



## Episode 55: Marcel and Angie

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**Antwan Williams:** This is Antwan Williams, the sound designer of *Ear Hustle*. And the following episode of *Ear Hustle* contains language and content that may not be suitable for all listeners, including discussion of suicide and sexual assault. Discretion is advised.

[abstract industrial sound collage as transition]

**Marcel Rabanes:** It's been times when I've been out in the yard and we're having a game, a football game going on, and all the femmes are over there acting ridiculous 'cause they being catty and being jealous and they fighting and stuff. And all of us boy-lookin' ones go over there to try to break it up... and then, when the police come and they start spraying, 'cause they don't ask no questions, they spraying and shit... the girls get to walk away with nothin'... they'd been drinking or smoking or whatever. We all get arrested or we all get 115'd.

There's too many politics in prison for people that look like me.

[soft music comes in] [as narrator]

**Earlonne Woods:** Prison politics are just like street politics... [Nigel affirms] a bunch of motherfuckers trying to make up a bunch of rules.

**Nigel Poor:** And those rules can get especially complicated for trans people, like Marcel...

**Earlonne:** ...Locked up with a whole bunch of people who identify as a different gender than you. I'm Earlonne Woods. [theme comes in]

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

[theme fades out]

**Nigel:** Marcel was incarcerated at the California Institution for Women, right outside of LA. And in that prison, there was a system: people who were more, quote, "feminine" were known as femmes.

**Earlonne:** And people like Marcel were called "aggressives."

[in the field – outdoor ambient noise comes in, cars driving down road in the distance]

**Marcel:** I was considered an aggressive or people would call me a "stud". I don't like the term "stud". I think "stud?" A stud is a horse, or... to mount railroad tracks down and stuff like that.

**Earlonne:** And there's hella prison protocol around this stuff.

**Nigel:** Oh yeah.

**Earlonne:** As an aggressive, Marcel had to stay away from other aggressives' girlfriends.

[outdoor ambient noise continues, birds chirping]

**Marcel:** I think my first fight that I had in prison was because I moved in a room. And just this dude told me, 'You can't stay in here.'

And I said, 'What?'

And he said, 'You can't move in that room.'

And I was like, 'What are you talking about? The police put me in that room.'

'Well, my woman lives there. And if you don't move within the next hour, you're gonna have to see me.'

I didn't even know that terminology. So, I was like, 'See you? I see you.'

And he was like, 'No, we gonna run it.'

'Where are we gon'...? I don't run. What do you mean we gon' run?'

He was like, 'Nigga, we going to dump!'

And I was like, 'Oh, you want to scrap?!' You know what I mean? [beat comes in]

And he was like, 'Yeah.'

So, we fought every, every week! [beat fades out]

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** Earlonne, we don't talk about it a lot on the podcast, but there is no doubt... prison can be a violent place.

**Earlonne:** Hell yeah. It be crackin' up in that motherfucker a lot of times. And Marcel kinda fit right in to that. He had grown up with a lot of violence too. His mom was what in hood parlance would be considered "a beast".

[low beat comes in]

**Marcel:** Like, she was the boss. My mother ran the city. She really did. Like, everybody knew Big M... because she carried a pistol until the day she died, a 38 snug nose Smith and Wesson... soft grip. And she used to beat the men up and the women. She didn't have no problem, like just... beat 'em up. People that know, like, ... 'Big M? Oh, that's your... Oh yeah. Ain't nobody fucking with Marsha.'

[beat fades out]

**Nigel:** And Marsha... she was especially tough on Marcel.

**Marcel:** I didn't socialize with friends or anything until I went to school. Because my mother didn't play that. I couldn't use a phone. I couldn't call nobody. Could nobody come over and I couldn't be outside in the front yard. I used to throw the ball over the fence, so that the kids on the other side would bring the ball back and I can meet the neighbor kids.

My mother used to beat the crap out of me all the time for everything. You know? So, I kinda... just knew I was going to get a whoopin' every day for something.

