

Ear Hustle
"What's Dangerous About Trees"
November 30, 2022

Knut: This is Knut Erik Wold. Although I used to be a gravedigger, I'm now the CFO and Daily Manager of RøverRadion, Norwegian prison radio. This episode of Ear Hustle contains language and content and may not be appropriate for all listeners. But take it from a Norseman, listen to every bit of it. You might learn something. So anyway, discretion is advised.

Nigel: *It looks like there's all trees inside.*

Knut: *Yeah, they have a forest inside.*

Nigel: *What?*

Knut: *Yeah. They have a huge problem with snakes.*

[laughter]

Knut: *I don't know how they get in.*

Earlonne: *Thanks for just telling us that.*

Nigel: *Yeah, I guess they can't get over that wall.*

Knut: *No, that's the problem. I have no idea how the snakes get in.*

Nigel: *Oh, you mean the snakes are stuck in there?*

Knut: *Yeah, they are. [laughs]*

Earlonne: So, what do you think about these snakes, Nyge?

Nigel: Well, at first, I was laughing, but when I realized that they're actually inside the prison with us, I started to think, "Okay, this is going to be a little different." You know how whenever we go to visit a prison, you're sort of anxious, you're curious. So, the snakes added a little bit to that anxious part.

Earlonne: Yeah. And we'd been curious about these prisons for a long time, because these were Norwegian prisons, and Norwegian prisons are famous. Even back at San Quentin, you hear stories about how plush those prisons are. They got computers, they go home on the weekend. You hear those type of stories.

Nigel: Do you think it'd be fair to say that guys feel like if you have to be in prison-

Earlone: -Norway might be the place to be.

[entering the prison, going through security]

Knut: *[Norwegian language]* Bruce Wallace, Nigel Poor, Earlone Woods.

Nigel: Apparently in Norway, all you got to do is just say your name and they let you into prison.

Earlone: Actually, I think our gate pass was our friend Knut Erik from Norwegian prison radio, RøverRadion.

Nigel: Yeah, that was the dude you heard at the top with the listener alert.

Earlone: He did a lot of work to line this up for us, and it was pretty cool. He and his crew got us into four Norwegian prisons.

Nigel: Okay, let me see if I can remember them all. There was the high security men's prison called Indre Østfold Fengsel.

Earlone: A women's prison called Bredtveit.

Nigel: Nice, yes.

Earlone: And another men's prison right in Oslo.

Nigel: And finally, this one, with the trees and the snakes, Halden.

Earlone: We were there to meet Halden's governor, a guy named Are Høidal.

Nigel: In Norway, they call him governor, but in the US, it's warden. So, let's stick with warden, okay?

Earlone: Definitely. And you know we had to ask him about the snakes, Nyge.

Nigel: Oh yes.

Are we going to see any snakes today?

Are: *[chuckles]* Yeah. If we go out in the forest, we can see snakes.

Earlone: Damn. Are they venomous?

Are: Yeah, but not deadly

Earlonne: *Venomous, but not deadly.*

Nigel: Venomous, but not deadly. You feeling reassured there, E?

Earlonne: No, not at all. That don't even sound right.

Nigel: So, all four prisons had elements to them that you would never see in a US prison.

Earlonne: Officers with no guns. Incarcerated people getting to actually leave prison, then come back?

Nigel: One of these prisons really looked like a small, almost fancy college campus.

Earlonne: You think Norwegian prisons lived up to the hype, Nyge?

Nigel: Well, yes and no.

Earlonne: I'm Earlonne Woods.

Nigel: I'm Nigel Poor. This is Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia. We're going to take you inside.

Earlonne: Of Norwegian prisons.

Nigel: From the outside, Halden is really imposing. There's a huge cement wall. It's like a walled fortress. But then you get inside, it's as if you're in a woodsy village or something. There's all these wooden buildings connected by pathways. I really got the idea that you are supposed to meander and stroll from building to building. And then, Earlonne, there are all those trees. Literally in the center, there was this little forested area.

Earlonne: Yeah. It was really strange to see trees in a prison. In California prisons, at least the ones I've been to, there are no trees because you've got officers up in those towers with rifles, keeping watch over the yard, and I guess they need to have a clear line of sight.

Nigel: But at Halden, there are no towers, no guns, and lots of trees. The warden gets asked about those trees all the time.

