



Episode 30: I Want the Fairy Tale
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Sabrina Sloan: [00:00] I'm Sabrina Sloan from *Hamilton*, Angelica Schuyler, and this episode of *Ear Hustle* contains language and sexual content that may not be appropriate for all listeners. Discretion is advised.

[Muffled voices, percussive sounds]

Earlonne Woods: [00:18] So here's the million dollar question, man. Are you still a virgin?

Curtis Roberts: [00:22] You're killing me. [Laughs] Why did she turn away?

Nigel Poor: [00:27] I thought business was gonna be taken care of—

Curtis: [00:31] Yes, I'm still a virgin. Sadly.

Earlonne: [00:34] How many days have you been out?

Curtis: [00:37] Probably close to 70.

Nigel: [00:38] Okay, so what? I know that guys inside are very preoccupied about how quickly guys are gonna have sex when they get out. I'm on the side of "What is the rush?"

Curtis: [00:49] Well, the rush is that many of us, like myself, have been on the inside for 24 years without sex. So now we come out and we think that we're gonna run right into the arms of some beautiful woman. It's just not happening. [Chuckles]

Nigel: [01:00] Well, maybe it'll take like six months. If you wanna have just sex, you could just have sex. But are you looking for sex or a relationship?

Earlonne: [01:08] So that's Curtis Roberts. Tell us about it, Curtis. [Laughter]

[Theme music starts]

Nigel: [01:17] You're now tuned in to San Quentin's *Ear Hustle* from PRX's *Radiotopia*. I'm Nigel Poor. I've been working with the guys at San Quentin State Prison in California for about eight years.

Earlonne: [01:28] And I'm Earlonne Woods, a podcaster and former resident of San Quentin.

Nigel: [01:33] And together, we're gonna take you inside...

Earlonne: [01:35] And back outside, post-incarceration.

[Theme music continues]

Nigel: [01:43] Our cohost New York is working on new stories inside San Quentin, so on this episode, Earlonne and I are staying mostly outside and talking about dating and romance after prison.

Earlonne: [01:53] What's it like to get back into the game after decades behind bars?

Nigel: [01:56] Oof, you know a thing or two about that.

Earlonne: [01:59] I sure do.

[Theme music ends. Plunky synths start.]

Nigel: [02:09] Okay Earlonne, last fall, after 21 years in prison, you finally got out. So I'm gonna put you in the same position you put Curtis in. Are you still a virgin? And by virgin, I mean what you like to call "post-incarcerated virgin"?

Earlonne: [02:23] Hoo! You just get right to the point, huh Nige? [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: [02:27] Sorry! I'm following in your footsteps.

Earlonne: [02:29] Nope, I'm not.

Nigel: [02:31] Interesting.

Earlonne: [02:33] Y'know, 'cause when I got out, first night we went to the movies. Next night we was on a plane to LA to sneak up on my family. And I can say we held out as long as words will allow, but eventually, y'know. Badda bing, badda bang, whoop whoop.

Nigel: [02:49] Fireworks?

Earlonne: [02:50] All that. [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: [02:52] Well E, you're saying "we," not "I." And so I think it's time to let the cat out of the bag: you've got a girlfriend.

Earlonne: [02:59] I do have a girlfriend. We met about a year before I got out, we started writing each other profound letters, and one thing led to another.

Nigel: [03:08] And man, you really hit the trifecta when you got out. Because you had a job, a place to live, and an awesome girlfriend.

Earlonne: [03:16] And I have 21 years of suspended animation behind me. Y'know, you're just in there, your life is on hold, you're imagining what it might be like if and when you get out. And now I'm living out what I imagined.

Nigel: [03:30] It's so great, and you know how happy I am for you. But you know what, you had realistic expectations, I think. And that's not always the case with guys inside.

Earlonne: [03:39] Some guys have been incarcerated since they were teenagers, so they've basically grown up in prison. They don't have any actual experience with romance and dating, so they have to look to some other source for inspiration.

Anouthinh "Choy" Pangthong: [03:51] While I was inside, I had an idea of what romance is. I had a lot of time to watch TV and a lot of movies and that influenced my definition of what romance is.

Earlonne: [04:03] This is Anouthinh Pangthong, aka Choy. He went to prison when he was 15, and he got out of San Quentin a few months before I did, in April 2018. He's 30 years old now.

Nigel: [04:14] Choy was on *Ear Hustle* last year, and when he got out, you got him on the phone from San Quentin, Earlonne, to ask him about his first date post-incarceration. And here's a bit of that call.

Choy: [04:24] So we walked, we actually walked, and I walked her to the TK station, gave her the hug, and she went her way and I went my way.

Earlonne: [04:34] A hug, no kiss?

Choy: [04:36] Dude. After I told her what I did, bro, that already cut the night short.

Nigel: [04:43] Well we are happy to report that Choy now has a girlfriend. But Earlonne, it really has not been smooth sailing. 'Cause do you remember when we first talked to him about it? He was just about in tears 'cause he was so in love. And then we talked to him, and they'd broken up, and it was all drama. But now they're back living together.

Earlonne: [05:01] Yeah, it's a learning curve. Especially if you haven't been in the game for a few decades. Like Choy said, a lot of what he knows about relationships comes from the movies.

Choy: [05:10] It's Hollywood, it's made up, and the real world is so much different than that.

Earlonne: [05:20] What movie would you base your romance life on?

Choy: [05:22] I love romantic movies. One of my favorites is actually, I saw a long long long long time ago *The Notebook*.

Nigel: [05:36] Okay Earlonne, it is time we had a talk about *The Notebook*.

Earlonne: [05:40] Alright.

Nigel: [05:41] I keep hearing about *The Notebook* from guys inside San Quentin.

Earlonne: [05:43] Well, a lot of people at San Quentin seen it because a couple of years ago on the closed-circuit TV channel, they showed the movie *The Notebook* for like about a week.

Nigel: [05:54] And you told me you actually dropped a few tears when you saw it.

Earlonne: [05:56] Wait, wait wait wait wait wait. [Nigel laughs] I might've just been tired that night, Nige, man.

Nigel: [06:00] I don't know, because I remember you said to me, [Laughing through the sentence] "You've got to watch that movie with your husband."

Earlonne: [06:04] You're gonna put me on blast too, huh? [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: [06:05] Well I still haven't seen it, and I bet a lot of our listeners haven't either, so tell me about it my friend.

Earlonne: [06:13] Okay. It's pretty involved, though. But here it goes. [Gentle harp music] Noah meets Allie at a carnival, and they fall in love. But Noah's working-class,

and Allie's rich parents ain't having it, so they send her away. Noah writes every day for a year, but her parents hide the letters. Allie gets engaged to someone else, but one day, she pays Noah a fateful visit. He still loves her and she still loves him. They marry and they live happily into old age... until Allie's Alzheimer's kicks in. But she's written their story down in a notebook, and Noah reads it to her as her memory fades. They die in each other's arms.

Nigel: [07:04] So I think I have some notion as to why it struck a chord in San Quentin, but what do you think, E?

Earlonne: [07:11] Well, it's a beautiful rich girl falling for a guy from the hood. [Both laugh]

Nigel: [07:18] Yeah, that's true.

Earlonne: [07:19] A lonely isolated guy writing letters to a woman he loves but can't touch. Remind you of anything?

Nigel: [07:26] Okay, I can see why it resonates with guys inside. But will they admit to it?

Earlonne: [07:30] Will they?

Nigel: [07:31] Well, we're gonna find out, because New York and Yahya, our inside producers, went out to the yard and got guys on the record about *The Notebook* and other romantic movies.

[Rustling, chatter]

Voice 1: [07:46] Everyone's seen *The Notebook* by now, is it like a spoiler alert thing?

Voice 2: [07:48] I haven't.

Voice 1: [07:49] Oh, you haven't?

Voice 2: [07:49] No.

Nigel: [07:50] I haven't seen it either!

Voice 3: [07:53] I haven't seen it and I wouldn't watch it.

New York: [07:55] Do you know what it is?

Voice 3: [07:55] I know it's about Mark Zuckerberg, right?

New York: [07:57] Would you watch a love story like that, a romance movie?

Voice 4: [07:59] No.

Voice 5: [08:00] I was forced to watch it. I was kinda glad when it was over, I wanted to go back to watching our *Star Wars* binge.

Voice 6: [08:07] I'm the only gangster you'd probably ever meet that my favorite movie would be *The Notebook*. I'm a very heartfelt gangster, man. I could watch a heartfelt movie and feel empathy for someone that got their heart broken or whatever, but I can turn around and beat your ass after too. [Laughs]

Voice 7: [08:23] It's a tearjerker but it's cool. It hits you here in the heart.

Voice 8: [08:27] Of course I cried! It's a very emotional... very emotional.

Yahya: [08:32] Have you ever seen the movie *The Notebook*?

Voice 9: [08:34] Nope.

Yahya: [08:34] You've never seen *The Notebook*? Why people so quick so just say "Oh nope, I never saw *The Notebook*!"

Voice 10: [08:38] I'm in love right now. I've been with my girlfriend, fiancée for six and a half years, throughout my whole incarceration experience. Being incarcerated, I could see being on the gentleman's end. Seeking approval from my fiancée's family when I get out.

Yahya: [08:55] If she had Alzheimer's, would you sit by her bed like old boy in *The Notebook*?