[music comes in]

I knew that I was a boy when I was like five. I, um... [hesitates] I was sitting outside and one of my aunties had came over, I remember. And she had really nice legs and she had pantyhose on. And I remember walking up to her and I was rubbing her pantyhose. And I looked up at my auntie and I said, 'You have nice legs. Girls have nice legs and boys have boy legs. And you have nice legs 'cause you're a girl. And I have boy legs cause I'm a boy.' And my auntie looked down at me, like, *what are you talking about?* But I remember just as clear as day as saying that to her.

[to Marcel]

**Nigel:** Was it a relief to say that out loud?

**Marcel:** It was like almost normal to me in my brain that that's what I was. [Nigel affirms] I didn't think I was any different until my body betrayed me. [Nigel affirms] 'Cause I got breasts when I was nine. So, I had breasts at nine years old. That was horrible! I remember one day playing basketball with a tank top on and I jumped, and it was like, *oh, that's not going to work.* I was just so devastated. *Why did you have to betray me?* Like, you know? [Nigel affirms] And then there's the people that have little small ones that all you had to do... they could form them into pecs real quick. I didn't get that. So, what happened? [Nigel affirms] I think that that was like the biggest form of betrayal.

[music fades out]

Soon as my body formed... my stepfather was on it. Yeah.

**Nigel:** Mm.

**Marcel:** I say this and it's vulgar, but it's... to me, it's the reality of my situation. I grew up when my mother, or our family, were starting to beat it out of me; and then my stepfather was trying to fuck it out of me.

[as narrator]

**Earlonne:** When Marcel got a little older, he got really into hood shit, which meant a lot of fighting.

**Nigel:** Yeah. But for him that fighting meant a lot more than just scrapping.

[music comes in]

**Marcel:** Like, something that you really, really enjoy – that's an addiction – whether it's sitting on the couch, eating Oreos... it's something that you just really enjoy that you really want to make sure you have it at all costs. So, that's what it is, you know? For me, violence was a way to control and release the stuff that was going on in my mind that I really didn't understand or put words to. And so, it felt good. It felt... um, for me just as good as it felt to be intimate with my woman.

[to Marcel]

**Nigel:** You said that you enjoyed it, like someone might enjoy eating Oreos. Did you enjoy the release of it, or did you enjoy seeing someone else suffer?

**Marcel:** Just the release. Just the release. Then you feel bad. That's how you know it's an addiction, right?

[abstract industrial sound collage as transition]

[to Angie]

**Nigel:** How long have you been in prison?

**Angie:** I've been in prison a total of six months in CDCR, but three years in the county jail fighting my case.

**Nigel:** Okay. How old are you?

**Angie:** 44.

**Nigel:** What? Where are your wrinkles?

**Angie:** I guess... um, Asian don't crack. [Nigel and Angie laugh]

[to New York]

**Nigel:** How old did you think she was?

**Rahsaan “New York” Thomas:** Thirty-something.

**Angie:** Thirty-something.

**Nigel:** Yeah, oh wow.

**Angie:** Thank you.

[music comes in]

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** This recording was from back before the pandemic. And in those before times, I was going into San Quentin on a regular basis, and New York and I were doing interviews down in the media lab.

**Earlone:** You'll be able to go hang soon, Nyge.

**Nigel:** I hope so. And at that time Angie agreed to come down and talk to us.

**Earlone:** Angie has been living as a woman since she was sixteen years old. That's when she ran away from home and had to figure out how to support herself.

[music fades out]

**Angie:** Back then, we were considered a freak. And they would just throw us away. It was hard... I was beat up along the way a lot. I was abused... all sorts of abuse. I had to... I couldn't get a job, so, I had to go to the extent of selling myself on the streets to survive. It was a survival tactic for me because I couldn't work. But I knew that the way I was made me happy. Even though society didn't accept me; I was being laughed at,

things thrown at me, jumped by other gangs... So, I had to find somebody to help me and protect me.

