



Episode 40: Sorry Means Nothing

Air Date: April 15, 2020

Nigel: [00:00:00] Hey E!

Earlonne: Whaddup, Nyge?

Nigel: We're about to get into this week's episode. But before we do that, because we're in the middle of this pandemic and prisons are being deeply affected by it, we wanted to talk a little bit about that first.

Earlonne: We asked families of incarcerated people to write us and let us know what's going on, and here's a bit of what we heard: Kathleen has a son in a federal prison in Louisiana where four incarcerated people who had died from coronavirus and seventeen others have tested positive.

Nigel: She said she was really worried when she stopped hearing from her son, but she did finally. He wasn't sick. He'd been quarantined because he had been in touch with one of those people who tested positive.

Earlone: Mm. She wrote: *He said he is not sure when he'll be able to call again, and he is tired of bologna and PB and J sandwiches.*

Nigel: Oh god, Earlone, I bet you can relate to that.

Earlone: I laughed when I read it. [Nigel laughs] 'Cause I understand. If that's all you got, that's all you got.

Nigel: Oh god. This is Amelia whose husband is in Corcoran State Prison in California. She wrote: *I'm scared. I've got no one to really talk to. I don't go anywhere during this crisis except work and the grocery store. And I have more hours lately than usual, which is hard on my body and soul, but at least it's good because I alone am responsible to support both of us financially. We have no one else to help us.*

Earlone: Stacy's husband is in prison in Solidad, California. She said, things are getting tense inside because of the limited access to phones. Her husband calls every other day, but the calls are two minutes tops. He hops off quickly, she says to avoid the bullshit and the drama. Still though, he's paying two to four soups per call.

Nigel: Two to four soups per call?

Earlone: It's a barter system, Nyge. You give me your soups, I give you my place in the phone line.

Nigel: Well. I guess there's a hustle for everything. And actually, the phone access thing can cut both ways. Nicole has a boyfriend in a prison in Texas where they've actually extended the phone hours late into the night. That sounds good, right?

Earlone: Oh yeah. That's that romantic shit.

Nigel: Mhm. But she wrote, I'm not particularly excited about it. I'm what you call an essential worker who also works on weekends. So I don't care to receive any incoming calls at midnight knowing I have to get up early to go to work. However, Earlone, her boyfriend called to just say, "Hey, I haven't been able to talk to you this late and over a decade."

Earlone: She wasn't tryna heard that shit though.

Nigel: Not when you got to get up early to go to work.

Earlone: Hell no. And hey, I hope since she's an essential worker, she's getting hazard pay.

Nigel: Oh god, I hope so.

Earlonne: Layoffs are happening inside too.

Nigel: Yeah. This one surprised me. It's so close to what's happening on the outside right now.

Earlonne: Right. Aubrey's father is in prison in Pennsylvania. Her dad was laid off from his job in the laundry to reduce the number of people working together in close quarters. Aside from the boredom, she worries about him losing a little bit of money he gets from that job that he could spend in a commissary.

Nigel: Yeah. And a lot of people wrote about the lack of cleaning supplies. But of course, folks in prison are finding a work around.

Earlonne: Prison ingenuity.

Nigel: Right. Amy has a loved one in a federal prison in Mississippi. She says a few of the men working in the laundry have repurposed some of the bleach. To clean their own areas, which they absolutely need to do.

Earlonne: Man, keeping things clean and sanitized is a really big deal in prison.

Nigel: Oh yeah

Earlonne: People are packed in close quarters. They're often not in great health and a lot of people are elderly and it's hard to keep things clean, which is exactly what you need to do during this pandemic.

Nigel: And Earlonne, you know that's one of the reasons in California, they're speeding up the release of something like 3,500 people who were supposed to get out soon.

Earlonne: Right.

Nigel: They want to keep them safe and reduce the crowding prisons. In fact, prisons and jails across the country...

Earlonne: Right like, Hawaii, Colorado, Pennsylvania. Orleans, Detroit.

Nigel: Yep. They're all letting people out, and it's happening right here in San Francisco too. They're doing the same thing.

Earlonne: We're going to do our best to keep you posted on the different ways this pandemic is affecting incarcerated people and their families. In the meantime, let's get to this week's episode. [abstract industrial sounds - transition]

Nigel: Okay. We're back in our closets, socially isolating at home. Our co-host Rahsaan "New York" Thomas is locked down and we can't get to the media lab. So E, it's just you and me.