Are: *And what about all these trees? Isn't that dangerous? "What's dangerous about trees?", I asked? "Well, they can climb up and maybe they can hide something there." "They will climb down when they're hungry," I said. And it's good exercise, climbing trees.*

Nigel: This struck me as such a Scandinavian thing to say. Just reasonable. "They'll come down when they're hungry."

Earlonne: The warden took us into a building of what they called "workshops."

Nigel: There was a craft room, a print shop, an autobody shop.

Earlone: Yes, I've been in autobody, autopaint shop in prison. And I think Halden's more like state of the art. They had a grocery store.

Nigel: Ah, it was beautiful.

Earlone: They had everything. Prisons in California, everything is behind a window when you go to the cafeteria. You put in a list and they give you stuff out of the window.

Nigel: Right, and it's all packaged stuff.

Earlone: It's all packaged, yeah.

Nigel: But this was a real store.

Earlone: Yeah. It was like a grocery store, fresh produce, fresh vegetables.

Nigel: Everything.

Earlone: They were over there watering it and stuff.

Nigel: I know. Like you're at Whole Foods or something.

Earlone: Spraying mist.

Nigel: *There's Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream. Wow.*

Earlone: *We got to look at this, come on.*

Earlone: *Sodas.*

Nigel: *There's beautiful oranges, cucumbers, mushrooms, cabbage.*

Earlone: *Squash.*

Nigel: *Squash.*

Earlone: *Broccoli.*

Nigel: *All kinds of peppers, leeks.*

Earlone: Dressing, hot dogs.

Nigel: There's almond milk. They have nice olive oil. Kiwis.

Earlone: Mushrooms.

Nigel: And, E, the music studio, remember?

Earlone: Hmm. They had everything in that studio.

Nigel: Do you remember we tried to count the guitars and we stopped counting?

Earlone: Yeah, that was a real-life studio with the sound booth.

Nigel: Professional.

Earlone: It was very, very professional. You would definitely leave up out of there knowing how to score movies and [chuckles] podcasts and all kinds of stuff.

Nigel: And we met this one guy there who looked kind of rockabilly.

Earlone: So, of course, I knew what you were going to do.

Nigel: Can we hear something? Just one line?

Earlone: Just one line?

Ken: As the snow flies on a cold and gray Chicago mornin' A poor little baby child is born.

Nigel: In the ghetto. [laughs]

Ken: That's right. You got it, girl.

Nigel: Elvis.

Ken: It's Elvis. Yeah.

Nigel: Given how nice everything was at Halden, I really wanted to know what the housing units looked like. How did these guys actually live?

Nigel: When you walk in here, does--

Trond: *It's like a little apartment. You have your own place. You can--*

Nigel: *So, does it feel safe?*

Trond: *It feels safe, yeah. This feels very safe.*

Nigel: This is Trond, and he was nice enough to show us his cell. Earlonne, remember what it looked like?

Earlonne: No, because I didn't go in.

Nigel: Okay, well, let me tell you.

Earlonne: Yes, tell me.

Nigel: I've got this seared in my mind. You walk in, it was pretty spacious. The first thing that hits you is on the backwall is a window that's like 4x5 feet. A glass window with a beautiful curtain over it, looking out to that forest. So, you've got this really nice light that comes in and a curtain that you can close and open at your own pleasure.

Earlonne: Right.

Nigel: It was homey. The furniture was made out of wood. Each cell had its own refrigerator, and shower, and a mattress that was like normal thickness, like six inches or something.

How would you describe it?

Trond: *You have a writing desk. You have a wall where you can put a picture of your family. You have bookshelves so you can have movies and books. You have a bed with a night table. You have TV, you have a closet. Out the window, we see forest.*

Nigel: *What are all those numbers?*

Trond: *That's a lottery.*

[laughter]

Trond: *It's lottery, my family have bought a ticket for me outside. So, they have sent me the number. I've been here now for one and a half year, and every week I go and check. And I hope I want to win a million when I--*

Nigel: *Have you won anything yet?*

Trond: *50 Kroner, [chuckles] it's not so much.*

Nigel: *On his board, there's a sheet of paper that has a bunch of numbers on it. I didn't know what it was, but it's his lottery.*

Trond: *It's a lottery. [chuckles]*

Nigel: So, we left Trond's cell and walked out into the dayroom, where the guys eat their meals.