**Earlonne:** Angie found that protection by associating with a gang.

**Nigel:** And she told us that as a trans woman... that was pretty unusual. But Earlonne, there was a reason for it.

**Earlonne:** Yep. This was the 1990s in Los Angeles. The LAPD was cracking down hard on gang activity. And gang members were having to move all their business underground.

[music comes in]

**Angie:** They couldn't go out and sell their drugs or go tax anybody, so, they didn't know what to do. Their children were hungry; their wives had no food or money. So, they needed somebody that the cops wouldn't recognize, so they jumped in a transgender. I would do their work for them, bring home their money. For their protection. I was accepted and I was one of the few that were accepted back then. I knew that, *okay I'm a transgender. I'm on the streets*. Instead of working on the streets, 'cause I didn't like doing it, I got to do something I thought was more better for my situation.

[to Angie]

**Nigel:** Wait, so the people in the gang treated you with respect?

**Angie:** They've treated me with so much respect.

[music fades out]

[as narrator]

**Earlonne:** In 2001, Angie got picked up on a robbery charge.

**Nigel:** And because Angie's birth certificate listed her as a man, she was placed in a mens' prison, which by her telling, was a pretty brutal place to be.

**Earlonne:** These days things are a bit different. There are federal and state laws that try to protect trans people in prison.

[music comes in]

**Nigel:** Like, for example, today in California, transgender people can request to be in a prison of their choice, not necessarily the one the gender on their birth certificate dictates. There's also a federal law with provisions aimed at preventing sexual assault of trans people in prison.

**Earlonne:** But back in 2001, those laws didn't exist.

**Nigel:** Because Angie was associated with a gang, that gave her special status.

**Earlonne:** Yeah, 'cause usually gangs inside are connected to gangs outside. So, if you're a member outside, that affiliation follows you when you get locked up.

**Nigel:** So, that kept Angie protected. But only as long as she did what the other gang members told her to do.

[music fades out]

**Angie:** And I was on mainline, level 3. And it was so hard. But the word came down from different prisons that I was okay – the only one okay to work the yards – and I did. But I had to prove myself more than one of their soldiers did, or one of their affiliates did. So, I had to put more work in than anybody. Because of what I did I was considered dedicated and loyal. So, I was accepted through that. But it's just a tragedy. The prison on mainline was horrible for me. I would have to go start the riots, do the– whatever I was supposed to do. And hold their knives. *Do this, do that.* I was subjected to so much. I was their pawn for everything.

[to Angie]

**New York:** What was your hardest moment?

[as narrator]

**Earlonne:** That's our inside host Rahsaan "New York" Thomas.

**Angie:** My hardest moment? [pauses] [to Nigel] I can say anything?

[to Angie]



**Nigel:** You can say anything.

**Angie:** When I didn't do what they asked me to do, and they sent people into my cell. and um.... *Ooh.* [uncomfortably] Certain things happen to me that um... I don't think... [hesitates] I was in the hospital for three months afterwards. So, um... and they put me back on the same yard after I got out of the hospital. So, that's when I decided to lock it up... for my protection. Because I didn't want to do what they wanted me to do. So, that's the only reason why. That was my hardest moment.

**New York:** Thank you for sharing that. [Angie affirms] Sorry. [quietly]

**Angie:** *Ooohhh.*

[music comes in] [as narrator]

**Nigel:** After that, Angie “locked it up”, meaning she went to prison authorities and asked to be removed from the general population.

**Earlonne:** So, when that happens you get put in administrative segregation, “the hole”, which is basically a cell alone without social contact with the rest of the prison population.

[to Angie]

**Nigel:** And are you now not associated...?

**Angie:** I am not. I don't claim anything right now. I'm not associated with anything. I'm just sticking to myself and worried about myself and trying to get where I need to be. You know. It's my time now.

[music fades out]

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** And recently, Angie got some good news. She's been approved for gender confirmation surgery, something she's been wanting for a long time.