Voice 11: [08:58] Yes I would, as long as she's breathing. Look, she's sticking with me through the hardest time man, being in a prison relationship, you know what I mean? So if she can go through all the visiting process, the clearance process, the CO searching you, to come see me, then I could do anything for her.

Yahya: [09:12] You sound like you're living in *The Notebook* right now.

Voice 11: [09:14] Yeah exactly, man. It's our *Notebook*, man.

[Voices fade out, transition music]

Curtis Roberts: [09:23] Did you ever see the movie *Pretty Woman*?

Nigel: [09:26] Believe it or not, I have not seen that.

Curtis: [09:28] Julia Roberts, at the end, she says this line that is like my calling card...

Nigel: [09:33] This is Curtis Roberts, we heard from him at the top of the podcast.

Curtis: [09:36] Richard Gere says, “Hey look, I’ll set you up with an apartment, an allowance, and once a month I’ll fly into town and we’ll just do our thing.” And Julia Roberts says, “No, I want the fairy tale.” The fairy tale is, “I want the whole ball of wax.” I want the wedding, I want the wife. So that’s my problem, ‘cause I wan the fairy tale.

[Transition music]

Earlonne: [10:03] Listeners might remember Curtis from an earlier *Ear Hustle* episode called “Left Behind.” At the time, he was serving a 50 year to life sentence on California’s three strike law. He’d been addicted to drugs, and his last strike was for stealing \$40 from a cash register.

Nigel: [10:19] So Curtis spent 24 years in prison, and when he sentence was commuted in 2018, he moved out of San Quentin and into transitional housing in San Francisco.

Earlonne: [10:28] And like a prince in a fairy tale, he was looking everywhere for his princess.

Curtis: [10:33] We were getting a delivery at the house, a lot of the local businesses deliver food to the house. They just donate it. Really cool. And this guy and this girl were delivering these boxes, so I went outside the house and I was helping bring in the boxes. And so the girl jumped off the back of the truck just to give me hug for helping them. And man, I talked about that hug for three days. [Laughs] She didn’t hug nobody else, but she hugged me, and I thought it meant something, you know, but I guess it was just a hug.

[Upbeat guitar]

Nigel: [11:13] Oof, Earlonne. [Earlonne laughs] Truly, sometimes a hug is just a hug.

Earlonne: [11:18] Yeah, but remember, Curtis spent decades in prison where there’s no hugging of women going on.

Nigel: [11:25] But wait, even in the visiting room?

Earlonne: [11:26] Well that’s different. Yeah, you can hug at the beginning of your visit and at the end of your visit—

Nigel: [11:30] [Overlapping] Yeah, that’s what I thought.

Earlonne: [11:32] —but, if you get caught hugging in between, your visit can be terminated.

Nigel: [11:35] Oof. So, prison is probably not the best place to learn about the intricacies of interacting with the opposite sex.

Earlonne: [11:44] I don't know, Nige. I mean, you got your memories, you got your movies, TV, books.

Nigel: [11:49] Well you're talking about manufactured things there.

Earlonne: [11:51] And you got your fantasies! That's all you need.

Nigel: [11:54] Even though Curtis didn't have any dates set up yet, he did have fantasies about them.

Earlonne: [11:59] What do you envision your first date being like?

Curtis: [12:01] Um, let's see. [Laughs] I envision it... we get to take off and run somewhere straight into the chapel. And get married. [Laughs]

Earlonne: [12:13] Goddamn, Curtis! [Curtis laughs]

Curtis: [12:16] You asked!

Nigel: [12:19] That man is in a hurry.

Earlonne: [12:22] [Laughing] He sure was. He went straight to the internet. I don't even think internet dating was around when Curtis first went to prison.

Nigel: [12:29] Oh, it wasn't. The internet itself was barely around. So for Curtis, the whole online world was new and super exciting.

Earlonne: [12:37] But for a guy that just got out of prison, there are pitfalls online, and here's one of 'em.

Curtis: [12:43] As soon as they find out that I've been in prison, 'cause I always like to tell 'em...

Earlonne: [12:45] Don't, don't. Let that be later, man. Don't.

Curtis: [12:48] Well I tried that on—I met a woman on a dating site. So she's like, "Well let's just go have a cup of coffee." And so I texted her back and I was like, "It's just not that easy." And she says, "Well what's your problem, what are you hiding? What do you mean it's not that easy?" Well, I have to get prior approval, governor's gotta sign off on it, you know the whole nine yards.

Nigel: [13:09] The governor?

Earlonne: [13:10] He was exaggerating.

Nigel: [13:12] [Chuckles] I guess so.

Earlonne: [13:14] But he does live in a transitional house, and he can't just come and go as he pleases.

Curtis: [13:17] I just can't walk out of the house and go have a cup of coffee with a date. She said I was hiding that I'm a convict, or ex-convict, and she called me a liar, a manipulator, a con. She said because I wasn't upfront.

Nigel: [13:33] Okay Earlonne, so when *is* the right time to tell someone you've been in prison?

Earlonne: [13:38] Well, in my case, it wasn't a problem 'cause I met my girlfriend while I was still incarcerated. So she knew. But on a recent visit to my parole office, I put that very question to some of my fellow parolees.

[Chatter, transition noises]

Voice 1: [14:00] Right away. Just to let her know where you're coming from, what your background is, and so you don't get no surprise later on.

Voice 2: [14:05] Will it be the first conversation? I doubt that. But eventually, I'm gonna let her know that I went to prison and what I went to prison for, 'cause I want her to understand who I am and how I got to be who I am today. It would be within the first week for sure.

Earlonne: [14:20] So you said it *would* be within the first week, so you haven't even shot your shot yet?

Voice 2: [14:23] I haven't even approached a woman yet.

Earlonne: [14:26] Alright Joseph, how long did you serve and how long you been out?

Joseph: [14:28] I did 35 seasons, 35 years, and I've been out 12 days.

Earlonne: [14:34] When do you think it's appropriate to tell a woman that you meet that you've been missing in action for 35 seasons?

Joseph: [14:41] I would have to wait until I built up the relationship and get the courage to see if she's able to handle that. So I would say probably... well it depends on how long the relationship goes. 'Cause I'm not going to just offer up information like that, but if she asks me then I would tell her the truth, I don't think that's being deceitful.

Earlonne: [15:00] So you don't feel that you owe a person that you meet that part of your life at that particular moment.

Joseph: [15:06] At that particular moment, no.

[Transition music]

Nigel: [15:12] Okay, so some difference of opinions on that one. Although, if you've been in prison for 35 years, that's a huge chunk of your life you're not talking about. It's gotta be awkward on a date.

Earlonne: [15:23] Right. But first thing's first: you gotta get on a date. A few weeks after he got out of San Quentin, Curtis got on Facebook. He thought that might be a good place to find someone, so he wrote this post.

Curtis: [15:35] "Curtis Roberts, in city, enjoying life and freedom. Seeking female connection. Come, let's play. I already lost..." [Fades underneath Erika]

Erika Solano: [15:45] "Come, let's play. I already lost 29 years, a family, a child, no more. I choose to live." And so I saw that and I had to put the brakes on him quickly. 'Cause I feel like it's my responsibility.

Nigel: [16:00] Erika Solano is a Facebook friend of Curtis's. They've never actually met in person, but hers was the first of many negative responses to his post.

Erika: [16:09] So I wrote him, and this is what I say to all the guys. "Facebook is for friends to stay in touch, and to network with like-minded people. Not a dating site. You need to delete this post and create an account with [match.com](https://www.match.com) or Tinder, or any of the other dozens of legitimate sites that are for people looking for intimate or romantic connection. I will block you if you try to see if I'm interested in you."

Curtis: [16:33] I was very surprised. [Laughs] I was shocked, matter of fact. I could not believe people were responding like that. Course I was very confused, I was like, I don't even know what Facebook's for.

Erika: [16:45] "I will continue to be your Facebook friend if you wanna communicate with someone who spent two decades incarcerated and has navigated to achieving almost all of my free world goals."

[Transition music]

Nigel: [16:58] Erika is a formerly incarcerated person herself. She now lives in Sacramento, drives a truck for a living, and Earlonne, would you agree she is someone who doesn't take shit from anybody?

Earlonne: [17:08] She did 20 years, hell no. [Both laugh]

Nigel: [17:11] She is no pushover. And she also makes it her business to tutor guys like Curtis on what dating is like in 2019.

Curtis: [17:17] Erika actually has become like a big sister to me. She has been great. So she schools me and she teaches me now.

Erika: [17:27] He was craving insight and information, and so I picked up on that and I was like, look, I see you're a good guy. I'm gonna just break this down for you.

Earlonne: [17:36] What did Curtis get wrong here? Was it the language that he used? Was it tagging you and a bunch of other women in the post?

Erika: [17:44] Yeah that was, that was inappropriate right from the get-go. You know, you don't do that. It's obvious he does not know the social appropriate standards of either social media or the world today. He just jumped into three decades in the future and is trying to communicate to people that he could compete.

Earlonne: [18:06] Erika has been out of prison for about five years now. She was 20 when she went in, and when she got out, she had to figure out all kinds of shit.

Erika: [18:15] I didn't know how to do stuff. I just didn't know about a lot of things. And I would just break down everywhere, and sometimes I would just wanna tell people: I've been in prison. I've been gone. [Gentle, spring-like strings] The hardest part was differentiating between my realities. My mind is still in 1992. And then there's the whole prison experience. And then I'm free. So the three different realities clashed constantly. I would see a woman walking with her kid and I would just start crying 'cause it felt like I was looking at myself, and I had to mourn the life that I lost, and I would just break down. All the years lost, I look in the mirror and I'm like, "Fuck. I'm old now." Well, not that old.

Nigel: [19:17] Erika says she wasn't in any hurry to get into a serious relationship.

Earlonne: [19:20] But she is in the game. There's a guy she sees pretty regularly and she's still online dating.

Nigel: [19:28] So would you call yourself an active dater?

Erika: [19:29] Yeah, yeah. When I feel like it. It's just not a priority. I don't make needing to feel love a priority. I don't need to feel loved. I have cats.

Nigel: [19:48] We'll be back with more post-incarceration stories on dating and romance, and a major update on Curtis, after the break.

[Thumping transition music. Then sound of lock turning, buzzing synths, door opening slowly.]

Nigel: [20:12] People getting out of prison have been through a lot, so when it comes to sex and romance, they're often dealing with a lot more than just the vagaries of online dating.

Sara: [20:22] You can't go through prison and not come out with some form of trauma that's impacted your soul and your body on a cellular level. [Slow drumbeat that mimics a heartbeat]

Nigel: [20:35] This is Sara. She was in a story we did called "Dirty Water," about sex traffickers and their victims. Here's a clip from that episode.

Sara: [20:45] I was eleven years old, and there was an intention when he intentionally learned my route, and then came in as a father figure. Developed a relationship with my mother, my mother being broken, so he knew that was a win.

Nigel: [21:06] Sara killed her trafficker when she was 16 years old and spent two decades in prison. Shortly after she got out on parole, she got married.

Sara: [21:14] I had this belief that if I came home and I got married and I had this—as if it would trump the fact that I had been labeled as a child that had killed someone. You know, the whole label would go away.

Nigel: [21:32] Sara got to know her future husband towards the end of her time in prison.

Sara: [21:37] He would visit me for probably like 11 months. Very charming. He was also like supermodel attractive, so I think [chuckles] he had that to his benefit.

Nigel: [21:50] Did you meet him through a—did he write you?

Sara: [21:51] He wrote me, and he was very charming through his letters and showing up. I think I had a fairy tale perspective. [Both laugh] You know, 'cause I got out October, I was married by February, and then separated and processing a divorce within four months.

Nigel: [22:18] All of that within four months?

Sara: [22:19] Mhm, pretty much, yeah.

Nigel: [22:20] The marriage ended when Sara was already pregnant with their daughter Summer.

Sara: [22:25] He was actually addicted to porn, and then the times when I caught him, and then the objectifying. I really did my best to honor our marriage, but it was based on falsehoods all the way around. And I remember we went to go check the sex of

Summer, and we were told it was a girl, we were having a girl. I was like, “Oh my God, this is so beautiful.” And the look on his face sealed the deal for me. He was upset that we were having a girl.

Nigel: [22:58] What was the look on his face?

Sara: [23:00] Like...

Nigel: [23:01] Like disgust?

Sara: [23:02] Yeah. And I was like, “I’m gonna protect her.” And not allow this objectifying individual to be in our home. And so I left.

[Transition music: dreamy, droning synth; snaps]

Nigel: [23:24] So this brief marriage post-prison was a trauma that Sara definitely did not wanna repeat, and I asked her what advice she would have for men and women just getting out of prison who are looking to connect romantically with someone.

Sara: [23:36] So what I would suggest, strongly suggest to somebody getting out of prison is take your time. Be mindful to yourself. Spend time rooting yourself outside of what you may believe you need to be. And clearly question the depths of why people are in your life.

[Music crescendos, ends]

Curtis: [24:09] Her name is Laura, and she is... amazing.

Earlonne: [24:14] A few months into Curtis’s search for love, I checked back in with him. He’d been busy.

Curtis: [24:20] We met each other on a dating site. And I don’t know, the more we started talking it was just really clicking. And I had already pointed her to the *Ear Hustle* podcast ‘cause I wanted her to hear my story, and she heard it, and she came back on and she had no problems. And she says, “I really want to get to know you, you’ve been through enough in life.”

Earlonne: [24:47] They met in person a few days later. I asked Curtis what stood out about Laura.

Curtis: [24:53] Well, it was her laugh. You know when people laugh and it’s so easy to join in with ‘em? What’s that word, “infectious”? It’s like that. Her laugh is like that.

Earlonne: [25:04] Laura’s been a nurse for 35 years. Curtis says she’s a hard worker, and she’s created a nice life for herself.

Curtis: [25:14] She has a lot of class. The way that she carries herself and the way that she lives.

Earlonne: [25:19] Do you fit into that equation?

