



Episode 44: Nobody Comes Back
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Darlene Burke: [00:00:00] This is Darlene Burke, the founder and Executive Director of Ten Toes In. The following episode contains language that may not be appropriate for all listeners. Discretion is advised.

Earlone Woods: This is our last episode of the season. And Nyge, these months have been *crazy*.

Nigel Poor: I know Earlone. I mean, I hardly know what to say about it. Our first episode dropped the first week of March, just as the pandemic broke out. And we've talked about how that's playing out in California prisons.

Earlone: Yeah. It's gotten really bad in there in the past few weeks. As of June 8th, when we're recording this, there are close to 2,500 confirmed cases of coronavirus amongst California state prisoners, including 15 in San Quentin. And there are 400 cases amongst CDCR staff.

Nigel: And Ear Hustle's work inside San Quentin, basically ground to a halt. Volunteers haven't been allowed inside since mid-March.

Earlone: And then the whole world watched as George Floyd was murdered and people are really feeling some kind of way behind that.

Nigel: We wanted to hear from people inside to find out what all of this has been like for them.

Earlone: So a few days ago I got on the phone with our inside cohost New York.

[over the phone to New York] That was the straw that broke the camel's back, man. And I think it's gonna be some type of resolve from this, you know? There's going to be some type of resolve. You know what I mean? Right now, people are really championing African Americans. You know what I'm saying? Or Black people or Brown people. People are really out here protesting. That's up here, man.

Rahsaan "New York" Thomas: [over the phone] And that's a beautiful thing. I love – 'cause for the first time in my life, honestly, Earlone, this is the first time I ever seen a whole world stand up. I really feel like my life matter right now.

Earlone: No, definitely, no seriously. Like, man, I can go down there and [indistinguishable]. It's a whole different feel. It's almost a feel of former royalty, of a king. I'm a king right now.

Nigel: I love hearing your optimism.

Earlone: I mean, that's what I see. I mean, I'm looking at it in today in real time, you know? I'm hoping that once in my life, this shit change.

Nigel: New York doesn't quite have the same outlook though.

New York: I'm not expecting a dramatic change. We need something new in order to have a dramatic change and that's gonna take a while.

Earlone: Bruh. I think it's finna be a dramatic change, bruh. I don't think – man, when you got people around the world, man, all on the same page, man, there's a problem. Something's gonna get overturned.

Nigel: Some listeners may be wondering how much people inside can actually follow the news about what's going on. And it's actually quite a bit.

Earlone: Yeah. I mean, when you're on the inside, you watch a lot of TV. Truth be told, I honestly watch more news on the inside than I do out here on the streets.

Steve Champion: My name is Steve Champion. I've been in San Quentin since December of 1982. I'm housed at East Block.

Earlone: East Block is death row in San Quentin.

[over the phone to Steve] Are you following what's going on dealing with the George Floyd...

Steve Champion: [over the phone] Yes, yes much as I can I have been paying attention to what's been going on in Germany, Berlin, Paris, just all the different protests that have been going on in the United States.

Nigel: How are you getting information?

Steve: Primarily television. And whenever I talk to people or if I get a newspaper and things of this nature, or a lot of it, I get from the radio because [Nigel affirms] they seem to have a much more in-depth analysis in terms of just the soundbite snippets that you see on TV.

Nigel: Are you hearing things that are surprising you? [automated voice, "This call and your telephone number will be monitored and recorded"]

Steve: Say that again?

Nigel: I said surprise you, are you hearing things that surprise you?

Steve: No, I'm not surprised at all. You know, people are tired. They're tired of seeing the same thing happen over and over again. They're tired of the same stories that they're hearing saying, "Well, we need to have better police training." They're tired of hearing the story that the overwhelming majority are good cops. As opposed to just, there's a few rotten apples. [Nigel affirms] What does that mean?

Nigel: Steve, is there any way from where you are, you feel like you can participate in the protests?

Steve: Uh, yeah, just in terms of having this conversation with you. I can write. You know, I can't be out there on the streets marching among the people, but you know, I am in solidarity with them and things of this nature, you know?

Nigel: What about you, E? Have you've been protesting?

Earlonne: Nyge, I really, really want to be out there protesting, but it's hella hard when you on parole. [Nigel affirms] You know what I'm saying? Like, I definitely want to get involved. I definitely want to be a part of it. I've seen my niece out there, one of these days, and she was out there protesting and she's like 18 and I'm proud of her, you know. But seeing all these videos about police shootings, [00:05:00] you know what I'm saying? That shit is personal to me. [Nigel affirms] Being out there and watching how this protest is going where you have the police versus the protesters, you know what I'm saying? And me being in the middle of that shit and the stuff that I hold somewhere deep inside? Like it's triggering, you know. So I don't even want to put myself in that situation. If I get caught up and get, just so happened to get detained and arrested, everybody else is getting out. Not me. I got to go

through a whole parole violation, came in contact with the police. It's all kind of shit I gotta go through.

Nigel: Yeah. I mean, there's a lot of hard choices that formerly incarcerated people are having to make. I mean, just like you, they want to be out there, but for some of them, it just feels too risky.

John "Yahya" Johnson: The reason why I'm scared is because having had 25 years of prison experience, how will I show up in society now, if I see an officer doing that to a Black man?

Nigel: Ear Hustler, John "Yahya" Johnson got out of San Quentin in April.