**Earlonne:** If you're an incarcerated trans person in California, you can request this surgery as part of your healthcare paid for by the CDCR.

**Nigel:** But that approval process is intense. Since 2015, there have been 205 requests. 65 people have been approved but only 9 have completed the surgery.

**Angie:** It's been a five-year process for me. I lived my life since I was young as a female and it's all documented. It has to be documented in order for anything to go forward. You have to live your life as a female on the streets for more than two years, you have to be on hormone therapy, you have to get a job as a female, change your ID and all that. Then, you have to go through your mental health process. So, the whole surgery will be done hopefully within a year.

[music comes in] [to Angie]

**Nigel:** So, do you feel like this is the most important thing to you right now. [Angie affirms] And nothing's going to stop this?

**Angie:** Yes. This is the most important thing in my life.

**New York:** Like, how much does confirmation surgery cost?

**Angie:** After all the surgeries and all the prepping and after the care and all that, it's a total about a hundred thousand, minimum.

**New York:** Would you be able to afford that surgery if you were free?

**Angie:** No. A hundred thousand dollars is a lot. And when I found out CDCR will provide on a case-by-case basis then, I decided to jump on that. It's my dream. It's what I've been following all my life.

[music fades out]

**Nigel:** if you were still out, and you knew this, would you have ever intentionally tried to come to prison so you could get it done?

**Angie:** Honestly, yes. I would have. And I'm pretty sure a lot of other real transgenders would. [Nigel affirms] Because it is hard out there and very expensive. [Nigel affirms]

**New York:** What's a real transgender?

**Angie:** There are different types of transgenders in my eye. There are some girls in prison that come to prison as a man, never lived their life as a woman on the streets

and decided to get on hormones to grow breasts to get attention because they see the real transgenders... they think that we're okay, that we have everything we need, and we get more attention. And that's not true. They don't know what I've been through. They don't know the hard struggles I've been through. They think it's easy for me and it's not. The ones that are with other transgenders are not transgenders. I dunno why you would become a transgender and be a lesbian with another transgender. It doesn't make sense. Like, I don't get it either. So, I don't know. I can't answer that question.

**Nigel:** But some people on the outside would be really angry at you for saying those things...

**Angie:** They can be angry for me... but like I said—

**Nigel:** ...or, if we said it.

**Angie:** If they had been in my shoes and they experienced what I've experienced and I see a girl that's not practicing the ways of becoming a female or who you are, don't call yourself a transgender. Don't call yourself a female. Because I believe that you're using that umbrella or that word for ulterior motives or different reasons.

**Nigel:** But—

**Angie:** And I feel like that's really disrespectful for me.

**Nigel:** Okay. Yeah, I'm not judging you, I'm just saying that...

**New York:** That bothers you. Why?

**Angie:** Because... I've... like I said, I've lived my whole life trying to be who I am. Who I'm supposed to be. And, like... suicide attempts... I tried to cut it off... I tried to do all this. And it's just so much that I went through. And then, this person comes along, and I just feel like I'm being disrespected, or my kind is being disrespected with shenanigans like that. It's the struggles that I had to go through... and everything that I fought for. In my heart and my mind, I'm a woman trapped in a yard of all men. I'm in a yard where these are not my people. My people are females. I'm a straight female in my head, in my heart. So, I'm here in my mind, scared to death on a yard with all these males. And not trying to get the attention from these guys... not trying to get all of this... and that's not my intentions.

[music fades out]

[as narrator]

**Earlonne:** What Angie's really counting on, is that surgery.

**Nigel:** Oh yeah.

[to Angie]

And have you seen pictures of what it will look like? [Angie affirms] And you like what's coming your way?

**Angie:** There's OBGYNs that can't tell the difference.

**Nigel:** Wow.

**Angie:** Yeah. So, it looks like a woman that had hysterectomy inside. [Nigel affirms] So, on the outside they cannot tell the difference.

**Nigel:** But on the outside, you can't...

**Angie:** You cannot tell in the inside... they make the labia, they make everything. It looks— it's beautiful.

**Nigel:** Wow.

**Angie:** Yeah. You can't see the scars or anything.

**Nigel:** That's amazing,

**Angie:** Yeah. It's really beautiful. So, it's like when I seen that, I was like 'Oh my gosh. It looks real!' [Nigel affirms] So, yeah.

[music comes in]

**Earlonne:** After the break: Marcel starts his new life... as a free man.

[music fades out]

**Marcel:** My born name was Kamisha Rich. I changed my name to Marcel Rabanes, which is my family last name. And Marcel is what my mother would have named her... named me if I would have been a boy.

[as narrator]

**Earlonne:** Marcel was released from prison on April 9, 2020 after serving 23 years in prison. Basically, his whole adult life.

**Marcel:** So, I've been in a box from 15 to 41. Even though I lived my life as a boy, I still was a child. I'm learning how to be an adult, free. And that's one avenue; then, I'm learning how to be an adult male, right? So, that's two. And then, I have a lot of negative male characteristics that I have – that's three – that's stuff that I've learned from growing up. Like, my belief system was for a long time, was like, *I should have all the girls. I'm handsome... I can get any, you know, I should have five girlfriends and everybody should know about it and everybody should get along.* I didn't know that I was womanizing women, you know? I learned that in prison. Or I feel like I should be able to... *you do what I tell you to do* type of, you know, that control stuff that I told you that I had to work on. [Nigel affirms] So, I know that I have a lot of negative male characteristics. And so, I'm changing them. [Nigel affirms] And learning how that fits to socialize with positive men that are doing positive things so that I could be– 'cause I'm shaping myself to be the man that I want to be.

[music comes in]

How does it feel to be a man? Is... uh, it's easy. It's an easy question. It just feels good to be able to be me. Now what does being a man mean? That's a whole different question.

[music fades out]

**Earlonne:** While Marcel was in prison, he enrolled in a college program.

**Marcel:** I had two guy professors, white boys. And they were married and they both had kids and stuff. And I remember my one professor, he talked about his kids and he said, 'I'm not gonna be here on Halloween, you guys. I just want to let you guys know because you guys are my students and I respect and love you guys.' He said, 'But I gotta take my kids out.'

And I said, 'You gotta take your kids out?'

And he was like, 'Yeah.' He said, 'I have two children and I'm their father. And I think that I'm supposed to be there with them to go trick or treating.'

And I said, 'Well, why?'

He said, 'Because it's not my wife's responsibility to raise our children. It's our responsibility. And that's just not the kind of guy...'

And I laughed. And I said, 'That's the kind of guy I want to be!'

**Earlonne:** Marcel was also making peace with the family he does have. Including his mom.

[music comes in]

**Marcel:** The day before I caught the chain, my mother found me, and she came to see me. So, I had fifteen minutes with her. And I think that, that was like the first time my mother ever told me she loved me. She was like, 'I love you. Just be careful and protect yourself. Always remember, *protect yourself*.' So, that was like the last time I physically seen my mother.

**Nigel:** While Marcel was locked up, his mom developed dementia.

**Marcel:** My mother started, what is it... um, when you start thinking you're a little kid, like going back? [Nigel affirms] She had got that. And I remember talking to her and, um... she always knew who I was when I called, which is... that's how smart the brain is. You know, like whenever I called her, got a hold of a cell phone and I call my moms and shit. And she said, 'Hi, baby. Kamisha, when you gettin' out?' [music fades out] And I'll just be like, I couldn't believe it. Like, that was like the first thing she said every single time I talked to her. Then she would go into being a little kid, talking about her pampers needed to be changed and all that stuff. She was the strongest woman I knew. The reality was we was never going to see each other again. And, um... I used to tell her like that I loved her and I understood. [getting emotional] [Nigel affirms]

[music comes in]

**Earlonne:** A few years after his mom died, Marcel went before the parole board.

[music fades out]

**Marcel:** It was a very big topic in the boardroom about me being a transgender. I mean, he asked me questions about... 'Where you're gonna go to the bathroom? Have you thought about...?' Like, all of this stuff, and I answered to the best that I could. And he said that he knew that this is who I was.

I never forget it. When they tell you that you got found suitable, they read like this paper, I swear, it's a page long. He moved the computer and he leaned into me and he said, 'So, what I'm saying to you is, you can go home, Mr. Marcel Rabanes.' And I looked at him and he said... he was like, 'And you're going to be a good man.'

[music comes in]

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** As soon as he got out, Marcel started working on a couple changes he'd been wanting to make for a long time.

**Earlonne:** First, he's got to get his name and gender legally changed from what it was at birth: a female named Kamisha Rich to a man named Marcel Rabanes.

**Marcel:** I, um... I'm calling it "shedding Kamisha". So, as piece by piece happens, I feel like I'm shedding a layer of her. [Nigel affirms] And I think the finalization when I have it, and it's on my driver's license is going to be like, *I made it to this level.*

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** The second thing, Marcel is taking the steps toward having surgery to remove his breasts.

[music fades out]

**Marcel:** When I have people that are, 'Hey, Marcel, how are you doing?' And then we're kickin' it and I take my jacket off, or I take my shirt off, and then they're, 'Oh, shit!' It's just it's a lot. And I don't want to have to go through all that.

This is the body that I was born into. This body has done a lot. It's protected me from a lot of different things. As well as letting me down in a lot of different ways. So, it's like a bittersweet. But it doesn't fit. And I need my mind, body and soul to line up so that I can be who I am. And, um, that part of me is no longer. And I want to be able to allow her to

go. She went through a lot of different things. And she deserves to be happy. She just wants to just be done, you know?

I love to go swimming. [music comes in] I went swimming when I got out and that was like the first actual experience I had, free. Like, I went and did something for myself was I jumped in the pool. And I had on, my sports bra, and a slingshot and swim trunks. And I remember when I came up out of the water, the first thing I did was I looked down and I had thought to myself, *why in the hell do I have these breasts?* I think it was how it felt. The moment of the material of it being wet and pulling on me like this? The way it felt... it didn't belong. So, it was like, the water, I felt it go off my shoulders, but then I felt that pull. It's a hard feeling or emotion to explain, but it literally felt like a weighted blanket. And I was at the edge of the pool and I stood there, and my auntie said, 'What's wrong with you?'

And I was like, 'I don't like it.'

And she was like, 'You don't like what?'

I was like, 'I don't like it. I don't like the way this feels.'

And she said, 'Well, take your tank top off!'

I was like, 'No, I just don't like it. I can't wait for this to be done.'

When it's done, and I can go jump in the water. And I can come up and just be... and that's just my bare skin and my shorts and not have that, *that weight*. [Nigel affirms] That's the only way I can describe it.

[to Marcel] [music comes in]

**Earlone:** When you say, for instance, a year after you get them removed, will somebody see Marcel out there in some shorts, no shirt, playing basketball, getting' it?

**Marcel:** That's going to be like a small taste of paradise.

**Earlone:** Oh, good time.

[as narrator]

As for Angie, when the pandemic hit, her surgery plans were put on hold.



[music fades out]

**Nigel:** Yeah... she's scheduled for release within the next year. She's hoping she can get the surgery done before then.

[music comes in]

**Marcel:** [over the phone] *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 Jassy.

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 Tony, Richard Saenz from Lambda Legal, Terry Thornton at CDCR, 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 was a different *Ear Hustle* episode. It's pretty deep. Pretty thought-provoking. Definitely I think it allows the *Ear Hustle* world just more knowledge about the subject, and maybe some more empathy in what people go through and what people, what people have to deal with in their lives, just on a whole different scale. And so... with that, I can say that I am Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the Public Information Officer at San Quentin State Prison and I approved this episode.

**Marcel:** 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.

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**END OF EPISODE.**