Hi.

Earlone: *What's up? Y'all doing all right--*

[crosstalk]

Earlone: *Y'all getting it in. Hey, how you doing, bro?*

Nigel: And, E, the scene we came across there, I mean is it fair to say we've never seen anything like that in prison before?

Earlone: For sure. I mean for starters at Halden Prison, incarcerated guys don't have to wear a uniform. So, a lot of times, you really can't tell who works there and who's incarcerated.

Nigel: Yeah, and so this meal, it just looked like a bunch of people sitting around, eating together, kind of like a family.

Earlone: Yeah, just chopping it up.

Nigel: *Can you tell us what you're doing right now?*

Speaker: *Eating.*

Nigel: *What's the scene here?*

Speaker: *I'm in a small department in the prison. It's 10 people. It's for addicts. It's like a treatment facility inside the prison.*

Nigel: *This is so unusual to us being in a prison. You have eggs, but you have fresh vegetables. You have cucumbers, tomatoes, peppers. Really nice bread. You have butter, jam. You're sitting like a family eating together.*

Speaker: *Yeah.*

Nigel: *There's men and women here. This would never happen in a prison in the United States.*

Speaker: *Well, in Norway, this is normal.*

Speaker: *I eat better in prison than outside, much better.*

Earlonne: This whole tour, I was just tripping. It was just a whole different world than California prisons.

Nigel: Yeah. And the people at Halden definitely know that this prison is special. It's because they seem used to showing it off.

Earlonne: Yeah, because I remember when we sat down with the warden, he had this whole presentation he was all set to give, like the PowerPoints, the glossy brochures.

Nigel: I think he was kind of surprised when we told him that we really just wanted to have a conversation. And it seemed to me, Earlonne, that he seemed kind of relieved.

Earlonne: Yeah, he was like, "Y'all want to hear about me?"

Nigel: *How do you think the people who work for you describe you when they talk about you?*

Are: *Describe me?*

Nigel: *Yeah. When they talk about you behind your back, what do they describe say?*

Are: *Too soft.*

[laughter]

Nigel: *Are you too soft?*

Are: *Maybe. But I managed this prison for 14 years now and we have no escapes. We have very little violence. We have fighting between inmates, of course. Every prison has that. And, of course, we have some drugs inside, but I think it's quite quiet here.*

Nigel: *So, what are the things that keep you up at night?*

Høidal: *I sleep very well at night.*

Earlonne: Are Høidal has been the warden at Halden since it opened. He's been working in the prison system since the 1980s.

Nigel: Back then, Norway's prisons weren't what they're like today. There was much more violence and the recidivism rates were like 60%, 70% percent. It's down to just 20% today.

Are: *I was motivated to try to maybe change something.*

Nigel: *So, from the beginning, your thoughts were as a reformer, not as a law-and-order person?*

Are: *Yeah, I will say so. Everyone who knows me will say the same, that I'm a reformer.*

[chuckles]

I thought about inmates as human beings, of course. They are the same as me, but they have done something wrong.

Nigel: *Yeah.*

Are: *And the best is if they can stop being criminals.*

Nigel: *Yeah.*

Are: *So, that was my mission in life, to help inmates to be good neighbors.*

Earlonne: We heard this a lot at the Norwegian prisons, this idea of helping people become good neighbors.

Nigel: Yeah, but I think sometimes it's more aspirational. It's just like anywhere else. When budgets get tight, peoples' priorities change.

Are: *When they planned this and built this, it was still quite good budgets in Norway and we had still lot of money. So, they wanted to make a prison-- it was quite special. They wanted to build something that you have never seen before in a prison, and I think they made it. But now, it's new times. They build not so cost expensive like this. More compact prisons they're building now.*

Bruce: *How do you feel about that?*

Are: *I don't like it, but I understand it because this was very expensive to build.*

Nigel: And he said that even Halden isn't living up to its own standards. For example, the prison has a really high staffing requirement. Like there are more people working at Halden than are incarcerated there.

Earlonne: But with budget cuts, they haven't been able to sustain that. One guy we met said they're often in their cells for 22 hours a day, because there's not enough staff to oversee all the programs.

Nigel: Yeah, that's bad. But, Earlonne, I loved feeling like this place was really just radically different from any prison that we've seen before. And I have to say, it gave me just a little bit of hope that there is actually another way of doing things.

What will be your legacy when you leave here? What do you think you will have left behind?

Are: *That I have created quite a special prison. They call this prison the most humane prison in the world or something like that. That's Time Magazine who said that because they were here at the opening.*

Nigel: *What will you be most proud of?*

Are: *The total thinking behind Halden prison.*

Nigel: Halden is one of those famous prisons in Norway, but we didn't want to just see the famous ones, we wanted to see as many as we could.

Earlonne: Including the ones that you're not going to read about back in the States. So, we went to Oslo to visit a prison that's right in the city.

Nigel: At Halden, they had all those trees and things, but this one in Oslo, reminded me a little bit more of San Quentin. Lots of brick buildings, a little bit imposing. In some ways more like you imagine when you think of a prison.

Earlonne: Right.

Nigel: *We're walking into a housing unit, and all the doors are solid here. So, the thing that really strikes me that's so different from San Quentin is that you cannot see into any of the cells. It feels more like a submarine. Does it feel like a submarine?*

Earlonne: *I don't know what a submarine feels like.*

Nigel: *I have never been in one, but this is what I imagine a submarine would be like.*

Nigel: From the outside, it did look like San Quentin, but when we got inside, it was eerie, it was so quiet. I just kept thinking like, "Where the hell is everybody?"

Earlonne: Yeah. It felt like there was no one else there. Just us, and this dude.

David: *My guy.*

Earlonne: *What's happening, man?*

David: *What's happening, my partner?*

Earlonne: Our host had arranged for this one guy to show us around.

Nigel: He didn't want to take pictures of him or use his real name. So, we're calling him David.

Do you think most of these rooms are full right now?

David: *Every room that you see with a letter is full.*

Nigel: *Do you think people are listening to us or looking?*

David: *No, I don't think people are looking--[crosstalk]*

Earlonne: *Why are you whispering, Nyge?*

David: *I think some people might be hearing us talking.*

Earlonne: *Can nobody see us?*

David: *But nobody sees us.*

Nigel: *There's no sneaky way to see us.*

David: *Most of the people are locked in right now.*

Nigel: *Hmm.*

This place just didn't have the warmth and community feeling of Halden prison.

Earlonne: Yeah, but there were still parts of it that were different from an American prison. Like they had those cool little kitchens, where guys can cook their own food.

David: *We've got egg warmers here somewhere here.*

Earlonne: *Oh, they boil the eggs?*

Nigel: And I know this is a little random, but I remember seeing this huge stack of toilet paper.

Can you have as much toilet paper as you want?

David: *Yeah, I usually take two at a time.*

Earlonne: *But you can come get 'em anytime?*

Nigel: *And you flush the toilet as many times as you want?*

David: *Yeah.*

Earlone: *In America, it's two flushes every five minutes.*

Nigel: *And in a room right off the kitchen, we saw a poster like we've never seen in an American prison. Never.*

Earlone: *Come read this.*

Nigel: *It is now possible to order porn movies and sex toys. It's allowed to have legal pornographic material and sex toys that do not pose a safety risk in your cell, as long as they are used and stored in a considerate manner. What would be a sex toy? Like a blowup doll?*

David: *No, like-- I think they got a picture of it there. I think it's like a--*

Earlone: *[crosstalk] -you think.*

Nigel: *Oh, it looks like a--*

Earlone: *Oh. Oh, that's a manufactured vagina.*

Nigel: *Vagina.*

David: *Yeah. It's called Pussy Pocket.*

Nigel: *Pussy Pocket.*

Earlone: *They call it Pocket Pussy in America. It says Fleshlight Flight Aviator.*

Nigel: *It's called Fifi.*

David: *Fifi.*

Earlone: *Fleshlight Aviator.*

David: *I think [unintelligible 00:20:50] it stands something about if you want to order this, you have to talk to the priest.*

Nigel: *Oh, Lord.*

This place was night and day from Halden. Like at one point, we went out to this sort of outdoor rec area.

Earlone: It was dirty, cigarette butts.

Nigel: And did you notice there were these nasty old teabags hanging from the chain link fences?

Earlone: I think that's so other people can dip them later.

Nigel: Ugh, that was gross.

Earlone: [laughs]

What do you think--

Nigel: *Is that like a--*

Earlone: *Place to eat or--?*

Nigel: *It's a really dirty built-in table. Concrete. Oh, there's a pull-up bar. I'm going to say it's little depressing.*

Earlone: Eventually, we made our way towards David's cell.

David: *Have you seen how the cells look like?*

Nigel: *Can you invite us in?*

David: *Yes. I will invite you in. Welcome to my cell.*

[crosstalk]

David: *Just come in, bro.*

Nigel: So, I asked him if he would invite us in because in Norway, they have this idea that the prison cell is private property and there's a line there. Like everything out in the hallway is state property. And then, remember there was like a yellow line in front of every door? The notion is, as soon as you step over that line, you're in what's considered private property.

Earlone: Yeah. Even here, at this more American-seeming prison, incarcerated guys still have a right to private space, which is pretty cool.

David: *I got a chair here, cabinet to put my clothes.*

Nigel: David started showing us the stuff he keeps in his cell.

Earlone: And I remember I spotted this book.

He got the book on how to seduce people.

David: *Nah, that's a book on how to survive, bro.*

[laughter]

Earlone: It's this book called *The 48 Laws of Power* by Robert Greene that is very popular in prison settings.

Actually, this book is on the banned list in San Quentin. I guess they feel by reading this book, you can manipulate others or you can use these strategies against others. It's almost like the Art of War or shit like that.

David: *I've read Art of War as well.*

Nigel: *Well, it says here, "A moral, cunning, ruthless and instructive, this piercing work distills 3000 years of the history of power into 48 well-explicated laws."*

Earlone: *Open it up and see what you see. What would you see?*

Nigel: *Oh, these are the laws. "Use selective honesty and generosity to disarm your victims. Keep it vague. Keep it simple." I've heard that from Earlone so many times. [chuckles] How about this? "Learn to keep people dependent on you." This is nefarious stuff.*

David: *[laughs] "Enter action with boldness." I like that law actually.*

Nigel: *What does that mean to you?*

David: *Like, don't hesitate if you're going to do something.*

Nigel: *"Work on the hearts and minds of others." This is fascinating.*

Earlone: *Nigel's going to go order this book.*

Nigel: *Yeah.*

David: *Some of the advices here are good, but some of them, you should know about them so they can't be used against you."*

Nigel: From *The 48 Laws of Power* by Robert Greene, Law #48: Assume formlessness.

Ali: *I can melt into the shadow or a bush and just poof, gone. People don't look for me, and I don't give them a reason too either. But I do what I need to do and I just walk away. I never run, never.*

Nigel: This is Ali. We met him at a third prison we went to. Another very quiet, very un-Halden-like prison called Indre Østfold Fengsel.

Earlone: Too Tall Ali, that's his nickname. Hard to imagine him melting into the shadows.

Nigel: *But how do you do because you are physically very imposing?*

Ali: *Yeah, and I used to have an Afro, but I cut my hair whenever I'm incarcerated but that's one of my strengths. I can go anywhere and just disappear into the masses. Growing up as a street rat, you read your surroundings, you adapt, you become invisible.*

Earlone: *And is this your first time in prison?*

Ali: *No, I've been in many different prisons.*

Earlone: *About how much time you think you have altogether?*

Ali: *I've served less than nine years. So now, it'll be 13 years.*

[somber music]

Ali: *I'm close to 50 years old. When I grew up, people hadn't seen black people on TV even. This was back in the day. There was no good support system to take care of children who came from bad homes. So, I got kicked out when I was seven on Christmas Eve and had nowhere to go. Then, it was the streets and crime.*

Earlone: *The way you grew up, do you feel that the world owes you or do people owe you something?*

Ali: *I would love to blame because I have 10 million good reasons to blame the system, family, yada, yada. But if I could trade places with anybody in the world, I still would not do it because this has been my journey. I've experienced more than most people can dream about. I've traveled the world. All my life has been one big circus. Starting, dealing different kinds of drugs, I graduated to be a professional car thief from age 8 to 10. I never lost a car chase after the age of 12 in no country, in no continent in the world. Not once.*

Nigel: Law #32: Play to people's fantasies.

Do you feel you could go to any country, not speak the language, not know the customs, but then just like figure it out?

Ali: *Definitely. I took pride in doing that. At the most, I knew nine languages fluently.*

Nigel: *Which are? Name them.*

Ali: *French, German. I taught myself Latin, Spanish. I knew Russian, like Yugoslav, and two kinds, almost three kinds of African, like Gambia, Wolof, and Mandinka.*

Nigel: E, I don't know if you felt this way, but it was kind of hard to tell what was fact and what was fiction with him. But honestly, I didn't care. This dude can tell a story.

Earlone: Yeah, he was what, James Bond, Black Panther? He was everything.

Nigel: Yeah. Everything mixed together.

Earlone: Law #37: Create compelling spectacles.

Nigel: More on that, and more from Too Tall Ali when we come back.

From *The 48 Laws of Power* by Robert Greene, law #3: Conceal your intentions.

Earlone: There's a lot of guys in prison who think of themselves as these crafty Machiavellian types. And one game they all got in common is chess.

Do you think of chess as street games, trying to knock your opponent down?

Ali: *There is something very exhilarating knowing that he don't see what I see, so you pick them apart like a surgeon doing his thing. It's a good thrill just to play a good match, and letting your opponent move but it's like you are guiding him or her. They think that they're playing their game, but it's like you're coaching them down that street, but there's nothing good happening on the bottom of that street. Let them think that they are in control.*

Earlone: *I went to jail for kidnap, robbery when I was a kid-- kidnap for ransom actually when I was 17. I used to always look at chess like that. Like, "I'm going to kidnap that dude. I'm going to get that king." You know what I'm saying?*

Ali: *Mm-hmm.*

Nigel: Law #42: Strike the shepherd and the sheep will scatter.

Ali: First the queen, then all these subjects, and then bam, isolate them.

Nigel: I'm laughing because the way you describe chess is exactly how I think about interviews.

Ali: Mm-hmm. Okay.

Earlonne: Law #14: Pose as a friend, work as a spy.

Nigel: Well, I think what you're saying about chess is the way anyone who's creative sees what they're doing, is that they're looking for what the other people don't see, how to move it into the space that you want it to be in. So, I'm thinking when you're doing your activities, that you're looking at it the same way.

Ali: Yeah, sure.

Nigel: Yeah. And then, as an artist that's what I'm looking at, is how to figure out what people are missing and how I can create it. And the same in a conversation. So, maybe anyone who's good at anything, that's how they're looking at something.

Ali: Yeah, chess, like everything, is almost like a magic trick. You know what you want to do, you know what you're going to do. But you keep that in the shadows and you keep them distracted with like the other hand.

Earlonne: Right now, I was just listening to you, I was like, "So, you're saying that we lead people down this little road and then we got you?"

Nigel: No, it's not "got you."

[laughter]

Nigel: No. It's not like that. It's that when you're talking to somebody-

Earlonne: Yeah, I know what you're talking about.

Nigel: -you're thinking ahead about what they're saying and what means and then what's the next question to get them to push themselves more deeply? And the "got you" is when that person has all of a sudden given in and is going to tell you something truthful or tell you something that's surprising or they didn't know they were going to share.

Ali: Like chess, you are two, three moves ahead at least. You know what's going to happen way, way before they do.

Nigel: Yeah, but you don't want the other person to know that.

Ali: No. I can actually make them think that it's their idea, when it's my plan all along to build them to that point.

Nigel: Wait, you're saying that you are a good manipulator?

Ali: I think I was born to do it. I think I can grow up anywhere, and even if I was a millionaire, I would still be a criminal to tell you the truth. 99.9% of what I've done has never been talked about or caught or nothing.

Earlone: From your life, what would your takeaway be?

Ali: [pause] That if anything is worth doing, it's worth doing right. And in that regard, everything was worth it.

Nigel: Law #29: Plan all the way to the end. The ending is everything.

Nina: To be honest with you, my first leave sucked because that was not 24 hours, because in the beginning, they really want to keep a track on you.

Earlone: This is Nina. We met her a couple episodes ago when we were talking about this conference we went to in Oslo.

Nigel: I talked about seeing her in the bathroom in the conference and we learned that she was actually on leave from prison to attend the conference, which totally blew my mind. So, we asked her to tell us about the first time she got to do something like that.

Nina: So, I had four hours and I had to report to the police station who was on the other side of the city. I got to run to the subway, take the subway to the other side of the city, run to the police station, and get the stamp in my leave papers. And then, I saw a pair of boots, [chuckles] in the shop on the way there, and I was, "Well, I really need to test them." And they were fitting me perfectly. So, I bought them and that was the highlight of that leave.

Nigel: Tell me about the boots.

Nina: Yeah, well, I love them.

Earlone: I knew you were going to get back to them boots, Nigel.

[laughter]

Nigel: Of course.

Nina: It was leather and they were black and they were cool and it fit me perfectly and it had little heels on them and it was kind of rocky. Yeah, it was nice. It was me. The last time I had to

take the subway or the [unintelligible [00:34:10] or the bus, you could go on the bus and buy a ticket from the driver. And now, that was gone. Instead, it was a machine, and the machine I had never seen before and since I haven't even owned a smartphone and anything. The digital world, it was quite scary at that point.

Nigel: *Yeah. What things were going through your mind about what happened?*

Nina: *It felt like handicapped sort of.*

Nigel: *Were you scared?*

Nina: *Yeah, I was. But luckily, I had a good officer who actually bought me a ticket because if I had to do it all by myself, I don't know how I should have managed. I just remember being very, very stressed because I knew that if I was one second late back to prison, they would make it so much harder for me to get out the other time. So, it was just a very stressful experience. But anyway, I thought, "Well, it's the first step, and the next one and the next one after that is going to be better." Now, I don't have to even call the prison anymore. Now, they trust me to get out and get back in.*

That is the great thing about the Norwegian prison system, because mostly we don't incarcerate people for life so that everybody is supposed to be somebody's neighbor around the next corner. And with that in mind, they try to prepare us for the life after prison, and that's why they give us leave.

Nigel: *The idea is that these prison leaves get longer the closer you are to being released. So, you're sort of slowly acclimating to society. When we met Nina, she was nearly at the end of her 10-year sentence, and she was able to take the maximum leave possible, 18-, 24-hour periods per year. And she could take three of them back-to-back. So, that's 72 hours out and about in the world.*

Earlone: *The day we met her, she'd just been to visit a transitional home she was thinking she might go stay at when her prison sentence is over.*

Nigel: *And I know the idea of being able to leave prison and come back seems amazing, but obviously, there's a reality to it that's more complicated.*

Nina: *I still don't feel like a citizen out there. I feel I have it written on my forehead somehow. It's always strange to me when people react to me like I'm normal, I'm just a normal citizen, because it's just for 72 hours. And then, I am back here and here is where my identity lies after all in so many ways.*

Nigel: *But do you think people look at you and they see something?*

Nina: *No, it's more the feeling I have. It's like, "Yeah, well, how can they not see? How can they not understand that I'm not like them?"*

Nigel: Can you describe that feeling?

Nina: It's just a feeling of being different from them with other set of experiences and other mindsets.

Earlonne: So, even though you have on regular clothes, in your mind, you have on a prison outfit?

Nina: Yes, it's like that.

Earlonne: Even though nobody knows nothing, you still feel a certain way. Yeah.

Nigel: But I'm going to go back to when I saw you in the bath--

Nina: Yeah.

Nigel: And it seems weird. I saw you in the bathroom.

Nina: Yeah, I heard you.

Nigel: Yeah. But I just saw you and I was like, "Oh, this looks like somebody I'd have something in common with." Like, you just looked like a cool lady.

Nina: Thank you.

Nigel: Yeah. It didn't occur to me anything except that, that, "Oh, I like her hairstyle. She has on a cool outfit. I'm probably going to talk to her at this conference."

Nina: Yeah. Well, it is very nice to hear, Nigel. Actually, it makes me happy, but I think in order to not feel like a prisoner, I have to not be a prisoner. I think even after I am released, after all these years, there will be a part of me that will always be. When I meet people, I'm afraid of their questions because I don't know how to answer them.

Bruce: What is it that makes you feel different?

Nina: I'm very insecure about how to meet people and how to deal with their curiosity because people are curious and they don't even mean anything bad about. It can be good curious but still, to me, it feels very invasive.

Nigel: What would be the question you'd be most nervous about someone asking you?

Nina: For instance, simple questions. "Where do you live?" "I have no home." "What do you do?" "Well, I don't do anything. I'm in prison." "Are you married?" "No." "Do you have children?"

"No." It's like I might as well be an alien know, because on the outside, I don't have what normal people or the usual people have in society.

Nigel: *Yeah. Those are just the very basic social questions.*

Nina: *Yeah. It's like what everybody opens with, and it's supposed to be not scary. For most people, it's not. But to me, it's like climbing Mount Everest because I don't know how to answer them.*

Earlonne: *But are people judgmental here?*

Nina: *Yeah, of course, they are. Aren't people judgmental everywhere? If I had been convicted of a theft or something nicer, maybe there would be a room for me and a place for me, and not so much judgment. But violent women, they are not considered very nice, are they?*

[somber music]

Earlonne: *What has been the best day so far?*

Nina: *It was the summer of 2018, and it was a heat wave. And I was in the ocean, I was lying like a cork in the water, just floating. I could hear all these things in the water and the sun was there. Then, I felt so free. It made me so happy and full of joy and hope for the future. I will try to never forget that that's what life's about, these small moments of happiness. When I'm out there, I go to a restaurant maybe and eat dinner, and this waiter treats me like everybody else. And then, I come back here, and the second I set foot inside the prison, I'm a prisoner again.*

[pensive music]

Nigel: Thanks to Loony and Hege for also talking to us for this episode.

Earlonne: Ear Hustle is produced by me, Earlonne Woods, Nigel Poor, Neroli Price, and Bruce Wallace with help from Rahsaan "New York" Thomas, Rhashiyd Zinnamon, and Tony Tafoya.

Nigel: This episode was sound designed and engineered by Earlonne Woods, with help from Fernando Arruda.

Earlonne: It features music by Antwan Williams, Rhashiyd Zinnamon, E. Phil Phillips, and David Jassy.

Nigel: Amy Standen edits our show. Shabnam Sigman is our managing producer, and Bruce Wallace is our executive producer.

Earlonne: Thanks to Warden Ron Broomfield. And as you know, every episode of Ear Hustle, even the ones from Norway, has to be approved by this cat here.

Are you on speaker or you got the hand to your head?

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: *Is this a better sound?*

Earlone: *That's a way better sound.*

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: *All right. All right. All right.*

Earlone: *That's way better sound, cool. Do-Re-Mi, which one?*

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: *Do-Re-Mi-Fa-So. Do-Re-Mi-Fa-So.*

Earlone: *You ready to tan up.*

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: *I don't think I could hit the high note today.*

Earlone: *Oh, no, we'll need the high note.*

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: *Let me warm it up the voice.*

Earlone: *Warming up the voice.*

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: *[crosstalk] -anyway, there we go. This is Lieutenant Sam Robinson at San Quentin State Prison. And I'll tell you, before Nigel and Earlone went to Norway, I had the opportunity to go to Norway looking at best practices in the correctional setting and how to bring those things back to California. And I'll tell you, I was really impressed. It sparked an interest relative to how we can do some things here better in States to have better outcomes for our staff, who are working in very, very stressful environments, and to have better outcomes for the people that live in our prisons here in the States.*

I'll tell you, they figured it out. It is much different than what I've experienced in California prisons. It was very, very impressive, and very, very inspiring. And I know California will get there. With that, I will say I do approve this episode.

Earlone: *Hey, man, we got one more episode for the end of another season, man. You ready for that?*

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: *Oh, I'm ready for it.*

Earlone: *You sure?*

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: *I'm positive. You want to spill the tea?*

Earlone: *Oh, no, no, not at all.*

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: *Okay, all right. We won't spill the tea, but I'm ready.*

Earlone: *You ready?*

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: *I'm like a bull in the bullpen. Just knocking the cage around, just ready for the bull to be released.*

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

Earlone: *Some of the best podcasts around. Hear more at [Radiotopia.fm](https://radiotopia.fm).*

Nigel: You can find out more about each of our episodes in our email newsletter, The Lowdown. This week, you can learn more about our friends at Norwegian prison radio.

Earlonne: Sign up for it at earhustlesq.com/newsletter. Big thanks to Knut Erik, Joacim, and all our Norwegian prison radio friends for all of their help while we were there.

Nigel: When we're not in San Quentin or Norway, we record at KQED studios in San Francisco.

Earlonne: Or our closets.

[laughter]

Nigel: I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlonne: And I'm Earlonne Woods.

Earlonne and Nigel: Thanks for listening.

Nigel: Law #29: Plan all the way to the end. The ending is everything.

Earlonne: And forgive us because sometimes, we ask questions that you will be openly crying, so you might need to get him some toilet paper.

[laughter]

END

[Transcript provided by SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription]