



Episode 65: Counting Lines
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Leila: [shares the following in Farsi, and then the English interpretation] My name is Leila. I'm a longtime fan and listener of Ear Hustle from London. The following episode of Ear Hustle contains language and content that may not be suitable for all listeners. Discretion is advised.

[transition comes in – abstract industrial sound collage]

Earlonne Woods: It's really good to have you back.

Richard Solomon: Great to be back man.

Earlonne Woods: I know it is.

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: This is my brody Richard Solomon.

Nigel Poor: What a minute — what's "brody"?

Earlonne Woods: Brody! My brother, my buddy, my homie.

Nigel Poor: Nice, OK. Got it.

Earlonne Woods: And he's a professional basketball player who was playing ball in Japan when he got picked up for possessing CBD vape pens.

Nigel Poor: Oh, I'm not surprised. I lived in Japan. They are serious.

Earlonne Woods: He spent almost five months alone in a prison cell. Pretty much nothing to do but sit and wait for the time to pass by.

Nigel Poor: Mm. [music comes in]

Richard Solomon: Sometimes I'd just lay down and just breathe. Literally just focus on my breathing. And I would breathe through every inch or limb of my body. From my toes to the soles of my feet, to my ankles, to my calves, to my shins, to my knees, to the back of my knees to the sides of my knees. To my hamstrings, to my quads, to my glutes, to my groins, to my private organs, to my back— my upper back, my lower back, my middle back, my shoulders, my biceps, my triceps, my elbows, my forearms, my fingers, my palms, my neck, my ears, my eyes, my mouth. Each hair follicle on my head. [music fades out]

Earlonne Woods: Richard doesn't speak Japanese.

Nigel Poor: Which means he couldn't read it either.

Earlonne Woods: Nah. [Nigel affirms] He couldn't communicate with the guards. [Nigel affirms] He couldn't communicate with the guys in the other cells. He had no idea what was going on [Nigel affirms] and had no one to talk to but himself.

Richard Solomon: We had a small little mirror, so I would look in the mirror and, in the morning, I'd just talk to myself like, "Man, how are you doing?" Somebody had to ask me how I was doing. If I didn't do it, who was going to do it? Nobody was gonna be able to do it.

"Man, you tired?"

"I'm tired as hell, man. But it's all right though. We gon' get through it. Just one more day. You got through another day already." [theme music comes in]

Earlonne Woods: I'm Earlonne Woods.

Nigel Poor: I'm Nigel Poor. And on today's show: what it's like to be locked up in a country thousands of miles from home.

Earlonne Woods: Where you don't know no one, can't speak the lingo. You're just... alone.

Nigel Poor: This is Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia.

[theme music fades out]

Pete Roles: Hi, I am Pete Roles. I am from L.A. and I'm currently in Valley Center, north side of San Diego. And... [crosstalk]

Nigel Poor: [crosstalk] And where are you sitting right now when we're talking to you?

Pete Roles: We're sitting in the cool shade of the avocado grove. Sorry, if you hear any of the dogs are rustling in the leaves here. [rustling in the background] I'm living and working on a 80-acre farm, and I've been here since the beginning of the year.

Nigel Poor: Oh!

Pete Roles: It's been an amazing place to kind of transition from, you know, to back to society.

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: The reason we tapped in with Pete is we wanted to hear about something that happened to him when he was just a youngster, just starting out.

Nigel Poor: Pete had always been interested in film, especially the gear side, like, behind the camera stuff. So, he was building that career and actually doing pretty well.

Pete Roles: I was a technician doing sound and video work. I got on a movie called *Hangover II*.

[clip from *Hangover II* comes in – a character says, "Where the hell are you?" and another character responds, "We're in Bangkok!"]

I found myself in Thailand and fell in love with it. [sighs] It's a different world out there, you know, and for the certain desires and compulsions that I had kind of already fallen into, that place became like... just a mecca for being a bad boy.

[to Pete]

Nigel Poor: And what are these compulsions that you're talking about?

Pete Roles: Uh, well... you know, uh... sex, drugs, alcohol, [Nigel affirms] partying... just doing what you want, when you want, how you want. And I went off the rails. I was in the depths of addiction.

Earlonne Woods: If myself and Nigel had met you on the streets of Bangkok the day before your arrest, who would we have met?

Pete Roles: Man, I probably wouldn't have been asleep for the previous four days. And I wouldn't have been able to look you in the eye. I wouldn't have been able to form a clear sentence. I might've been thinking about how I could manipulate you. Maybe you're a tourist that I could take advantage of. Maybe I even bring my team of locals in, and they drug you and we rob you, you know, I mean... [crosstalk]

Nigel Poor: [crosstalk] My God, that's the level you were at?

Pete Roles: It got to that point. [music comes in]

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: Pete had lost his job. He was basically just supporting himself by conning tourists and dealing drugs.

Nigel Poor: To make the deliveries, he was using an app called Grab Taxi, you know, kind of like UberEats or Doordash. But, one day, a driver got suspicious about a package Pete had sent out. [music fades out]

Pete Roles: There had been a huge bombing the month before there at an actual Buddhist temple. So this delivery guy was scared that he was somehow participating in a bombing. So he decided to open up the package. He saw that there was ice in there, and he contacted the police. So of course, they had my address from the order, and they stormed right on in.

Earlonne Woods: This wasn't Pete's first run in with the Thai police, so he kind of knew the drill.

Pete Roles: They hold you in the police station for several days. That's usually a time when you can negotiate with them... [Nigel affirms] to pay a bribe. I hadn't spoken with my mom for quite some time. I was ashamed and just didn't want to hear it. I called her and I asked her to send a bunch of money. And she said no.

[to Linda, Pete's mother]

Nigel Poor: We're excited. We don't get to speak to a lot of moms. [Nigel and Linda laugh]

Linda: I imagine.

Earlonne Woods: Definitely not.

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: Pete's mom Linda lives outside of Palm Springs in the California desert. She's retired now, but she spent her career working as an assistant for big time musicians, and Earlonne, you know I really wanted to know who she worked for.
[Earlonne laughs]

Earlonne Woods: You tried, you tried. [crosstalk]

Nigel Poor: [crosstalk] Of course! I tried.

Earlonne Woods: But she wasn't a feint.

Nigel Poor: No [laughing]

Earlonne Woods: She wasn't giving up nothin'. She was tight lipped on this one.

Nigel Poor: Yes indeed. But she did tell us that she and Pete were really close.

[to Linda]

Nigel Poor: How old is he... now?

Linda: In my head he's 7, but he is... [hesitating as if she cannot remember exact age] 42.

Nigel Poor: 42, OK. [laughing softly] He's your only child?

Linda: He is.

Nigel Poor: How was it when he moved to Thailand? How did you feel about that?

Linda: Horrible. Horrible. When he told me— well, he first went to work on a movie on a film. What was that — *Hangover*? And that was fine. But then when he wanted to go back, I said, you know, "I don't think it's a good idea. I don't think it's a good..." I just knew it was not gonna be good.

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: Sometimes Pete would call Linda and be really drunk and yelling at her. Other times she wouldn't hear from him for months.

[music comes in]

Linda: I used to send him money, Western Union for food, knowing that he wasn't really going to buy food — hoping he was going to buy food. And at one point he said, "Don't send me any more money. I'm just going to use it. I'm gonna get drugs."

You sleep with your phone 24/7 glued to you. And I just, you know, I lit my candle twice a day and did my prayers for him. I said, “OK, God, he is in your hands. I've done everything I can do.” You know, I had to let it go. [music fades out]

Nigel Poor: Linda hadn't heard from Pete in a year when that call came in from the police station.

Linda: You know, when he first called me, he said, “Oh, you need to send this much money to this person.” And it was a good chunk of money— to a person I don't even know!

“No, I'm not gonna do that. I'm not gonna do that.”

Earlonne Woods: The cops let Pete call the U.S. Embassy, but the Embassy told him there wasn't anything they could do for him. They told him they'd come see him in prison.

Pete Roles: So, after couple of days in the police station, they pick you up and one of their prison trucks. You're in there with a lot of other hard-up men and women. You don't know where you're going. There's no explanation; they're just kind of yelling at you to go in this direction to get in, to sit down. [music comes in] There's no questions that you can ask. There's no information passed on. I went to a place called the slang name's called *Bambat*. It's the Central Institute for Drug Addicts. And I was in there sitting on the cold ground in a in a prison uniform. Didn't know anybody. I was detoxing very hard.

First of all, there was constant tattooing going on. They're using these sewing needles. They will tie them together, put them on a long stick, bribe the officials for some printer ink, and they'll be tattooing their faces, tattooing their eyeballs. I mean, all kinds of crazy stuff like that. Of course, they're sharing needles.

Part of the culture of this kind of drug underground was that they did these penis modifications, with very dirty utensils. They were slicing their penises [Nigel winces] and injecting them with Vaseline to make them look bigger, apparently. [Nigel says “What?” in disbelief quietly] I saw many people die from this.

[music fades out]

Earlonne Woods: Can you describe what the sleeping quarters was like? Can you just describe that whole little scene?

Pete Roles: They're all open-air rooms. [music comes in] There's not really any walls because it's so hot there, right, so there's, say, 200 people in there, and your legs are scissor-locked in with another prisoner's who's sleeping across from you with his head on the opposite side. There's a poster of slave ships — it's exactly that way. [Nigel

affirms] There's never any space to not be in contact with someone, which obviously that took time to get used to.

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: Pete and the other guys were locked in there from 2 in the afternoon until 6 a.m. the next day, when they could finally go down to the yard. Earlonne, *16 hours* in that tiny space with nowhere to go. I couldn't get my head around that.

Pete Roles: If you need go to the hole at the end of the room to use a toilet, you're walking over all these sets of crossed legs. People do get pissed about if you touch their leg while you're trying to walk. Taking a shower with a small bowl was something I had never done before. There's no privacy. There's no room to be shy. So you're kind of like, you know, rubbing up next to, and all around you, other men that are naked, trying to get a bowl of water to throw over your head and clean yourself. And if you show that you were uncomfortable that would give other prisoners more of a reason to heckle you and maybe punk you. [music fades out] And so, you kind of had to just bite the bullet and jump in there and act like this stuff wasn't phasing you.

Earlonne Woods: And the food he described, Nyge... I would definitely be hella skinny right now.

Nigel Poor: [laughing softly] You would be a little slip.

Earlonne Woods: Yeah.

Pete Roles: The prison food that they provide you is basically white rice, and the soup that goes along with that is either the outer layer of a pig with the hair still in it, so there's no meat... [Nigel affirms] it's not even the fat; it's just the thick layer of the pig's skin, which I could never get that one down. Or then the other one would be chicken feet, which aren't so bad actually

Nigel Poor: So that was the same food over and over again were those three basic...

Pete Roles: Yeah, until you have money. [music comes in] At the risk of sounding dramatic, it was the first time that I felt like, *Wow, is this what starvation feels like?*

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: Being hungry, being alone, I think that's kind of a universal prison experience. [Nigel affirms] When you first get there, you feel like everyone else has found their place, found their people, you know? [Nigel affirms] And you're an outsider.

Nigel Poor: Yeah, totally. But finally, things started to turn around for him. For one thing, Pete's mom figured out how to send him money.

Earlonne Woods: Yup, and just like any prison anywhere, Nyge, you gotta have some type of income, some type of money. 'Cause you need it in prison.

[music fades out]

Pete Roles: Once you have money on your account, then you're styling. [Nigel affirms] You can get some really good food, which is not part of the actual official system there. The whole prison is an actual living community. The guards are called "commandos". They all live in there; their wives will cook up wonderful Thai food every day and package it. You can order a really nice, I mean, original Thai food [Nigel affirms] — meal for one dollar. [chuckles softly] And, you know, you order a couple of those and share them with your mates or your friends.

Earlonne Woods: Those *friends*? That's the second good thing that finally happened for Pete.

Nigel Poor: Yeah, it all started with this guy who yelled out to him on the yard, Earlonne, in the most delightful way. [both laugh]

Pete Roles: And he just said, "Were you made in the USA?"

And I'm like, "What?"

He goes, "Were you made in the USA?"

I'm like, "Yeah, I'm an American."

He goes, "I grew up in L.A."

And I'm like, "Whoa! That's crazy, man. I'm from L.A. too." I couldn't believe it. It was unbelievable. Like, wow.

And he just said, "Yeah, if you want to roll with us, you know, we'll take care of you. You buy some food every day, and my boys will take care of all the laundry. You'll be safe. No one messes with you in here."

Earlonne Woods: Pete found his gang, his crew, his posse, he was in.

Pete Roles: It's called your *bahn*. [music comes in] Mine was about 8 guys, and everybody contributed in some way to the house. You're family. And you look out for each other. You don't care about anybody else. You take care of each. And you eat together, you co-exist together. That was a huge blessing for me.

We were living pretty large, you know, I was taking care of my group. So I was spending, you know, I would say \$15 a day. We'd have a big feast for lunch. We'd have

certain items that we could keep leftover for the next day, eat them for breakfast. I did gain a lot of weight in there.

Nigel Poor: It took a year for Pete's case to make it through the Thai court system. Back in L.A., Linda was talking to lawyers, talking to the Embassy, pulling every string she could think of to try to get her son out of prison. [music fades out]

Linda: At the beginning, I just, there was no way... I just couldn't accept the fact that I couldn't fix it... 'cause that was my job. I could fix anything. I can make something happen, you know, out of nothing in the middle of the night, if somebody needed something, I could do it! But this is the end of the road. I couldn't.

Nigel Poor: Eventually Pete received his sentence: 7 and a half years.

Earlonne Woods: Pete and Linda stayed in touch through letters. Linda's were taking months to reach him, so she hired an attorney in Thailand who would print them out and bring them to the prison for Pete.

Nigel Poor: Sometimes Linda wouldn't get a letter from her son for weeks. Sometimes 5 in a day. She still has a big stack of them at her house. [music comes in]

Linda: [reading] *Now it's 8:00 p.m. Schedule is 15-hour lockdown. Then 7:00 a.m., down to the yard. There goes my family. It's small, just five of us, but exceptionally ideal. We sleep on the floor, but three blankets makes a bed. There's a flat screen TV playing movies and TV shows until 9:00 p.m. It's really not so bad. But then again, I'm not looking at 25 to life like most of the others in this den. I love you, Mom. I really do.*

I just finished Eric Clapton's autobiography. It was left by a foreigner in the library here. What an ocean of suffering he has suffered. He has survived, but he pulled through just like I will.

It hit me like a ton of bricks just how much of a prick I am by not keeping my own mother as a top priority. I really fell apart today somehow, even though crying is a bad idea in here.

[music fades out]

[to Linda]

Earlonne Woods: Were the letters ever... a little too much for you? Like, was there some part of you that wanted to hold back, or maybe know a little less?

Linda: Thank you. [laughing] Yes. Sometimes it was too hard to read. There was a lot of really good stuff, but there were days when I just thought, *Ugh*.

Nigel Poor: What were you trying to protect in yourself?

Linda: I had to stay strong! I couldn't break down. I had to fight. I had to hold this together. I just— this my baby.

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: And there's also a whole financial side to what Linda's going through.

Earlonne Woods: Yeah, and that's the side that no one sees.

[to Linda]

Earlonne Woods: Like, how much do you send monthly to a foreign prison?

Linda: Maybe 1200? And then I paid 500 for the attorney.

Nigel Poor: Every month?!

Linda: Yes.

Nigel Poor: Wow. What did you give up for yourself in order to make that happen?

Linda: Um... I mortgaged my house. Yeah, my savings, my retirement. Oh, my girlfriend—bless her heart, I love her—she says, "Oh man, this is going to cost a fortune." And she said, "Listen, if you have to rob a bank, I'll go with you." [Nigel and Linda laugh]

Nigel Poor: Do you think he understood what a financial strain this was for you?

Linda: Um... you know, at the time, I didn't want to even to... go there. I didn't want him to feel any more guilt. No, he probably didn't.

Nigel Poor: Was there any part of you that resented it?

Linda: Yeah! [laughs] Of course! Believe me, I got a bill to give him!

Nigel Poor: Yeah. I mean, is he going to take care of you?

Linda: You bet he is. [crosstalk] [laughing]

Nigel Poor: [crosstalk] Now it's his turn. Yeah.

Linda: You bet he is.

