

Ear Hustle
Episode 94: Once You're in the Ocean, You're Going Everywhere
September 20, 2023

Phyllis: Hello. This is Phyllis Poor, Nigel's mother. The following episode of Ear Hustle contains language and content that may not be appropriate for all listeners. Discretion is advised. Please enjoy this experience. Thank you so much.

Nigel: Are you excited?

Earlonne: Well, I mean she looked physically fit, so I can do that.

Nigel: And how often do you do that?

Leslie: I try to come here almost every day. Yeah.

Nigel: Do you suggest we all try?

Leslie: I think it's excellent for your body and I think it will make you feel younger.

Nigel: And we have to do it without shoes on.

Female Speaker: She prefers you don't wear shoes.

Nigel: This is my first time taking my shoes off in any prison. Feels really weird. Thank you.

Leslie: Well, they keep the carpet pretty clean. I don't think there's any prison cooties.

Nigel: Oh, yeah, no, I'm not worried about the cooties. I've just been so trained that you don't do anything vulnerable.

Leslie: Yes, but this room is special.

Female Speaker: Okay, we're going to start.

[background audio playing]

Nigel: [whispers] I noticed earlier so he doesn't have to do this anymore.

Earlonne: Nigel?

Nigel: Yes.

Earlonne: These little women are going to get us.

Nigel: You think so? Aren't we in pretty good shape?

Earlonne: [chuckles] I think they limber.

Nigel: [laughs] Well, we are going to find out. Are you, Earlonne Out of Breath Woods?

Earlonne: I'm Earlonne Out of Breath Woods.

Nigel: [laughs] I'm Nigel Panting Poor. And this is Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia.

[show theme]

Nigel: I'm just going to describe the scene a little bit. There's a big television on the wall. It was probably about 54 inches and we're watching PBS and there's a woman stretching and Earlonne is really getting into it. He's doing modern dance right now.

Earlonne: Jeans, Nigel. These are not yoga pants.

Nigel: He's still doing a really good job. And Bruce is even jumping in a little bit.

Earlonne: I can do that.

[workout audio playing in the background]

Earlonne: This was at the California Institution for Women, a prison near LA where you and I have been spending a lot of time these days, Nyge.

Nigel: And we are in a room they call the Senior Center. But don't think about some big fancy complex. It's basically a large carpeted windowless room in a structure that is kind of like a double-wide trailer.

Earlonne: Right.

Leslie: *Where's your rhythm? You don't throw us off?*

[background chattering]

Earlonne: *She's going there.*

Leslie: *I got a bad knee and a replaced knee now, y'all.*

[laughter]

Nigel: *You know how they always tell us we have to keep our distance inside prison?*

Earlonne: Mm-hmm.

Nigel: I loved how we could just kind of let our guard down a little bit. It was really fun to kick back and try to keep up with those ladies.

Earlonne: Yeah, I felt like I got my workout in for the day.

Nigel: [chuckles]

Earlonne: I feel it. I definitely feel it. I feel stretched.

Nigel: I'm putting my shoes back on.

Earlonne: Wait a minute. Hold on. What you mean you putting your shoes back on? Nigel, we only two minutes into this. Leslie's still going.

Nigel: I know. She's good.

Leslie: *Are you done?*

Earlonne: Our friend, Leslie, is kind of the ringleader here at the Senior Center, which come to think of it, just got a rebranding.

Nigel: Yes, it did. So right now, we are in the She Shed, which I like better than the Senior Center, I have to say.

Leslie: Yeah, it's kind of fun. We'll see how it goes over.

Nigel: Yeah. It brings up conversation when you say it.

Leslie: Yeah.

Earlonne: You know, Nyge, with all the time that they give you in California, the prison population is kind of old.

Nigel: It's ageing.

Earlonne: There are segments that are and have been there for a long time.

Nigel: Definitely. And Leslie is part of that. She's been in prison, I mean, since her 20s.

Earlonne: Yeah, 19. So, her idea for the Senior Center was, how can we make prison more accommodating for old people?

Nigel: So, Leslie convinced the prison to open up this room, and she got some boardgames and some greenery and lamps and started getting the word out.

Leslie: At first, I thought I would be like Julie from *The Love Boat*, create these programs, social director and all this. But it's been a long, slow process of getting people curious and interested. At first, there was, I think, a feeling that this was a Band-Aid on an ongoing problem of the aging population, and so they weren't going to come.

Nigel: Were people angry at you or resentful that you were wanting to spearhead this?

Leslie: I don't think that-- it could have been, and I missed it, but I think it was just more angry that they're still incarcerated.

[pensive music]

We can't do much about the diet, but we can stay in mental shape and physical and spiritual. This is hopefully more of a holistic thing to stay sharp and good and also being recognized, because I don't think people are aware that there's so many women over 60 incarcerated.

Gladys: My name is Gladys Ortiz.

Nigel: What do you love about the Senior Center?

Gladys: There's so much to do there. Yeah, and you get to socialize with people your age.

Earlonne: How long have you been incarcerated?

Gladys: Seven.

Earlonne: And what is your sentence?

Gladys: *I got 15 years.*

Nigel: *Okay. How old were you when you came to prison?*

Gladys: *60 years old.*

Nigel: *Had you ever been to prison before?*

Gladys: *Never. It's a little embarrassing too, because I have my grown children who now have to learn how to maneuver prison. And then, I learned about 50-minute phone calls. I never thought I'd be here. Never. It's like, wow. None of my friends back home-- I've disappeared, I've just fallen off the face of the earth. Nobody knows I'm here.*

Nigel: *What do they think happened to you?*

Gladys: *I don't know.*

Nigel: *These older women, you don't really see them when you're walking around the main part of the prison.*

Earlone: *Nah, they don't hang out like that. They probably spend a lot of their time in the cell.*

Nigel: *So, it's actually cool when you get to the Senior Center and it's a place just for them.*

Earlone: *Yep. It's a cubbyhole, you know what I'm saying? They get to go hang out. They got air conditioning and you definitely need that in that part of California.*

Nigel: *You definitely want air conditioning. So, I think that makes it attractive. But it's open every day and they have so many activities, like the exercising. They have different people coming in to give talks. And once a week, I think at least once a week, they show movies.*

Earlone: *Have you all seen *The Notebook*?*

Female Speaker: *Yeah.*

Leslie: *Oh, yeah.*

Nigel: *What do you think of it?*

Leslie: *I wasn't into it.*

Nigel: *Men love this movie and women are like, "Really?" Oh, wait a minute. You said you loved it?*

Female Speaker: *Yes, I loved it.*

Nigel: *Oh, okay. I take back what I said.*

[laughter]

Female Speaker: *I thought it was interesting and educational for people who've never had an instance to recognize Alzheimer's.*

Nigel: Earlonne I love this. Men see *The Notebook* as a romance movie, and women, at least here at the Senior Center, see it as an Alzheimer's movie.

Female Speaker: *Okay. It's quite a distressing disease, not only for the person suffering, but for all of the family as well.*

Nigel: So, you were more drawn to it because of that, not because of the romance?

Female Speaker: *Oh, not the romance. [laughs] I want you to see how they portray the Alzheimer's.*

Leslie: *The romance seemed a little corny.*

Nigel: *I just have to say this, I've never met so many men in my life that cried over this movie than at San Quentin. Even this dude got all teary about it.*

Earlonne: *Did I?*

Leslie: *Oh, we need to rewatch it and think about that.*

Nigel: *You told me you did, you find it very emotional.*

Earlonne: *It was a cool story.*

So, one of the most popular things to do in this little area are these bicycles.

Nigel: Really? Bicycles?

Earlonne: I mean well, they're like miniatures.

Nigel: They're like little pedals on the ground.

Earlonne: Pedals, sprockets.

Nigel: So, after the stretching, I think we wanted to redeem ourselves, so we both sat down and started pedaling.

Earlonne: *I'm Earlonne Woods.*

Nigel: *I'm Nigel. Nigel Poor.*

LaVelma: *Nigel. Earlonne. And?*

Bruce: *Bruce.*

LaVelma: *Bruce. LaVelma Byrd. Yes, thank you. Pleased to meet you all.*

Earlonne: *How long have you been here, LaVelma?*

LaVelma: *Well, 29 years.*

Nigel: *What are you doing right now.*

LaVelma: *You seen that little thing on TV where people sit in their chair and work their legs? That's what this is.*

Nigel: *It's like a bike. A little bike. And are you a senior?*

LaVelma: *I'm 72.*

Nigel: *72, okay. What is this?*

LaVelma: *Because I have arthritis in both of my hands and the bouncing, I made this little soft cushion for my hands when I'm walking with my walker.*

Nigel: *Do you remember LaVelma and her walker?*

Earlone: *Yeah, yeah.*

Nigel: *It was all decked out. She'd done all this handiwork crocheting to make the handles softer and give it some personality.*

Earlone: *Yeah, she was cool.*

Nigel: *Do you find that do you stay separate from the younger people?*

LaVelma: *As much as possible. [laughs] I'm going to be totally honest.*

Earlone: *Are they bullies, or they just have a different way?*

LaVelma: *Yes.*

Nigel: *Do you think it would be a good idea to have younger people house separately?*

LaVelma: *Yes, ma'am.*

Nigel: *Yeah.*

LaVelma: *And some of the old rowdy ones too.*

[laughter]

LaVelma: *Don't leave them out. There's a few of them too. They're up in age. They should know better.*

Earlone: *When you stepped in here 29 years ago, how was you moving?*

LaVelma: *Oh, I was out working out every day. I was running 30 laps around the track every day. I was in good shape when I came here. But now, gravity and everything else have caught up with me. [laughs]*

Christine: *I'm Ms. Christine. We started calling each other-- the older people started calling us by our first names, but we say Miss. So, Ms. Lainey, Ms. Candice, Ms. Christine, Ms. Leslie.*

Leslie: *I didn't know that.*

[laughter]

Nigel: *You remember Christine, right?*

Earlonne: Yep.

Nigel: She definitely spends a lot of time down the Senior Center. And she had that beautiful long-

Earlonne: Braid.

Nigel: -silver braid. And she's the type of person that likes to sit against the wall and kind of take in the whole scene, makes sure she knows everything that's happening down there.

Christine: *I've been here four years and was three years in Chowchilla, so I haven't been here as long as some people. I came to prison when I was 72. Not all of us are lifelong criminals. And speaking for myself, most of my friends have been teachers and nurses and lawyers, and one is a doctor. And we are not lifelong criminals, and we'd really prefer not to be around criminal activity in prison.*

I know I'm a criminal. I did commit a crime when I was 71. But as a person, I am not a criminal. I've not ever led a criminal lifestyle. I was never arrested before. And many of these older people are in the same boat that I'm in.

Earlonne: *It took 71 years to commit a crime?*

Christine: *Yes. Alcohol and a loaded gun, and one second, and now I'm a criminal for the rest of my life. But I'm not asking for sympathy. I know that's what happened, and I know that I'm here. I just would prefer while in prison not to be around people who led a criminal lifestyle.*

Nigel: *Now, we don't normally do this, but you brought it up. Can we ask you what your crime was?*

Christine: *Yes. I killed someone when I was drunk and a loaded gun was there. I am here for first-degree murder, and not only first degree, but also gun enhancement, which means that I'll never get out.*

Nigel: *And who did you kill?*

Christine: *I killed a close relative.*

Nigel: *So, what we really wanted to talk to you about is what is it like, as you were saying, to come to prison at 71 when you've lived a long, professional life? I believe you were--*

Christine: *I was a retired nurse.*

Nigel: *And how does someone adjust?*

Christine: *It's a rude shock. [chuckles] It's a very rude shock.*

Nigel: *Yeah. I mean, did you ever see this in your future?*

Christine: *No. I never thought about prison. I never considered prison. It was totally not in my world. I always thought that really, really bad, hardened people who had committed terrible crimes went to prison, obviously.*

Nigel: *Tell us, what is it like when you're 71 to walk into a prison?*

Christine: They gave me an upper bunk, first of all, which it was hard. It was hard because I have to get up and pee during the night. So, it means you have to come down carefully, get to the bathroom, get up carefully without waking anybody up and all that a couple of times a night. It was very difficult. I was put in with people that fought in the room, had fights with each other, girlfriends, always these jealousy fights and blood, women having sex with each other in the shower or over to the side of me. And I got used to all of that. But people being up all night because they were tweaking and they were up all night making noise, and I couldn't sleep.

I moved into a room with this couple, and they liked to play the radio really loud, and it was rap music. And I asked them one day if they would turn it down, and they just turned on me [chuckles] like wild beasts. And they told me, "Get out of the room." And I got out of the room for a while. But you can absolutely not tell anybody in the room in Chowchilla what kind of noise they can make or can't make. That's a huge issue. I had no clout at all. I had no clout. I had nothing. I didn't sell drugs. I didn't have any stature there at all. So I was like at the bottom of the heap.

Earlone: You were just an old person in prison.

Christine: I was an old person without a whole lot to offer. And I wasn't even an interesting old person that could do drugs or something or that had anything going for me in prison at all. I didn't have anything.

Lanie: My name's Lanie.

Nigel: How long have you been in prison?

Lanie: Since 1988. I'm sorry I have a new partial-- [laughs] and I'm having a hard time in case I sound a little old lady stuff.

Earlone: Lanie came in, she had those bright eyes with the short hairstyle, and she was very engaging.

Nigel: Yeah. I mean, I found her proper. I don't know what else to say. Hospitable. And she seemed to me like a character out of a southern novel.

Earlone: Kentucky Derby.

Nigel: Maybe, with the hat and the gloves.

Earlone: The hat and the gloves. Betting on horses.

Nigel: Ooh.

[laughter]

Nigel: How old are you?

Lanie: I'm 76 now. I was 41 then.

Earlone: What's your sentence?

Lanie: LWOP.

Earlonne: LWOP stands for life without parole. Most people say life without the possibility of parole, but it's life without parole.

Nigel: Right. And considering that's what she's dealing with, there's a lot more going on with her beyond this proper southern lady description we gave.

Earlonne: Oh, definitely.

What is the Senior Center about?

Lanie: *When it first opened, I wasn't real impressed because I thought it was just a way for them to say they did something for us when we're really used to being invisible.*

Nigel: *When you say invisible, do you mean being someone who's in prison or being a woman, being someone who's older?*

Lanie: *Being elderly.*

Nigel: *Can you talk about that invisibility?*

Lanie: *This is set up for young people, basically. Even at 50, I felt young. You can do it. You can keep up with the program. You can hustle. You just keep the pace. It's a fast pace. And at 76, I don't care how hard you try, and I've got two hip replacements and deteriorating bones. You can't keep the pace anymore. You just can't. The getting up, even getting ready and getting out the door, it's a challenge. Or to get to the shower and to have to use a particular shower because another shower is slippery and you might fall. There are struggles everywhere. I don't want to go around saying, "I can't do this," or, "I can't do that." I got the cane and I won't make it. The grace of God, I'm going to be okay. But it makes it so much more difficult.*

We have a lot of people here now who are over 70, 75, 80 years old, and I don't think they've ever had this kind of accumulation of elderly before.

Nigel: *So, when you came in at 41, is that what you said, were there elderly women?*

Lanie: *Very, very few.*

Nigel: *And do you remember seeing any older women--*

Lanie: *Oh, yes.*

Nigel: *And what did you think when--?*

Lanie: *Oh, my heart went out to them because I had wonderful relationships with my grandparents. And so, you try to help them.*

Nigel: *But when you saw them, did it worry you, like, "Oh, my God, that could be me one day"?*

Lanie: *I never thought that this would last that long.*

Earlonne: *When I first came into the women's prison, I was thrown by seeing older women in prison. It wasn't even in my mindset. I didn't even think older women would be in prison. And I spent a long time in men prison. I'm used to seeing older men, and when I seen it, I was like, "Damn." I don't know, that was one of them days you just left depleted.*

Lanie: Are there a lot of older men in prison?

Nigel: Yes. Earlonne and I have talked about this a lot. We find it way harder to see older women in prison. I don't think about it when I'm at a men's prison and there's plenty of old men there. Why do you think it's so much harder for us to see older women in prison? Like you said, it's draining. It is really heavy.

Lanie: Well, that's a good question. And it's interesting because to me, it would be sad to see older men too. It's sad with women because the saddest thing for me is family. I'll start crying if I talk about it, so I'd rather not.

Nigel: Yeah, but why do you think it affects us so much?

Lanie: Well, because we're maternal. Mothers are not meant to make mistakes and commit crimes and come to prison. We're just not. And I hate the fact that I did this to my family.

Nigel: I feel like older women are not supposed to be in prison, and I'm trying to figure out why I don't have that feeling about older men. You know what I mean? It's very hard for me to separate my heart feeling.

Lanie: Were you very close to your mother?

Nigel: I'm very close to my mother.

Lanie: I think, like I said before, we're all a product of our environment. Just like me, I had a great relationship, as I said, not only with my grandparents, but with my mother. So, when I would see these elderly ladies in prison when I first came, I'd make their beds, I'd do their laundry, anything I could to help them.

Nigel: Your supposition is that the three of us have very close relationships with older women in our lives, or did.

Lanie: Maybe if not even with your inner family, with someone older that influenced your life.

Nigel: But now, I'm smiling because what does that say about what we think about men?

Lanie: Well, did you have a great relationship with your father? [laughs]

Nigel: I have very different feelings about men than I have about women. And now, I'm wondering-- [crosstalk]

Lanie: And I do too.

Nigel: Thank you for that revelation.

[chuckles]

Lanie: And I'm ready for the hereafter.

Nigel: You are?

Lanie: Yes.

Nigel: How so?

Lanie: Well, I believe I'm going to heaven. I believe in heaven. I don't have a real close personal relationship with my grandchildren because my son was raised coming to prison to see mom. He was only six at the time. And he has decided he doesn't want his children to know that I'm in prison. And I have to respect that. My son and I talk a couple of times a week, and I get tons and tons of pictures and videos and everything of the kids, but we tiptoe around it, and it's heartbreaking. My daughter-in-law is a schoolteacher, and she's wonderful. But she was trying to get him to go to a funeral one day. He who's usually very accommodating and kind, said, "I'm not going to any funerals. I live with the death that never ends." Meaning I can't take anymore. He's very emotional. And so, I think once I'm gone I'm gone, and he don't have to continue living the death that never ends. "My mom's gone, and she can't come home."

Nigel: Yeah.

Lanie: So, it's heavy. It's heavy aging in prison and not just dealing with it myself but trying to help others to deal with it. My family, especially my child.

Nigel: Yeah.

Lanie: The heartache never ends. You accept it, but it doesn't mean that it doesn't hurt.

Nigel: Yeah.

Earlonne: What are some of the most loneliest times in prison?

Lanie: Oh, wow. Truthfully, it's all lonely. It's all lonely. Every day. Every day. I wake up and I look at their pictures because they're all over my bed. And you just miss them. You wish just for one time, I could just hug them. I saw my grandson when he was first born. They brought him, so I have seen him, but he was five by the time my granddaughter was born, and my granddaughter's named after me. So, that's something wonderful.

Nigel: That says so much that they named their daughter after you. That's huge.

Lanie: I told you they're wonderful. And if my son could figure a way, he would have them here. I think at this point, it hurts him. He hasn't come to terms with it like I am, but he's 41. He's the age I was when I came to prison, and I'm 76. So, I've learned how to cope with life's disappointments.

Earlonne: In 35 years, how many people in your family have you lost?

Lanie: Everybody. Everybody but my son. Everybody. My mom. I never really had a relationship with my dad. That's why I said what I said about-- [laughs] but my mom, my older brother, all my aunts and uncles and grand-- everybody. And everybody was alive when I came to prison.

Nigel: Back to the Alzheimer, it's very upsetting to see anybody, if you're in prison or not, starting to deal with that. And I think you don't want to admit that it's happening to people that you know. You know what I mean?

Lanie: Yeah.

Nigel: You try to find excuses like, "Oh, it's this. They're tired," blah, blah. When you start to see that happening to somebody in here, what's the reaction to it?

Lanie: *It's a very scary disease. And that's why watching The Notebook, I wasn't watching the love story. I'm looking to see how they're portraying what's going on here between the husband and the wife and how he's dealing with her. Really, I can tell you it's heartbreaking, and I've seen it happen to a few people. You try to keep up with what happens to them, but you can't. If I can engage them and I can keep them in the here and now, I know that's good, because that's what I was told to do as my mother. Act like everything's normal, invite them to play a game of Skippo. There's things that you can do to try to keep their mind stimulated. I'm scared to death that's what's going to happen to me, to tell you the truth, because it's what happened to everybody in my mother's family.*

So, I got to call every day and interact with her. She'd forgotten how to hold the telephone and the nurses had to do these things for her. And at the end, they said that just hearing my voice, that you could tell that something in there clicked. That may be why God gave me that experience, is to use it for people that are not going to get that and also to talk myself down off that ledge.

Earlone: *So, when you were here and you couldn't be there for your mother, how was that?*

Lanie: *Heartbreaking. The guilt. The guilt, the shame, all of that, it kills you because I was supposed to be there. I'm her daughter. It's never ending. There's not a day goes by I still don't think about my mother and the fact that she died without me there, not a day. And that I'm going to do the same thing to my son. It's a hard pill to swallow. If I didn't have a child, I'd just go to death row and get it over with, because this is horrible. This is worse than dying.*

[contemplative music]

Earlone: We'll be right back after the break.

Do you have to work?

Female Speaker: *Yes, the elderly are working, broke down and all.*

Nigel: So, Earlone, at this point, you were talking with LaVelma Byrd.

Earlone: She's the 72-year-old that has that sweet crochet work on her walker.

Retirement age.

LaVelma: *They don't let them retire. All these young kids running around here running amok, doing nothing, but they want these old folks to work too. Broke down. I mean, from the floor up. [laughs]*

Nigel: So, it doesn't seem like folks retire in prison.

Earlone: I think when you die, you retire, but if you're medically unable to do a job, they will medically unassign you. Meaning you still have the work status, but you don't have to go to work. But until that happens, you will be going to work every day, even at 90.

LaVelma: *Am I lying, Ms. Candy?*

Candy: *No.*

LaVelma: *Look at her. She works.*

Earlonne: Y'all work construction?

[laughter]

LaVelma: She said that getting out of bed is construction. We get exercise just getting in and out of our beds. [laughs] That's real talk.

Earlonne: So, Candy was one of the other women hanging out in the Senior Center that day.

Nigel: Yeah, Candy has this kind of solid I don't want to say tough presence, but she's a straight shooter, you know what I mean? I feel like there's no BS with her.

Candy: I'm Candace Restivo. They call me Candy or Ms. Restivo. The girls at work call me Ms. Restivo. It's a sign of respect, even though they don't respect me. [laughs]

Nigel: But Ms. Candy, how old are you?

Candy: I'll be 72 in two months.

Nigel: Okay. I can't remember. How long have you been in prison? Okay.

Candy: 2002. It's not a long time for some of these old—[crosstalk]

Earlonne: It is definitely a lot of time.

Nigel: It's 20 years.

Candy: But I don't want to think of it that way.

Earlonne: 12 months is a lot of time.

Candy: But I don't want to think of it that way, because if I do, then I get depressed, and I don't want to be depressed, so I just say, "It's not that long," [chuckles] and laugh about it. I work all day.

Nigel: What is your job?

Candy: I work in clothing, so I fold laundry all day.

Nigel: Well, what do you think about working? Are you glad that you have a job? Do you wish you didn't have to work?

Candy: Well, okay. In my case, I don't have any close family that supports me. My brother gets me two boxes a year, which I am very grateful for. So, I need to work. It takes me a whole month to buy a jar of coffee. That's what my pay is.

Earlonne: Hmm. How much is a jar of coffee nowadays?

Candy: \$9-\$10. Almost \$10.

Earlonne: It takes you a month to buy a \$10 coffee.

Candy is another woman at CIW who's serving a sentence of LWOP, life without parole.

You have life without, and this is the first time you've been arrested. Can you say your crime, you don't have, I mean?

Candy: *Murder for hire.*

Earlone: *What were your thoughts when you got sentenced to LWOP? What emotion did that sentence bring?*

Candy: *It crushed me. I mean, it really crushed me, because at first, I wasn't paying attention to what the judge said. My sentence was, I thought I had 25 to life until I read the newspaper.*

Nigel: *You left sentencing without realizing what your sentence was?*

Candy: *Yeah.*

Earlone: *Especially your first time at it. People that go to trial don't pay attention to the trial because you don't know the legal jargon that's being spoke around you.*

Nigel: *So up to 50, I'm going to use the word "normal." I don't know what else to say. You had a very recognizable life. You had a family, you had a job, you worked hard. How does somebody then make that shift?*

Candy: *Okay, my crime happened when I was 30. It was a cold case, and they found me.*

Nigel: *Can we talk about that or not?*

Candy: *Yeah, okay.*

Nigel: *Maybe not the case, but--*

Candy: *No, I'm not going to talk about how they found me.*

Nigel: *No more living with that for 22 years.*

Candy: *That was hard, because I always thought about it was always in the back of my mind, but I kept thinking, "Well. They haven't got me yet. They haven't come for me yet."*

Nigel: *How did living like that for 20 years affect you?*

Candy: *I didn't trust a lot of people. I didn't want them to know what my life was like before.*

Nigel: *Yeah. And did you live with a lot of guilt and grief and were you able to push it away?*

Candy: *I dealt with the guilt and the grief, but I kind of just stuffed it. I was a good stuffer. I knew there was something wrong with me. Why I would have something like this and not do anything about it?*

Nigel: *Did you think it was a possibility it would never come out?*

Candy: *Let's put it this way. I was hoping. I was hoping it would never get found out.*

Nigel: *Yeah, yeah. So, people in your life didn't know about it?*

Candy: *No. Nobody knew.*

Nigel: Yeah.

Earlonne: So, I know they looked at you totally different. First, they was like, "No, no way."

Candy: None of my family knew when I got arrested. That day they knew, everybody knew. It went like wildfire.

Nigel: So, you came to prison at 51. Is my math right?

Candy: Mm-hmm.

Nigel: Okay. And was this your--

Earlonne: What?

Nigel: I know. Shocking. I was using my fingers over here.

[laughter]

Nigel: Had you ever been to prison before?

Candy: No. I'd never been to prison. Never been to jail. Never even so much as had a traffic ticket since I was 16. I'm not going to say it was a shock, because it wasn't really a shock, but it was life changing.

Nigel: Yeah. And so, what is it like at 50 to make that transition?

Candy: County jail is county jail. You know what it's like. And Santa Ana Jail is like an ice box. And being over 50, they only give you one blanket, they give you one sheet.

Nigel: But what about the emotional change? Because at 50, you've lived a good portion of your life. You've probably had a family, jobs, all of that stuff.

Candy: Yeah, I had a real secure job. My husband and I drove long haul truck for 18 years before I got arrested. My husband and I got along really well for being in the truck 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I drove nights, he drove days, and we were going to drive till we couldn't drive anymore and then move to the mountains and live a happy life with a porch around the house with dogs. That's what I pictured.

Nigel: Yeah.

Earlonne: Was he very supportive of you?

Candy: Yes and no, because every time I would call, he would cry. I couldn't take the crying, so I didn't call home as much.

Nigel: You didn't cry?

Candy: I cried a lot to begin with, I cried a lot, and I thought I couldn't cry anymore, but I cried a lot. I think the first months, I was on a death wish. I'm a diabetic, so I was eating myself to death basically. I was just-- whatever sweets were on the commissary, that's what I was eating. I don't know. I guess I was about a year in, I kind of just woke up and said, "No, you can't do this." So, I changed my lifestyle.

Nigel: Do you cry anymore about things?

Candy: Yeah. I woke up the other day and I told my bunkie, I said I was crying because I was thinking about my husband. One of the things that we had done, we had gone fishing out in a boat, and we had gone out on a boat with friends. And I was thinking about that time and how great it was. And I woke up. Those are happy memories. I don't want to think about all the ugly stuff because it doesn't benefit me.

Nigel: Did you go through a grief process when you got your sentence?

Candy: I sure did. I went to grief groups four times. It was like the first time I didn't get it. The second time, I was close. And the third and the fourth, I finally got it because we're grieving not just the loss of our family, our freedom, just who we are in general.

Nigel: So, does that mean you accepted that this was going to be your life for a while?

Candy: Well, no, I just adjusted. I'm not going to say I accept it because I don't accept what my sentence is. I still don't accept it. My family is very supportive. My brother, my cousin. I don't know about my sister because she doesn't talk to me. And my daughter stopped talking to me. She wanted to testify when I went to court, and being a mother, I said no. Maybe I should have, maybe she would have helped me.

Earlonne: Do you feel she's bitter about your current offense?

Candy: I think she's bitter that she thought she could have helped me, and I wouldn't let her. I don't know. That's second guessing, but I didn't want her to get on the stand.

Nigel: Do you feel like you've lost your daughter?

Candy: No, because she's not lost to me. She's always going to be right here. She's lost as far as the physical presence, coming and visiting me and things like that. That's the only way she's lost. I write one letter a month and send it to whatever address I think she's still at. And if I don't get the letter back, I know she's okay. That's what you have to deal with. If I don't get the mail back, then I know she's okay. She might not be perfect like I want her to be, but she's okay. She's alive.

Nigel: Do you think she's happy? What do you think she does with her time? Do you think she thinks about you?

Candy: I pray that she thinks about me, and I hope-- mostly I just write, I want to know if she's okay. It's funny the letters I send, because I'll send a letter with an envelope, with a stamp, with my address so that she could get back to me. Yes, no. And I used to send like a little questionnaire. I'm okay - Yes, no, that kind of thing. The baby's okay? Well, her baby isn't a baby anymore. He's almost 20. But how's the baby? - Yes, no, that kind of thing. And see if she would send that, so at least she didn't have to write anything. She could just check, check, check. But I never got any of them back, so I guess I have to be patient, because patience pays off in the long run.

Nigel: You seem like a very practical person too. So, I hope you won't mind me asking this question. How do you think about possibly dying in prison?

Candy: I don't want to think about it, but if it happens, it happens. I'm going to go to heaven either way. Whether I'm here or out there, that's where my head lies.

Earlonne: So, is it true you only been in jail for two weeks?

Pat: [laughs] Yeah. [laughs] Plus 53 years. My name is Pat.

Nigel: And you've been in prison for 53 years.

Pat: 53 years.

Nigel: Do you remember the first time you realized, "Oh, I'm getting older"?

Pat: Gosh, no.

Nigel: I remember the first time I felt old. I looked down at my hands, and I realized all of a sudden, like, "Oh, I don't have young persons hands anymore, and they looked like my mom's," and it was like a first cue, like, "Oh, I'm definitely at a different point in my life." So', I wonder if you had anything like that.

Pat: Well, I'm probably the number one Band-Aid person in the prison, because all I have to do is knock something, anything-- And what's really difficult is that our cells are just pure metal, so I'm constantly cutting myself. And if it's not that, then I get a big bruise on my hand. Yes, hands really tell you that, "Wow, I'm old."

Nigel: I did notice you had a Band-Aid on.

Pat: Yeah. [laughs]

Nigel: But when you think about yourself, how old do you see yourself as?

Pat: I don't think I really do. I think that's really the interesting part about aging is as long as you have your brain, you can remember when. It's just your body won't go with you. It's like, "Hey, get up and dance." But it's a little more difficult for me to get up and dance at 75 and do what I did at 20. When I see young people, I feel I'm the same age as whatever they are. It's just because I'm not looking in a mirror and saying, "Oh, my God, what happened to you?"

Nigel: When you discovered that you had to set limitations, did it make you feel sad? Did it make you feel empowered that you could say, "These are my limitations?" What was like the psychology--?

Pat: Oh, it's hard at first. Are you kidding? I've always been a really active person, so I mean, when I realize maybe jogging isn't my thing anymore, I have to look at it and go, "I want to stay as healthy as I can. I don't want to fall and break things. I'm breakable." It's really lousy to think about, but I'm breakable. That's what aging is. You hear everybody sitting around talking about, "Oh, on my arms and my back, oh, yeah." And you used to think, "I'll never be me." Now we sit around and then talk about all my aching. It is what we do because it's a part of our life so much that you can't help bring it up when you're talking to someone and say, "Heck, I hurt."

Nigel: So, on the outside, as you get older, you start to feel like you become invisible. People don't know-- does that happen in prison too?

Pat: Oh, for sure.

Nigel: Can you talk about that?

Pat: People, they just pass you by. Like the young people don't want to include you because they think somehow you won't understand. I've been here 57 years. Believe me, I know it all, been there, done that. And you're not offending me. Whatever you're saying, whatever words you-- whatever your lifestyle, whatever, been there, done that. I may be old, I may look to you that I'm old, but what I've lived is no different than you.

Nigel: Yeah. I notice that people don't notice you in a line or you don't get-- I mean, it's different in prison, but you don't get the service you used to get. You just start to somehow become smaller and smaller--

Earlonne: Do you think that or—

Nigel: I hear it from a lot of aging people who are older.

Pat: Yeah. I don't think they figure you can contribute anymore or that you'll understand it. I get it all the time, these young people, they'll cuss or something and say, "Oh, I'm sorry."

Nigel: But I think the other side of it, Pat, which is the harder, is that people are afraid of aging and they're afraid of dying.

Pat: Yeah. I think they don't want to see it because whether you're young or old, if you're different, if I look really feeble, it scares them.

Nigel: So, you've been in prison 50 years, as the decades have gone on, do you feel more connected to this community and fulfilled? Or do you feel as you get older, less connected and more lonely?

Pat: Less connected, I think at times, now definitely less connected. It depends on what's starting to happen. It's like with the Senior Center, I'm talking with people now, and we're getting together because we are kind of outcast amongst the youth. But at the same time, I don't know. It's learning to put myself out a little-- Where before, I didn't because I was part of, now it's kind of pushing myself out to say, "Don't just isolate." That's so easy to me. I have no problem whatsoever being with me. I really don't. I'm perfectly comfortable with me. A good book, I do hand work, I'm perfectly happy. But then, I tell myself, "Don't do that."

We are social animals. I know that. And you don't want to completely just isolate ever. I was talking about that with somebody the other day. I said, "Get your butt up and do something. I'm sure you have young people in your life, so know what they're interested in. You aren't going to know it if you never come out of your cell and talk to some of these people, because as crazy as they may seem to you, this is what the world is. You have to become engaged with them. They know things that I don't.

Nigel: Yeah. It's interesting. All the things that you're saying about what you need to do in here are the same things that people on the outside, as you get older, need to do. And I'm always fascinated by the similarities between life inside prison and life outside. So, what you're describing is, I think, what older people have to do everywhere.

Pat: One thing that I just hope for myself is that I die with all my memories, all the good, all the bad. I want to have them to the end. I want to remember who I was and am. I just find Alzheimer's and that just as cruel beyond belief. That would be my biggest fear. The rest of the stuff that may come at me, sure it's going to-- something eventually it'll take me down, but I don't want it to be that I have no idea who I was or what I was. All the hurt, the pain I have given, all the things I've learned about myself, all the friends, family, every little, tiny memory, I want that to come with me to the very bitter end, because that's who I am.

Nigel: *What do you hope your last memory is? What's the memory you want to go out on?*

Pat: *It'd just be having my friends with me again. A lot of them I've lost. I would love to see the faces of those that I've loved. If I think about getting out, I think about contacting the friends that I have and seeing them again and just seeing the world. Going for a swim is my number one. I go right out of here into the ocean as quick as I possibly could. I don't care fully dressed. I don't care if it's winter, summer, whatever. I'd be in the water.*

Earlonne: *It's a trip because I think that's on the top list of everybody. Ocean, beach, is first place, people that get out want to go.*

Pat: *That would be the most best thing for, like, a brand new start, because the ocean really is our womb. And the sound, it's like a heartbeat. Almost all the people that I've loved that are dead are there. Their ashes have been thrown. Almost everybody I know is getting cremated. I'm going to get cremated, and to the ocean they go. And so, I figure I'm swimming with my buds. Evolution.*

Nigel: *I was thinking about it, that it also is very womb like.*

Pat: *It is the womb. It's ours. We're made out of water. We're water babies. A friend of mine, they contacted a mortuary that cremates. And not only that, drops you into the ocean. I don't care if it's a pinch. Just put me and give me a pinch because I got an awful lot of friends in there.*

Earlonne: *Does it matter what ocean?*

Pat: *No. Pacific and Atlantic, I have friends. [laughs] I do. And family. My dad's down at Malibu. My best friend is in Cape Hatteras. So, hey, either one will do me.*

Earlonne: *Yeah, because you're definitely going to do some traveling.*

Pat: *Yeah. Once you're in the ocean, you're going everywhere.*

My name is Pat, and right now I'm sitting in the Senior Center. Ear Hustle is produced by Nigel Poor, Earlonne Woods, Amy Standen, Bruce Wallace, and Rahsaan "New York" Thomas. Shabnam Sigman is our managing producer. Our producing team inside San Quentin includes Steve Brooks, Derrell Sadiq Davis, Tony de Trinidad and Tam Nguyen. Our inside managing producer is Tony Tafoya. Earlonne Woods sound designs and engineers the show with help from Fernando Arruda and Darrell Sadiq Davis.

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. For more information about this episode, check out the show notes on our website, earhustlesq.com. You can also find out more about the show on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram [@earhustlesq](https://www.instagram.com/earhustlesq).

Nigel: Special thanks to all the women at the She Shed at CIW. We cannot wait for our next visit.

Earlonne: And you know we're working on our stretching game, right?

Nigel: Definitely. Definitely.

Earlonne: Thanks also to Rhashiyd Zinnamon who provided music for this episode.

Nigel: We appreciate all of our listeners, but there's one we want to give a special shoutout today. That's Tamara in Victoria, Canada.

Earlonne: Tamara's our ride or die. She's been following our journey since the early days.

Nigel: And, Tamara, I know that you love stories where you learn something new, like how to make a meal in a hot pot or how the prison uniform came to be. I love that you have that curious mind, and I think you're going to find a lot to appreciate in this upcoming season.

Earlonne: She mentioned a favorite episode that's one of ours too.

Nigel: That's right. *Home for Me Is Really a Memory*, and that was from Season 7. That one is also near and dear to my heart and knowing that you care so much about it makes me feel closer to you, Tamara.

Earlonne: And Tamara's doing cool work on her own too, making stories about some righteous projects out in the world.

Nigel: Thank you so much for the work you do, for being part of the Ear Hustle family, and for spreading the word about our show. I love learning about our listeners. So, thanks, Tamara, for being one of them.

Earlonne: We really appreciate you.

Nigel: Thanks to Acting Warden Smith and Lt. Berry at San Quentin and Acting Warden Hill at the California Institution for Women for their support of the show.

Earlonne: Thanks also to this guy here.

Lt. Newborg: Hi, I am Lt. Newborg, Public Information Officer at the California Institution for Women, and I approve this episode.

Nigel: Please don't forget to sign up for our newsletter, The Lowdown. Subscribe at earhustlesq.com/newsletter.

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

Nigel: Discover audio with vision at *Radiotopia.fm*. I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlonne: I'm Earlonne Woods.

In Unison: Thanks for listening.

Earlonne: [singing *You'll Never Find Another Love like Mine* by Lou Rawls] Lou Rawls in it. All right, you have a good one.

End

[Transcript provided by [SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription](#)]