Yahya: Will I be a spectator that point my phone at the situation and try to document it for the world to see, or will I physically run over there and try to stop this person from harming this person unjustly, especially when they land on the ground and they're not moving? How am I going to show up with that? 25 years of survival instinct and self-preservation in a prison that was inherently violent? That's what really scares me? I'm on parole. I'm a parolee. Anything that I do can send me back to prison for life. I'm scared for that. I'm scared to have to make that decision.

Nigel: Ear Hustle friend Jason Jones got out in 2018 and he's still on parole.

Earlonne: But he has been going to protest.

Jason Jones: I went a couple times. One, I actually took my daughters. I didn't let them get out the car. We drove by and the reason being, I wanted them to see themselves, right? And I feel like as a parent, it's our responsibility to educate our kids and expose them to like the realities of the world and make them aware and then be able to answer some of their questions. And I don't think social media or the news, per se, is doing a good job at interpreting what the problem, or what it is. And the refreshing part of it is that when I asked them if they had any questions and they didn't understand why the cops was out there. And I was like, that's a different perspective. I wasn't expecting that.

Nigel: There's one other thing that pushed Jason to show up at that protest. It was something he'd seen earlier that day.

Jason: My wife and I went on a hike and as we come back down the hike, I looked to my right at these two young boys that happened to be white. And they was about, like, anywhere from ten to twelve. And they're swinging on a swing and completely oblivious to what's going on right now in the world. And it struck me because when I came home, right when I got on Instagram, it's a little Black boy that's around the same age as their counterpart and he's holding the sign at the protest, asking, "Am I next?" And like, I just had like this complete feeling of like, it's not fair. And it's not fair on both sides, not fair

for the kids to be subjected to that. And it's not fair for the kids to be protected from like the reality of the world, right? Because ten years from now, they're going to be in a power position, right? And ten years from now with the little Black kid, he might not make it. He might be in prison or he might be dead. And that's the harsh reality of it, right? And that's the reason why I think it's gonna take like both sides to come together. All races to come together, to understand and learn from each other's perspectives. [simple beat comes in followed by transition]

Earlone: Test one-two, check one-two. [David Jassy beatboxing] Uh oh, uh oh.

David Jassy: My name is David Jassy. I'm from Stockholm, Sweden.

Nigel: David Jassy is a songwriter, producer, and a regular contributor to your hustle. [upbeat tones come in]

David: So on March 27, I was in my cell, asleep. I was actually having a dream about being back in Sweden and I was just about to go on stage and perform. And just before that, my cellie woke me up and say, "Yo, they want you by the podium ASAP. Hurry up."

Earlone: When Jassy got there, he found two other prisoners waiting, including his friend Fanon. [ambient noise from inside prison, voices chattering]

David: There was a sergeant standing there looking super serious, and then he just looked at us and say, "Hey, you three guys, come with me right now." We followed him and he went over to the barracks, but they usually hold disciplinary hearings and the 115s. [beat comes in]

Nigel: Fanon went into the barracks first. He was in there for a few minutes. Jassy did not know what was going on.

David: And then I'm looking over to the barracks and I [00:10:00] see Fanon coming out and he got his hands over his face and he just go, "Thank you, Jesus." And I see tears coming down his eyes. And now I got really nervous and you know, I'm starting to feel tears coming down my eyes. 'Cause I know Fanon had 210 years to life. So I asked him what's up. He's like, "Man, immediate release". So Sergeant Everly's looking at both me and the other guy and he's like, "Who's going next?" And we're just sitting there and nobody want to go. And we're just looking at each other and he's like, he's like, "Come on, man, you go, you go." I was like, "All right, I go." [beat fades out]

And I walk in there and there's a CO sitting in there and he's like, "State your name." And I say, "David Jassy." "State your CDC number." "AC 9202." And he got on the phone with Sergeant Pacheo. And he was basically saying, "Mr.

Jassy" I said, "Yeah?" He said, "Well, Governor Gavin Newsom took a look at your case. And he has decided to commute your sentence with immediate release within five days." And I just frozen and tears just started coming down my eyes and it was just like, I didn't remember anything else or could hear anything he said after that. And I just, you know, I just turned around and tried to hold onto something. And then he was like, "Mr. Jassy, Mr. Jassy, are you there?" And I was like, "Yeah, I'm here." He said, "Are you okay?" I said, "Yeah, I'm okay." And that was pretty much it.

Nigel: I never get tired of these kinds of stories. [theme song comes in]

Earlonne: Definitely. Like that's the best feeling in the world to you at that moment. Like seriously, like there's no better news.

Nigel: Man. But obviously, getting the call is just the beginning.

Earlonne: Getting out means freedom. But that freedom often comes with a very big asterisk. That's what we're talking about on this episode: the surprises that meet you at the gate.

Nigel: I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlonne: And I'm Earlonne Woods. This is Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia. [theme song fades out]

Hey everyone, before we get any further, just a quick break. [soft beat comes in]

Nigel: Just a quick one. I promise.

Earlonne: To say thank you.

Nigel: We just wrapped up our first ever spring fundraiser and it was a huge success.

Earlonne: Thanks to all of you we crushed our goals. And we are so grateful.

Nigel: Your support ensures Ear Hustle will be back another season and that we'll be able to keep bringing you those important stories. And you what else is exciting?

Earlonne: What's that, Nyge?

Nigel: All the support also means we've been able to expand the team.

Earlonne: Yep. The Ear Hustle fam bam is growing.

Nigel: And that's great.

Earlonne: From my heart, thank you for the support. [beat fades out]
Considering everything that's been going on, [beat comes in] it means the world to us that you chipped in and helped Ear Hustle continue to do the work.

Nigel: Hey partner, do you remember way back at the end of Season One, I said the reality is bigger than the dream?