Curtis: [25:22] Not yet. I'm, you know, I'm fresh out of prison. I'm used to a Top Ramen soup and I think I'm really flying, really doing something. But she really takes care of herself and lives. And she's looking forward to teaching me that stuff. It's intimidating, 'cause I have never been a good provider, so I'm not sure what I'm bringing to the home.

Earlonne: [25:53] When we first spoke to Curtis, he was still a post-incarcerated virgin. So of course, I had to ask if he had any updates.

Curtis: [26:02] She has a dog and an apartment. It's a little pug dog. So anyway, so we were kinda just messing with the dog, and then I think finally she had had enough and...

Earlonne: [26:14] She knew you weren't never gonna make that move.

Curtis: [26:15] [Laughing] I was not.

Earlonne: [26:16] You weren't never gonna bust no move, just sit there and play with the pug.

Curtis: [26:20] So yeah, I was not. And she finally just turned around and kissed me and then she even had to ask, "Is it okay? Do you wanna go to the room?" I'm like a typical 56 year old male. You know, you're still wondering after all these years of incarceration...

Earlonne: [26:40] Will you be able to perform?

Curtis: [26:41] Yes. Exactly.

Earlonne: [26:43] Will you be able to do a great performance?

Curtis: [26:44] Well I wasn't even trying that part. [Laughs] Let's just get the performance over. The first one after 25 years, so let's get that one over.

Earlonne: [26:55] When both of y'all are stark naked, how do you feel?

Curtis: [27:00] Nervous as all get out. I felt like I was 12 years old.

Nigel: [27:13] About this time, on Facebook, Curtis changed his relationship status to "Married." Can you explain what the hell is up with that?

Earlone: [27:22] Well, I think that was a bit premature. [Nigel laughs] Again, Curtis is not that familiar with Facebook. I think he meant to change it to “engaged,” because, in fact, earlier that day, Curtis and Laura decided to commit themselves to a life sentence together.

Nigel: [27:40] And they made this commitment to a life sentence just two weeks after they met.

Earlone: [27:46] Do you think that it’s going too fast, or do you think it’s going as planned?

Curtis: [27:52] Well, since I’ve waited 25 years, I don’t think it’s going too fast. Neither of us think it’s going too fast. You know, it’s easy to stand on the outside and judge it one way or the other. It just is what it is right now, and this is our choice.

Earlone: [28:10] And Curtis also said that being in a relationship represented something he’d been missing.

Curtis: [28:15] To me, that represents security. Something I haven’t had for a long long long time, if at all, ever. So just coming out of all the years in prison, nothing is secure there. Nothing. You own nothing, you are nothing, and we’ll do with you what we want. So now I’m looking for security.

Earlone: [28:40] After answering all my questions, Curtis actually had a question for me.

Curtis: [28:47] And the reason why I’m gonna ask you this question is because I really looked up to you in prison. I did. I looked up to you, and you were like, even though you were hard on me, you were like a big brother. So I wanted to ask you to be my best man at the wedding.

[Chatter, light piano]

Nigel: [29:08] It actually turned out to be kind of a San Quentin, *Ear Hustle* wedding. There was Adnan Khan, who was a former resident of San Quentin and was also in an episode last year, there were other guys from San Quentin, I was there, you were there. It was in this cozy, pretty church in Mill Valley, up north of San Francisco, actually not far from San Quentin, but it felt like another world. There were about 30 of us there, and it was... it was really nice. It was simple but really sweet.

Earlone: [29:35] The bride had a pink dress, Curtis had on a gray suit with a pink tie, and I wore a blue suit with a pink shirt.

Nigel: [29:42] But casual.

Earlone: [29:43] Very casual.

Nigel: [29:43] No tie.

Earlonne: [29:44] No tie.

Nigel: [29:45] But you know who wasn't there when the ceremony was supposed to start?

Earlonne: [29:48] Who? [Nigel laughs] The best man?

Nigel: [29:51] It was hot, and we waited for 45 minutes for you to casually show up.

Earlonne: [29:57] But I got an excuse here.

Nigel: [29:58] Oh yeah? Let me hear this one.

Earlonne: [29:58] [Overlapping] I got an excuse. Let's just say that even though I spent my last seven years *living* in the Bay Area, in San Quentin, I haven't quite mastered the geography and the traffic patterns.

Nigel: [30:13] But you know what the bottom line is? You made it, and Laura and Curtis tied the knot.

Officiant: [30:16] And so Laura and Curtis have openly declared their wish to be united in marriage and have pledged their faith and love to each other before these witnesses. Therefore now they have become husband and wife. [Cheering] You may kiss the bride.

Earlonne: [30:36] The reception was in a long room right behind the church. There were snacks, chips, dip, chopped-up eggs, coffee. It wasn't that far from what Curtis and I used to see at San Quentin.

Nigel: [30:48] Are you saying it was a prison spread? [Earlonne laughs]

Earlonne: [30:51] Somewhat, somewhat.

Nigel: [30:53] Okay, but they did have cake. And not just one, but two beautiful cakes.

Earlonne: [30:58] That's right. It turns out there was something else to celebrate: it was Curtis's birthday. [Live sound from the reception] Curtis is 33 years old.

Laura: [31:06] 33. [Laughs]

Curtis: [31:07] 57! 57.

Earlonne: [31:11] He's a '57 Chevy. [All laugh]

[Crowd sings “Happy Birthday” to Curtis, end with whistles, cheers, and applause]

Curtis: [31:30] Nigel, did you get to meet Laura?

Nigel: [31:31] No, I’m waiting my turn!

Curtis: [31:33] Nigel, Laura. Nigel. She works with Earlonne. [Nigel and Laura greet one another]

Nigel: [31:37] Okay, Earlonne, you know me well enough. You know I could not help myself, and I had to ask her some questions.

Earlonne: [31:44] No, I knew you was going in.

Nigel: [31:46] What do you love about him? How’d you know? Two weeks, this is the guy for me.

Laura: [31:48] It’s his heart, his heart. We had a lot of very quiet, very intimate conversations about things that no one else knows but Curtis, and you can tell Curtis’s heart immediately.

[Slow transition music]

Earlonne: [32:07] See Nige? Just like *The Notebook*. [Both laugh hard]

Nigel: [32:10] Oh my God, you are so corny! Are you gonna say this was love at first sight?

Earlonne: [32:15] This was love at first sight. They found each other when they were both at crossroads in their lives.

Nigel: [32:21] You have the mushiest heart, it’s very sweet.

Earlonne: [32:24] That’s what prison do to you.

Nigel: [32:27] Okay, I can totally hear what you’re saying. I can hear their love in that clip. What can I say? I gotta be honest; I had some concerns. I care about Curtis and I want him to be happy. And I have to say, I’m not the only one who had some... quandaries about the union.

Earlonne: [32:43] “Quandaries,” huh?

Nigel: [32:44] Yes. This is Val, Laura’s maid of honor.

Val: [32:47] I just wanted her to be careful. And I told her, “Don’t go too fast, take things slow.” [Inaudible male voice] Yeah, that was fast.

Nigel: [32:55] So while I was talking to Val, her husband Frank had been hanging out nearby, sort of ear hustling, and it really felt like he didn't want to speak to us, but of course I was really curious to know what he thought of this. So, you probably missed it, but while I was talking to Val, Frank chimed in and said, "That wasn't slow. That was fast."

Earlonne: [33:14] It turns out Frank had a backstory that I can relate to.

Frank: [33:17] You gotta remember I'm an ex-con. I had 10 years in Illinois, but I'd been out 20 years before I met her.

Nigel: [33:25] So Frank was out of prison for 20 years before he met the right woman, and they've been married for 11 years now. They are both a little bit skeptical about Curtis and Laura's rush to get married.

Frank: [33:36] Very skeptical.

Val: [33:38] I—I think that they really do care for each other. You know, in the amount of time it could be love, because we loved each other right away. But I wish they would've spent a little bit more time, especially... he just got out of the halfway house.

Frank: [33:55] He hasn't been out long enough to know he wants to be committed to a marriage.

Nigel: [33:59] So I just wanna clarify what you're saying. You're skeptical of the time that he's been out, not that he's an ex-convict.

Frank: [34:04] Right, I don't think he's ready for... I don't think he's ready for that big commitment.

Nigel: [34:13] So E, what do you think? Is Curtis really ready for this big commitment?

Earlonne: [34:18] Well, I'll tell you this, Nige. Time will tell. The real question is has Curtis done the work to get past the trauma of prison? I mean, we didn't bring it up in this episode, but Curtis, he was bullied in prison, he was brutally assaulted. He went through some shit. 24 years of shit.

Nigel: [34:38] Yeah, that's right. And that reminds me of something Sara told us. She's been through a lot of trauma in her life, and like we said, she was trafficked when she was a child, and she killed her trafficker when she was 16.

Earlonne: [34:19] She was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole, which is its own kind of trauma.

Nigel: [34:53] But in prison, and since she got out almost six years ago, she's spent a lot of time trying to heal those wounds. [To Sara] Now do you think because of all the work that you've done on yourself and all the groups that you've been involved with that you are actually much better at relationships? [Sara laughs, Nigel chuckles in response] You have so many tools.

Sara: [35:14] Um... I do have tools. I also have deep trauma, and sometimes my body and my feelings betray what may be my present.

Nigel: [35:31] Yeah, and how... how does one regain, or maybe it's not even regain, maybe they never had it, the understanding and the love of your own body, when it hasn't been loved by people like—

Sara: [35:45] It's hard, Nigel. I don't think that there's a class. I don't know if one day it's all gonna be gone. I hope so. I mean I think about how many times my body has been assaulted and abused, and you got hundreds. And then being in a space where you wanna be intimate and really present is huge, because my body wants to just sometimes float away. Um, but breathing. When I notice my body, when I start holding my breath and I'm breathing shallow, that means I'm preparing for harm somehow. So I have to be mindful to breathe through some of the things. Or just say, "You know what? I can't do this right now." And when you have a partner that loves you and that's your friend, it's good, 'cause you just take a time out. But I also think, for people who come with different types of trauma, it's great when the partner also really wants to be informed of what that trauma could look like.

Nigel: [37:02] And Sara does have a partner now.

Sara: [37:05] I never thought that I'd have a gift of having that kind of love in my life. Like— [Giggles] Not like that. So when this man showed up... [Sniffles, exhales sharply] And he inhaled my breath? I was like, "Okay. We can do this." I've been in this space and...

Earlonne: [37:37] You say you're in this space. Is it easy space?

Sara: [37:40] At times, yeah. There's this beautiful fluidity of being in that space. And there's other times when I'm like a cactus. [Laughs] Cactus.

Earlonne: [37:58] What turns you into a cactus?

Sara: [37:59] Oh! The triggers of insecurities and... I fill in the blanks from my experiences. And I wish that brothers, or just any man, could take his class on how to treat the person that you love.

[Gentle strings]

Nigel: [38:32] So E, I guess we should let listeners know. That person Sara's talking about there is you.

Earlonne: [38:41] Indeed.

[Strings continue, the tempo picks up, a voice starts scatting over them]

Earlonne: [39:09] Thanks to Choy, Curtis, Erika, Laura, Val, Frank, and Sara for taking the time to kick it with us. Also, Rahsaan "New York" Thomas, John "Yahya" Johnson, and all the men we spoke with on the yard and at the parole office. *Ear Hustle* is produced by me, Earlonne Woods, Nigel Poor, John "Yahya" Johnson, Rahsaan "New York" Thomas...

Nigel: [39:31] ...and Pat Mesiti-Miller, who also comes in to work with our sound design team. This episode was scored with music by Antwan Williams, David Jassy, Lee Jaspas, and Earlonne, get in here, there are too many names for me. [Earlonne laughs]

Earlonne: [39:42] Rashid Zinnamon, E. Phil Phillips, John "Yahya" Johnson, and Dee Dixon.

Nigel: [39:47] Bruce Wallace produces our outside stories with Earlonne.

Earlonne: [39:50] Curtis Fox is our senior producer, Erin Wade our digital producer, Julie Shaprio is our executive producer for Radiotopia.

Nigel: [39:59] And we wanna thank Warden Ron Davis, and as you know, every episode has to be approved by this guy here.

Lt. Sam Robinson: [40:05] I'm Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the public information officer at San Quentin State Prison, and again I get to weigh in on an episode, and listen to the life of a guy who I spent a number of years with here inside the prison. Curtis is Curtis and the guy who I hear outside is the guy that I know. I pray that his marriage and his life is as great as he envisions it is. And so with that, I will say that I approve this episode.

[Beat boxing]

Nigel: [40:36] Next time on *Ear Hustle*, we're breaking our format. It's wall-to-wall music.

Earlonne: [40:39] Since the first season, listeners have been wanting to hear more music up out of San Quentin, so this episode is just for you.

[Beat boxing ends, harmonica starts. When harmonica fades out, percussion and singing start.]

Voice: [Singing] [40:53] *I was blinded by the light/I was drawn out by the Christ/He said "gimme your life and I'll give it back"*

[End theme starts]

Earlonne: [41:05] 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: [41:16] Check out our website earhustlesq.com where you can sign up for our newsletter, you can see pictures of people in our stories, and it's also a place to buy *Ear Hustle* t-shirts and mugs. And also, please follow us on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook @EarHustleSQ.

Earlonne: [41:30] Hell yeah, follow us, mane. *Ear Hustle* is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of... you know what?

Nigel: [41:39] The best podcasts around?

Earlonne: [41:40] [Overlapping] The *best* podcasts around. Hear more at radiotopia.fm. I'm Earlonne Woods.

Nigel: [41:46] And I'm Nigel Poor. Thanks for tuning in.

[Music ends]

New York: [41:54] I know you're just acting hard 'cause the recorder on. [Laughter] I know you saw *The Notebook*. I know it!

Voice: [41:57] I never seen *The Notebook*!

New York: [41:58] Come on, man. I know you seen it, man.

Voice: [42:00] I've never seen *The Notebook*!

New York: [42:01] I saw *The Notebook* and I'm way tougher than you.

END OF EPISODE.