

Ear Hustle
"Last Memory: Michael"
May 25, 2022

Nigel: Hey, listeners. This episode contains mention of substance abuse and conversation about suicide. Please take care while listening.

[ignition starts]

[beep]

Nigel: So, tell us how to get there, can you give us--?

Michael: Okay.

Nigel: Okay.

Michael: Yeah. So, if I remember right, you'll take 5 down to probably 99 to Bakersfield. And I wouldn't get off at Union Avenue. That's the old part of town. It's the old row where all the hookers and dope fiend motels. It takes you a lot of twists and turns to get to where we're going. So, you want to get off on 58 going east and then take the Mount Vernon exit, the Memorial Hospital will be right there on your right.

Well, from Mount Vernon Avenue, you'll pull in on the east side of the hospital. Just go by 10 or 12 parking spaces down and then you'll be able to see Elton Avenue. Once you pull in, grill first on the curb that faces Mount Vernon and get out of your car and look left, you'll be looking north, and you'll see the same sunset over the same trees.

Earlonne: You think we're going to see all this?

Nigel: I think so.

Michael: My last memory from the street was, I remember standing in a parking lot of Bakersfield Memorial Hospital, with a hose coming out of the exhaust pipe in my truck, and watching the sun set. I thought I couldn't go on any further. That if I did, I was going to end up in prison. Everything had pretty much gone to hell. I was an alcoholic. I was drinking a fifth of whiskey a day, a Wild Turkey 101. Tried to find work. At the time, there wasn't any work to be found. I felt like I was just going to go off into the abyss, and I'd rather have some control of what was going to happen.

Nigel: Mm-hmm.

Michael: So, that control was to end it myself. Instead of something else ending it, whatever it was I was afraid of.

[engine running]

Michael: *I had a failed a sprinkler business. So, I had equipment in the back of the truck, and I thought the easiest way to go out would be just to put a hose in the exhaust pipe, put it in the cab of the truck, go in, and drink some whiskey until I figured I would just faint. I wouldn't know when I would go out.*

Nigel: *What did you think would happen to you after you died?*

Michael: *I figured the guy running around the parking lot would finally see me still there and come check on me. See that the hose is running in there. Probably open the door and check me. I should be dead. He'd call the hospital folks or police. And since the hospital was right there, they'd take me in there. I had all my ID. I had written a note, something about no blame. A note there's no one to blame.*

Nigel: *Yeah.*

Michael: *I went to this parking lot in this hospital, because it was close to my parents' house. I figured the hospital people would come out, find me, take me straight into the hospital, find out who my parents are. Then, they'd only have to come two or three blocks to the hospital, identify me, and then go back home. So, I was like within almost sight of the intersection where they lived like four houses on.*

Nigel: *Could you see their house?*

Michael: *Not quite Almost. I could see the street to the house and the big tree next door. And I thought about this. I thought about how sad everyone was going to be, but I didn't really know what I was going to do after that, so they might've been sadder. I don't know.*

Nigel: *Did you ever think about that if you had killed yourself, yes, it was convenient for your parents, but every time they saw that spot, they would be reminded?*

Michael: *I had thought about that, but I think maybe at the time I thought that was part of it. I was in too much pain. Maybe I wanted them to feel a little bit.*

Nigel: *Yeah. Were you afraid to die?*

Michael: *No, I don't think I was afraid to die. I still don't think I'm afraid to die. I think death in a way is still kind of a relief of life. I don't have a death wish, but I think death is a relief.*

Nigel: *Then, what happens after you die?*

Michael: *I don't know.*

[engine running]

Michael: When I taped up the hose to the exhaust pipe, when I walked around, I looked up and the sunset was just like-- I'm colorblind. I only see maybe three, four different colors. I don't see colors of the rainbow, but that day, I saw many colors. A lot of it red, and I thought that's pretty appropriate for the moment. And I just was stuck on the sunset. I just thought how beautiful it was and that I wasn't going to see another one. I guess the sunset sort of reduced it to like, "What am I doing? What are you going to do here?" I just decided that I did want to see another one and that prison was going to be better than death. So, I decided to go rob a bank instead. I pulled the hose out of the exhaust pipe, threw it in the back of the truck, and drove off.

[somber music fades off]

Nigel: What did you do after you made that decision? What was the next step for you?

Michael: So, I went back to the house, went in the garage and there was an old paint gun that was sitting around in there for some reason. I broke pieces off of it. Kept the pistol and the plastic part to blast electrical tape, taped up all the huge holes, that's all over it, to make it look like a gun, so I could swing it around in the bank. And the next morning I robbed a home savings and loan right behind Marie Callender's on Oswald Avenue.

[music builds up]

Michael: I walked in, had a bandana and a cowboy straw hat on and sunglasses. Went and waved that around real quick so they think I have a gun, put it back in and walked out with money from three tellers and ran off. Got home, told my girlfriend at the time what I had done. We went for a drive. Went and picked up eight ball, picked up a fifth of whiskey, tank of gas. Drove around for about five hours and we got in an argument. And I told her if she didn't turn left at the next street, I was going to grab the steering wheel. She got pissed off, turned left, gunned it, and it was a dead end. There was a black and white sitting in the end asleep facing this way. And when we stopped, we stopped right parallel with him. I had that fifth on my knee, money in my pocket. She got a DUI and I got a bank robbery. That's how that went down.

Earlone: You got some good luck, bro.

[laughter]

Michael: Well, in a way, Earlone, you're right. In a way, it was good luck. In a way, it was good luck. In a way, it was good luck. It was good luck.

Nigel: We've been thinking a lot about memory, and about the particular memories that people carry with them while they're inside.

Earlone: And the places where those memories were first made.

Nigel: Yeah. It seems to me that the memories are tethered to specific spots. So, while you're inside, you're somehow psychologically anchored to that physical place.

Earlonne: Yeah. You're going to keep coming back to it in your mind, and you can picture that place perfectly.

Nigel: Do you think that those memories, that picture of the memory get stronger? Or, does it recede over time?

Earlonne: I would say recede, but I would definitely say you conjure it up so much to where you're able to paint the picture perfectly.

Nigel: Mm-hmm.

Earlonne: In this episode, and the next one, we're hearing a few of those memories, and visiting the spots where they took place. I'm Earlonne Woods.

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

[Ear Hustle theme]

Earlonne: Michael Moore is a resident of San Quentin, which is where we met him. He's an older dude.

Nigel: Yeah. He's little rough around the edges physically, but he has a real warmth about him.

Earlonne: He is serving a 35-year-to-life sentence for the bank robbery that he committed, after deciding not to end his life in that hospital parking lot.

Nigel: *If we could, which we can't, but if we could bring you something back from that place, what would you want?*

Michael: *Probably a leaf. Yeah, a leaf. Just the leaf blowing in the wind, yeah.*

Nigel: *You think those two trees are still there?*

Michael: *All of those trees are still there.*

Nigel: *Okay, that will help us identify it.*

Michael: *Yeah, because you would be looking at Mount Vernon and then turn directly to the left and you'll see the trees.*

Nigel: *Yeah.*

Michael: *I hope you guys will enjoy the scenery.*

[travelling in car]

Michael: *You'll be coming from the north. You'll take 5 down to probably 99 to Bakersfield. You want to get off on the 58.*

Bruce: *Can I see the instructions?*

Nigel: *Yup.*

Earlonne: A few weeks after we talked to Michael in San Quentin, we jumped in a car with our producer, Bruce, and drove down to Bakersfield, looking for the lot where Michael had seen that sunset.

Nigel: *I can't believe that-- this is a very crowded parking lot. When he was describing it, I imagined it being really empty.*

We found Memorial Hospital, but it didn't look like Michael had described it at all. It was really busy, and we couldn't even find the streets, Mount Vernon or Elton Ave.

Earlonne: We couldn't see mountains or the trees or any of that.

Nigel: I know. And, Earlonne, it actually made me start to question the whole premise of this episode. Were we just chasing ghosts or something?

We're 2.5 miles from Mount Vernon Avenue. So, do you think his memory just of where he was, is completely off?

Bruce: *Or, the hospital might have moved.*

Nigel: *Yeah.*

Earlonne: And that's when you started scrolling around Google Maps and found, a few miles away, another hospital with a different name. And it had those street names that he told us about though.

Nigel: Yeah, weren't you surprised I could do that on my phone?

Earlonne: No, I didn't doubt you one bit, Nyge.

Nigel: [laughs] Okay. So armed with that information, we headed that way, and Bakersfield started getting a little bit, uh, a little weird.

Earlonne. What's ahead of us? [chuckles]

Earlone: *It looked like some billowing black smoke. I don't know if it's a car or a structure.*

Nigel: *It's so dark and close to the ground. And then open to the left, like about half a mile away, there was another fire like that, like thick black smoke.*

Earlone: *Uh-oh, you think it's going down out here in Bakers?*

Nigel: *Mm-hmm. Yeah. Look, straight ahead, there's another fire. I think we're going by the same underpass and there was a guy walking there with no shirt on and what I would describe as a very big knife sticking out of the back of his pants.*

Earlone: *A knife or a machete.*

Nigel: *I think it was a machete. It was a little menacing. Bakersfield Druids. Druids? A Druid Club?*

Earlone: *What is druid?*

Nigel: *People that worship like, what, sun and such. Pagans?*

Earlone: *Guy walking down the street with no shirt.*

Nigel: *Shirtless is a common look here.*

Earlone: Remember when Michael told us not to take that one road to his parking lot?

Nigel: You mean the road to hookers and dope fiends and all that stuff?

Earlone: [chuckles] Yeah, I think we ended up taking that route.

Nigel: Yeah, I think we did. But eventually, we did find that other hospital and things started to make more sense.

Earlone: *We're facing some mountains.*

Bruce: *Oh, we're facing mountains, you can see.*

Earlone: *Can you see?*

Bruce: *Yeah.*

Nigel: *Oh.*

Earlone: *Oh, we good.*

Nigel: Wow.

[car doors shut]

[helicopter whirring]

Nigel: That sound is a medical helicopter sitting on top of the hospital. We actually saw it land. What we're looking at is very manicured lawn. There's a street that's pretty quiet. And then, you can see another part of the hospital. And I could imagine you could be pretty anonymous out here, right?

This, on the surface, does not look like a very inspiring spot to see beauty or things about humanity that would snap you out of your depression. And so, the only thing that I think that would potentially change what you're thinking about is the sky and the sunset and the grass and the trees.

Earlonne: He definitely had to be in a cold mindset. He wanted intervention, and I guess the sky intervened, and showed him some colors he'd never seen.

Nigel: Yeah. He said he was looking through two trees. So, these could be the trees.

Earlonne: It could be these two trees. He could be right here in this moment where we at.

Nigel: He said 10 to 12 spots.

Earlonne: Yeah, and we're 10 to 12 spots in.

Nigel: Every once in a while, there's people walking by coming out of the hospital, getting into their cars. So, it makes me wonder about how many people actually saw him here, and either weren't paying attention or maybe saw what he was doing and just didn't want to get involved, and ignored it. If you look all four ways, which way would you look to for some inspiration?

Earlonne: Uh. *[pause]* Shit, I don't see no inspiration around here. Yeah, I don't see any.

Nigel: I think the only life-affirming thing here is the sound of the birds and then the voices that you hear of people walking by. That would be something that would make you think for a minute. But I don't see how any of these buildings would really do much to change your mindset.

We were standing there, and it was-- I don't know, it wasn't quite working out the way I had imagined it. And then Bruce, our producer, suggested, "Why don't we start talking to people as we see them walk by?"

Nigel: Can we ask you a question to record? When you look around, do you see anything that's life affirming to you when look around the space?

Speaker: *Life affirming?*

Nigel: *Yeah, that would snap you out of a sadness if you were here?*

Speaker: *No. I mean, not really.*

Nigel: *Do you see anything life affirming when you're in this parking lot? If you were depressed, would you see anything here that would--*

Speaker: *No.*

Speaker: *Not really. I mean-- I don't know.*

Speaker: *Nothing good?*

Nigel: *No? Oh, can you ask in Spanish?*

Bruce: *[chuckles] [speaking in Spanish]*

Nigel: *Too hard?*

Bruce: *No.*

Nigel: *Okay, all right. Thank you.*

Earlonne: *Yeah. Folks weren't feeling so inspired out in the parking lot.*

Nigel: *Hmm, no, they weren't. I started wondering, what are we going to bring back to Michael?*

Earlonne: *We'll hear that after the break.*

[ad]

Michael: *I've tried to picture you guys trying to find the spot and the whole-- what would be going through your mind as you go to find the spot, and picturing you turning left and looking where I looked and how different a spot can be.*

Nigel: *And how many years ago--?*

Michael: *That would have been in 2000.*

Nigel: *So, we're talking 21 years ago.*

Michael: *20-- yeah.*

Nigel: *We had the address. We knew it was on Mount Vernon and Elton was near there. And you told us it was Memorial Hospital. Either the names have changed, or you didn't remember correctly, because we went to Memorial Hospital, and it wasn't on Mount Vernon.*

Michael: *Oh, no. Bakersfield Memorial. Oh, Kern Medical. That's what it was. It's Kern Medical, not Memorial. Memorial is down on Truxtun. It's Kern Medical.*

Nigel: *That's exactly what it was.*

Michael: *So, that's interesting that you stood on the same spot. Often, I think, when I'm in a spot, how many things could have happened. Like the stairs here, the 46 stairs of San Quentin has so much-- Horrible things have happened on those stairs. It's funny how a spot can have a good memory for some and a bad memory for others, right?*

Nigel: *Yeah.*

Michael: *And so awesome that you guys would hear this story and go to that spot after hunting it down.*

Nigel: E, as you know, there are very strict rules about taking in anything to give to guys inside.

Earlone: Yeah. But you were able to bring something in to show Michael.

Michael: *Oh, you did. Oh, wow.*

Nigel: *What is that? What are you looking at?*

I've got permission from Lt. Robinson to show Michael a branch that I had grabbed from one of those trees in the hospital parking lot.

Earlone: As long as you took that branch with you when you left.

Nigel: Yes, which of course I did. When I showed the branch to Michael, there was this moment of silence and then incredible recognition.

Michael: *It's a small twig about six or seven inches long with a bunch of curled up small leaves. The desire kind of dried up to do what I was going to do when I was there. So, it represents it well. And that's cool that I'm touching something from Bakersfield too. I haven't been back there almost 23 years, so.*

Nigel: *What memories do those bring back?*

Michael: Right away, it just reminds me of the trees that sort of framed the sunset. I had taped the hose into the exhaust pipe and then when I turned around, I was going to take my last look at the world. The trees were-- I don't know, if they were silhouetted, but they kind of framed the sky, right?

Nigel: Yeah.

Michael: And I think that made the colors more vivid. This reminds me of the trees that just framed all the colors of the sky.

Nigel: I kept looking around for something that would snap me out of a depression. Or an end of my rope feeling. And there just wasn't that much. So then, we decided, "Okay, we're going to start going around and we're going to ask people if they see anything here that's life-affirming." So, we started going around the parking lot and asking people, and everyone was like, "No, I don't really see anything here." Eventually, an ambulance drove by, and we stopped them and we asked the guys inside, "Do you see anything life-affirming here?" And, of course, they're kind of like, "What are you talking about?"

Nigel: If you were depressed and you looked around this parking lot, would you see anything that would pull you out of your depression and make you feel like life was worth living?

Speaker: Maybe a little bit. Just cause there's a little bit of trees, a couple of flowers and stuff. And I would say there's some life there. So, I'd say, naturally, if we keep going on, we'd be all right. But I'd have to be pretty deep down to find that in this parking lot, yeah.

Nigel: Yeah. We're doing a story about a man who came here to kill himself-

Speaker: Oh, shit.

Nigel: -parked right over there. This was 20 years ago, and then he saw a sunset over there and that's what stopped him from doing it.

Speaker: Oh, wow.

Nigel: So, we wanted to come here for ourselves and see if we could find anything that would be life-affirming. It's pretty hard.

Speaker: It is hard. I think maybe subconsciously he was looking for it.

Nigel: Maybe.

Speaker: But I'd say you could find-- if it just happened to be the right time, perfect divine timing or whatever, I think that you could find it if you're looking for it, but you have to want it to.

Nigel: You have to look pretty hard.

Speake: Yeah, but you can definitely not find it.

Nigel: Do you have any thought on this?

Speaker: Well, what's going on?

[chuckles]

Nigel: I love this guy, how his head is just peeping out from the back of the ambulance. Can you hear me?

Speaker: I can hear you.

Nigel: So, if you were depressed and you looked around this parking lot, would you see anything to snap you out of your sadness?

Speaker: Snap me out. Probably look at the sky. Maybe, just to know that I'm not limited. There's horizons, there's something off in the distance that I can focus on, something probably better.

Nigel: And the ambulance driver was telling us what he does if you see somebody who he thinks is having a problem. And so, I said, "Well, what would you have done if you saw this man sitting here?" And he said, "Well, what I normally do is I look and then I'll drive around the block and come back and see if anything's changed. And if I'm still not sure, I'll drive around again and then I'll slowly move in and then try to talk to the person to see what's going on." So, I described your situation, do you think he would have noticed? And he said, "Yeah, I think I would have noticed something, something wasn't right."

Michael: I think I was hoping that would happen.

Nigel: Yeah.

Michael: [clears throat] It's still a little emotional, when I think back when I'm talking about it.

Nigel: Yeah.

Michael: Because you guys were the first ones that I talked to about it. [pause] I think the lack of options that when somebody's in that space, it's really dark. You've got all just life running around you and you just can't-- [sobs]

Nigel: Do you have any tissues?

Michael: You just can't connect, and it's really lonely. Like you just want to be found, right?

Nigel: Yeah.

Michael: *Before I do this, I hope somebody finds me in a way. Of course, this is the only time I would admit that because I'm being so honest with you guys. If that ambulance would have started skulking around like a shark or something and started concentric circles on me, I might have thought this wasn't a good idea and changed my mind.*

Nigel: *I guess when I was there looking out, trying to find something that would change my mood, it felt so heavy that I couldn't see anything. I just think like, "What was Michael seeing here? Through his eyes, how did this all look? It looked dreary. It looked like the end."*

Michael: *I think that's why I looked up. Did you look up?*

Nigel: *Mm-hmm. That was it. That was the only thing.*

Michael: *That was the only place you could look and see anything.*

[somber music]

Nigel: I'm really intrigued by our ability to live in memory. But so often that memory, it's foggy and it's little bits of experience that we really want to try to understand, but we can't always get to it. And so, it was so cool that we were able to bring back to Michael and experience that memory together. It somehow made it more concrete.

Earlone: Right. And I don't know if this is a thing or not, Nyge, but when you're locked up your last memory, I don't care if it's 10, 15, 20, 25 years later, your last memories are still vivid to you. Like it happened yesterday.

Nigel: Hmm.

Earlone: You know what I'm saying? Because that's the last thing you'd probably did while you was free.

Nigel: Well, I guess, yeah, because you also said to me one time that people on the outside are constantly making new memories.

Earlone: Every day.

Nigel: All their memories are piling up.

Earlone: Every day, and our memories are just in that little suspended animation. So, those are different memories than the ones you're on the streets with.

Nigel: Yeah.

Earlonne: On our next episode, how life totally changed for one family around a table at Applebee's

Nigel: And, E, we're also going to explore one of your last memories before prison.

Earlonne: It's a deep moment. I mean, I haven't been there.

Nigel: Yeah, you ready for it?

Earlonne: I don't know, ah. I don't know.

Nigel: Well, we'll be there together.

[credits]

Earlonne: Ear Hustle is produced by me, Earlonne Woods, Nigel Poor, Rahsaan "New York" Thomas, John "Yahya" Johnson, Rhashiyd Zinnamon, Bruce Wallace, and Tony Tafoya.

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

Earlonne: Additional sound design and engineering by Terence Bernardo.

Nigel: Amy Standen edits the show. Shabnam Sigman is our digital producer, and Julie Shapiro is the executive producer for Radiotopia.

Earlonne: We'd also like to thank Warden Ron Broomfield. And as you know, every episode of Ear Hustle has to be approved by this smooth guy here.

Sam Robinson: This is Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the Public Information Officer here at San Quentin State Prison. There are many memories that you hear people recalling during their time here, their time before they got here. And this is an interesting episode because it really gives you an idea of how people reflect on their situation and their world. So, with that, I will say that I approve this episode.

Nigel: This episode was made possible by The Just Trust, working to amplify the voices, vision, and power of communities that are transforming the justice system.

Earlonne: Don't forget to sign up for our newsletter, The Lowdown, where you can learn more about each episode, and find out what the Ear Hustle team is up to. Subscribe at earhustlesq.com/newsletter.

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 around. Hear more at Radiotopia.fm.

Nigel: When we're outside of San Quentin, we record at KQED in San Francisco. I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlone: And I'm Earlone Woods.

Unison: Thanks for listening.

[credits music playing]

Earlone: That was a sequins dress from that yard sale, Nigel.

Nigel: I know I saw a yard full of dresses.

[Radiotopia from PRX]

End of Episode

[Transcript provided by SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription]