

Ear Hustle
" Some Darkness and Some Light "
October 5, 2022

Nigel: Hey, listeners, this episode contains mention of suicide. Please take care while listening.

[abstract music]

Nigel: Okay. It's 9:30 AM. It's the 15th of June and we're in the car. Where are we, Earlonne?

Earlonne: We are somewhere in Norway.

Nigel: Where are we going?

Earlonne: I think it's a city. We're on our way to a conference.

Nigel: Bruce is driving. Bruce, how are you feeling about driving here?

Bruce: It's fine. It's very calm. Sometimes, I don't know what signs mean at all, but generally, they make sense. I don't know, there's the blue with the red arrow that says "Strøm."

Nigel: Yeah. [chuckles]

Bruce: We need to learn what that means because we might have broken a law earlier.

Nigel: I know, it might mean "don't enter", I'm not sure.

Earlonne: I think American schools need to teach us-- which system is it, Nigel?

Nigel: Oh, damnit, the metric system? We're all a little bit lost here with the metric system. We've been debating--

Earlonne: How far is the kilometers or what is it? Kilometers?

Nigel: And, of course, I want to know how many kilo something are in a pound

Bruce: And gas might be \$500.

Earlonne: 242.

Nigel: Exactly. Yes. Gas could either be \$2 a gallon or \$233.

Earlonne: \$23.

Nigel: We're not sure.

Navigator: In 600 meters, at the roundabout, take the second exit.

Earlonne: See, they're talking about meters and shit.

[upbeat music]

Earlonne: So, Nyge, how did you like Norway?

Nigel: Well, I was very excited because we were together on our first international reporting trip and it was a big freaking deal.

Earlonne: Was it our first international reporting trip?

Nigel: Yeah. We've never done stories from other countries before. We've traveled, but this was our first time traveling with the idea that we'd bring back stories for Ear Hustle.

Earlonne: Ah, we need to do more of that.

Nigel: Yeah.

Earlonne: There was a conference in Norway that we were not going to miss.

Nigel: It was a conference that was all about doing radio inside of prison. There were people there from all over the world.

Earlonne: So, today's episode is kind of a postcard from our trip. Sounds right, Nyge?

Nigel: Ear Hustle International?

Earlonne: Ear Hustle-- That sounds good.

Nigel: Yeah, it does, doesn't it?

Earlonne: International version.

Nigel: I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlonne: I'm Earlonne Woods. And this is Ear Hustle's from PRX's Radiotopia. Drop that theme.

[Ear Hustle theme playing]

Nigel: Norway is the home of a group called RøverRadion. And please forgive me, I know if I could speak Norwegian, I would say it way better than that, but that's what we call it.

Earlonne: That sounded good, Nigel.

Nigel: Does it? RøverRadion?

Earlonne: Yeah.

Nigel: So, anyway, they were the hosts for this first international prison radio conference. It was a bunch of people we've been in touch with, or we'd heard about for a while, but we'd never been in one place all together.

Earlonne: So, all that was pretty cool. But first, we had to figure out how to park.

Nigel: [laughs]

Bruce is putting in the credit card.

Earlonne: *Oh, damn. That's \$125, man. What was that, krone?*

So, we walked into this conference.

Nigel: And even though we're all the way on the other side of the planet, one of the first people we saw--

Earlonne: Was this guy here, who I'm going to check his chin.

Nigel: [laughs] Of course, you are.

Hey, who's here?

Shakur: *It's Tommy Shakur who went out the front door. Now, I'm coming back for more. Tommy Shakur Ross, reporter extraordinaire. I'm out.*

Nigel: So, listeners might remember Shakur. He was in our second episode of Ear Hustle.

Earlonne: It was called Misguided Loyalty.

Shakur: *In 1985, I'm in a liquor store, and I see this brother come in and I say, "What's up?" And he's like, "What that westside rolling 60s like?" Now, that was the worst thing he could have said to me at that point because I was at the height of my career as a gang banger.*

Earlonne: *In 1985, Tommy Shakur Ross was 19 years old. What happened next at the liquor store is why he's here with me in prison, 30 years later.*

It was a story about how he joined a gang as a teenager and the really terrible fallout that came from that decision.

Nigel: Ugh. It is a pretty memorable episode, for sure.

Where're you coming to us from?

Shakur: *Where I'm coming from?*

Nigel: *Yeah, no, right now, where are you?*

Shakur: *I am in Oslo, Norway at an international prison radio conference.*

Nigel: *And what are you wearing today?*

Shakur: *What am I wearing today? I have a blue sweater on and I have a blue, white, and brown checkered light shirt with like beige brown slacks and blue sway shoes, like Elvis Presley says.*

Earlonne: *You're not giving a presentation today about some type of organism that was--[crosstalk]*

Nigel: *Nothing has changed. They used to go after each other inside and it is exactly the same on the outside.*

Earlonne: *Yeah. He's giving a lecture on biology today.*

Shakur spent almost 40 years in prison and when he got on that plane for Norway, he'd only been out for like a month.

Nigel: Crazy.

Earlonne: Good crazy.

Nigel: *You know what? If anyone asks you, how was it going for the first time by yourself on an international flight?*

Shakur: *Wow. It was a bit overwhelming initially because I've never flown before. I had some of my younger cousins take me to the airport, get me checked in, turn in my baggage, and just tell me what it is I needed to do. And so, once I got on the plane, I found myself watching movies and going to sleep on every one of them.*

Nigel: *Did you start to panic at all?*

Shakur: *I sort of felt it a little bit. I did have the urge to get up and start walking the aisles and stretching. But I was like, "No, I can ride it out."*

Nigel: *So, what are you expecting it's going to be like here?*

Shakur: *Well, I've already met so many different people from Australia, London, so I'm just open to hear what everybody has to say.*

Simen: *A very warm welcome to the world's very first prison radio conference.*

[cheers and applause]

Simen: *My name is Simen. I started RøverRadion on as an inmate in Oslo prison in 2015, and I will guide you through the day.*

Nigel: There were so many parts of this conference that were just, I don't know, Earlonne, mind blowing.

Earlonne: Right.

Nigel: Before the conference started, I was in the bathroom, and you know I like to peep at people, right?

Earlonne: In the bathroom?

Nigel: Well, kind of anywhere.

Earlonne: I didn't know that, Nigel.

Nigel: [laughs] [unintelligible [00:08:29] about me. I saw this woman in there and she just looked really cool. She just looked like someone I'd want to hang out with, just talk to. Fast forward a few minutes, and I'm walking into the conference, but I can't see the stage, because I'm still looking for my seat. And I hear a woman's voice, and she mentions that she's currently incarcerated, but she's welcoming people to the conference. So, I just assume this is either pre-recorded, or she's somehow Zooming in from prison.

Earlonne: How we do it sometimes when we're on stage.

Nigel: Yes, exactly. But then I looked up, and it was the woman from the bathroom. She was currently incarcerated, and she was out of prison attending this conference.

Earlonne: Yeah.

Nigel: And I was like, "We are not in the US anymore."

Earlonne: [laughs] Same thing I said, like, "Wow, this is a trip." I mean she's up there wearing regular clothes, no labeling, no nothing.

Nigel: Not orange-- Nothing about her would tell you that she is currently incarcerated.

Earlonne: And then, she starts singing this song.

Nina: *This is a little song that I wrote after I came to prison, and it's called Lady Blue.*

[singing]

Nigel: Earlonne, in the US, there are some specific times when incarcerated people leave prison.

Earlonne: Right.

Nigel: Hospital visits, court appointments. But you have a guard by your side the entire time. You're never just walking around or going to a conference. No, not going to happen.

Earlonne: It is hard to get permission to leave the prison, even for funerals, they have a process where you're supposed to be able go through it and you pay the money and you're going to have correctional officers escort you. But I've have never seen that in decades of being incarcerated.

Nigel: Well, that kind of says it all, right?

Earlonne: Yeah, I don't think it happens.

Nigel: But in Norway, they have this idea is that after certain amount of time in prison, periodically you should be able to get out and spend time like in the normal living--

Earlonne: Environment.

Nigel: Yeah, normal environment, exactly.

Earlonne: That way you won't completely forget about what the outside world is like.

Nigel: Mm-hmm. It's a pretty radical idea.

Earlonne: Yeah, definitely.

Nigel: Between seeing this woman on this stage who was currently incarcerated, seeing guys who I had last seen in San Quentin, or Shakur who had only been out for a month, it just totally played with my sense of inside and outside prison. It was wild.

Earlonne: Right. It was very strange, but it was good.

Nigel: And speaking of Shakur--

Shakur: *First of all, I want to say, my name is Tommy Ross but Shakur is who I am. "Shakur" means thankful, grateful, appreciative. So, I'm so grateful and appreciative to be standing in front of you today, as I was recently paroled from San Quentin on April 27th of this year after serving 36.7 years.*

[cheers and applause]

Shakur: *Yeah. So, this is really surreal and--*

Nigel: At one point in the conference, they opened up the mic, so anyone could go up and speak for five minutes.

Earlonne: And I just knew [Nigel laughs] Tommy Shakur Ross would find his way up to that mic.

Nigel: Mm-hmm.

Shakur: *I got involved in prison radio in 2012 in San Quentin. Launching a radio program in 2012, I experienced all the emotions of what that entails. So, initially when the first story aired, I can recall how we all got around in the studio. We had one of those little radios and wires poking out everywhere. And we sat down, and we listened to that story for the first time. It just felt like magic. Just hearing my voice over the radio. It wasn't just me doing it on my own, it was a collaborative effort.*

Nigel: Earlonne, this brings back really one of my most cherished memories.

Earlonne: Yeah?

Nigel: Yes. I remember when that story came on and we were all huddled around the office inside the media center. And it was getting dark out and we were in that dingy area just waiting for this story to come on the radio.

Earlonne: This was before Ear Hustle even existed. We had just made one radio story that was supposed to air on the local radio station.

Nigel: And all day we were waiting, looking at the clock, like, we knew it was going to come out at 5:00 and we're like, "Okay, it's 1 o'clock. Four more hours, three more hours, two more hours." And just like Tommy said, we didn't even have a real radio. Someone had to go up to the housing unit and get-- I don't know, Earlonne, one of those little portable things they--[crosstalk]

Earlone: Transistors?

Nigel: It's like a transistor. Yeah.

Earlone: And it had all these little wires, to make an antenna to get a signal.

Nigel: [chuckles] Exactly. And then it came on.

The San Quentin Prison Report.

SQPR is a media collective of prisoners and volunteers from the community.

SQPR.

Earlone: And we knew thousands of people were hearing this. It was something.

Nigel: Yeah. It's hard to overstate how radical this was. These voices from inside prison were going outside.

Shakur: *Good, bad, or indifferent. I'm Tommy Shakur Ross with the San Quentin Prison Report. I'm out.*

Earlone: I think we thought we were the only ones, Nyge.

Nigel: Yeah, we did.

Earlone: And look at what's happening today.

[international prison radios playing]

[upbeat music]

Nigel: Now, we were finally all in person at this international conference in Oslo, comparing notes on what it's like to work inside of prison, listening to clips from all around the world all in one space. And it was fabulous. And the guy who brought us all together was Phil Maguire.

Phil: *-was incredible. It's important to find people who think like you. It's important to find friends.*

Earlonne: Phil runs the Prison Radio Association based in the United Kingdom.

Nigel: And he's a really important person in the prison radio movement. He's been doing this work for a couple decades.

Earlonne: Yeah, and he even got a special recognition from Queen Elizabeth for the work he does.

Nigel: Yeah.

Phil: Being whole means we can be imperfect together. We can rely on each other. We can build each other up. We can face challenges together, but we can also celebrate each other. Ladies and gentlemen, thanks so much for your time today. And let's build a beautiful global movement of prison radio people.

[cheers and applause]

Nigel: Here's Simen. Who are you?

Simen: *[laughs]* I'm a former inmate. I went from an inmate to an employee in RøverRadion, seven years since I started.

Nigel: We heard Simen up on stage earlier, welcoming everyone to the conference.

Earlonne: He had mentioned something that we really wanted to follow up on. So, when we ran into him in the hallway, Nigel pulled out her iPhone, like she's always doing.

Nigel: Hey, don't give me a phone if you don't want me to use it.

[laughter]

Nigel: What's the t-shirt that you wearing?

Simen: So, it just says "pride" in some small letters over it.

Nigel: It says "pride" in the colors and it's on top of the radio.

Simen: *This one was made especially for our first in-prison pride parade anywhere in the world. True pioneering. We had it on the 15th of October last year. We declared the second Friday of October as International Prison Pride Day. In Norway, we've come a long way. 50 years ago, it stopped being against the law.*

Nigel: *Is there a lot of LGBT phobia in prisons in Norway?*

Simen: *Prison is probably one of the places where it's the hardest to be gay or transsexual. It's a hypermasculine environment. For me, as a hugger, you can't hug people because that's gay. First of all, there's nothing wrong with being gay. Why can't you give people a hug?*

We have inmates, only because of their sexuality, they have been beaten, they have been threatened, they have been told by staff that, "You shouldn't come out of your cell because people will beat you up."

We knew about one inmate, so we thought maybe more than two, and there were 13 inmates. 13 people doesn't sound like much, but when the first pride parade started in Oslo, it was also only like 20 people.

Simen: *My master stroke in there was that there's a band in Olo. They're a really big brass band. They're very cool. I booked them and they they're like 17 musicians walking in the parade, there's 13 inmates and, of course, some employees in their uniforms.*

Nigel: *There were people dancing?*

Simen: *People were dancing. They had a concert afterwards where[?] people in uniforms and the inmates were dancing together. So, it was beautiful.*

Nigel: *People who worked there and people who were incarcerated were dancing together?*

Simen: *Yep.*

Nigel: *And nothing went wrong.*

Simen: *Nothing went wrong.*

Nigel: *Earlone, can you imagine that in San Quentin?*

Earlonne: *I can imagine it. Yes.*

[laughter]

Earlonne: *Would it happen? Probably not.*

[cheers in the background]

Nigel: *Why do you personally care? I mean, there's so many things you could work on to change in the prison. Why did you care to spearhead this?*

Simen: *I had a friend who killed himself. He was a very effeminate gay guy. He was in prison. I'm sure that he got harassed because he just was his beautiful self. So, that's a personal, personal thing.*

Nigel: *Did you think a lot about him when you were working on this?*

Simen: *I dedicated my work to him, kind of. [chuckles] He was a very fun person and it's always strange when people who had so much life pass away. So, I think about him sometimes. And I hope, yeah-- I'm not religious. So, I don't think he's looking down from me from some cloud, but, yeah, I hope he got his peace.*

Nigel: There was an ongoing conversation when we were in Norway about how there's so much less violence in that country.

Earlonne: I mean, I've seen the police didn't even have guns.

Nigel: They didn't carry guns. But the day after we left, right as Oslo was about to start its pride celebrations, there was a deadly shooting near a gay bar.

Earlonne: Two people were killed and 21 were injured. The city's pride celebration was canceled.

Nigel: And I have to admit when I learned about this, I felt like I was hearing a story that would've taken place in the US.

Earlonne: Yeah. But this kind of shit happens all over the world, I guess.

Nigel: Yeah.

Earlonne: That's what it seems.

Nigel: *Where are we?*

Earlonne: *We are in the City Plaza--*

Nigel: *Can you describe the room? It's really--*

Earlonne: *It looks like it's back from the 1800s. Very artsy, artsy ceiling with frames all up in the ceiling with gold trimming.*

One night at the conference, we were all invited to Oslo City Hall because the woman who runs RøverRadion-- did I get that right?

Nigel: Sounded good to my ears

Earlonne: Was being honored.

Nigel: This place was really splendid. It was palatial, all the walls were covered with exquisite murals. Each room, each wall had this different intricate scene. It was like you were walking into a different world.

Earlonne: That was dope.

Nigel: These murals depict the history of the city and also life as it unfolded over the decades, like you saw people working on farms, you saw people in industry. Then, there were rooms with like dragons and stuff. They were glorious.

Earlonne: Definitely. And they're really into their nudity.

Nigel: Yeah. There were lots of penises.

Earlonne: And across the room, we spotted the warden of the Oslo prison.

Nigel: In Norway, they call him a Governor

Earlonne: Governor.

Nigel: And we went up to talk to him.

Could you just introduce yourself?

Nils: My name is Nils Leyell Finstad. I work as a Governor in Oslo prison, which is the main prison or the only prison actually in Oslo for male offenders.

Nigel: Where are we right now?

Nils: Now, we are in the city hall. A building from-- I think it's from around 1950, which is very famous in Oslo because it's the city hall, but also because this is where Nobel Peace Prize, the ceremony, is in this room.

Nigel: So, just imagine if there were a place in the US that had this internationally significant event, like the Nobel Peace Prize. And imagine in that space, they're honoring work that's being done in prison. That is a real nod to how significant this work is seen there.

Earlonne: Well, in the US, for the most part we keep prisons out of sight, out of mind. They build them in the middle of nowhere, so people forget they exist. But things are done pretty differently in Norway.

Nils: We are going to build a new prison in Oslo. And for me, as the prisoner governor, it's extremely important that this new prison will be in Oslo because then we have the prison here, we have the city hall here, we have the new national museum here, we have new housing facilities here, but the capital should be for everyone.

Nigel: We've been looking at all these incredible murals and I was wondering, what would be in a visual picture of how you imagine your job and your responsibility and what you'd like to see in prisons?

Nils: I would create a picture with a lot of different people, a lot of different people. All sexes, all ages, all backgrounds. And I would have some darkness in it and some light in it. I think that would be my picture.

Nigel: Would you include yourself?

Nils: Yes. I would think I would be in the middle of the darkness and the light.

Earlonne: We're going to take a short break.

Nigel: When we get back, what happens when guys who were incarcerated in the US get a look at what their experience might have been like in Norway.

[*Hot in Here* by Nelly playing]

Nigel: Oh, my God, Earlonne, is that Nate pulling out those old moves?

[laughter]

Nigel: Oh, my God.

Earlonne: I wasn't supposed to show nobody this video.

[laughter]

Nigel: Ooh. Blackmail tape.

Earlonne: It was a-- We didn't know what time of the day it was. We were just hanging out in the club until like 3:00, 4:00 in the morning.

Nigel: I know, Earlonne. It was so cool. The whole time we were in Norway, we kept seeing these guys that we know from prison back in the US, in this completely different context. And, Earlonne, do you remember before you all went out on that adventure, that little evening-- [chuckles] what, party time?

Earlonne: Rendezvous.

Nigel: Yes. Earlier that evening, we'd all been at this restaurant.

What did you buy at the conference?

Ken: *I bought a small bird-shaped thing that looks like it would be hanging like a Christmas ornament. And I bought it because it was made from a tree that grew inside the prison. And I got it from my daughter who was conceived on the grounds of a prison.*

Nigel: *May I ask what prison your daughter was conceived in?*

Ken: *California Correctional Institution, Facility 4B.*

Nigel: *Anything else we can ask him about that?*

Ken: *Probably not.*

[laughter]

Earlonne: *How much time did you serve or what was your sentence when you were part of the California Department of Corrections?*

Ken: *I had life without the possibility of parole, and I served 38 years.*

Nigel: *And would you mind identifying yourself?*

Ken: *I'm Ken.*

Nigel: *Why are you here?*

Ken: *I'm really not sure why I'm here actually, Nigel. This is my third time in Norway and I was here a month ago. I'm an advocate for prison reform in California. And California is talking about implementing a Norway model, which I'm hopeful.*

Nigel: *Can you describe to me what you think the model is here?*

Ken: *I think you could boil it down to treat people in prison as if they're human beings.*

Nigel: *I keep hearing that, but I haven't seen it yet, but you've seen it.*

Ken: *I have seen it. I want to say they're prisons and no one wants to be in prison but when you compare it to how people are treated in the United States, it's so different. The first time I saw it, it was an emotionally jarring and unsettling experience.*

Nigel: *Can you say a little more about that?*

Ken: *They refer to the officers by their first names. They allow them to say whatever they want to say. Folks come to visit you, you go into a closed room and they leave some condoms in the room, because sex is normal and natural and healthy.*

Earlonne: *Because sex is normal and natural and healthy.*

[laughter]

Nigel: I know. Can you believe it?

Earlonne: We're going to be talking a lot more about those kinds of differences in an episode later this season, where you and I get to tour four of Norway's prisons.

Nigel: For now, we can just say that it's a whole different way of thinking about prisons and what they're for.

***Ken:** I think that they have adopted an idea that treating people like they're human beings will ultimately result in people being more likely to go back into society successfully. 40 years ago, they treated people the same as California does now, and they had terrible violence in their prisons, they had a terrible recidivism rate, and their prisons were not good at all.*

And now, they have virtually no violence in their prisons. Their staff are basically happy and not have the terrible outcomes that our staff have. It's still a prison, and people commit crimes, but it certainly is vastly more humane than what we do in California.

***Nigel:** You said that it was very emotional. I was wondering, did it bring up old hurts or make you think about things that could have been different for you in those 38 years?*

***Ken:** Oh, yeah. I did commit crimes, and I'd served a lot of time for them. Had I committed the same crimes in Norway, I would've been held to account. There would've been a punishment for it, and I understand that. But I would never have been treated as if I was not a human. It would've been, "You are a human being. You're a member of our community. We want you out of prison as fast as we can safely get you out." As opposed to, "You're a monster. You've forfeited your right to be treated like a human being. You can parole in a pine box." It is emotional. It took me a long time to be able to even feel that I was actually a worthy human being.*

Nigel: After we finished talking with Ken, we all went into this restaurant. There were maybe like five or six super long, like banquet tables and we found a place to sit, people you knew, strangers. It was super festive. I had a few glasses of--[crosstalk]

Earlonne: Definitely. It seemed like you had a cool corner down there.

Nigel: I did have a cool corner.

Earlonne: Because I sure seen a bottle, not a few glasses of wine. I've seen a bottle come floating over

Nigel: I went to the bar, a full bottle for my section of that table, and we were having--

Earlonne: Was that for your section, Nigel? Was that for you?

[laughter]

Nigel: I did share. There was one other Chardonnay lover there.

Earlonne: Okay.

Knut Erik: *I want to just thank all of you to coming to Oslo this year and making this a very, very nice thing.*

[laughter]

Knut Erik: *Thanks to all of you for being here.*

[cheers and applause]

Nigel: Before we sat down, one of RøverRadion's guys got up to make a toast.

Earlonne: This was Knut Erik. And this guy, he was running the show for this whole conference, working overtime.

Nigel: Oh, man. He was constantly running around, taking care of everything. And when he finished that toast, that room was just full of love.

[applause, chatter, clinks]

Nigel: *That was incredibly touching. Did that give you a little tears in your eyes?*

Brent: *Yeah. I was getting choked up.*

Nigel: *I know. It was so sweet. This was so much work to put together.*

Brent: *It's just amazing.*

Nigel: *Can you identify yourself for me?*

Brent: Yeah. I'm Brent Nicholas, music and sound producer and audio content manager for Inside Wire: Colorado Prison Radio.

Earlonne: Damn, Nyge. You was recording everything. We in there swinging, you over there, working and shit.

Nigel: Earlonne, you know I always work.

[chuckles]

Nigel: So, I was sitting across from this guy and I noticed that he was really moved by Knut Erik's toast. And it turned out, he was a formerly incarcerated guy who had somehow found a job that felt like it had been invented for him.

So, wait a minute. How did you get this job?

Brent: I'd been looking for a while. Honestly, it was almost to the point where I was just going to give up. I'd pretty much done everything else you can think of that an ex-felon has done. I've worked in restaurants, I worked in construction sites, delivery jobs, just any menial job. I came across this ad, encouraged people who were previously incarcerated to apply. And then, the thing that caught my eye too, was the word 'beatmatching' was in there.

Nigel: What? Wait, wait, what?

Brent: Beatmatching. So, for like deejaying, at least old school deejaying, like on vinyl, you had to learn to pitch up and match the speed of both the records on both sides. You don't see that word every day. So, for me, to see that word in a job posting, with prison experience, I had never seen an ad like that, where it just ticked off all those boxes in my life. Ah, you're going to make me cry now.

Being able to work with people inside, doing something creative and doing something that, [pause] I feel like [sobbing] gives these people, these men and women something to look forward to inside there and still be able to have a life. You don't normally look at a job posting and you think of the word 'hope'. You know what I mean? You're just thinking like, "Oh, pay bills. Something to put on my resume." So many years of not being able to get any kind of job that's meaningful in any way or that you feel like you're really making any kind of a difference in anyone's life.

Nigel: *You read a cluster of words and that made the difference. And that was like 10 words.*

Brent: *When you put it that way, it's kind of redemption for me too because I was in graduate school for linguistics when I went to prison. I was working on a PhD, so I thought my life was going to be around words, and around language and around articulating things to people in some way or another. I had to resign myself to the fact that words are never going to be your friend, having to articulate your life and your story is always going to be your enemy. It's always going to be a detriment.*

Even down to trying to get jobs and articulating the words, like talk about, "Yeah, I've been to prison, but this is what I've done since, and this is why you should hire me. And this is why you should give me a chance." So, to actually see an ad where right upfront, they're saying like, "Hey, this is all right. This is what we want. This is useful. There's some value to this." I honestly felt like, "Your life is over dude. You're never going to have any opportunities or chances." Ten plus years of just trying to run from that. And now, I feel like I'm running towards that.

Nigel: Earlonne, first, I have to say experiencing this conference with you and this trip was incredible.

Earlonne: Definitely.

Nigel: And I would love to know what was one thing you saw that really stood out to you as different between prisons in Norway and in the US.

Earlonne: Okay. The one thing that I can say that makes the biggest difference, and it might be the smallest thing--

Nigel: What's that?

Earlonne: And that was individuals in prison get to wear their own clothes.

Nigel: Yeah. When I saw that, it was really interesting. You can't tell who's incarcerated and who works there. It's like everybody just blends together.

Earlonne: And it didn't hurt nothing.

Nigel: Nothing went bad.

Earlone: Nothing went bad.

Earlone: Now you tell me, what was one thing that stood out to you?

Nigel: All right, no problem with this one. It was that experience with Nina, the incarcerated woman who had been given leave to attend the conference. That would never, Earlone, never happen in the US.

Earlone: But it's a great idea.

Nigel: Mm-hmm.

Earlone: I mean, I think if people knew that they could work towards this type of thing, it'd be a better system. I think it'd produce better people.

Nigel: But, Earlone, to be honest, how many people do you think would actually come back?

Earlone: [chuckles] It probably depends on the sentence. I mean, people who are serving shorter terms, they're trying to do the good behavior thing, they're trying to get parole. I think they might come back. But at those level 4s, where people are serving a million years, life sentences, life without, those conditions are a little different. So, ain't nobody coming back.

Nigel: Well, on that note, Earlone, I've got this story I've been dying to tell you. After our trip, I went on to Denmark for a little vacation. I met some people that had a really, really great story. So, sit back, you don't have to do any work here. I'm going to tell you this one.

Earlone: Okay. Cool. I get to finally listen.

Ada: *My name is Ada and I am turning 47 on the 23rd this month. I'm born on the same day as Monica Lewinsky and Slash from Guns N' Roses. And I'm a filmmaker and an artist.*

Nigel: *And how do I know you? How do I even meet you?*

Ada: *You met me because I am an Ear Hustle listener.*

Earlone: So, what, did this Ada write you a letter or something?

Nigel: Well, not a letter. She sent me an email. We get so many emails from people, but hers really grabbed my attention.

Earlonne: Stood out.

Nigel: I had to follow up.

Can you describe Frank to me?

Ada: Frank? Yeah. Okay. So, Frank is a guy that I've known for many years. We are both filmmakers.

Nigel: And what's his personality like?

Ada: He talks a lot. *[laughs]* He has many, many opinions about many, many things. He's very Danish, bordering rude. I border rude too sometimes. We just say what's up. But he's also super talented. He was always fighting for the little guy. I have a lot of respect for that.

[somber music]

Nigel: *It is Saturday, July 2nd. I'm in Denmark and I'm walking over to interview Frank Poulsen.*

Earlonne: Ahem-ahem.

Nigel: He doesn't like that I go to these places on my own.

Earlonne: Nigel finds herself in some weird situations at times.

Nigel: And, Earlonne, you know I was nervous because I'm usually with you when we do these things.

I'm about to ring the bell. Hi, it's Nigel.

Frank: Come in.

Nigel: *Okay. Going up the stairs. [footsteps] Maybe it's one more flight?*

Earlonne: You sound a little winded there, Nyge.

[laughter]

Nigel: No elevators in this country. And also, E, I had gotten the feeling that the guy I was walking up all those stairs to meet, that filmmaker named Frank, was a little bit maybe ornery? And I wasn't sure how I was going to be received.

[door knock]

Frank: Hello.

Nigel: Hey, I have my audio rolling, is that okay?

Frank: It's okay. Come in.

Nigel: Thank you.

Frank: You're welcome. You drink coffee?

Nigel: I do.

Frank: I made it.

Nigel: Ah, thank you. I'm going to sit right across from you if that's okay.

Frank: Oh, yes.

Frank: I'm going to be smoking.

Nigel: I'm a former smoker, so I always enjoy it when other people smoke.

Frank: Yeah, okay.

Nigel: The reason I contacted you was Ada. She said that she had this really odd experience where she went to a wedding and she was sitting next to someone she didn't know. And apparently that's you

Frank: That's me.

Nigel: *How long ago was that?*

Frank: *Yeah, it's actually very long ago, and I didn't think about this story for such a long time. It has to be more than 20 years ago.*

Nigel: *When you first saw him at the wedding, what did you think when you saw him?*

Ada: *I didn't think anything because he just looked like a regular Danish Viking dude. He was blonde, he was tall. He's the type of guy I grew up with-- thousands of those. So, it's like I didn't think anything. I was at a wedding and I know that when you're at a Danish wedding, the hosts have decided who you're going to sit next to. So, they must have thought that I would have a good time with him and vice versa. We were both 25 and it was a wedding on the countryside.*

Nigel: *Do you remember meeting Ada at the wedding?*

Frank: *Yeah, for sure.*

Nigel: *Can you describe her?*

Frank: *Ada, she's like a very lively, very loudly laughing person. I remembered her as a lot of fun at that wedding. We became good friends.*

Ada: *I just remember, at one point, I asked him like, "So, where do you live?" And then, he said this random town where I was like, "What the hell are you doing there?" And then, he just smiled very [laughs] broadly. He was like, "I'm actually living there because I'm in prison and I escaped to be at this wedding." And I was like, "You what?" "I escaped because I really wanted to be here."*

Earlonne: This dude escaped from prison just to go to a wedding? I like this dude.

Nigel: Right? So now, you see why I had to go do this interview.

Earlonne: Why was he in prison in the first place?

Nigel: Okay. Good question. Frank is a filmmaker and a political activist, and he had been part of a protest on the behalf of these Algerian refugees who were being held in like a detention center. And so, it was kind of like a civil disobedience. He went with some other activists and pulled a fence down and started a fire, basically caused a public disturbance on government property.

Earlone: Okay, gotcha.

Nigel: So, then he got sent to prison, and you know, there's a lot of downtime in prison.

Frank: *It was just at the time when Harry Potter came out [laughs] and I forgot that detail. We were reading Harry Potter for the kids, me and my wife at that time. And because it was so exciting, we were kind of fighting on who should read it, who should finish it. And then she ended up finishing it, and I ended up bringing it to prison. And then, I was reading the end of the Harry Potter book. And when Neville Longbottom gets five points for being brave, I thought that was so moving, so I was crying. [chuckles] I was in prison thinking about, "Okay, nobody has to see that I'm crying about a children's book."*

[laughter]

Nigel: *So, you were at this prison for a month and then someone you knew was getting married?*

Frank: *Yes. Actually, I called her my wife. We were not married, but we were living really much as man and wife and her best friend, who's also a filmmaker. She was being married to this guy, he was a movie star when he was a child and he was in a film that was nominated for an Oscar, actually*

Nigel: *What movie?*

Frank: *Pelle the Conqueror. He was playing the main character.*

Earlone: Ooh, a fancy wedding. [Nigel laughs] Now I get it.

Nigel: Right. And, of course, Frank wants to go to this wedding. But, there's this one little problem.

Earlone: He's in prison.

Nigel: Mm-hmm.

Ada: *Apparently, he had asked for permission to leave, which they give prisoners sometimes, but he had gotten it a hard no, like, "No," [laughs] "We're not going to let*

you go to a wedding, dude." And then, he just decided to take matters into his own hands.

Frank: I was really sad that I was going to miss this great party, and it was in Jutland where the prison was, the same part of Denmark. My wife drove with friends to Jutland to her grandmother's house, borrowed her grandmother's car and went south to pick me up in the prison.

Nigel: Wait. What do you mean? You can't just pick someone up at a prison. How did that work?

Frank: Because it was an open prison. You were only locked in after 8 o'clock in the evening. So, we agreed that after dinner, she would be outside the prison.

Ada: First, he told me how he had escaped. He had run over these fields or something. He just slipped out of a door and ran. And then, his girlfriend was waiting in a car with a suit for him because he was going to a wedding and then they just took off.

Frank: So, I wrote a note saying, "Dear guard, I have run away. I will be coming back on Sunday."

Ada: And I remember thinking, "That sounds so fun." I mean, come on. That is like Bonnie and Clyde on the run, singing songs and eating salmon or something. It was crazy. [laughs] It was just crazy.

Nigel: Did you wonder about him, "How is he going to get back there? This is so strange"?

Ada: I think I just assumed that his girlfriend was going to give him a ride back. [laughs] I don't know. Denmark is very small, you can always jump on a bus or a train. It's very small. Maybe he was three hours away from where the prison was.

Nigel: So, you left Friday, you had the wedding Saturday, Sunday, and you just walked back in on Sunday evening?

Frank: Yeah.

Nigel: Did anyone say anything? Did they yell at you?

Frank: No. They were a little bit surprised and they were like, "Who are you? What are you doing here because it is out of visiting hours." "I don't know, but I'm an inmate." "But why are you--?" Okay. But then they put me in isolation.

And then the next day, I had to go the prison ward to talk to him and I was sitting-- It looked a little bit like, when you go to the doctor, you sit outside his office. I was reading the newspaper from yesterday and there was a picture from the wedding in the newspaper because the one was a film director and the other one was a famous children's movie star. So, there were a few paparazzis at the wedding. And in this tabloid newspaper, there was a picture of everybody, where I was in.

Nigel: You were in the picture?

Frank: I was in the picture.

Earlonne: Okay. So, what did the warden do?

Nigel: Frank says the warden told him, "Of course, people had run away before."

Earlonne: But who comes back?

[laughter]

Nigel: Exactly.

Earlonne: Voluntarily, you know?

Nigel: Exactly.

Frank: And then, he said, "When people run away from prison, they often do something criminal. So, what have you been doing? I said, "Well, I went to a wedding and here's the picture. You can see I'm here," so I can prove to him where I've been to, what I've been doing

Nigel: And what was his reaction?

Frank: He was laughing. And he said that, "Okay. Normally, when you run away, you have to go to a closed prison. You can't stay in an open prison if you run away. But since you came back, okay, let's say that we will just stay here. Normally when you run away, you have to be punished by going to the isolation. But there are prisoners who

did something that are even worse than you, so there's no room in the isolation department. And normally if you are a runaway, you have those days you have to add to the sentence, but that's so much paperwork. So, let's just say that you go back and we don't talk more about this." So, actually part of my sentence was going to this wedding. That was part of my prison sentence. [laughs]

Ada: *I just thought it was hilarious. And I remember calling my mom the next day and telling her, like, "I sat next to someone who escaped from a prison," and she was like, "That's so cool."*

We have a different, I think, relationship to all that stuff here. It is a big deal to go to prison, but I think our sentences are not as long, and it's maybe a little bit more humane. I have a feeling.

Frank: *And also, maybe I should mention that the marriage that we went to, it only lasted for eight months. Then, they got divorced. [laughs]*

Nigel: *Not even a year?*

Frank: *No, not even a year*

Earlonne: *Whoever was my best man was going to get kicked out for the person that escaped to be at my wedding. That would have been my best man.*

Nigel: *Right?*

Earlonne: *Yeah, that's dope.*

Nigel: *That is a friend.*

Earlonne: *Shit.*

We have more stories from our travels in Scandinavia coming up later this season.

Nigel: *Hey, E.*

Earlonne: *Hey, what up, Nyge?*

Nigel: *Over the last nine seasons, we've done a lot of stories. We've talked to a lot of people. And obviously, some of those stories really stay with us.*

Earlonne: True that. And one of those stories comes from an episode called Unwritten which was about the rules that exist in prison about how different races are supposed to interact.

Nigel: That was from Season 1. And the story featured these two guys from San Quentin, Drew and AR, and they really crossed the race line in there and became besties.

Earlonne: Right.

AR: My most recent birthday was on February 12 when I just turned 32. I woke up that morning when I feeling old because I'd just spent a lot of years in prison. My boy, Drew, then, had my bunk all done up. I was like, "Oh, my God." I came back, I was shocked.

Drew: I'll usually take post-it notes also and I'll put post-it notes everywhere.

AR: I've never even received a birthday card as far as from any of my family members. Here it is, a guy that I just met in prison who I became close with actually walked around and had everybody actually sign a birthday card and actually give it to me. It was amazing.

Nigel: I really wanted to catch up with them and find out what's going on now.

Earlonne: Well, too bad AR was traveling, so we couldn't reach him. But we got Drew on the line.

Nigel: Mm-hmm.

Nigel: Drew, I'm so excited to talk to you.

Drew: I know. How's it going?

Nigel: It's great. I was super excited when we were going to like, "Let's call Drew and see how he's doing."

Drew: Yeah, I'm a super big fan of the show, not only because I'm on there, but I listen to you guys all the time. You guys are awesome.

Nigel: Aw, that's so sweet. Are you and AR still in touch?

Drew: Yeah, we're in touch. We keep in touch over social media. It is definitely a lot harder when you don't have the time.

Nigel: I know. When you get out of prison, you think you're going to be in touch with everybody and it gets really hard. You just get pulled into your life.

Drew: Yeah.

Nigel: So, what are updates? What's going on?

Drew: Well, I'm doing really. I'm getting married October 16th.

Nigel: Exciting.

Drew: We've been together for just over five years now. Things are good. My kids are doing great. They got straight A's. I really can't complain.

Nigel: Now, one of the big things in the story was when you got your-- who was the tattoo you had to get covered over?

Drew: Eazy-E.

Nigel: And that was the race thing, right? The white guys didn't want you to have that tattoo?

Drew: Yeah.

Nigel: So, what's the newest tattoo that you've gotten?

Drew: I have a silhouette for my twin daughters. My family dog passed away. I got a ladybug for my mom. The last one I got was another girl on my arm, and that whole arm is just full of girls. [laughs]

Nigel: Girls in your life? Important girls? [laughs]

Drew: Girls, that way I can always say I have girls all over me.

[laughter]

Nigel: So, if you were going to say something to AR right now, what would you say to him since he can't be here, what would you like him to know?

Drew: Ah, man, I think about him all the time. Just little things, like whether if I see a show that we used to watch together because he would be in his bunk and I would be in my bunk. In prison, you don't have DVR, you have commercials. So, every single time we would pop up and we would just talk during commercials and it would just make the commercials fly by and then we'd get right back to the show. We don't see each other that often or talk to each other that often, but I always wish the best for him. And I'm very happy for him in the life that he's built after he got out.

Nigel: Well, awesome to hear your voice. I guess in less than two weeks, you're going to be married.

Drew: Yes, I will.

Nigel: Yeah. Very exciting. Congratulations.

Drew: Thank you so much. Thank you, guys.

Nigel: Okay, take care.

Drew: Bye.

Earlonne: It was good to hear ol' Drew again.

Nigel: Yeah, it sure was.

[upbeat music]

Drew: Special thanks to Joacim, Knut Eric, and Martine in Oslo for their help with this episode. Thanks also to Ken Hartman and all the other former San Quentin residents we hung out with on this trip. This episode was produced by Earlonne Woods, Nigel Poor, Amy Standen and Bruce Wallace. It was sound designed and engineered by Earlonne Woods, with help from Fernando Arruda. It features music by Antwan Williams, Rhashiyd Zinnamon, David Jassy and Earlonne Woods.

Amy Standen edits the show. Shabnam Sigman is our managing producer, and Bruce Wallace is our Executive Producer. Thanks to Warden Ron Broomfield. And as you know, every episode of Ear Hustle has to be approved by this guy here.

Sam Robinson: This is Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the Public Information Officer at San Quentin State Prison. These folks went all the way across the pond. They're over in Norway. They went without me though, but I guess that's a whole another conversation. They were able to find people who had the San Quentin experience looking to do greater things here in the world. So, it was a very, very interesting episode to me. No matter how far away you can get, the impact of incarceration matters, and the impacts of our rehabilitative efforts are as well. With that, I will say I do approve this episode.

[upbeat music]

Earlonne: 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.

Nigel: Don't forget to sign up for our newsletter, The Lowdown. This week, we've got photos from our amazing summer trip, and more information about our international prison radio friends. Subscribe at earhustlesq.com/newsletter.

Earlonne: Ear Hustle is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX. Radiotopia is a collection of independent, listener-supported podcasts.

Nigel: Some of the best podcasts around. Hear more at *Radiotopia.fm*.

Earlonne: I'm Earlonne Woods.

Nigel: And I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlonne and Nigel: Thanks for listening.

Nigel: Wait, wait, wait. Earlonne, before we go, there's just one more little nugget from our trip, something I really wanted to share that happened on that day we were out in Oslo, kind of doing tourist things with Tommy Shakur Ross.

What did I just buy you?

Shakur: *She bought me a pee pass.*

Nigel: *[laughs] Pee pass.*

Shakur: Nigel and I have to use the restroom as we're in this park and actually, you have to pay to use the bathroom here. There's a guy sitting at the door, charging people to piss.

Nigel: Yeah. That's a first for me.

Shakur: I never imagined that you would have to pay to pee in a public space.

Nigel: [unintelligible 00:55:40], "Is this for one or two?" He look behind me. I was like, "No, that's two of us."

Shakur: Exactly. That's a first.

Nigel: Well, I'm glad to buy you your first pee--

Shakur: Well, thank you, Nigel. I really appreciate it. It was a pleasure.

Nigel: [laughs] I want to make the most of my experience.

Shakur: Yeah, yeah. Me, too. That's my thought as well.

Nigel: My only other option was to really wash my hands aggressively.

Shakur: Exactly. So, I washed my hands. I said, "Should I leave the water on?" I turned it off.

Nigel: I actually turned the water on quite hard. I used more water than I would normally use to get my money's worth.

Shakur: Yeah. I was definitely aware of the fact that you paid. I was like, "I need to do something to make sure that you get your money's worth."

Nigel: Well, thank you for thinking of that.

Shakur: Yeah. Wow.

Nigel: Well, it's our first experiences in sharing them together.

Shakur: First experiences. Yes. Wow.

Nigel: Yes.

Radiotopia from PRX.

End of Episode

[Transcript provided by SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription]