



Episode 41: Hold That Space
Air Date: April 29, 2020

Earlone Woods: [00:00:00] Hey Nyge

Nigel Poor: What's up, E?

Earlone: We're going to get to this week's show in just a few minutes.

Nigel: A show that you reported entirely outside of San Quentin.

Earlone: That's right. Down in Southern California, back when we still could travel, freely. Before we get to that, we did want to talk a bit about what's going on in the California prisons during this pandemic.

Nigel: But first sad news, California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation has reported the first death of an incarcerated person due to complications thought to be related to Covid-19. The exact cause of death has not been determined.

Earlone: The guy was incarcerated as CIM, California Institution for Men. One of two prisons in the state that have a lot of incarcerated people who have tested positive for this virus.

Nigel: CIM also has over 20 staff who have reported they're positive for Covid. This worried the Loraine Serrano. She's locked up at California Institution for Women, right next to CIM.

Loraine Serrano: [over the phone] What happens is some of our staff, like our freewill staff, they go back and forth to CIM, which is a men's prison across away, and they do have cases there and they come over here and work as well, so they go back and forth.

Earlone: Loraine says she didn't think staff or other incarcerated women were taking these threats seriously enough and it was really getting to her.

Loraine: We're fighting a battle against the clock and then we're fighting against our population because, they're not informed of anything. It's too stressful for me. The other day I broke down, I went to go have a one on one NA meeting with my friend in her room because I just, I needed an outlet. So luckily through the coping skills that we have and through the groups that we did in the past, we were able to come together, unite and do that ourselves.

Nigel: We also talked to Erica Olsen, who's locked up at Central California Women's Facility. She said there's a real sense of fear and panic among the population there too.

Erica Olsen: [over the phone] One of my personal concerns is the mental health of people. You know, are people being reached out to checking in with them, "Hey, how you doing? What's going on with you?" 'Cause this is definitely, definitely a stressful time and stressful times, as we all know are difficult for adults who have mental health issues.

Nigel: One thing keeping Erica sane right now is a project she does with other incarcerated ladies. They normally sew clothing for poor kids in other countries. Now they're sewing masks.

Erica: We have come together to try to make masks for the community.

Nigel: [over the phone, speaking to Erica] Yeah, are you making masks for you and other women inside or are you making masks to send out to other people?

Erica: We're hoping that we're going to be able to donate them to where the greater need is.

Nigel: A little positivity in dark times.

Earlone: Thanks to Erica and Loraine for reaching out and to Sara Kruzan for making that happen.

Nigel: Okay. Let's get to this week's show, but first...

Earlone: This episode of Ear Hustle contains language that may not be suitable for all listeners. Discretion is advised. [abstract industrial sounds as transition]

[in the field, in South Central, LA] When the van from juvenile hall used to come in through this way, and then it'd pull up into this gate right here, and then they'd take you out this gate and then to one of them little holding cells. Come on.

[as narrator] Check it out. Back in January when we could still leave our homes,
[Nigel affirms] I went to South Central LA, the East side where I grew up.

Nigel: Okay

Earlone: I went to the very building where my interactions with the criminal justice system all started. [voices chattering in the background] While I was there, I ran into a cat who went through the same shit as I did.

[in the field] Yup, we used to come here our lil chains on.

Speaker 1: Me too!

Earlone: Nyge, this is the building where all the juveniles in my part of Los Angeles went when you were on the wrong side of the law. They put you in these holding cells where you waited to see the judge. And while I was up in there, of course I used to write my gang and my name on those walls. Just to let other gang members know "EMAC" was there.

[in the field] You know what? I must've hit up on one of these walls. They say, you hit up on wall, you be back before the wall falls. [several people laugh]

Nigel: So what was it like to be back there?

Earlone: [as narrator] It was definitely interesting. I mean...

Nigel: I knew you were gonna use that word. [laughs]

Earlone: Of course, because this was the first time since I got out of prison that I actually been back to that neighborhood. [Nigel affirms] You know what I'm saying? Like I haven't gone back because there's nothing else over there for me.

Nigel: Yeah...

Earlone: As we were standing there in that room, a woman stopped right at the door and paused. It was almost like she was seeing a ghost.

Speaker 2: I don't want... [voices chattering, other woman says, "C'mon, girl!"] No, I don't want to be in this space, for real, for real. I don't want to be in this space. For real, for real.

Earlone: I don't know why she didn't want to be there. Maybe, like me and the other cat, she had an experience in those cells. [door closes]

Now down the hall, I found the room where I first appeared before the honorable Judge Moore.

[00:05:00] [in the field] The crazy part about being in this room right here is I remember all the way back when I was nine years old, I was in here.

Nigel: What happened to you when you were nine, E?

Earlone: [as narrator] Oh man, I was leaving the pool at this park called Roosevelt, and right across the street was some train tracks and it was a train actually ending. [Nigel affirms] And after the train had went by, the railroad crossings never lifted back up. So I saw all the cars struggling to go around the crossing arm. So me and my good Samaritan ass went over there and lifted it for the cars to go by. And a few minutes later. I was in handcuffs.

Nigel: How could they do that to a smiling kid?

Earlone: Should I add that I was black? [laughs] Yep. And that was the first of several times I ended up in that building. Right before high school, I got caught slinging crack.

[in the field] This is it. This is the place. This is where it started. Like I was put on probation here when I was fourteen and since then, I've been on some form of probation, parole or prison. And currently I'm on parole.

Nigel: So Earlone, can you explain for the listeners why you went back there?

Earlone: [as narrator] Well, that building is no longer about locking kids up. It's been totally transformed.

Nigel: Now it's a community center.

Earlone: Yep. The evening that I was there, some folks from the neighborhood were outside, barbecuing. Inside, you have a bunch of nonprofits.

Nigel: There's groups to help with housing and job issues, legal problems, and then there's this group:

Darlene Burke: Well, first and foremost, Happy New Year, ladies! [small group clapping and cheering]

Earlone: And this was who I was there to see: an organization called Ten Toes In. It's a support group of people who have partners that are locked up.

Darlene: After *six years* of Ten Toes In's existence, we finally have our own office space, so...

Earlone: The dozen or so women have Ten Toes In meet every month to talk about what it's like to be together with someone who's serving time.

Nigel: These are women who have, not one, not two, but ten toes in a relationship with someone in prison. They are *in*.

Earlone: There's a question written at the top of the group's website: "Are you ready for the journey?"

Nigel: Being with someone in prison, that is definitely a journey and that's what we're talking about on this episode. Women and men who are on that journey in it for the long haul... [dreamy upbeat music comes in, followed by jazzy beat]

Earlone: ...even when your partner may never get out. I'm Earlone Woods.

Nigel: I'm Nigel Poor. This is Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia. [music fades out, abstract industrial sounds come in as transition]

Darlene: We feel now, options versus a priority.

Group Member: Yeah. Women wanna feel loved, men wanna feel respected.

Darlene: At the lowest point in your life, and then everybody comes out the woodwork when you come home, [women affirming] "I want to take you out. I want to buy you clothes, I want to do this, I want to do that." But I've been JPayin', I had Global Tel Link on for you. I sent you packages, I sent your homeboy packages. I came and saw you every weekend, every other weekend. Where was your family and friends at during that time? But now you want to give them all your time and we're back here like... "what about me?" [women laughing and affirming]

Earlonne: The women have Ten Toes In, sit down around tables in the same damn room where way back when I appeared before Judge Moore.

Nigel: I can't get over that. It is the same building that you used to get hauled into?

Earlonne: Nyge, the judge's bench and witness stand are *still there*.

Nigel: I am just shaking my head. It is crazy. Darlene Burke, the co-founder of 10 Toes In, asks everybody to check in, you know, share what's been going on since the last time they met.

Earlonne: One of the women said her husband is coming home in June after serving 19 years. Another is still adjusting to life with her husband who returned about a year ago.

Nigel: And another woman, Annette, is close to retiring from her job with the County of Los Angeles. She has some news to share.

Annette Shields: My name is Annette. Mmhmm. My boyfriend... he's boyfriend now. [women mock lovingly] Darlene told me to wait. We've been together five months now. So we officially said we were a couple, December the 20th. women in background clap, and one person says, "*alright*" encouragingly]

Earlonne: The guy Annette is now officially calling her boyfriend has been locked up for 36 years. Since he was 19.

Nigel: They met through Annette's daughter.

Annette: This is my daughter, everybody, Raven. [someone says, "Welcome, Raven" in the background and Raven responds, "thank you"] She calls him "daddy-uncle." [women laughing] The reason she calls him daddy-uncle because [00:10:00] her boyfriend, that's his uncle.

Group Member: It's all in the family?

Annette: It's all in the family. So she calls him daddy-uncle.

Raven Ruiz: Uncle-Dad

Annette: Uncle-Daddy? [Raven affirms] Oh, I had it backwards. [women laughing]
Uncle-Daddy.

Darlene: So what did you think about your mom's – her new relationship now?

Raven: I support it. I just want to see her happy because I know everything she been through in her past relationship and I just want to see her like, you know, smile with that beautiful smile she has on her face...

Earlone: But not everyone in their family is cool with this new relationship. Annette filled us in the next day when we visited her at her home.

Annette: My other daughter, she's in the Air Force. She's judgmental, you shouldn't be like that. She see he's in prison, so she just thinks that he's a bad person. Okay, he was in there from time he was, you know, 19. People can change. People do change. They don't stay the same forever. [soft atmospheric tones come in]

Earlone: Her dude was recently found suitable for parole and he could be out by summer. Her sisters at Ten Toes In have some strong opinions about what the couple should do.

Nigel: So currently the plan is for him to move in with Annette. But at another meeting, the group said maybe she should rethink that. That maybe he should first go to transitional housing and then they could get to know each other. And actually, Earlone, that kind of seems like a reasonable plan.

Earlone: Honestly, this is just my opinion, Nyge, but I think anybody who's released after a significant number of years, need to have some space to adjust.

Nigel: Totally. And they need time to figure out who they are, right?

Earlone: They need a lot of time to figure that out. Straight up!

Nigel: And this is just my opinion. The woman needs time to get used to this change as well. I mean, all of a sudden there's a new person in your house and a new person in your life, 24/7.

Earlone: A new person in your 'fridgeator, in your space, in your bathroom...

Nigel: So Annette and her guys still have some time to figure it out. [music fades out] In the meantime, he's in prison about seven hours away, too far for her to keep visiting. So they stay in touch with phone calls and with letters.

Annette: But I keep them all in order. I have a space in my room, in my drawer for them. [shuffling papers]

Earlone: She had all his letters in a little box. Each numbered and shit.

Annette: And he sent me this one on the fourth. And I know he always start with profound greetings and that...

Earlone: The letter talks about how tough his past was and how he's looking forward to their future together.

Annette: It says, Anna, this is our time, nobody else but us, so let's enjoy it to the fullest together as one. We gonna be having a lot of love and sex. [laughing] That's what it says. [soft tones come in]

Nigel: Okay, E. Now that that brings up a question I bet a lot of people are asking themselves, what about the sex part when guys are still locked up? The physical intimacy. I mean, that is so important in a romantic relationship. And it's so hard to have with your partner when they're locked up.

Earlonne: Well, there are some unofficial ways that we've described before on Ear Hustle. [Nigel affirms] There are visiting rooms where everybody looks the other way. And then, I don't want to say where, but there might be a "boom boom room" where couples can actually get a little alone time.

Nigel: That's right.

Earlonne: And don't forget the original way, Nyge.

Nigel: Wait, what's that?

Earlonne: Phone sex. [Nigel laughs] [music fades out]

Nigel: Okay. And then of course there's the official way: family visits. Where you get to spend 48 hours alone with your loved one in something they call a cottage, but really imagine more a 500 square foot trailer.

Earlonne: But not everyone can get family visits. Even if they're married. So they end up in a relationship that's romantic, but physically apart. Like there's one woman I met at Ten Toes In, Raylene.

Raylene: I remember being a kid and having this feeling in my heart and not knowing what it was. But yet knowing, like, I think this is what love feels like – with him.

Nigel: Raylene fell for her guy, Raul, when they were teenagers. It didn't last long though. Raylene moved out of the neighborhood and Raul dropped out of school.

Raylene: The last time I seen him was the night of my graduation from high school, was back in 1993. And I remember we went to a party and I seen him walk in and I was so excited to see him. And I walked up to him and said, "hello." But I was pregnant at the time with my daughter. And when we were younger, right before my fifteenth birthday, you know, he used to try to, you know, see where he could go with me. And I used to always say, "No, we can't do that. We gotta be married, if you want to do that." [00:15:00] And then there I was at that party standing in front of him pregnant, and I felt like I could kick myself thinking, "why didn't I just do that with him?!" [laughing]

Nigel: Raylene got married to her kid's father and then divorced 20 years later. By this time, Raul was in prison.

Earlonne: Eventually they got in touch again, started exchanging letters, things got romantic. Then they got married.

Nigel: But they were denied family visits because Raul had an accusation of domestic violence on his record, so no sex.

Earlonne: And I asked Raylene how that's affected their relationship.

Raylene: I feel like this type of relationship when you're not allowed to be physically intimate with each other, allows you to get to know each other a little deeper, without that interfering. It builds a stronger, deeper connection. I've experienced the most intimacy that I ever have with a man – [soft tones come in] with my husband without being physically intimate. And it's been one of the most beautiful experiences to have.

Earlonne: Raylene's hoping Raul will get out this fall so they'll be able to, you know.

Nigel: E, these are sweet. Annette's getting new love. [Earlonne affirms] Raylene reconnecting with her first love. [music fades out] But I have heard plenty of horror stories about women dating guys in prison.

Earlonne: I can't confirm nor deny what you're saying, but what have you heard, Nyge? [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: Let's just say, there are a lot of ways for these relationships to go bad.

Earlonne: Definitely. One of the women I met at Ten Toes In, was going through it.

Theresa: I think I've been apart almost two years now, and last year was just the worst.

Earlonne: Four years ago, Theresa met an incarcerated man online through a friend.

Nigel: But at first, Theresa didn't realize that he was locked up. When she found out she thought about heading for the hills and she told us the next day.

Theresa: But, um, he was very attractive. And I've known people who were in prison and I felt like he deserved a chance and I gave it. [soft, dreamlike tones come in]

Nigel: Theresa didn't start visiting him immediately. It was a long drive to the prison and there was something else.

Theresa: From my picture, it doesn't look like I'm a big girl, you know? But that was my thing was, you know, I put off going to visit for a long time because of my size. And finally, I just had to tell him, like, I'm a big girl, and he was okay with it. And so I finally went up to visit. [music fades out]

Earlonne: Theresa said he was a good man and very sensitive, but she said he had a drug problem.

Nigel: Still, she hung in there.

Earlonne: Right. She told me she thought her love might fix him also she'd promised.

Theresa: When I made a commitment and took that vow to love you for better, for worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. Drug addiction is a sickness. I don't know if it's just us women that have this where we think we can fix people; but he had been so hurt in his childhood and just, you know, I guess I thought I could fix him. [atmospheric tones and beat come in]

Earlone: You know, Theresa is a caregiver, professionally.

Nigel: That is true.

Earlone: She's a home health aide, so it's not really surprising that she tried to fix the guy.

Nigel: And they stayed together, and they got married.

Earlone: Theresa knew that the money she sent him, went for drugs. She knew that. Instead of fixing him, she might be supporting his habit.

Nigel: A year ago, after they'd been married for a while, Theresa fell down and broke her arm and shoulder. She couldn't work for a bit, so she didn't have any extra money to send him.

Earlone: Things got bad between them. He sent her divorce papers and when we met her at the Ten Toes In meeting, she just learned that he has something going on with a teacher who worked in the prison. [music fades out]

Darlene: So how are you feeling now? Because you still wanted it to make it work even after all of this.

Theresa: I still, you know, and the crazy thing is, even after finding out, if he was to call me today and tell me he's sorry, because of who I am and what I believe in and commitment and the vow that I made before the Lord, I would forgive him. [voice breaking emotionally] So like right now, seriously, though, [00:20:00] I say that but, I'm just like all over the place right now. [atmospheric tones come in]

Nigel: Ugh, Earlone, I don't know what's in this guy's heart. I don't know him. But I do know that there's lots of guys inside and out who take advantage of the generosity of women like Theresa.

Earlone: I mean, I've definitely seen that. But there's nothing like boredom, loneliness, and a drug addiction to make a guy do some questionable things.

Nigel: When we come back, we're going to hear from one last couple trying to make it under very difficult circumstances.

Earlone: LWOP. Life without the possibility of parole. [music fades out and into abstract industrial sounds as transition]

Sutina Green: Steven is my first love. He was someone that I always could confide in. Crazy enough, like, we've always been open and honest with each other, even as teenagers, which that's not really, that doesn't happen a lot. [upbeat tones come in]

Nigel: That's Sutina Green. She's in her forties with dark, straight black hair. She's really pretty, super – kind of vicious and present.

Earlone: Steven's got short hair, a beard, wired frame glasses, and has a sexy belly like mine.

Nigel: Sidebar, I'm waiting for the day that women have sexy bellies. [Earlone laughs]

Earlone: Women do have sexy bellies.

Nigel: Ah, thank you, E. She and Steve started dating in junior high. She says they did a lot of making up and breaking up.

Earlone: They grew apart at the high school. Steven, he ended up going to prison for murder-robbery. He was the one sentenced to LWOP: life without the possibility of parole. [music fades out]

[in the field] When the judge said life without the possibility. What was your mindset?

Steven Green: Honestly? Um, I didn't understand. I didn't have no point of reference to understand what life without meant. But I didn't understand it until years later. Like, so for me, I was on the yard at like 22, I think, almost about to turn 23. And it seemed like the world had slowed down and like my focus had got onto one individual. He was like in his sixties. He already had the hunchback. He was already, you know, he had signs of age on him. And then I realized, like, I'm going to be here until I'm that age or more. For me, it was a sinking feeling of like, what did I do to myself? Then the questions came, well, what did I do to other people? Because that's why they put me here. [soft tones come in]

Earlone: During the years Steven spent inside Sutina moved on, got married, and had two crumb snatchers. [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: Crumb snatchers? I have never heard that before. [laughing]

Earlone: That's old school, Nyge. That's kids.