[music comes in]

Linda: You do it because I love him, and I want him to see him again. And who else is going to do it? I knew I was feeding, not just Pete I was feeding all of them. They used to send me cards. And this one inmate said, he was from Cambodia, he was in there nine years, and he never received a letter or a card. Had no family. Had nobody. So, I wrote him a letter. Then he would write me, and they'd call me mom. And when some of the inmates got out, they would call me from India, Cambodia, England. And they still write me.

Nigel Poor: What I'm hearing is, like, this was almost like a job for you. You're sending money to your son. You're finding ways to get letters to him. You're trying to take care of other people there. You're making calls to other people's family. Like, did this just take over your life?

Linda: Yes, it did. [laughs] It was a daily. It took over a lot of my life. I really retreated because it's not like I really felt like I could go have a social life and party. [music fades out] You can't see friends and tell them in a few minutes... "Oh, how's Pete?" You're not gonna say in five minutes, you know, tell them the story. So I really withdrew a lot. Just the stress of it all definitely took a toll.

Earlonne Woods: You know what, Nyge?

Nigel Poor: What?

Earlonne Woods: It's time to get to my favorite part of this story.

Linda: So, I was driving. I did a lot of trips in those years from L.A. to where I live in the Coachella Valley. I put on public radio, and I hear this story about a prisoner. I just turned it. I said, "Man, I just do not want to hear any more prison stories." [Nigel and Linda laugh] Turn that sucker off, you know? Then, driving little ways, "Well, I'm curious now. What's going on there?" [muffled clip from Ear Hustle episode comes in featuring conversation between Earlonne and Nigel] I started listening and it was really a good program.

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: Hmmm, Earlonne. A really good program!

Earlonne Woods: *Great.* [Ear Hustle clip continues]

Nigel Poor: Called... Ear Hustle.

Earlonne Woods: I've heard of that. [Nigel laughs]

Yup, a public radio station was broadcasting one of our episodes, and Linda just happened to catch it.

[to Linda]

Nigel Poor: What do you think made you keep listening?

Linda: Well because it was a positive thing! It was somebody telling the story of how... they made it through. That they were still standing, and they were still having their experience in life.

Pete Roles: So she found the transcripts! Printed out an episode, and she sent it to me. And I read it and I'm like, "Wow, this is so cool!" So, I, of course, asked her for more. And I said, "Send as many as you can."

Linda: He wrote me back. He said, "That's so great. Everyone loves it. We love it!" Kept printing them and sending them to him.

Pete Roles: When the mail came, which was very, very rarely, maybe once every week and a half or so, we pass it around to all the other foreigners, and everybody was taking turns. Four or five episodes at a time. And "OK." I'd delegate them out. "OK, when you finished with that one, pass it to him." I'd see my guy that was in another room.

"Hey, did you read that one part of the story?"

"Oh, that was so great!"

"Oh, how about this side?"

"How about that guy?"

You know, and one transcript was probably read by over 25 people. We had this form of entertainment that was relative to our life, and actually put things in a very interesting perspective! And it got us connected with other prisoners, just through the text on a page.

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: Pete starts thinking maybe we'd want to know about him.

Pete Roles: *I'm overseas. We're in this dungeon and we're really enjoying your show, but we don't have radios.*

[to Earlonne]

Nigel Poor: I totally remember getting this letter. In fact, Earlonne... [paper rustling]

Earlonne Woods: Oh, you got it right here.

Nigel Poor: Of course! I have it right here. You know I keep everything archived. This is in a little... its own little plastic sleeve.

Earlonne Woods: Damn.

[music comes in]

Nigel Poor: [reading]

MARKER

Dear Ear Hustlers,

PR here, writing from Bangkok's Bambat drug prison. Just wanted to tell you that we've been getting printouts of your show, and it's great for us to read locked up here abroad. Myself, I'm American, but dudes here from all over the world: England, France, Germany, Colombia, Peru, China, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, you name it. Thailand is real drug central, but we appreciate whoever it is over there who's in charge of transcribing your show, so people like us without the privilege of radio can still enjoy and even be part of it. Hint, hint, if you all could give us a shout out in the future, that would be really great.

Earlonne Woods: And you know what? Pete got his shoutout. This was back in Season 4.

[Season 4 clip comes in]

[to Rahsaan "New York" Thomas]

Nigel Poor: OK, this is really cool. You know how we have listeners send us letters?

Rahsaan "New York" Thomas: Yeah.

Nigel Poor: Well we got this letter from a woman whose son is serving time in a prison in Thailand.

Rahsaan "New York" Thomas: Shout out to the guys in Thailand, man.

Nigel Poor: I can't wait until they read that in the transcript. [New York laughs]

[Season 4 clip fades out]

Pete Roles: And sure enough, you guys gave me that shout out! We got the transcript of that episode, and we were like, "Yay! We're on the radio in America, man!" Like,

everybody's tripping out, and like, "That's pretty cool!" Like, nobody would have imagined that.

Nigel Poor: It was just so amazing [Pete affirms] when your mom wrote to us and told us about that. It really was, I think blew all of our minds and made us really happy. [Pete affirms] So, thank you. It's really incredible.

[as narrator]

For years, Pete had been on the list for a prison treaty transfer.

Earlonne Woods: This is when countries agree to send a foreigner back to their home country, so they can serve out the remainder of their sentence there.

Nigel Poor: So Pete was eligible, and ready to go... but there was one other guy ahead of him. [music comes in]

Pete Roles: Months went by, didn't hear anything. And one day I was eating my breakfast, they called my name over the loudspeaker in Thai. They said, you know, "Pack your things. You're going now."

All my family's yelling, "Yay! Yay!" Everybody's going, "Oh, wow, wow!"

People are coming up and giving me hugs and slapping me on the back. And I was just in shock. And so, I just dropped everything and gave my few possessions away to my friends, and they handed me over, you know, as a prisoner from their system into the hands of the DOJ. [music fades out]

Earlonne Woods: It wasn't until Pete got home that he found out what had happened to the other guy in the Thai prison... the one who was ahead of him on the list to get transferred.

Pete Roles: Federal prison guards came to his building to pick him up. And he was sick. He had diarrhea, he was vomiting. And they said, "No way, we can't take this guy." Somehow on that day, they managed to change *all* the travel documents, the visas, the tickets, everything into my name, like within the hour! And that was the reason why they picked me up spur of the moment without any forewarning.

Two days later, COVID hit officially, and they shut the whole thing down.

Earlonne Woods: Mmm. [in empathy for situation]

Pete Roles: And that other American, that other American got stuck there, and he's still there now.

Earlonne Woods: Mmm! [in empathy for situation]

Pete Roles: One day I'd like to find him, [Earlonne laughs] and thank him. And tell him, "Sorry man."

[music comes in]

Linda: It was February 28th, 20... I guess it was 2020. I'm driving and the phone rings and I see this number, 800 number come up. I think, *Ah, I'm not gonna answer it. It's one of those calls.* Then I thought, *Oh, OK. Let me see who it is.*

And then they said, "This is..." some prison — I didn't know who it was — "So-and-so has a collect call for you. Will you accept?" And I thought, *Who in the heck?*

And he said, "Hey, it's me."

I said, "Who?"

He says, "Mom, it's me." He goes, "I'm here in L.A."

I said, "Oh man, let me pull over. I'm gonna crash this car."

[music fades out]

Earlonne Woods: Pete had been taken to the Metropolitan Detention Center in Downtown Los Angeles to carry out the rest of his sentence.

Nigel Poor: Which turned out to be just 7 weeks after the judge factored in the time he'd already served in Thailand. When Pete was finally released, his mom was there to pick him up.

Linda: He just lost it. He fell at my feet and cried. [Nigel affirms] And we just had the biggest embrace and hug and it was great. He looked full of light.

Nigel Poor: And how were you? Did you feel lighter? Did you move differently...?

Linda: Yes, all of the above. [Nigel affirms] All of the above.

[music comes in]

Nigel Poor: Do you remember ever waking up in the middle of the night and being like, *Yep, he's here. He's right downstairs...* [crosstalk]

Linda: [crosstalk] Oh yeah, yeah. I'd say, "Oh my God. All this time I didn't know where I was. And now he's in the room next door! He's there!" [Nigel laughs]

Nigel Poor: Did you ever go in and like peep at him sleeping or anything like that?

Linda: Oh, sure. Yeah, go in there and see him there and his chest breathing and his, you know, comfortable. And I know he had a good dinner and... yeah, that's a mother's dream. Still checking on their baby, right?

[music fades out]

Nigel Poor: Earlonne?

Earlonne Woods: Yes.

Nigel Poor: We're gonna take a quick break.

Earlonne Woods: So please stick around.

[to Sarah Shourd]

Nigel Poor: If we had met you in June 2009, can you tell me about the person that we've would have met— Who would we have sat down and had a cup of coffee with?

Sarah Shourd: Woo, OK. Um... the person I was in 2009, um... I was passionate and I was angry. I was very, really kind of destroyed by the failure of our movement to stop the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. [music comes in] I was also idealistic and driven to move across the world, and discover and create a whole new life in Syria, in the Middle East

Nigel Poor: And how old were you?

Sarah Shourd: 29.

Nigel Poor: 29, OK. So like at a real— that's a real turning point age. [Sarah affirms] Yeah.

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: This is journalist and playwright, Sarah Shourd.

[to Sarah]

Nigel Poor: When you look back at that person you were at 29, what sorts of feelings do you have?

Sarah Shourd: Definitely have a sense of loss. Feeling of how much we've lost in the interim in our world. That this sort of anything seemed possible. [laughing] Like, when I

was 29, I was just like, *powow!* [imitating sound of explosion] *The world is endless and I'm falling in love with the world.*

[music fades out]

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: Some listeners will probably remember hearing about Sarah when her name was in the news in 2010. Earlonne, did you remember her?

Earlonne Woods: Yeah, I remember the story. Not every detail, but I do remember it happening.

Nigel Poor: Yeah, pretty much the same for me. Well, when Sarah was 29, she was living in Syria, inside a camp for Palestinian refugees. She was teaching English, studying Arabic and also working toward a career as a journalist.

Earlonne Woods: And she was also in love with another American journalist named **Shane Bauer**.

Sarah Shourd: I felt like I had met my match with him, that we could do anything and go anywhere together. We had a real, like, kind of... powerful [hesitating] and expansiveness to our relationship. I mean, I had the most beautiful year of my life in the Middle East before our captivity, truly. Just a year of incredible growth.

Nigel Poor: In July of 2009, a friend of theirs, Josh Fattal, came to visit from the States. And the three of them decided to go on an excursion into northern Iraq, this mountainous area where they thought they could do some nice hiking.

Earlonne Woods: And I know later on a lot of people were like: *What were they thinking?!* [Nigel affirms] You know? Like, why would an American be hiking around in this part of the world?

Nigel Poor: Totally. But I think what got lost in the story is that this part of Iraq was actually really welcoming to Americans.

Sarah Shourd: We spent the night there and had tea from a tea vendor, and the tea vendor just pointed out a trail. And there were literally like hundreds of other families camped there. So we felt safe. We felt like we were doing what other people were doing. And they were really welcoming. If we made any mistake, we hiked too far, we had a different concept probably than the tea vendor of what a hike is. [music comes in] We were just taken away by the beauty of the place and each other's company. When we got to the top of the ridge, there was a guard with a gun, and he motioned for us to cross the trail. And when we approached him, he pointed to the ground, and he said "Iran". We had no idea that we were anywhere near the Islamic Republic of Iran.