Earlonne: Of course.

Nigel: Well, I gotta say it again. The reality continues to be bigger than the dream and thank you Ear Hustle listeners for being part of that dream.

Earlonne: Thank you again and be well. [beat fades out]

David: The sergeant allowed us to get on a phone and I immediately called the Swedish Consulate who put together a three-part conversation with me and my son. And yeah, that was a powerful moment, just to be able to tell my son that daddy's finally coming home. And I'm tearing up as I'm just saying this man, 'cause it's so unreal, man. It's so unreal. [dreamy tones come in]

Oh my god, the first two days I didn't sleep. And my cellie was like, "Go to bed." I was like, "No." 'Cause I know if I go to bed, I know it's gonna be a dream 'cause there's so many times during my incarceration that I used to dream that I was back in Sweden. I mean like, super realistic dreams that I was free. And then I wake up and I'm still in this cell. And I really didn't feel that I was gonna get released until three o'clock on April 7. When they came and he asked me, "Is there a Mr. Jassy in here?" That's when it got really real and tears just started coming down my eyes. [tones fade out]

Earlonne: Jassy's friend Fanon was getting out the same day. Between the two of them, they had served 35 years.

Nigel: A little while later, they met up and walked out of their housing unit, West Block

David: We just both looked back and looked at West Block, then we passed Death Row, you know, took a last look at that. And then we passed, you know, North Block and the hospital. And [00:15:00] this is the beautiful thing, because when we came to the yard, it was a full moon that was so big and so bright. And I saw it as a sign as in the same way that you can't really see the sun, it's still letting you know through the moon that it's there. And I kind of feel like that's how God was showing us that even if you don't see me, I'm there and I'm faithful.

Earlonne: How did it feel gettin' out, man, like when you finally walked out of that prison?

David: Well, I was picked up by the ICE agency. [soft beat comes in]

Nigel: And there is the asterisk.

Earlone: David Jassy is a Swedish citizen. His mom is from Sweden and his dad is from Gambia. His crime made him eligible for deportation.

Nigel: Which is why ICE got involved.

Earlone: That would be Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Nigel: And those guys were waiting for him when he walked out of San Quentin.

Earlone: Jassy could have followed his deportation order. But he knew that might mean another few years locked up waiting for a decision.

Nigel: And we've heard that ICE detention centers are worse than a lot of prisons. Also Jassy knew that there was very little chance that he could win a fight against ICE.

Earlone: So he didn't fight. He was deported. [tones fade out]

David: So, I spent 24 hours at ICE. And from there I pretty much went to the airport.

Earlone: When we talked to Jassy back in Season Three for our feature on ICE episode, you asked him about getting out.

Nigel: So [to David] when you get out, what are you expecting? What's waiting for you when you get out?

David: Well, first thing is, my son and [long pause] I would say that the first thing I'm gonna do is I'm gonna fly to Sweden – see my son. And I always tell him that the day after we're going to fly to Gambia to see my dad. It bothers me a lot because I have a lot of guilt for getting into this situation and to have him growing up without me.

Earlone: Jassy got back to Sweden in early April. When I reached him there, I asked him about those plans to see his son and father. [beat comes in]

David: My son is actually studying business right now in San Francisco. So he's actually still in America. He's pretty much stuck in San Francisco. And I can't even go to Gambia as well. So, it's kind of weird, man. He used to be in Sweden and I used to be in Cali and now it's like the opposite. Trading places, but it's a good thing 'cause he's going to college and he's doing something very positive with his life and I'm extremely proud of him. So yeah, but we, we keep daily contact. Just to have to tough it out, but you know, that's like free people problem. I'm not complaining.

Earlonne: Did he, did he go to school in Cali to be closer to you?

David: Well, yeah. I think that was the main reason. Yeah. And now I'm gone. [beat fades out] I got to go to my mom's grave and put some flower on the grave. And that was definitely my favorite moment so far, just to be able to go back to my mom's grave and just let her know I love her.

Troy: My name is Troy Talib Young. I paroled from San Quentin State Prison, February 3rd, 2020. [dreamy toned beat comes in]

Nigel: Troy was actually just in our last episode.

Earlonne: He was the cat talking about being on the run and finally surrendering to the cops, during a party at his uncle's house. He served close to 30 years of a life sentence.

Nigel: We didn't expect to be updating you on Troy so soon. But when we checked in with him, we discovered that he's also having a post-incarceration life that's anything but free.

Earlonne: For one thing, his parole conditions required him to stay in a transitional home for one year.

Nigel: He ended up in a place that sounded pretty awful.

Earlonne: He said there were a lot of drugs in there. And people would real mental health problems not getting the help they needed. [beat fades out]

Troy: Dudes up in the middle of the night, shooting dope, gettin' high. So I try to stay gone much as I could. I had two jobs. I literally was working two jobs, so I can stay out of here.

Earlonne: People were packed in the rooms. Troy's room has six people in in.

Troy: Which is considered a kelle room. You know, we didn't have double bunks with six people in there. So that was more so a [00:20:00] privilege to be in a room like that 'cause regular rooms had ten people, they were double bunked. It was crowded. There's no ventilation in this building at all.

Nigel: And then the coronavirus pandemic hit.

Earlonne: And some of those guys that Troy was sharing a room with, they started to look kinda sick.

Troy: So I was alerting staff about these dudes conditions. And I say they coughin' all the time. You know, they stay in the bed, they not moving around and... I was seeing the signs.

Earlone: Sure enough, one of the guys tested positive. So Troy got tested too.

Troy: So the 14th, I was tested. My test results came back on the 17th on Sunday. Around three in the afternoon, I was sent the email by the clinic and they told me that I had uh...the exact language, was SARS 2 - SARS COVID 2, was detected in my system.

Earlone: Troy is not certain where he caught COVID. The guy at the transitional home is obviously one possibility.

Nigel: Yeah but Earlone, he could have also gotten it on the job.

Earlone: Right. One of his jobs was working in a hotel that San Francisco opened up to homeless people when the coronavirus pandemic broke out.

Nigel: And here's the good thing: this job meant that Troy was able to get tested quickly. And when he tested positive, the organization he was working for actually helped him find a place to quarantine.

Earlone: That was way better than being in a transitional home.

Nigel: Oh, no kidding. I mean, those guys are totally packed in and there is no way you could social distance in there.

Earlone: Right. Troy's job set them up in one of those hotel rooms by himself. That's where he is now. When I got him on the phone, he sounded pretty beat up.

Troy: I became real cold for a long time. My body wouldn't heat up. And my appetite has all but disappeared. I can eat, but it doesn't feel as I'm eating anything.

Earlone: And, and are you talking to your family still?

Troy: Every day, all day.

Earlone: How are they taking it?

Troy: I had to stop talking to them because they was, they got so damn worried they starting to worry me. You know, I wasn't sick and everybody has a story about what they heard and what took place. So one of my sisters and my siblings contact me, I kept it very brief. [soft tones come in]

Sitting up in this room with nothing but time to think, your mind begins to play other tapes, like stories, you done heard or saw on the news of people dying. And hearing all the different stories of the people who tested positive, who didn't make it. And who's on life support and hearing about how the young people, a lot of these kids is coming up with these respiratory issues and you

know, they're not making it – plays on a person's psyche. I've been told that a cousin and a distant cousin of mine, both died of this disease. Shit, one of the thoughts I had was, "Is this how I'mma go?" I don't wanna go like this. [coughs] Excuse me. You know, sitting up in a hotel by myself. [tones fade out] So it's like, you be saying to yourself, "Damn, like this?" I've survived 30 years of prison, man. I survived violence, you know, been shot at by the police, and stabbings and everything up in here. Survive all that to come out here in society to be faced with this.

Earlone: When you were inside and you imagined what it would be like to get out, what did you picture?

Troy: Damn sure wasn't this. [laughs] I used to hear people talk about their bills and dealing with everyday life issues, right? Sitting on the inside, I'm like, "Man, I wish I had those problems." I want those problems. I want to be able to worry about paying a bill and going to work, that way I know I'm living. So my only concerns when I got out was puttin' my life in order. Falling in with the everyday average John citizen. You know, payin' my taxes, doing the right thing, you know. [soft tones come in]

My intention was come home and to see mom – all these years and meet my grandkids for the first time. And now I ain't been able to do that. And the shit I'm worried about is the COVID-19. And I got grandkids I ain't never met, man. You know, I ain't seen mom since 2013 and I'm her only son out of [00:25:00] four that's out. And I still can't see her. This shit is crazy. *Man*. The good thing about it is since we've been on the phone, I ain't cold no more.

Earlone: Oh, man, I heated you up dog [Troy laughs] with conversation. [laughs]

Nigel: We'll be right back after a break. [beat fades out]

Earlone: Any reason why you named your child Kobe? [beat comes in]

Sok Khoeun Loeun: Kobe is my favorite player. So in 2002, it was all star week February 9th. He won the all-star game, MVP that year. And right after the game, my son was born. I had to name him after Kobe.

Earlone: This is Sok Khoeun Loeun. He grew up in California, but his family is from Cambodia.

Nigel: His parents escaped the Cambodian genocide of the 1970s. And Sok was born in a refugee camp in Thailand, right over the border from Cambodia.

Earlone: The family moved to the U.S. when he was two years old, they ended up in Fresno, California living in a pretty rough part of town. [beat fades out]

Sok: We were the only Cambodian family, Asian family in that area. People broke into our house all the time. Like, I'll go to school and if I had stuff, they'd snatch it out of my hands. If I'm drinking something, if they want it, they'll just take it. We got beat up so many times, me and my brothers. They made fun of us all the time. Dude, like, they said we had slanted eyes, we eat dogs and cats, and they make fun of us when their cats get run over. They'll pick up the cat and throw it to the front of our house. You know what I mean? Tell us, "This is your guys' dinner." It was rough.

Earlonne: Eventually he managed to transfer to another school where there were other Asian kids like him.

Sok: As soon as I got there, I made friends right away. My friends, they were in gangs already. At twelve, thirteen years old, they were already in gangs. They had their own cliques, you know, four or five of them. And no one would ever mess with them. Dude, we could do whatever we want now. [soft, melancholic tones come in]

Earlonne: As he got into high school, the gang went from being about strength in numbers to some more serious shit. And around that time, Sok got arrested on a gun charge. He played it down to a misdemeanor and did community service.

Nigel: Then he had his first son, Kobe.

Earlonne: And becoming a father made Sok put some serious distance between himself and the gang shit. He started getting really involved in his family business: making doughnuts.

Nigel: Right. The doughnut shop. Ever since you've been working on this story, you've been talking about those doughnuts.

Earlonne: I love doughnuts, Nyge.

Nigel: Oh, I know you do.

Earlonne: Sok's parents have been in the doughnut business since the late eighties. It's actually a really common thing for Cambodian immigrants to do here.

Nigel: Really? I'd never heard that.

Earlonne: Yeah! One person I talked to said, they thought 90% of the doughnut shops in California might be run by folks with Cambodian roots.

Nigel: Are you serious, 90%? That's huge.

Earlonne: Okay. That might be a little high, but if you're going into a shop around here for classic doughnuts...

Nigel: We're talking about the kind you buy by the dozen in one of those pink boxes, not those hipster, artisanal ones that you buy one at a time.

Earlonne: No, not those. If you go to buy a classic doughnut, chances are you're buying it from a Cambodian American. And making those doughnuts, it's grueling work.

Nigel: On a typical shift, Sok's dad bakes through the night. Starting at 9:00 p.m. and he goes 'til 8 or 9 in the morning. And sometimes he grabs a quick nap in one of those utility closets in the back of the store.

Earlonne: Sok started working with his father when he was a teenager. He told me that working those long hours, side by side with his father brought them a lot closer.

Sok: When I was younger, I hated my father because he'd always tell me what to do when I didn't want to do it. But as I got older, when I started baking doughnut, that's what the main thing, too, that tied me with my father was and made my relationship better than what it was – was because of doughnuts. So when I'd go bake with them at night, we would always talk. He'd always talk about the war. He'd always talk about what he did when he was younger. The things he liked, how my grandfather and my grandmother met, I knew all that stuff from my dad. You know, it's just every single day work. Baking doughnut, you bake seven days a week. There's never a day off. And so every day is just a different story.

Nigel: So Sok was working hard. He had some money coming in.

Earlonne: But he hadn't totally left the gang life behind. Plus the financial pressures of being a father was piling up.

Nigel: Then an opportunity presented itself.

Sok: I knew some dudes in the East Coast that were going to pay me top dollar for it. All I had to do was get the weed from California to them. [beat comes in]

Nigel: Oh boy.

Earlonne: Sok made it as far as Nebraska before he got pulled over. [00:30:00] The cops smell weed. And he ended up in a state prison there.

Nigel: He spent the first month in solitary confinement because of points from that earlier gun charge.

Earlone: But he was able to do some programs in prison that got his sentence reduced from three years to less than one.

Nigel: So he's getting ready to be released when he starts hearing a lot of guys who like him had been born outside the country. And they're worrying about getting deported.

Earlone: [to Sok] When did you start hearing about ICE? [beat fades out]

Sok: Oh, I heard about ICE inside. A lot of people in Nebraska were Mexicans and they were getting deported. Like right away, they're like, "Oh, once we parole, we get deported." And dude, it didn't even click in my head that I can be deported.

Earlone: He paroled and unlike Jassy, there was no ICE van there waiting on him.

Nigel: So he went back to California and he went back to working at the doughnut shop. [ambient sounds from inside doughnut shop, Earlone greeted by woman] This is Sok's mom, Nath Meas.

Earlone: Back in February pre-pandemic, I made a little road trip to the shop. It's on the outskirts of Avenal, a town in the Central Valley. And when you get to the shop, you pull up, there's tables outside and you walk in the door and you're looking directly at doughnuts.

Nigel: Nice.

Earlone: Nath opens up the shop at 4:30 in the morning, seven days a week. And every day, you know who the first customers are?

Nigel: No, who?

Earlone: Come on, this is Ear Hustle.

Nigel: Wait a minute...

Earlone: We never get them on the show.

Nigel: Are you saying that her first customers are correctional officers?

Earlone: Yup. Correctional officers from Avenal's State Prison. Five minutes down the road.

Nigel: Classic.

Earlone: Nath runs shop, sells the doughnuts, and cooks and sells Chinese food too.

Nigel: Damn. I really wish I'd gone with you on this trip. I bet she fed you awesome Chinese food, right?

Earlone: Nope.

Nigel: What do you mean?

Earlone: She served us Cambodian food.

Nigel: Even better. I am regretting not going all the more. So this family works *hard*. Eventually Sok's mom managed to put enough money aside to take a trip she'd been planning for a long time: a trip back to Cambodia.

Sok: And they wanted to take us back to their roots.

Nath Meas: At that time I'm really happy 'cause we go with my parents, go with my grandkid, my kid, you know.

Nigel: They visited the village where Sok's parents were from – where Sok's father watched his brother be killed during the genocide.

Earlone: They also went to the refugee camp where Sok had been born.

Nigel: It was a really meaningful trip, but when they got back to the States, Sok ran into some trouble.

Sok: As we returned in March of 2015, I was going through customs. I had all the passports. I'm the one who walked up. It was about ten passports. I handed over to customs agent and he looked at it. He looked at everyone else's. Then he came to mine. He opened it up and he asked me, have I ever been convicted of a crime? I said, "Yes. Some marijuana charges." And then he goes, "You're going to have to wait here." [soft tones come in] So they took me to what they call the secondary. That's when I found out that I had a case pending against me for final deportation.

Nigel: Sok's passport was Cambodian, but he also had a green card for the U.S. This customs agent did not believe that Sok was a citizen.

Earlone: And if you're not a citizen and you get a drug charge, that can make you a target for deportation.

Sok: I was like, "Nah, you cannot deport me. I never lived in that country." I was like, "Where are you going to deport me to?" They're like, "To Cambodia." I was like, "Dude, I just came from there and I don't live there. I live in America."

Earlone: Sok was stuck back in secondary for something like six hours. Meanwhile, his family had no idea what was going on.

Nath Meas: So that time I'm crying because of why the cop take my son – go in there takes so long. I'm really sad. I lost my son.

Nigel: Finally, Sok was released. But the customs agent had set a court date for a deportation hearing.

Sok: My dad took it rough. It was hard. He was mad. But he was like, "Man, what are we going to do? Let's go get a lawyer." All this stuff. "Let's go talk to people," "I told you not to go with us. I knew you were going to get in trouble." You know, he was just like mad and upset at the same time. You know, it really broke them down.

Earlone: The family wanted to hire a lawyer, but they couldn't afford it. [soft beat come in]

Nath Meas: I don't have money. Anything. I don't have nothing because I spend it all in Cambodia.

Nigel: Without legal advice, their main source of information was friends in the Cambodian American community.

Earlone: And those friends had some horror stories to tell.

Nigel: Word on the street in the Cambodian community was that kids who were caught up in gangs and committed crimes got deported a lot. Sok could try and fight deportation, but [00:35:00] nobody they spoke to knew anybody who had luck with that, especially without a lawyer.

Earlone: He could also just wait and hope ICE never scooped him back up. But that could mean a long time living in limbo.

Nigel: And if ICE did detain him, he could spend years locked up before being deported. This had happened to people they knew. [beat fades out]

Earlone: There was one of the options the custom officers had mentioned back at the airport. Sok could self-deport. He could leave the country voluntarily.

Nigel: But that would also mean leaving his kids behind.

Earlone: Well, you know, Sok actually thought he could be a better father in Cambodia than he can ever be an ICE detention center.

Nigel: Wait, how's that?

Earlone: Well, in Cambodia, he could FaceTime with his kids whenever, you know what I'm saying? [Nigel affirms] He could work, he can earn some money, he could support them a bit. And he couldn't do none of that stuff in a detention center. So, Sok decided to move to Cambodia.

Sok: It's March 19th – a day after my birthday, I guess. I got a plane ticket and was on my way back to Cambodia.

Nigel: Sok's mom couldn't even bear to go to the airport to see him off.

Nath Meas: I don't go with them because I don't want to see everything like make my heart break up. You know, I just stay here and cry with my husband over here. [soft tones come in]

Nigel: In Cambodia, Sok moved in with his uncle.

Earlonne: He lived out in the country. About a 40-minute motorcycle ride to the nearest town. There was no toilet or running water.

Nigel: His uncle was deaf. So, Sok had to learn to communicate with him in sign language.

Earlonne: And the food, Nyge...

Nigel: Tell me about it.

Earlonne: It was not like what Sok's mom cooked for me. It was just dried fish and rice, dried fish and rice. Every day.

Nigel: He was really alone there. And it sounds like he was pretty cut off from other Cambodians, too.

Earlonne: Right. We talked about how a lot of young Cambodian Americans like Sok were getting deported after committing a crime.

Nigel: And when they get to Cambodia, they find they aren't welcome there either. And that's what happened to Sok.

Sok: We didn't come out to say we're deportees out there because a lot of people, they looked down on us on it. That's how the Cambodian community is. They just look at us different and they'll say we're bad people. We're criminals. We got sent from another country.

Nigel: Meanwhile, a similar kind of stigma was bubbling up for Sok's family back in the States. Everyone in the Cambodian community had heard that Sok got in trouble with ICE and there was a lot of talk. [tones fade out]

Earlonne: Folks were whispering that the money Sok's family had, it wasn't because of the hard work his mom and dad did. It was money Sok made selling drugs.

Nigel: This wasn't true, but that didn't make it sting any less.

Sok: They'll talk about it. "Oh, no wonder why she drives a nice car," "Oh, no wonder why they have a doughnut shop. It's because their kid's a drug dealer.

He makes all his money and we thought they were working hard." And my mom felt like I disgraced her. [music comes in]

Nigel: Sok's relationship with his mom was starting to strain. Things got even worse when Sok told her he wanted to get married.

Earlonne: Sok had met a woman through family in Cambodia. They hadn't really dated because apparently that's not done there. But they liked each other. Plus Sok was hella lonely.

Nigel: But Sok's mom, she was worried that getting married was going to be really expensive. And I wonder whether she also felt sad about not being able to be there.

Earlonne: That might be right, but Sok still went through with the marriage and it caused a big riff between him and his mom.

Nath Meas: And then, "Okay. Whatever you want to do." So I stopped talk with him during that time, like almost one year. I think almost one year I don't talk to him at all.

Nigel: Sok and his wife had a daughter together. And he started building a community in Cambodia. One really important connection he made was with a guy named Zar. He'd met him on Facebook.

Sok: This guy always had the right thing to tell me, you know what I mean? When I felt like I wanted to kill myself because I felt alone, I felt like everybody forgot about me in Cambodia. But when I was talking to Zar, I would talk about the holidays, the missing the kids, missing the family out there. He related. He was in the same situation and he related.

Earlonne: Towards the end of 2019, after he'd been in Cambodia, nearly five years, Zar told Sok about a meeting. [soft tones come in]

Nigel: A lawyer with an immigration rights organization was coming from the United States and offering folks like Sok free legal advice.

Earlonne: Sok was skeptical. His family had had no luck with any kind of legal advice back when he was in the States. Certainly not free legal advice. Plus, he thought nobody ever beats ICE.

Nigel: But apparently there was going to be food there. Something other than that fish and rice he was having every day.

Sok: I wanted a barbecue, like an [00:40:00] American barbecue. Where we just stood around with our beer cans. We had hot dogs and burgers on the grill. I wanted that. And he was like, "Look, there's gonna be a lot of guys that

are gonna be coming out. And you can hang out, we can hang out, like we're in America.

Earlone: So Sok went. Mostly for the barbecue, but he did take his paperwork with him. He waited in line and he finally got to sit down with the visiting lawyer, Anoop.

Sok: So it's my turn. I go up. I talked to Anoop about two minutes, three minutes tops, and he looks at all of it and he goes, "I believe you're a citizen."

Nigel: Anoop needed to see one more document to be sure. Sok didn't have it. He panicked a bit and texted his sister, Lisa.

Sok: And then Lisa was like, "You need mom's certificate of citizenship?" She goes, "Dude, I got the paper here at home, like right in front of me." So she – it's like a minute. My sister took a picture and sent it right back to me. Anoop looked at the date and he's like, "Yeah, you're a citizen. Since you were twelve years old."

Nigel: When he was twelve, Sok's mom had become a U.S. Citizen. And at that moment Sok did too. Sok even remembers mentioning to the custom agent at the airport that he thought he might be a U.S. citizen. But the guy's computer told him something different.

Earlone: And you know, what's so crazy, Nyge?

Nigel: What?

Earlone: Immigration officials had already figured this out. A few years before Sok meeting with Anoop, his case finally arrived in front of an immigration judge back in the States. The judge determined he was a citizen and canceled the deportation order against him. But the family never heard about it.

Nigel: So there's this whole different way his life could have gone if Sok's family could have afforded a lawyer, or if he had waited in California for his case to play out, this would have been one of those rare cases when a person faces down ICE and wins.

Earlone: And Anoop, the lawyer that Sok met with, he told me that out of the 60 or so people he saw the same day he talked to Sok, most of them had grounds to fight their deportation. [soft, upbeat music come in]

Sok: When he told me I was a citizen, I said this: "Is my daughter, a citizen?" He said, "Yes." It was the best feeling ever. One of the greatest feelings ever.

Nath Meas: He called me. Called and called. I don't pick up. And then his dad pick up. "Oh, Dad, I go back, I go back to the United States!" His dad come

talk to me. "Oh, Sok gonna come back." [indistinguishable] Calling him liar.
The state not let him come!

Earlone: Right.

Nath Meas: How he gonna come? No-no—

Earlone: Nobody

Nath Meas: Nobody come back. [music fades out]

Earlone: Sok flew back to San Francisco in January. At first, his mom said she didn't want to go meet him at the airport.

Nigel: She'd been through so many emotional ups and downs over the five years Sok had been gone and she just didn't want to go through one more. Plus part of her didn't believe Sok was coming home.

Nath Meas: And then I see my husband sit down and cry and then he felt sad. "Okay. I go." I drive over there. I never drive a car like past the city. I never, and then, you know how I speed in the car? I wanna see my son, but I don't tell my husband at all. I don't tell no one. And then I speed in the car. Whoa! 80 and 85. And then my husband, he say, "The car look fast." I told him, "No, I wanna see my son, too." [laughs]

Nigel: Sok's friends arranged a big party for Sok's return. There was a DJ, dancing. *At the airport.* [ambient noise from airport party in the background] [celebratory music comes in]

Earlone: It was crackin'! I even got involved and picked up some cool Cambodian dance moves. And of course, there were a lot of doughnuts.

Nigel: Sok took forever to get through customs.

Earlone: But finally, he arrived. [family and friends cheering as Sok arrives while live drum music plays] When he got to the terminal, after weaving through everybody, he seen his pops and he dropped down to the ground in front of him, bowing and giving him honor.

Nigel: Sok came back to America alone.

Earlone: But since he's been back, Sok's been working with his lawyer, Anoop, to get a passport for his daughter and a visa to bring his [00:45:00] wife here. It's actually easier for him to work out all those details from California then from back in Cambodia.

Nigel: And in the meantime, he's back at the doughnut shop. [ambient noise from inside the shop, Sok's father speaks quietly]

Earlone: It was a little after nine when I met him there and Sok's father was dropping doughnut batter into a deep fryer. He and Sok move around each other in a tight kitchen, not talking that much.

Sok: It's just, it's like a dance. We just already know. Nobody really has to be told to do anything.

Earlone: A little while later, Sok props up his phone next to a table where he and his father are rolling out more dough. He FaceTimes with his wife and daughter in Cambodia. [Sok speaks in Cambodian over FaceTime with wife and daughter] Sok pauses to watch his daughter take a spin on her bicycle. [Sok and his father laugh while watching]

Sok's dad took a break from working too.

Nigel: Did he just call his granddaughter, "crazy girl"?

Earlone: Yes, he did.

Nigel: That's really sweet. [Sok's daughter speaks in Cambodia over FaceTime]

Before we go. There's one last story we wanted to share.

Earlone: It's something David Jassy told me about the ICE officers who were escorting him out of the United States.

David: You know, they were very formal. They didn't say a lot and they put handcuffs on me. Once we got to the airport, they pretty much took the handcuffs off and allowed me to check in without having any handcuffs on. They flew with us from San Francisco to Los Angeles. And not until we were like maybe ten minutes away from the gate, he actually said that – he was like, "You know, Mr. Jassy, I actually know who you are. I heard the ICE episode on Ear Hustle." I was like, "You did?" He's like, "Yeah, it's kind of weird that you were talking about, you know, ICE and actually going home and here we are transporting you." You know, I took up my guitar and, I played a song called, "Coming Home."

[David singing and playing acoustic guitar]

*Soon as the gate open up I'mma hit the ground running
I'm on a first thing, smokin' for my homecoming
I'm coming home to Stockholm
but via London
I'm bringing all of my stocks, home
Dow Jones and abundance
Came from being locked up in a dungeon
Now I'm running for the third base, homerunnin'
I'm so done with seeing prison Blocks.*

So ready for this new world,
even though it feels like a trip to mars
'Cause I ain't seen the streets in so long
Bear with me if I need a moment.
I may look calm on the outside
but my brain is filled with serotonin
and I just wanna call my son, Terrance
He the first that I'm telephonin' [ring]
Hello?
But I'm coming home again
to the place where I belong,
I'm coming home again
I've been gone for oh so long
but I'm coming home again
to the city that I'm from.
I'm coming home, again
to my city [3x]

I praise God
to my city
I could feel the rush of adrenaline
bubble under my skin again
I'm coming back home
Let the free life began again
Feeling like I stand at the verge of a new millennium,
button up my shoulder
like I lost 100 kilograms
Happy like I ate a pill of Ritalin
sniffing in the cinnamon,
the aroma that been lingerin'
At San Quentin,
I pray, I never see the pen again
Writing with a pen in hand,
letters to my fam
saying I return a better man
I promise
I'll return a better man.
It's been a long time coming
like the Sam Cooke song
I'm on a plane flying across the pond

'Cause I'm coming home again
to the place where I belong
I'm coming home again
I've been [00:50:00] gone for oh so long
But I'm comin' home again
to the city where I'm from
to my city yeah, yeah, yeah [2x]
Stockholm, that's my city,
yeah, yeah, yeah

*I praise God
for my city*

[music fades out] [theme song comes in]

Thanks to Steve Champion, Jason Jones, me - David Jassy, Troy Talib Young, Sok Khoeun Loeun, and Nath Meas for being a part of the episode.

Sok: Thanks also to Romarilyn Ralson, Peejay Ai, and Lisa Loeun for their help with this episode

David: Ear Hustle is produced by Nigel Poor, Earlonne Woods, Rahsaan "New York" Thomas, John "Yahya" Johnson, Bruce Wallace.

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: This episode was scored with music by Antwan Williams and David Jassy.

David: It was sound designed and engineered by Antwan Williams.

Sok: Amy Standen edits the show. Erin Wade is the Digital Producer and Julie Shapiro is the Executive Producer for Radiotopia.

David: Ear Hustle would like to thank acting warden, Ron Broomfield, and as you know, every episode of Ear Hustle has to be approved by this guy here.

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: This is Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the public information officer at San Quentin State Prison. And as always, I get the opportunity to finish off the season. There is no question and no doubt that what happened to George Floyd in Minneapolis was a crime. That was pure evil. And so with that, I think there's a weight that as an African American male that I've had over the course of the last couple of weeks. Being reflective and recognizing that although I am a peace officer, when I take off my uniform and, uh, my badge is not on my hip or on my chest that when I exit the walls of San Quentin and I'm in the community, I am an African American male. And what happened to George Floyd, I think many of us recognize that that could have been yourself, it could have been your brother, the child that was underneath the knees of evil.

And so there's a weight that goes with that. It'll be awhile before there's healing that replaces that. But with that, how do we fix it? How do we get to a better place? I challenge the Ear Hustle world. It takes good people to dawn the uniforms and to police their communities if it's going to be effective and compensating and serving all.

When I get the opportunity to recruit people to join the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and speak about what it is to be a peace officer – so when I entered the classroom, there are students who were Black and Brown who approach me and ask, "How was that experience? How was it

experienced to be a peace officer, a Black male, uh, in law enforcement, and to go back home and to be accepted by your counterparts." And what I often share is that you are who you are. The job does not make you who you are. You bring all of your talents, all of your compassion, all of your respect for life and how you treat people to the job. It takes people like them to be brave enough to dawn the uniform and the badge, and to have impact with those who they interface with every day.

And so, if you really want to reform what policing looks like, it takes people like you and I to do that ourselves. And so, with that I approve this episode.

Troy: [00:55:00] 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.

David: Ear Hustle is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of the best podcasts around. Hear more at radiotopia.fm.

Nigel: Thanks for listening this season.

Earlonne: Yeah, big thanks. Like you, we don't know what the next few months are going to bring.

Nigel: Whatever happens. Just know, we will be back with new episodes in September.

Earlonne: And in the meantime, keep your eyes on our feed. There may be some surprises for you.

Nigel: Also, the Low Down, our monthly email newsletter will still be coming out. And there's always good stuff in there. You can sign up for that at our website, earhustlesq.com.

Earlonne: One more thing before we go. My boy, David Jassy, who we heard from in this episode, just dropped the San Quentin Mixtape Volume One, full of songs he produced with the youth offender program. Check it out wherever you find your music.

I'm Earlonne Woods.

Nigel: And I'm Nigel Poor.

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

New York: [performing "Hands Up I Can't Breathe Don't Shoot" accompanied by flute-like synth tones]

*I was born most likely not to make it
Most likely to be killed before I'm 25*

*or mass incarcerated
I'm the most feared
The most hated
The least fully educated
The most likely to be killed by institutionally biased cops
And unlawful racial profile stops
even though I'm unarmed and mean no harm
They terrorize me like a terrorist, carrying a bomb
How much longer will this go on?*

*Ain't no jobs for me
in this recessed economy
So I'm slinging cigarettes to feed my family
Police see me
and they start the bunch
Because I'm Black,
they got a hunch
They say I'm resistant though I ain't throw a punch
I'm telling them I can't breathe.
I can't breathe.
What part of that couldn't they believe?
They view Black as cheap, like Friday sales,
So we gotta protest every time they kill a Black male.
The peace disturbed until they protect and serve
like we all deserve.
Hands up
I can't breathe
Don't shoot*

[beat fades out]

END OF EPISODE [00:56:18]