Nigel: Okay. Two crumb snatchers. Then, ten years into his sentence, Steven got a letter from Sutina. She'd recently split up with her husband. And she wanted to come visit him. [beat fades out]

Earlone: So what was it like when you got that letter?

Steven: It was awesome because one, I have, I've always had love for, you know, I've always loved her. I've always had love for her. And for her to say like, hey, I'm coming back. It felt really good, but the life without will scare people off 'cause that means I'm not coming home. And that was always my reservation with her, like, hey, it's cool that you love me, but you know I'm not coming home, right? You're going to burn yourself out in five years. Like it's cool. I'm gonna rock with it while it's good. But I know a hundred percent sure that she'll be gone to five years. [soft tones come in]

Nigel: But he still wanted to see her. Steven got ready for their first visit.

Earlonne: And you know the cold part about a first visit, Nyge?

Nigel: What's that?

Earlonne: You want to look like a CDCR model of what a prisoner looks like.

Nigel: Wait, what do you mean? [laughs]

Earlonne: Your clothes are ironed and creased. They brand new, your draws are new. It's like the cover of a GQ magazine, only it's SQ. [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: So if you're at San Quentin, you're an SQ model, is that what you're saying? [Earlonne laughs]

Earlonne: Yeah, definitely on a first visit. You finna go out there lookin' like the system take care of you. [music fades out]

Steven: And then she didn't show up. [soft tones come in]

Sutina: My kids were in a car accident, so I wasn't able to get ahold of him.

Steven: And I was like, damn, what happened?

Sutina: So he probably felt like I stood him up. [music fades out]

Earlonne: A few weeks later though...

Sutina: [00:25:00] I visited, and we picked up where we left off as young teenagers.

Earlonne: And man, Sutina was committed. Steven was in a level four prison about four hours from where Sutina lived. Every other Friday, she and the kids piled into the car. [soft tones come in]

Sutina: When they were little, it wasn't that bad for them. The older they got, they were like, "I hate this drive. Do we really have to go?" [laughs]

Nigel: She would drive up there and park her car in a dirt road.

Earlonne: At some California prisons, you had to get there hella early to hold your spot in line on the road outside the prison.

Nigel: I heard that people had to show up at like two or three in the morning just to start waiting in this damn long line. And sometimes when they got there, they would find out simply that visits had been canceled. [music fades out]

Sutina: And I would be like, "I hate this place. I'm tired of how they treat me. I'm tired of how they treat us in the visiting room. I'm never coming back."

Nigel: But she did come back. Again and again and again. And despite the circumstances, she and Steven did all they could to build a normal childhood for Sutina's kids.

Sutina: The girls would bring their homework, so he would work on homework with them. When they were a little bit older and they were doing jujitsu, he would get on

the mats in the play area with them and do some jujitsu moves with the girls. So like, we tried to make it as normal as possible, considering it was in a prison. [beat comes in]

Steven: I just kept waiting for that day where like, hey, I'm tired of this. I'm tired of the visits. I'm tired of the, you know, the stuff that goes with all that, like having to get up, having to kill the weekends off, having like, just put your whole life on hold just to come see me. And I never wanted to put their life on hold when I know it's affected them too. [beat fades out]

Nigel: That reality made Steven really conflicted about the relationship.

Earlonne: This all got very real for Steven when Sutina told him she wanted to get married.

[to Stephan] And you had some reservations. Tell us about that.

Steven: They're not even reservations. They were, "no, I don't want to do this." I guess it's hard to explain unless you've been to prison, like you know what it's like. You have to deal with the guards and whatever they're going through. You gotta deal with the crazy rules that don't make sense to anybody. I can't put anything on the table. I can't pay any bills. I'm emotional support through a telephone for a fifteen-minute call and a letter? And what kind of husband is that? To love someone really love him and then say, "Hey, I want you to come experience this trauma with me." C'mon man. It don't make sense. [slow beat comes in]

Nigel: E, explain that trauma of prison that he's talking about.

Earlonne: Well, you know, the violence, the anxiety, the depression, the loneliness of all of it. It is fucking hard, man. I mean, who wants to pull someone that you care about into that bullshit?

Nigel: Mmhmm. But, and this may not surprise you, Sutina stuck in there. After a couple years, Steven put aside his reservations and they actually did get married.

Earlonne: Not only that, they also managed to have two new crumb snatchers without having the privilege of family visit. Because lifers at that time weren't allowed to have family visits. [music fades out]

Nigel: Uh, boom boom room?

Earlonne: Somethin' like that. And even though they were making it work in prison, Sutina wanted to get him out of prison. She wanted him to apply for a commutation.

Nigel: Once again, he had reservations.

Steven: Having life without, but that's really what it is, like you're gonna die in prison. It's death by incarceration. And I fully accepted that's where I'm going to die at. And then to open that door to really open the door for hope. I don't know how to say it, but I felt that if I opened the door and nothing happened, that that would really just, like, the depression that you can't come back from. It's real. And I don't even like talking about it because I could, I felt it and, it's not cool, man. Like, people really don't even

know, like, no hope really means until you have no hope. You know what I mean? Maybe, like maybe a drowning victim might understand what no hope looks like. [soft tones come in]

Nigel: But again, Sutina did not give up.

Earlonne: And eventually he did file for that commutation. He did it for her though.

Nigel: Sutina started spending as much time as she could fighting for his release. She started an LWOP group, got to know other people whose partners had life without.

Earlonne: She'd go to Sacramento, advocate for Steven's release, and in August of 2018, my partner, [00:30:00] the honorable California governor, Jerry Brown, announced a bunch of commutations.

Nigel: And... [music fades out]

Sutina: Commutations came out and he was not on it, and I was devastated. I was like, "Shit. He wasn't commuted."

Earlonne: Then a few months later, her phone rang,

Sutina: Ironwood State Prison popped up, and I was like, "uh, why is the prison calling me?" And so Steven's on the phone and I'm like, "what's going on?" He's like, "I just got off the phone with a nice lady from the governor's office who told me my sentence has been commuted." [soft tones come in]

Earlonne: In the fall of 2019, after 28 years in prison, Steven Green walked out the door of his cell for the last time.

Steven: So I shut it. And I was like, I've been a porter before, so I've cleaned cells out and shut them. But this was the cell that I lived in. This was the, you know, this is where they, this is where I was caged at. That cell was mine and it's empty. And then I got to tear the tag off the door. And the sound is very different 'cause I knew I wasn't coming back no more.

Sutina: It was shock. I was crying for a few days just like, "oh my god, I can't believe he's really coming." And then I kind of went through survivor's guilt because all of my fellow wives, you know, who their husbands weren't commuted. [music fades out]

Steven: It was weird, like, they're going to really let me go.

Earlonne: [to Steven] Like, is this happening?

Steven: Yeah. Like, you know, look what just crawled out the belly of the beast. And we got the truck and went there. And I remember looking in the back, like, I go, "I'm leaving people that I love too. I'm going to the people that I love, but I'm leaving people that I love." And, it was weird. It was weird. It's still weird.

Earlonne: At Sutina's house, Steven saw something that really threw him.

Steven: Like when I came home, like there's like, what do I call it, a shrine – a memorial? I don't even know what it even was. I came home, this is my first time ever seeing it and I walked into the bedroom and there's like a thousand pictures of us and me and our family all on her nightstand. And the first thing, I wanted to start crying, like, this is like a shrine, like a memorial to our marriage or who I was inside. But this is what she was hanging on to. And for me, I mean it's, it's moving, it's touching. And I was like, what logical thinking person would do that to themselves? [soft tones come in]

Earlonne: Steven had been out for about three months when I interviewed him and Sutina they were both still getting used to their new reality.

Sutina: I've had to control my household and my life for the last 20 years.

Earlonne: The power dynamic, does it change a little bit because he's home now? You've been doing everything for the longest.

Sutina: Definitely, I've taken care of him the last 19 years. I'm used to helping him and doing everything for him. And he comes home, and I still want to be that. Let me do it for you. Well, how is he going to learn anything if I'm doing everything for him?

Steven: I feel like with her with the power and control thing that's going on, like I've been controlled my whole damn life. Like, back up. [music fades out]

Sutina: He was more affectionate it seemed, inside. Always holding my hand, always rubbing my leg, always touchy-feely kind of, and now that he's out, I'm like, "why don't you want to hold my hand in public?" [beat comes in]

Steven: I'm getting out and I'm looking at like, "dang! There's a gang of colors out here. Look at all the greens, and blues, and purple, like all the different shades!" That's what's going through my head. And she's like, "why aren't you holding my hand?" And I'm like... Or I'm looking at all the different cars and how they're shaped and the sounds. And I'm tripping on all that stuff. And she's thinking about holding my hand or hold me or... way different, I'm on a different page. And then it's like, "hey, I'm not going nowhere. I can hold your hand tomorrow."

Sutina: For me personally, knowing he had a life without the possibility of parole sentence, I did kind of have a wall up. I never wanted to be fully vulnerable because I don't want to get hurt. And I think him coming home, I tore down that wall. I was like, "okay, he's home. I don't have to worry about anything. [00:35:00] I'm vulnerable." And I'm like, "oh shit, I don't like how this feels." Like, I'm scared. [music fades out]

Steven: I definitely believe that if I was single, I think my adjustment would be easier. Just because I only have to worry about me. But like adjusting to being a husband, which never have been. And like you have an idea of what you think a husband is, but your wife is gonna let you know that you're failing in areas that you're failing in, every time. And it's not always pleasant.

Sutina: But there's a lot of things that I'm learning that I know I need to step up and be a better wife. [getting emotional] You know, just sometimes the way I talk to him or treat him. I don't know sometimes why I act the way I do. I get scared and I try to

push people away 'cause I don't want to be hurt. And I feel like sometimes I'm scared. And so I'm mean to him 'cause I'm trying to protect myself. Yeah, it's just, it's been a roller coaster. There's times that we're on a high and I'm like, this is great. And then there's times what we hit the low and I'm like, I don't know if I can do this. [beat comes in]

Nigel: So Earlonne, you spoke with Sutina and Steven back in January. Steven had only been out for a few months.

Earlonne: He was still living in a transitional house.

Nigel: He was part of a program called Project Rebound that gives people coming out of prison, a place to live, and it supports them while they're getting a degree from one of California's state schools.

Earlonne: So the transitional house, his school, it was going great. Then the pandemic hit.

Nigel: Because of that, Steven moved from the transitional house into Sutina's home. [beat fades out] And so they're locked in together now.

Earlonne: Alright, so everybody got the headphones in? Cool.

Sutina: Yes.

Earlonne: We wanted to check in with them and see how they were making it during this pandemic.

Nigel: So how many people are in your house now? How many people are living there?

Sutina: There's seven of us. So it's me and Steven. And then my oldest daughter Sariah with her boyfriend. And then they're expecting a baby. My son Joshua, who just came home from UC Berkeley and then our daughters, Genesee and Jayden.

Earlonne: So is this the Brady bunch. Y'all in there chillin'. [Sutina laughs]

Nigel: Yeah.

Steven: I wouldn't describe it as chillin', but alright. [everyone laughing]

Earlonne: Hey, Hey, I bet it's the best lockdown you've been on.

Steven: This is the biggest cell I've ever been in, that's for sure. [laughs] So I'm happy to be here with my family. But it's definitely a handful of trying to continue my studies. There's no more alone time or no more quiet time. My quiet time is interrupted by what my girls need for school, and so they can be successful. And it's definitely a challenge in that direction, that's for sure.

Earlonne: So you're going through Sutina been going through?

Steven: Oh yeah. I've already, I've, yeah. The longer that I'm out, the more that I realized, like how much, not the only my wife has done. But like any lady who's in this

situation, whether it's a sister, a mom. She's paid all the bills. She's kept a roof over their head. She's kept them in school. And not just kept them in school, but like decently in school. Like they're good kids. Like, being here now full time, I start to really see like, she's like the linchpin in everybody's life and you remove the linchpin, everybody falls apart.

Nigel: This is the first time you've been living together, right?

Steven: Right. Oh, this is the first time I've lived with anybody, other than my family.

Sutina: Yeah.

Nigel: That's huge!

Steven: Yeah.

Earlonne: Let me ask you this, Steven.

Steven: Yes.

Earlonne: Uh, you got home and you seen the shrine that was dedicated to you [Steven laughs]

Steven: The memorial? Yeah, exactly.

Earlonne: Well, the memorial of your prison life.

Steven: Right, right. [laughs]

Nigel: Is that shrine still there?

Steven: No. I'm trying to bust it up. I'm like, look, we need new pictures. That's over with.

Nigel: So, what's the new shrine going to be like?

Steven: Hopefully it's all family stuff. [Sutina laughs and affirms] Family together. Right, right?

Sutina: It was funny 'cause we were just talking about, I'm like, "I need to replace a lot of these pictures from blues to you being home."

Nigel: But Steven, I can totally understand what you're saying about not wanting to be defined by that experience. But a big part of your relationship occurred obviously while you were in prison. So there must be memories you want to hold onto. And it's tough that they happen to swirl around being in prison, but there's still such an important part of your relationship. It seems like it'd be hard to try to negate all of those memories.

Steven: Yeah, well, I'm not trying to negate anything. I just don't think we should be defined by that. [Nigel affirms] Like even our relationship. I think that it's fine. [00:40:00] I mean, it started in junior high. And yes, there's a big chunk of it in prison.

But as the days go by, that big chunk is no longer the big chunk. There's now this other chunk.

Nigel: Right.

Steven: And so as it keeps going on, I'm like, hey, well, we know what happened here. We lived it. [Nigel affirms] Let's look together towards the future. And let's worry about that part.

Earlone: Okay. So I have two questions left. One is Steven, do you feel she's still crazy for staying down for you?

Steven: Yes. That answer never changes, just so you're so you're aware.

Earlone: Do you understand you would still be in prison if it wasn't for that woman?

Steven: Yeah. [all laughing] [soft beat comes in]

Earlone: He had his head down. "Yeah."

Nigel: I love the pause. It was great. [all laughing]

Darlene: Thanks to me: Darlene, Annette, Raven, Raylene, Theresa, Sutina and Steven. And their crumb snatchers. Ear Hustle is produced on the inside by Nigel Poor, Rahsaan New York Thomas, John Yahya Johnson and Pat Mesiti-Miller. And on the outside by Mr. Earlone Woods and Mr. Bruce Wallace. This episode was scored with music by Antwan Williams and Rhashiyd Zinnamon.

Sutina: Curtis Fox edits the show. Erin Wade is the Digital Producer. Julie Shapiro is the Executive Producer for Radiotopia. Ear Hustle would like to thank acting warden Ron Broomfield.

Darlene: And as you know, every episode of Ear Hustle, it has to be approved by this awesome guy here. [music fades out]

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: This is Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the Public Information Officer at San Quentin State Prison. I've just finished listening to the latest episode of Ear Hustle. And since we're all separate from each other, I'm actually calling from home, where I just finished my evening routine workout, three inches down and the heart is strong and healthy. I feel like I'm built to last. And I hope that you too feel like you're built to last. That you and yours are doing well during this quarantine, not suffering losses during this time. And for those of you who have suffered a loss, my condolences are with you. With that, I do approve this episode.

Earlone: [jazzy, upbeat melody comes in] This podcast was made possible with support from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative: working to redesign the justice system by building power and opportunity for communities impacted by incarceration

Nigel: Earlone? We have some very exciting news to announce.

Earlone: That's right. We've chosen a winner in our t-shirt contest.

Nigel: We had a ton of great entries, thanks to everyone who sent one in.

Earlonne: Our new limited-edition t-shirt features a fun picture of your three Ear Hustle co-hosts illustrated by Ana Hicks.

Nigel: Hey, I couldn't imagine being on a tee shirt with two better guys.

Earlonne: That's wassup. You can find a t-shirt and a whole lot else on our website: earhustlesq.com

Nigel: Ear Hustle is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of the best podcasts around here more at radiotopia.fm. I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlonne: And Earlonne Woods.

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

Nigel: Is it going to do anything if I pull— [sound cuts out]

Earlonne: Uhhhh...

Nigel: I think that's in the right side. Does that sound better?

Earlonne: One, two, three, in the— that's too high.

Nigel: We'll get it right.

Earlonne: One, two, three, in the place to be. [beat comes in]

Nigel: Okay, E. Making good radio is *so hard*, so hard.

Earlonne: Fortunately, we've been taught by some *amazing* people.

Nigel: Yes, we have, but the bittersweet thing is we are now saying farewell to two of them.

Earlonne: Since the beginning of Ear Hustle, Curtis Fox has been our steady editorial guide. We've spent hours and hours working through scripts with Curtis. I personally would never forget how in the beginning we did not know how to correctly utilize an editor. The one thing that Curtis does, that's the realest shit ever, he can imagine how a half-baked idea can blow up into a full-on story.

Nigel: Oh, and man, I love writing with him because we could argue, spar, laugh, and we really enjoyed working together. I learned a lot from that guy. I mean, he is just a great writing partner. [beat fades out into another beat]

Earlonne: [00:45:02] Also, since the beginning, producer, engineer and sound designer, Pat Mesiti-Miller has helped us design the audio style of the show.

Nigel: And I've worked inside with Pat for quite a few years now, and he is so diligent, hardworking, unbelievably talented and deeply supportive of the guys inside.

Earlone: And I used to be one of those guys. Pat used to always ask me my opinion on things. And I appreciate him for teaching me how to make dope ass beats and how to sound design an episode. He's a great friend and a good dude.

Nigel: They're both great people. But now Pat and Curtis are moving on to other projects.

Earlone: Hands down, they've left a real impact on the show. And they'll always be a part of the Ear Hustle family.

Nigel: So Pat and Curtis, we're going to miss you a ton. And Earlone, you know what? One more thing I love about Curtis? I love that I can aggravate him with my singing. So Curtis, this one's for you.

Earlone: Drum roll, please. [Earlone imitates a drum roll] [Nigel laugh]

Nigel: Two things you hate: my singing and cars.

Earlone: Hit it. [beat fades out]

Nigel: [singing] *Baby, you can drive my car. Yes, I'm gonna be a star. Baby, you can drive my car and maybe I love you. Beep beep beep beep, yeah!*

Earlone: *Beep, beep, bump, bump, bump.* [sound fades out]

[00:46:24] **END OF EPISODE.**