There were so many narratives competing in my mind and one of them was like, *Oh, come on. This is impossible*. I mean, they knew that we weren't doing anything other than just having a hike and a picnic.

Nigel Poor: When Sarah, Shane and Josh arrived at prison, the guards took everything from them. All of their clothes, their belongings, and E, they even took Sarah's glasses. [Earlonne affirms] Yeah. So as a glasses wearer that is my worst nightmare. I mean, to be in a scary, unfamiliar place and you can't even see. You are so vulnerable without your glasses.

Earlonne Woods: I know that has to be bad.

[to Sarah]

Nigel Poor: Can you try to go back there and just in detail — the smells, the textures, the light, the other space around you. And again, as I said, if we ask something you don't want to answer...

Sarah Shourd: No, I'm just appreciating your invitation and I'm... and I'm finding, know, trying to find the fresh access to it...

What I remember from entering the cell for the first time is that I was yelling, screaming for Shane and for Josh. And I don't know how long I was yelling, but I remember the feeling of the cell door closing and locking. And there's definitely just like no other feeling like that. The helplessness and realization, *Oh shit. I lost my freedom. And there's nothing I can do to get it back*. [music fades out]

So that first day was, um, yeah, just a tremendous amount of pain, like physical pain. Anything I would think of that I love or care about, just feeling like... just the stabs of physical anguish. [music comes in] It felt like grieving and loss of everything. Not knowing if I would ever get it back. Telling myself, *Of course, you're going to get it back*. Come on, any day, *tomorrow it's all going to come back*. But not knowing not knowing if it was going to be 5 years, 10 years, forever.

Nigel Poor: It's the not knowing how long... like, if you knew, *OK, I'm going to be here for 6 months. I can get my mind around this. I can understand that*. But the idea of that, the not knowing, that just makes my heart race... it makes me so nervous.

Sarah Shourd: Yeah, that is the intolerableness of it. The time that has no definition, no meaning. I had to construct a reason. [music fades out] So just didn't feel like I dropped off the earth into an abyss. I want to understand humanity better. I want to understand myself better. I want to be able to understand suffering. I knew that if I was going to be of any use, I would have to just fight and stay vigilant in there, and not let myself cross that line into just total desperation or hopelessness. I would just pace, and I would cry for a little while, and then like force myself to stop crying. Did multiplication tables that was my early coping mechanism just to stay focused and grounded and ready.

Earlonne Woods: How many things did you count in the cell?

Sarah Shourd: Oh, the number? [crosstalk]

Earlonne Woods: [crosstalk] Cracks... No, I'm just saying, cracks, dots on the wall. [Sarah affirms] 'Cause I know when I know when I've been in these cells even had honeycomb doors, and you'll know how many honeycombs, how many holes is on that door... [crosstalk]

Sarah Shourd: Absolutely.

Earlonne Woods: Because it's so... the boredom.

Sarah Shourd: Yeah, I used to count every line. Because there's two doors. There's the lines on the walls, the lines on the windows. So I would just count lines.

Earlonne Woods: Math can break up the monotony.

Sarah Shourd: [laughing] Yeah. And, you know, I counted my body parts. Like, "Hello finger, hello finger." More than counting, it was like each part of my body was a friend. Was like— had its own identity.

Earlonne Woods: Can you describe the actual space?

Sarah Shourd: It was about 8 by 10 feet, I would guess? And the window was high up and it was covered in a metal plate, perforated metal plate. And the sunlight would come in through the perforated metal plate and cast a beam onto the wall, which moved in an arc across the cell throughout the day. And it's how I kept track of time.

Nigel Poor: Beyond examining yourself and going inside, was the movement of the light, like the only physical curiosity that happened in the in the cell?

Sarah Shourd: When I was taken out to the, what they call here, the dog room, or the open-air cell there, we called it, [says word in Arabic] "the place where you eat air". I collected leaves and little things that blew in. I had a sort of altar that I made out of the scraps of things from the trash in one corner of my cell.

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: Earlonne, you know I totally understand that urge to try and find something beautiful, something intentional, something connective, especially such a cold, isolated place.

Earlonne Woods: Yeah. I think it's human nature. We were just talking about this on the last episode, it's like saying "I'm here! I exist."

Nigel Poor: Oh yeah, absolutely. And Sarah kept finding new ways to do this. Like, pretty regularly, she'd get pulled out of her cell to be interrogated. And eventually, she got brave enough to steal a pen from her interrogator.

Earlonne Woods: Yeah. That's... [crosstalk]

Nigel Poor: [crosstalk] Wild, huh?

Earlonne Woods: Dangerous.

Nigel Poor: Dangerous for sure. [Earlonne affirms] I remember what she was telling us, I was getting very nervous. But, so anyway, she would use the pen when she got back to her cell to create decorations on the back of her door. So she'd go back into her memory, [music comes in] and reproducing things, like a little cottage where she had spent time by a marsh with pussy willows.

Earlonne Woods: And you got to imagine how much time that took that just filled her day, you know?

Nigel Poor: Yeah, I mean, it was the only visual decoration she had in her cell.

Sarah Shourd: No, there were no colors. I mean, yeah, it's the gray limitless ocean of times stretched out in every direction. And I spent a lot of time with my eyes closed, trying to imagine things. Imagine what my mother looks like. I think if I'm honest, I spend a lot of time just dealing with a tremendous amount of anger and rage. In prison it was useful to be angry. Because if you're sad, you fall apart. And if you fall too deep into a hole, you may never get out. [music fades out]

Earlonne Woods: From time to time, her interrogator would give her something, like a notebook or some photos printed out from a website. But she wasn't really told anything about where these objects came from or why she was getting them,

Nigel Poor: So she'd come up with a theory.

Sarah Shourd: I was given a beautiful head scarf that I decided was from my mother. That was the most beautiful color in my cell, that purple scarf.

Nigel Poor: Yeah, when you saw that color, I'm just wondering, like how you responded to it. Like, how did it fill you emotionally? And then you thought it was from your mom. Could you imagine her smell on the scarf? Or did you put it on, and imagine it was your mom hugging you, or...?

Sarah Shourd: [pauses] I wish it was that kind of sweet and simple, the memory I have of the scarf, [music comes in] I remember the scarf coming in at a time of extreme desperation when my interrogators told me that the U.S. wasn't going to do anything for

us, and that we weren't going to be taken to trial. And that we could be there for a very long time. I came back to the cell and really got the closest I've ever gotten to crossing that line into insanity and desperation. It was one of the most terrifying moments of my life. And that's what I think of when I think of that scarf. [music fades out]

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: Sarah's isolation dragged on and on. A whole year passed.

Earlonne Woods: There were days when the old Sarah started to emerge, you know, the activist, the fighter.

Sarah Shourd: I think that really started to happen when I found ways to communicate with the other women inside. So, in the beginning it was knocking on the walls, our shared walls. And not just knocking, but like coming up with rhythms and then repeating them and then like adding to the rhythm and creating music together. I sang at the top of my lungs. I sang Mercedes Sosa's song *Gracias a la vida* every morning. And all the other women in the hallway would clap. I came up with dance moves.

Nigel Poor: That's what I was going to ask you. [crosstalk]

Earlonne Woods: [crosstalk] I know you [indistinguishable] dance in there You gotta.

Nigel Poor: Did you have some good dance moves?

Sarah Shourd: Oh yeah. Lots of dancing. For a while, I was a nudist in there. I just decided like, *This is a way to say, fuck you to the guards*. [laughing] To shock them with my nudity. I was the only one in isolation in my corridor. Some of the women were... many, there were many women in one cell. And they knew they all knew about me. And it felt amazing to be known about. They would sing songs to me, and we could have conversations down the hallway.

I just got into this, like, no bullshit kind of relationship with the guards. Like, this guard that I called "Mask Lady", she used to always put my food on the floor and make me pick it up. And I started refusing food until she would hand it to me. And then I started refusing food until she would say "Good morning" to me. [laughing] 'Cause was like, *you can't just come to myself with that face and not acknowledge my humanity. I'm not going to eat*.

Nigel Poor: What about on the harder days?

Sarah Shourd: I heard of women being beaten, which they would never do to me 'cause I was valuable prisoner and they, you know, didn't want to leave any marks. But I felt like I heard screaming and I was just losing my mind. And I just was praying that the screaming would stop. And feeling a tremendous amount of hatred for the person screaming. 'Cause I couldn't handle the pain. The guards burst into my cell and started

to shake me. And I realized it was me. I was screaming. That's the only time of my life I've ever lost it to that degree. And it scares the shit out of you.

[music comes in]

Nigel Poor: What was the longest you went without seeing Josh and Shane?

Sarah Shourd: It was at least a month. [Nigel affirms] They knew which hallway I was in, so they would yell my name. Just knowing that they were in the same building, and that they were going through the same reality, that they were in the same boat; I wasn't alone even though I was physically alone.

[music fades out]

Nigel Poor: So I read at a point, that it really bothered you to have them use the word "we". And I'm just curious about that use of language, if you could talk about that. What it felt like to hear them talk about "we", when you weren't... maybe not feeling like a "we".

Sarah Shourd: Yeah. I mean, I think that prison activates your core wounds, right? Like whatever core wounds you have from childhood, those are going to kind of define your daily experience in your emotional life. One of my core wounds from childhood is just being different than everyone else and not fitting in. And so, in prison when Shane and Josh got put together, I could feel how their energy shifted. Jealous is not even a word. All day long I would think about what they're doing that I can't do. And what they're feeling that I can't feel. *Am I ever going to be a "we" again? Am I ever going to get to do anything with anybody else that I can then talk about?* [Nigel affirms]

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: In those situations, your mind really starts playing tricks on you.

Nigel Poor: Could you relate to that?

Earlonne Woods: Yeah! Yeah, you feel like you're not a part of what's going on. [Nigel affirms] You feel like you're excluded, or you're not in those conversations.

[music comes in]

Sarah Shourd: I woke up one morning, and that light that I described to you coming through the window that would move in an arc throughout the day, often I would wake up hours before and just agonize waiting for the light to come in. And this morning it was already shining when I opened my eyes, and I could see all of these dust motes floating around inside of it. And each dust mote to me represented someone in my life or just someone that I hadn't met yet and maybe would never meet. And I thought if I just disappeared, the whole thing will go on without me, and then it'll be okay. [Earlonne

affirms] And on one hand, it's like a beautiful vision of acceptance and letting go surrendering. And on the other hand, in that is also just a realization, like *I don't know how... if I can go on with this forever.* [music fades out]

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: In September 2010, Sarah was released, after 410 days of solitary confinement.

Earlonne Woods: Iran said it was letting her out on humanitarian grounds. [Nigel affirms] But they kept Shane and Josh in prison.

Nigel Poor: So, Sarah after all those months of total isolation, Earlonne, suddenly it's the opposite. I mean, she's everywhere, lobbying politicians, on the news, she's being interviewed. And can you imagine what it's like to go from that drab, isolated place, and all of a sudden, everybody wants a piece of you?

Earlonne Woods: Actually, I almost can. [Nigel affirms]

Nigel Poor: But for her, the only thing that mattered was getting her friends out of prison.

Sarah Shourd: I came out of prison with unbelievable determination and focus. The only thing that mattered to me is getting Shane and Josh out of prison. I was like a machine, like a robot. I didn't feel much of anything. I felt emotionally burned to a crisp. And I kind of liked it 'cause I was like, *I don't need these emotions. I have a job to do. I have to get these guys out of prison.* [Nigel affirms]

Nigel Poor: And how did you physically present yourself at that time?

Sarah Shourd: I was in the media all the time. So, I was trying to look kind of normal for the first time in my life? [laughing] I was trying to appeal to, like, America.

Earlonne Woods: She had a business suit on. [Sarah continues laughing]

Sarah Shourd: I mean, you know, during that time I went on Oprah, I met with Obama. I had many meetings with Hillary Clinton. And so, I was just trying to play the game, which I wasn't very good at as far as style was concerned. I was just wearing slacks and button shirts and like, you know, trying to...

Nigel Poor: Right. Like, bland. Like bland?

Sarah Shourd: Yeah, like bland, yeah. I think I didn't really— took a while for the color to come back into my life. I felt guilty! I hear that from so many formerly incarcerated people to have gotten out first. The only way I could justify my freedom, or my existence was deprivation. I didn't drink, you know, I exercised, you know, just way too much. I

just worked, worked, worked, worked. And I think that that was a real sense of guilt, and not like— *I don't deserve to enjoy this. Not yet.*

[music comes in]

Earlone Woods: I understand the sentiment of that. But I don't ever feel guilty. [Nigel affirms] Me and my co-defendant got the same amount of time. My sentence got commuted after 21 years, right, and I'm out. [Nigel affirms] And he's still in there to this very day. But Nyge, I can say, I don't feel guilty because I worked hella hard to get out.

Nigel Poor: Totally.

Earlone Woods: You know what I'm saying?

Nigel Poor: Totally.

Earlone Woods: And being paralyzed by guilt don't help shit.

Nigel Poor: Exactly. And you're still helping guys.

Earlone Woods: Yes, definitely. I mean, they need me on the outside to do that.

Nigel Poor: Yeah, that's true.

Earlone Woods: A year after Sarah got out, Shane and Josh were released as well.

Nigel Poor: And since then, Sarah's really devoted herself to ending mass incarceration.

Earlone Woods: Yep. She's created a play about solitary confinement called *The Box*. There's gonna be a national tour starting in the spring.

Nigel Poor: So Sarah's still very much out in the world. But those bland pants and button downs... Earlone, they're definitely gone.

[music fades out]

[to Sarah]

Nigel Poor: OK, I'm gonna have to ask you this one more time. So it's 2021, we're having coffee, [Sarah and Nigel giggle softly] so can you describe who you are now, and just again, and just how you present.

Sarah Shourd: Can you answer this one for me, Nigel? No, I'm just kidding [laughing]

Nigel Poor: Yeah, I can! I can if you want.

Sarah: Yeah, yeah. Go for it

Nigel Poor: OK. You have a lightness to you, and you seem like you have a life that's full of love. You have a great style. You're sexy in a nice way [Sarah laughs softly] In a way that just says, "I feel my life." Do any of that resonate with you?

Sarah Shourd: You said lightness. I love those parts of me to be seen by you right now. And I also want to add that, like, I'm also very angry. [laughs] There's parts of my personality that are hard for people, even the people who love me the most. I think now that you said it, that it's not a contradiction to be sparkly and to be angry. [music comes in] You gotta have that slow burning fire in you.

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: So Nyge.

Nigel Poor: Yes, my friend?

Earlonne Woods: How are you feeling?

Nigel Poor: Well, first of all, let me ask you, how do I look?

Earlonne Woods: Great as always, you know.

Nigel Poor: Aw, you're sweet. Do I look like I've been on a 30-day prison diet?
[crosstalk]

Earlonne Woods: [crosstalk] Do you look 30-day challenge great? [Nigel laughs] Yes, of course. Ripped up and everything.

Nigel Poor: Ripped up, yes, yes. I'm finally doing pushups. So, yep, we have finished the 30-day challenge. It's been a pretty wild experience. And I'm looking forward to diving in to making an episode around it.

Earlonne Woods: Sneak peek. What's the most you felt behind this?

Nigel Poor: Well, I think the most I felt was learning that my ride-or-die partner here loved taunting me with candy when I couldn't eat it. [Earlonne laughs] But I think it has been really interesting, all the conversations we've been having around it with the people out here on the team and the guys inside who have been supporting the project. [Earlonne affirms] So we're going to dive into all of that when put the episode out in December.

Earlonne Woods: I'm looking forward to that episode.

Nigel Poor: Me too.

Linda: This episode of Ear Hustle was produced by Nigel Poor, Earlonne Woods, Rahsaan “New York” Thomas, John “Yahya” Johnson, Rhashiyd Zinnamon, Bruce Wallace, and Tony Tafoya.

Pete Roles: It was sound designed and engineered by Antwan Williams, with music by Antwan 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 also like to thank 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 Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the Public Information Officer at San Quentin State Prison, and I do approve this episode.

Pete Roles: 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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Nigel Poor: I’m Nigel Poor

Earlonne Woods: And I’m Earlonne Woods

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

END OF EPISODE.