeah. I mean, is it 'cause you know when I was incarcerated, it was people wore vests that said "vision impaired".

Hatch: Yeah. I've seen that in the visiting room where a guy will have... just says "blind". But no, I'm not sensitive at all.

[as narrator]

Nigel: So, I'd never heard of this before, but Michael told us that there's a federal law that gives blind people priority for contracts operating vending machines on a lot of government property. So, that's highway rest stops, government buildings...

Earlone: And... of course, prisons.

[to Hatch]

Nigel: You select the foods that are going to be put in these machines?

Hatch: Yes. There are some foods that I'm not allowed to sell. But for the most part, yes, yes.

Earlone: Such as like what?

Hatch: Certain times I haven't been able to sell M&Ms and certain candies like that. My understanding is because it could look like a little balloon of drugs. [Earlone affirms]
I actually have a couple of visiting rooms where they told me not to sell microwave popcorn because the people at the tables pass the bag of popcorn around and they put their hand in to grab it. And maybe somebody... a visitor... could drop something in there and then the inmate could then pull it out when the bag comes around to them.
[music comes in]

Nigel: Do you like food? Do you like to eat? Are you a foodie?

Hatch: [laughs] I'm not a foodie as far as esoteric foods, but yes, [Nigel affirms] I love food. Probably the most popular thing in the visiting room is a taco platter that we make where they get three little tacos and a wedge of lime and a cup of salsa.

Nigel: So Earlonne, did you ever have a taco platter when you were inside?

Earlonne: No... I have never... I've never had the pleasure of even thinking about a taco platter unless it was a food sale.

[as narrator]

Nigel: This was the second new thing we learned. In some prisons you can get "homemade food" from some of the vending machines.

Earlonne: Never in my experience, so, that's crazy.

Nigel: That blew my mind. And Michael says that he really does it up for the holidays. [to Earlonne] I think I remember you saying you would ask your family not to visit you on holidays like Thanksgiving.

Earlonne: Yeah. I felt like they should be at home. [Nigel affirms] You know, I can join over the phone. But for lot of guys inside, Thanksgiving is a big visiting day.

Nigel: At a couple of the prisons where Michael works, he has access to the prison staff kitchen. And so, when he wants to, he can really cook up a feast.

Nigel: Can you describe the meal so I can see it in front of me?

Hatch: Well, it's in a microwaveable platter and it has to be the size that would fit into the vending machine. [Nigel affirms] And we would cook turkey and slice it up, put it in there, mashed potatoes, some stuffing and maybe a roll. And we usually gave them a little bit of cranberry sauce. And then we always had a pumpkin pie with whipped cream as well.

Nigel: Mmm.

Earlonne: And what would that sell for?

Hatch: I'm gonna say if I was doing it today... um... probably about \$7.50.

Earlonne: OK.

Nigel: Wow. That seems reasonable. [Hatch affirms]

Earlonne: Hell yeah, that seems reasonable.

Nigel: Have you ever had a vending machine nightmare? Like, you've ever woken up in the middle of the night. [chuckles] [Hatch laughs] Like, woken up in the middle of the night like, 'Oh my God!' I would just imagine a nightmare where all the food is piling up and it just can't come out. [music comes in] And it's just getting rancid in there. And... I don't know.

Hatch: Oh no, that's real life. That's when you make all this food, and you find out that they locked the yard down Friday night. [Earlonne affirms] And now I got all this fresh food in there and there's nobody there to buy it 'cause there's no visiting. You know, what I don't want is a whole bunch of food left over because, frankly, whatever's left in the visiting room with the fresh food on Sunday afternoon, we have to toss 'cause it's not manufactured in a way that it has that kind of a shelf life.

Nigel: Right.

Hatch: Whereas the Big AZ burger can sit there for three weeks and it's still within date.

Nigel: Ew, that does... yeah. OK, that makes me not want to eat one. [Hatch laughs]

[music comes in]

Nigel: Can you talk about like what this job means to you emotionally?

Hatch: Well, I mean, as a blind person... blind people, it's one of the highest rates of unemployment of any group in the country. It's not easy for blind people to get work. So, I took over my first location in December of 1986 and I haven't been out of work for one day this entire time.

Nigel: Wait a minute, you've done this 35 years?

Hatch: Whatever December of '86 [Nigel affirms] to now is, yeah.

Nigel: If my fingers are correct, I'm coming up 35.

[music comes in]

I think you love what you do. And it probably shows in the food that you put in there.

Hatch: Well, I do. Like I say, I'm just thankful that I've had a job all these years. [Nigel affirms] Been able to support my family and do all that.

[as narrator] [to Nigel]

Earlonne: He's not puttin' a taste of love in it, Nigel, he's putting a taste of freedom in it.

Nigel: Yep. [Earlonne laughs] [music fades out]

Earlonne: Speaking of freedom, Nyge, [Nigel affirms] Bucci got his own taste of freedom not too long ago.

Nigel: Yep. He served his sentence and walked out the gates of San Quentin on January first of this year: 2021.

Bucci: Frank and his family were there. His daughter documented the whole thing. It was very... surreal. I think when you stop at the captain's porch or the watch commander, where they say, 'OK, one paroling Bucci.' That's when it really hits. It's been just a surge of processing my emotions, like, my emotions will come in these surges and waves and I just let it go and let go.

[music comes in] [as narrator]

Nigel: So, Bucci had only been out a few months when we were sitting with him and Frank in this park near Frank's house.

Earlonne: Yeah. And Bucci had landed himself a pretty *sweet* re-entry gig.

[to Bucci]

Nigel: So, what are you doing now for a job?

Bucci: Frank and his husband were kind enough to allow me to be their personal chef. And so, I just feel a sense of gratitude and humility and just... I feel fortunate.

Frank: He talks like he's the only one grateful for that! We got to eat this food [Bucci laughs] twice a day and I used to do all the cooking and Andrew did all the cleaning up and now we have been freed up to do other things with our time. [chuckles] An he just brings so much joy and the food is so much better than what I was able to prepare. [laughs]

Bucci: The way I can give back was through cooking. Because that's a demonstration of my love. And also, if you don't put love in your food, it's not gonna taste good. [music fades out]

[abstract industrial sound montage comes in as transition]

New York: It's been that long, bruh.

Rhashiyd Zinnamon: One, two, one, two,

New York: Hold on, hold on. Let me see if I'm on the right mic.

[as narrator]

Nigel: I am so excited about what we're hearing right now.

Earlonne: I was waiting on the theme music to come in! [singing] *Do-do-do-dum-boom.* [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: Not yet my friend. [Earlonne affirms] We have not been working in the media lab for about a year now.

Earlonne: Nope.

Nigel: But... *finally*, our inside co-host New York was able to get in there with our friend Rhashiyd.

Earlonne: Listeners might remember Rhashiyd's name from the credits – he's one of our music dudes. He sat down and chopped it up with New York.

[to Rhashiyd]

New York: So, check it. They come out with the video visits at the end of November.

Rhashiyd: Right.

New York: I rush the information to my folks trying to get a video visit. They didn't do it in time. We missed November. You only get one a month.

Rhashiyd: I know.

New York: And so, I was trying to like schedule stuff to like stack it: get moms in this month, get Sue in that month, Rock this month, like tryin' to work this thing. We get appointment for... I think it was January 16th. They canceled it 'cause we on quarantine again. Then we get another appointment for January 23rd. They cancel it! [Rhashiyd laughs] Because we went on quarantine again! Next thing you know, I'm on a yard and they call 'Thomas 5-89. You gotta visit.'

Rhashiyd: I was out there with you.

New York: *Maaan.*

Rhashiyd: I remember 'cause we teased you, remember? [New York affirms] I was like, 'Gon' up there for your phone call.'

New York: And my brother think I'm trying to get out of workin' out... I'm in the middle of the burpees... I'm sweating like a goldfish in a pond. So, I come up out of there. I rushed to the building. I said, 'What time is the visit?' They said, '11:30.' It was like 11:05. I took a five-minute military shower.

[as narrator]

Earlonne: He slides into that visiting chair just in time. And there's his friend on the screen.

New York: And I can see her! And it's like my first time getting a Zoom meeting. You see the Zoom on TV. [laughs] So I'm getting my Zoom meeting on, and this is cool! [music comes in] She's in her car on her cell phone having this video visit. And I'm seeing the back of the leather seats in the back of the car and all that. And I'm like, *this is a crazy place*. I wanted to see a room. Like I never been there, right. But it was cool. And so, we in the middle of the video visit and I asked her a question, she said, well, let me look it up. I said, 'No! It ain't that serious. We just chillin' right now. You ain't gotta look up nothing!' She said, 'It's nothing. It's nothing. I'll do it right now!' Man, the next

thing I know it says... just got her name: Ms. Rock D. Watts on the screen, right? The video part of the visit is gone. Now, we havin' a phone call. [laughs]

[as narrator]

Earlonne: So, when New York's friend flipped over to another screen on her phone to search, it killed the video feed.

Nigel: Yeah... we've heard folks complain about some...

Earlonne: Problems? [chuckles]

Nigel: Yeah... some problems in the video connections.

Earlonne: Yeah. And families we've talked to said they don't even like to call them "video visits" because they're not visits. And they don't want CDCR to ever forget that.

Rhashiyd: You know, it's, it's weird 'cause like when you get to see your people, when you talk to them, it doesn't feel the same as when you see them in person, right? And so, it's like you looking at somebody on TV that you're talking to but it's just weird. Did you get that when you...?

New York: I don't know... it felt like I was part of the world for a change.

[abstract industrial sound montage comes in as transition]

Vesta: There's a lot of natural light coming in through the window, 'cause it's a pretty large window, so it'd be bright.

[as narrator]

Nigel: This is Vesta – we met her at the start of the show.

Earlonne: She was looking forward to her video call to introduce her husband who's currently incarcerated to their four-month-old daughter. For the very first time.

Nigel: And I asked her - how did she imagine it going.

[music comes in]

Vesta: It would just be very light and airy.

Nigel: And what would you be wearing?

Vesta: I don't know. I was thinking I want to show my shoulders, but I don't— 'cause I can't do that at the visit. [laughs] But I want to look elegant, classy, beautiful, motherly. Not too sexy. [laughs] But just right.

Nigel: And what do you imagine his reaction is going to be?

Vesta: [pauses] I think he'll cry.

Nigel: When you have this visit, after you introduce her, do you think you'll feel closer or further away from him?

Vesta: I think I'll feel further away. For sure.

At almost 8:34 this morning, I get that email title: “Canceled WebEx meeting – 3A-4 weeks” His CDC number and my name. And the contents say, “Core visit 3A-4 canceled this WebEx meeting: Saturday, January 30th, 2021 at 1:30.”

Nigel: And that's it? There's no... there's nothing else.

Vesta: That's it.

Nigel: It's so cold.

[music fades out]

Hatch: I'll pat myself on the back if I can go all the way through. This is all from memory. I'm not reading anything. [laughs] *Ear Hustle* would like to thank Hamisi Spears, Lacedrick Johnson, Elton Spencer, Michael Marler Kim Puckett, Anthony Ammons, Bashar Aremu, Floyd Collins, Brandon Browner, and Nephew for talking with us on Yard Talk.

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This episode was sound designed and engineered by Antwan Williams, with music by Antwan, David Jassy, Gregg Sayers, and Rhashiyd Zinnamon. 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...

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: This is Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the Public Information Officer at San Quentin State Prison. Visiting, man... much different visiting story than what we had in the past with uh... and I can't. [to Earlonne] You gotta remind me of the episode, man.

Earlonne: Oh. What, what? You mean "The Boom Boom Room"

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: [laughs] Oh yeah, "The Boom Boom Room" and there have been some other episodes that have kind of skirted the issue. But this one definitely had a much different feel than the "The Boom Boom Room" and everything else. So... and I think the listeners will agree with me. 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. Radiotopia is a collection of independent, listener-supported podcasts.

Earlonne: Some of the best podcasts in the land. Hear more at radiotopia.fm.

Nigel: I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlonne: And I'm Earlonne Woods.

Earlonne and Nigel: [simultaneously] Thanks for listening. [music fades out]

[funk music comes in and ad for Big AZ burger begins]

Narrator: [in a deep, sultry voice] Your customer is the man. Big AZ value and they crave Big AZ taste. So, make the Big AZ choice. Now that's a lot of Big AZ. [laughs in character] [music fades out]

END OF EPISODE.