Earlonne: Yep. And we've been working on this episode for quite a while, since back when you could still get into San Quentin, Nyge.

Nigel: Right. So New York and I did a lot of these interviews. You'll be hearing from him in the tape. But you're stepping in as co-host and E, this one really needs an advisory.

Earlonne: The following episode contains disturbing subject matter and graphic depictions of sexual abuse of minors. It is not appropriate for all listeners. Some people may find the content deeply upsetting. Discretion is advised, especially for younger listeners.

Nigel: [00:05:00] Also, because of the subject matter, all names have been changed and the voices digitally altered.

Daniel: The first thing I want to say is nothing talked about here justifies what I eventually did.

Nigel: We know that altered voices can be tough to listen to, but we hope that you'll stick with it. [transition sounds]

Daniel: If I wanted to stop myself that night, I would be what I hate. You know me. I'm soft as cotton. I'm soft as cotton. [quiet beat comes in]

Earlonne: You're now tuned in to Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia. I'm Earloone Woods.

Nigel: And I'm Nigel Poor. On this episode, we're doing something a little different. Normally we don't focus on the crimes that people have committed, but this time that's exactly what we're doing. And it's the type of crime that really provokes people, both inside and outside of prison.

Earlonne: We're talking about sex crime. In particular, the sexual abuse of children. In prison, sex offenders are the lowest of the low. Nobody want to cell with them, nobody want to eat with them. Nobody want to work with them. And they have to watch their backs because if they're exposed, they can become targets.

Nigel: So E, when you were in prison, would you have celled with a sex offender.

Earlone: The first time I went to prison, no, not at all. The second time I went to prison, I really didn't care about a person's crime. But if that person was a child molester, *hell naw*. But let me ask you, would you live next to someone who did time for a sex offense?

Nigel: You know, I hate to say it, but probably not. You know, I would definitely have concerns. I'm not proud of that fact, but to be honest, it would be difficult. And that's actually one of the reasons I really wanted to do this episode because I really want to try to understand why I feel that way. Why are some crimes harder to deal with than others?

Earlone: And this crime is really hard to deal with. But we thought we should talk about it. We thought we should hear from people who have personal experience with this crime, victims, perpetrators. That's what we do on this podcast. We give people who normally have been ignored, an opportunity to tell their stories.

Nigel: And it's a difficult subject. We're really nervous about it. And we won't blame you if you don't want to listen any further. But we feel like we have to go there, and I hope that you'll stay with us. [beat comes in followed by abstracted industrial sounds and voices as a transition] Could you just describe your family? What was it like? What was your household like growing up?

Daniel: Oh, I felt loved. My parents and I got along great. I mean, it was like Romeo and Juliet. It was like, you know, my mom and dad, used to go dancing every weekend, held hands, you know, they kissed in public. They didn't care. We just, we did everything together.

Nigel: So, you would describe it as having a happy childhood?

Daniel: Yes. Yeah, up to a point.

Earlone: Daniel has never served time for a sex offense. He's had a few stints in prison for other crimes, and we'll get into that later.

Nigel: Like the other people you'll hear from in this episode, Daniel wants to remain anonymous. And as we've mentioned, we've altered everyone's voice and given them a pseudonym.

Daniel: The easiest way to explain it is I had two childhoods. I had the childhood when I was with my parents and my parents were around. And then I had the ugly childhood when my

parents went dancing. They would send me next door to a babysitter. A neighborhood babysitter and her boyfriend would molest me.

Nigel: How old were you?

Daniel: Uh, early, like three, four, five years old. It's kind of weird. I was like frightened, scared, and then happy and playful. I mean, it was like, it was, it was wrong, like weird, wrong. But it was attention. It was, they liked me and it felt good. [transition sound]

Elijah: So I felt this incredible sense of guilt and confusion and shame, but it felt good. [quiet beat comes in]

Earlonne: Elijah has been locked up since he was seventeen. He's in his early forties now. He says he wouldn't describe his childhood as happy.

Nigel: His dad left his family when Elijah was four years old, and he told us that around that time, his half-brother, who was fourteen, started molesting him.

Elijah: [00:10:00] At the same time of the confusion and the weirdness and the smell of things that you're not accustomed to and understanding body parts and whatnot as just a young child, there's the feeling of eroticism.

Nigel: And did you find yourself in some ways looking forward to it?

Elijah: I'll tell you why I did. There was a part of me emotionally that they craved his attention. [Nigel affirms] Man, if he'll spend time with me, then that's awesome because nobody spent time with me.

New York: What techniques did he use to like to lure you in? How'd he keep you from telling anyone?

Elijah: I didn't want to tell. I didn't want it to stop because of the good feelings and the fact that I was getting to spend time with my brother.

Nigel: So, the good feeling you're talking about, was it not necessarily a sexual good feeling? It was in an emotional, in a touch...

Elijah: It was both.

Nigel: It was sexual at that age?

Elijah: It was very sexual. I got to a point where I remember being six years old and I was already, I was masturbating [Nigel affirms] because it was like, I craved that feeling. [soft atmospheric tones come in]

Nigel: After that happened to you, did you notice a change in your own behavior?

Daniel: Oh, I was more secretive.

Nigel: It made you secretive, but how did it make you look at other kids? Did it, did you start to develop sexual feelings?

Daniel: Yeah, I mean, it was like, "Dude, check this out. This is what I know." Yeah, stuff like that. I mean, and then later on when I had a cousin who's just months older than me, you know, we were like sleeping together because our families at the holidays would spend time together. And he just reached over and said, "Hey, dah dah dah." And then we started doing, and then I had other cousins. In fact, every male or female cousin that's around my age, I had been with before 13, before we even reached puberty. [Nigel affirms] And the sad thing is that I've got a cousin that hates me now because of it.

Elijah: I'll sum up my life like this: my brother took us to a water park. And I lived in a very hot location. And what fifteen-year-old kid doesn't want to go down water slides and chill out at a waterpark. That's amazing, right? They're expensive, but they're fun. They're amazing. Well, where was Elijah the entire three hours we were there? Not on one water slide. I didn't go down one water slide. I didn't go in one pool. I didn't hit any of the rides or attractions. I was in the bathroom. The entire three hours masturbating and looking for penis. I could have been anything. And I had all these opportunities. Man, I was offered honor positions in school because I was smart. I was offered special symphony things because I did music, but I was always in the bathroom. Right? I was always looking for my next dope fix, my next dopamine release. I really, I blame my brother because had he not done that to me, I might've had a fighting chance. It robbed my whole life. It destroyed my life. [soft beat comes in]

Nigel: And how did you feel about yourself?

Daniel: Ashamed. Weird. Unloved. Unforgiven. Basically, didn't care. I mean, I was seriously suicidal, but without being suicidal. I did suicidal things. I didn't – I was in a head on car collision, right? I spent two and a half months in traction in the hospital. It almost killed me. And it's kind of funny, but my dad worked at the hospital. Everyday come and see me and we'd talk.

And that's the greatest two and a half months in my life. You know what I mean? Because I was talking to my dad. [soft beat comes in] And then once again, the childhood stuff came in 'cause there was a forty-one year old nurse and I was a seventeen year old kid and I was in traction. "How are you doing?" "How are you doing?" You know what I mean? The next thing, "Oh, I know you're a youngster and you need relief" and you know, yeah. So it's just, it's weird because I was like, a magnet.

Nigel: Well, I want to ask you about that because as you're describing the world, I'm seeing it as a place that's full of predators.

Daniel: Yes. To me it was.

Nigel: [00:15:00] So how does that, you just said you were a magnet. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Daniel: Yeah. I was a magnet to every weirdo in the world.

Nigel: Why?

Daniel: I don't know. "I think 'cause Pandora's box was open. Because I had a sexual vibe. I don't know.

New York: Do you feel like guys that have been, or people that have been through abuse recognize each other?

Elijah: Yes, absolutely. I think that there's body language and there's unspoken, just, you know, predators and victims identify with each other because it's a cycle. When I was younger, I was broken. And you can see the kid with their head down. You can see the shy one. You can see the one, who may not have the best clothes or, you know, there's signs. You know, the confidence, or lack thereof. That was me, all day.

Nigel: Even before he was a teenager, Elijah started to identify as gay. And a pastor from his church took notes.

Elijah: This man approached my mother and said, "Hey, you know, I will mentor Elijah. You just let me have a Bible study with him." And so my mom agreed. And off I went. I remember him reading me everything there was to be read in the Bible about homosexuality and how wrong it was. And then he said, come here, and I pulled my pants down and started to orally copulate me. And I was sobbing. I was crying, and I was, it was just like familiar and disgusting and yet

familiar. And amazing. I remember feeling loved and accepted and but angry, like, why is this happening? And he just made me feel like crap. And he would sodomize me, and I would scream. I would beg him not to do it. But I loved him because he loved me. [beat comes in]

Nigel: But looking back as an adult, do you still see that as love?

Elijah: Of course not. But it kind of set a precedence in my life. Head deacons, an assistant youth pastor, a schoolteacher, all these people that sexually abused me. And I accepted hurt and pain for the little bit of affection and a little bit of of love that I felt because I was so depleted and empty. This man also made molest other kids with him.

Nigel: And how old were the kids?

Elijah: Um, six and eight.

Nigel: When he was 13 years old, Elijah started seeing a counselor. He was open and honest with her, and he told her about the younger boys and she reported it.

Earlonne: She was legally obligated to report it. A few weeks later, a police officer came into their session.

Elijah: And I was so scared. I cried and I'm like, "what did I do wrong? Why is he here?" I mean, genuinely, I had no idea that what I was doing was a crime. I knew nothing about law or crime or...

Nigel: So you thought you were in a safe space to talk to someone about it?

Elijah: I did. I did and but again, I didn't know what I had done was wrong. [Nigel affirms] I didn't know legally it was wrong. I felt like we were kids and it was just something kids do. And I was arrested. I served time for that. [soft beat comes in]

Earlonne: He's still serving time for it. But it took a long time for the authorities to act. He wasn't arrested until he was seventeen.

Nigel: And what do you think happened to those young kids?

Elijah: I'm assuming that it sucked. And there's not a day that goes by that I don't think about those people. To be broken and not repaired quickly as a child, you're going to remain fundamentally broken forever.

Daniel: I was about fourteen years old and a younger member of a family. Like younger to where it was weird. And I had thoughts of being with him and when I caught myself. And all of a sudden, well, I gotta go home. I want to go home. [00:20:00] I didn't want to be one of them people. I didn't want to be a weirdo. I didn't want to go basically in essence, I didn't want to be a child molester. I didn't. And I chose not to.

Nigel: How old were you when this happened?

Daniel: I was in my teens.

Nigel: And how old was the other?

Daniel: Preteen. [Nigel affirms]

New York: What do you think would have happened if you had crossed that line?

Daniel: I'd be sitting in San Quentin today talking about my sins for being a child molester. I really believe that. I think if I had crossed that one a day, it would have been nonstop. And once...it's like tasting blood and yeah. So I honestly believe that if I were to cross that threshold that day, I'd be a child molester.

Nigel: So what stopped you from becoming a molester?

Daniel: The innate sense that it was wrong. Remembering how much I hated it, and by the grace of God. [soft beat comes in]

Nigel: We said earlier that Daniel was not in prison for a sex crime, and as far as we know, he's never committed one. But he said that the crime that sent him to prison the first time, he did because of being molested as a child.

Daniel: On Labor Day weekend, 1980, I came across a child molester and a rapist that just got out of jail from raping a childhood friend. And I knew it. And we took him out to the river, and I pulled out a knife. I got a knife from my porter, opened it up, and I stabbed him. I stabbed the guy 10 times. I had never stabbed nobody in my life. I never thought about stabbing anybody. I never thought about shooting anybody with a gun. I took out every bit of rage, anger, and whatever I had for everything that happened to me out on him that night. [soft atmospheric tones come in]

Earlonne: Daniel served 20 years for that crime. New York asked him about that sentence.

New York: Was it worth it?

Daniel: Every single day. Because he never raped or molested anybody ever again. And a lot of people don't realize the damage that a child molester does to the child. He creates a murderer. He creates a sexual pervert. He creates a child molester himself. He creates somebody that's going to hurt people emotionally and scar them for the rest of their lives later on in their life because of what happened to them. [beat comes in]

Earlone: Daniel got out when he was forty-seven. But was back in prison just a few years later. This time for theft. [beat fades out]

Daniel: I'm back in prison because I don't know how to live on the streets because a child molester got ahold of me and almost became one, and I became rageful and I ended up killing a man. I've come to the conclusion that my life will never truly be normal. And everything else was taken when I was a little, little kid. It was taken. I didn't give it honestly, willingly. It was taken from me. And I'm almost 58. That's the damage they do. That's the damage they do.

Nigel: Yeah. [beat comes in and then fades out]

Like sitting across from you, I'm enjoying talking to you, even though it's hard. I'm interested in you as a person. I see you as a fully formed, interesting person. But people in general want us to see you as a monster.

Elijah: If people are so quick to judge, it's something I have said on many occasions, "Where the hell were you when I was four?" You know, where was that anger and passion when I was a child? Why are drug offenders worth saving? Why are, you know, are murders worth rehabilitating? I mean, sex offense is obviously a very hard thing to heal because you never, you never escape the label, no matter what strides you're making treatment. And you're going to come up against that over and over and over. And I can tell you it beats you down. In treatment, people say you need to forgive yourself. In society they say, I need to be shot and hung. [beat comes in]

Daniel: They need to be studied and locked away. And kept away from children. Point blank. Forever. [00:25:00] If you want to stop it, if you want to break the chain, keep them away from children. [beat fades out]

Elijah: I think you are what you practice. I don't practice sexual deviance anymore, and I think for me, I came to the point where I was tired. I was physically, emotionally destroying my life.

And I got tired and I got to the point in the treatment place where I said, " I'm done lying. I'm done hiding." And I started to admit all the things that I was thinking about, all the things that were plaguing me. And um, I cleaned out all the dark corners of my life and it was hard because it made me hate myself even more.

New York: So, let me ask you this as well, right? Like I don't judge, I understand that you wouldn't have done that if it wasn't done to you, right? But I'm also hearing from people that have been through these types of experiences that is very difficult or some people say you can't stop. How do you change that attraction? How do you, is it, how can we break that cycle once it starts?

Elijah: It's called management. It's not healed. It's not cured. It's managed. I have it in my brain. That it's a reality and it can happen. And so I have to set up a very real foundation and, you know, relapse prevention plan for not offending.

Nigel: Are you saying that you would molest children or that you would...

Elijah: If you did it once, you can do it again, given a perfect storm or the right situations, who knows what could arise. Do you know what I mean? To not be realistic, that's a huge red flag in itself. I've been told a sex offender's biggest weapon is secrecy. By just telling your secret gives people a couple of things. They have knowledge. And they can choose whether or not they want you in their life or not, which I respect, but that's why I tell people. And so those things will always be with me. I don't think it would ever be smart for me to be alone with younger people for those reasons. [soft atmospheric tones come in and fades out]

Nigel: So I know you're Christian. [Daniel affirms] And you believe in heaven, I'm sure [Daniel affirms] and hell, where are you going to go?

Daniel: I believe I'm saved. I truly believe I'm saved. It's up to my Lord and savior if I am really saved or where I'm going to go and I hope I don't go hell. [laughs nervously]

Nigel: So

Daniel: I've asked for forgiveness. I've asked for forgiveness. I've changed my life around. I became baptized –

Nigel: But I gonna push you a little bit on this. You've asked for forgiveness, but you don't have remorse for taking that man's life. You have remorse for other parts of it. So how can you ask for forgiveness if you still have the feeling that what you did wasn't wrong?

Daniel: That's a good question. Nothing talked about here justifies what I eventually did. I'm just trying to explain why that's all.

Nigel: Yeah.

Daniel: Because there's been numerous people who were for centuries had been molested as children. They didn't become killers. [soft harp and bass beat]

Earlone: Daniel was released from San Quentin in 2019, shortly after Nigel in New York recorded him. Elijah is still in prison. [beat fades out]

Elijah: It's really hard sometimes to, you know, humanize yourself and feel like you do matter. It's hard not being able to talk about it actually, especially in a place like this where you have so many emotions about it, you know? Because I get it. I mean, I get it. I get it. I get why everyone hates sex offenders. All I ever wanted to say what's I'm sorry but sorry means nothing.

Nigel: Elijah's been incarcerated most of his life. To protect his identity, we can't reveal too many details about when and where, but we did want to ask him what's different about life in prison when you're a sex offender, especially if you're not able to hide the crime from the other guys inside?

Earlone: Elijah first did time as a juvenile in the California youth authority. He said [00:30:00] the staff in the facility made it known that he was in for child molestation.

Elijah: I always felt like I was going to be beat up, killed. I'm so happy I survived because I didn't think – there were many, many, many times where, like, the first night I got there, I woke up, two big black guys, one of them had their finger in my butt and the other one had a knife at my neck my first night. My very first night.

Earlone: All his stuff got stolen. He was a target of constant abuse, and then there was this.

Elijah: I pay rent.

New York: How much was the rent?

Elijah: I think it was fifty. I had to pay rent to the North and to and, uh, the Crips.

Nigel: I'm sorry. I've never heard of this before, having to pay rent. What, to keep safe?

Elijah: Yes. In order for them, you know, it can be two things. Rent can keep you, can buy you safety, and it can also just keep people from attacking you. So they charge you. They charge you monthly and they might tax your canteen, or they might take your packages. In which case, for me, they took everything. I literally had nothing. And they forced prostituted me. The North End used to.

Nigel: So what does it do to somebody to be in a situation and realize there is truly no one here that cares? There's no one here that has sympathy. Nobody sees me and wants to help. What does that do to a person? It makes them a child molester. It makes them a drug offender. It makes them a murderer. It makes them give up. [soft beat comes in]

Elijah is in San Quentin now and things have definitely gotten better for him. E, let's talk about how sex offenders at San Quentin keep themselves safe.

Earlone: Well, they have a lot of ways to do that. One, they can get heavily involved in church. You know, hiding in that environment. [Nigel affirms] You out the way. You're not spending all the time on a yard or other places that might be vulnerable.

Nigel: Okay. All right.

Earlone: Then you got some guys that exaggerates their mental health problems, [Nigel affirms] which will get you sent to a program where you're not in contact with the general population. And then there's race. Your race matters if you're a sex offender in prison.

Nigel: Okay. This is one of the strangest things about prison life, and no one has ever explained this clearly. I just, I don't get it.

Earlone: Alright. So the whites. Hispanics and others, [Nigel affirms] their gangs have tight power structures. They enforce the rules. [Nigel affirms] And one of those rules is you have to present your paperwork, the documents that say what crime you're in for. If it says sex offense, now that's a problem.

Nigel: Okay. But it's not a big deal with the African American guys?

Earlonne: Naw because with the Blacks it's splintered. There's no one gang leader that runs everything. [Nigel affirms] So certain things aren't enforced. Like with other races.

Nigel: Prison politics.

Earlonne: Nyge, it'd take a whole episode to explain it.

Nigel: Clearly. [beat comes in] When we come back, Earlonne and I are going to speak with someone who has thought long and hard about one particular sex offender: her husband.

[transition sound] [beat fades out]

Earlonne: When did you first get any type of notion that this was going on?

At five in the morning when the FBI battered through our front door and reamed into the house. I thought something was wrong at a neighbor's house and they were trying to go through my house to get to the neighbors and it turns out they had a warrant for my house. I can never, I will never be able to describe the incredulity that I felt in that moment. I could barely think. And I remember saying, "you have the wrong house. What are you doing here?" I was wrong.

Nigel: This is a woman we're calling Del. Like Daniel and Alijah, we've altered her voice. We met Dell in our outside studio.

Del: They gave my husband the opportunity to tell me. They stepped out of the [00:35:00] room for a moment, and he told me what he had been doing. And I had no idea at all. Absolutely none.

Earlonne: And when the FBI gave him that moment to tell you and explain it to you, did he?

Del: Oh yeah, he owned it. He owned it 100%.

Nigel: Do you remember what he said? Would you feel comfortable sharing it?

Del: I'm pretty sure he used the word addiction and I'm pretty sure he used the word child pornography. And my first question to him was: boys or girls?

Earlonne: We're going to call her husband Paul. Paul and Del are in their late forties. At the time of his incident, they had one child.

Nigel: So in your words what was Paul's crime? What did he do?

Del: I'm gonna name it the way that I named it for our seven-year-old. He looked at pictures of children on the internet and the children often didn't have any clothes on. And that's wrong and that makes the children feel really bad. So that's a very youth centric [Nigel affirms] explanation of what he did. But it's also exactly what he did.

Nigel: So it's interesting that you want to describe it as you would to a young person. Why is that?

Del: Because I'm using simple, clear, neutral language. And I think child pornography immediately pushes 500 buttons. And I'm not trying to say that those buttons aren't real and valid, and those are also my own buttons as a mother and a feminist. But, the action of what he did was on a computer, was in a room with the door shut, did not involve any contact with youth. And I think those things are important too. [soft atmospheric tones]

Earlone: We also wanted to talk to Paul who spent five years in a federal prison before being released, and we did interview him the same day we interviewed Dell. But after our recording, Paul sent you an email.

Nigel: Yes, he did. He said, quote, "I am respectfully requesting that you withdraw my interview recorded yesterday. I'm also respectfully requesting that you please do not contact me by email or phone" unquote.

Earlone: So that ended that.

Nigel: Yep. And honestly, I found it really frustrating. We gave him the opportunity to speak anonymously and to help us understand where he was coming from. But I didn't want to make things harder on them, so we're not going to use any of our interview with him.

Earlone: But we still wanted to hear from Dell. We wanted to know what it's like to be with someone who has committed a sex crime.

Nigel: How do you deal with the stigma? How do you deal with the judgment that comes your way and how do you reengage with their spouse after learning about what he did? I mean, I just had so many questions.

Earlone: Here's our conversation with Del.

Nigel: Did they take your husband away?

Del: They didn't take him away. They took his computer. We basically said, "what is happening? What now?" And they explained that it would be a while before they analyze the computer. And most likely there would be an arrest warrant issued in the next four to six weeks. We knew at that point that we had to get a lawyer and then –

Nigel: Is there a trial?

Del: No, it was a plea bargain.

Nigel: Okay.

Del: Um, and then he was able to self-surrender.

Nigel: What is that like? Did you –

Del: I drove him down. It was so traumatic and emotional. I can't believe I drove a car. [laughs nervously] I can't believe I drove home. You know, it was a six-hour drive. I'm glad that that that happened for both of us, that, you know, he wasn't taken away in handcuffs and that I was able to let him go. It was so hard to leave. I have this memory that I don't actually think this happened, but my memory is that the CO had to like claw us apart. I don't think it had to happen physically, but energetically he definitely had to like, get me out of there.

Nigel: All of a sudden you found yourself in a completely different world where you had to negotiate things I'm sure you never even imagined you were going to have to deal with. So what was it like to all of a sudden find yourself in a completely unknown world?

Del: I felt extremely burdened by all the legal obligations that inevitably fell on me. I felt a lot of shame for having to negotiate my way given what my husband had done. I'm a [00:40:00] do-er. I'm someone that gets things done. So it wasn't that complicated, but the emotional toll, I feel like I'm still living through that.

Earlone: Did it change your perspective of, let's say how you felt about yourself knowing that he was looking at child porn?

Del: I definitely had waves of feeling ashamed and belittled and irrelevant and I was really sad. I was sad for myself. I was sad for our partnership. I felt a sense of loss for my own sexuality and like, am I just a prop? And that's his real life? In that I felt a great sense of betrayal. [Nigel affirms] Because he had another sexual life that I didn't know about. [Nigel affirms] That he was also deeply ashamed of.

Nigel: And how have you been able to repair this?

Del: One of the things about prison, for women like me, women living under secondary incarceration, is that it makes it impossible for you to have your anger. Because you're so busy surviving on behalf of yourself, your children and your partner. You're so busy figuring out how am I going to get the money to put it on the books this month? How am I going to get the time, the energy, the money together to do the visiting? How am I going to negotiate with the lawyers for this, that, and the other thing? I was so busy dealing with the burden of incarceration that my anger just had to be pushed to the side until he came home. And that wasn't very easy for him because he came home out of incredible – an experience of being incarcerated that is rooted in trauma. And there I was ready to be angry and fight and push and work this out, and I couldn't wait. I had already waited several years, and my timing was terrible for him. He wasn't ready for this, but I wasn't ready to keep waiting.

Nigel: I mean, are you admonishing yourself for that?

Del: Well in hindsight, you know, strategically, it wasn't very productive timing. [Nigel and Del laugh] But no, I don't apologize for reaching my limit of putting myself to the side.

Nigel: Yeah. And I would think, like, my reaction to that is how could you not have had insane rage.

Del: I did, I had moments. But in terms of like a substantive repair, [Nigel affirms] you know, a process of restoration, which is not pretty. That had to wait. It had to wait for us to be face-to-face and in person. It's not something you can do on the phone or in a letter in a waiting room, [Nigel affirms] visiting room. But I had moments of fury. And once I expressed it to him over the phone and he didn't call me for a few days. And then that was terrible 'cause I'm like, where is he? Is he in the SHU? What's going on? Did he get hit? Like what, you know? [Nigel affirms]

Earlone: So was that like, did you worry a lot about that as far as him being physically assaulted in prison and –

Del: I worried about it every day.

Earlone: So, if he didn't make that call...

Del: Yeah, I was really panicky.

Nigel: Was there ever a part of you that was so angry that you hoped something would happen to him?

Del: No.

Nigel: No.

Del: No. I mean, what guided me was my son. And that what was best for my son was and is a healed father. And all of me was invested in that.

Nigel: Have you felt judged for staying with him?

Del: Oh yeah. That was the other huge judgment: "why did you stay? Why do you stay? Why did you bail him out?" Was one of the first things a friend said. A friend I lost, and then she came back to me because she went out and educated herself. [Nigel affirms] She said, "why did you bail him out? Why did you do that?" And, you know, I explained that this is the father of my child. This is someone that needs help, not imprisonment. These are the things I believe, and I believe in his goodness. [Nigel affirms] And I was really impressed that she went out and read up on this and educated herself. And I felt judged, but also a lot of my friends set their positions based on my position. So as I said, this is something we're going to go through together. They said, okay, I'm with you. Not every friend.

Nigel: Yeah.

Del: But many.

Nigel: Yeah. So you could still support him. He could still be the father, an [00:45:00] active father, but not be your life partner anymore. So did you ever think about that? Like he can still be in my life. I can still make this work, but he doesn't have to be my partner.

Del: That was a choice I could have made. I just didn't feel like that was the right choice for our family, [Nigel affirms] for my son. [Nigel affirms]

Nigel: And what, how did you –

Del: And I'll say why, because there was already so much fracture and pain and the bottom fell out for our child that I just decided to invest in repair.

Nigel: So for you, there's no problem with your husband being around children because you know he would never harm a child?

Del: So legally there are limitations on where he's able to go and who's able to be around. [Nigel affirms] I believe that my husband is a safe person, and that what he did falls into the realm of fantasy, which is true of all porn, you know? Like, do we think that men who look at porn are then going to go out and have rampant affairs everywhere? Some men do. Many men don't.

Nigel: Yeah.

Del: I think there's a truth that the majority of men who look at child pornography do not act on their fantasies. The majority of men who violate children, look at child pornography. And that's a difficult thing to reconcile. [Nigel affirms]

Nigel: I hear what you're saying. But I've talked to a lot of people who are very interested in criminal justice issues. When this issue comes up, they're not interested. There's no chink in the armor.

Del: And to those, I think in on this program, those are the people I want to speak to the most because I would just beg you to open your eyes and educate yourself a little bit and not treat sex crimes as one thing. I think that's a mistake. And there's a lot of rhetoric in the abolitionist community about supporting returning citizens unless they're a sex offender and then the rhetoric was out the window. And that's where I think things can and should change.

Nigel: And so what would you say to them?

Del: I'd say educate yourself. I'd say talk to people who work with sex offenders. Get to know what is possible. Nothing's possible through shame. Nothing will change through shame and guilt. [Nigel affirms] I think there are monsters out there. For sure. My husband is not one of them.

Nigel: So you said that your husband was just looking, he wasn't, he wasn't touching any children, but those children had to be touched to make the those images. How do you reconcile that? I mean, some children had to be harmed.

Del: Yeah. You know, there's an interesting conversation with some people around child porn that it's a victimless crime, and I don't believe that that's the case. I think my husband did something wrong. To me, the children were harmed by being photographed. There's no bone in my body that says that this is okay. I think the human capacity for compartmentalization is large,

and this is a case where it was in full blast mode. [soft tones come in followed by transition sound]

Nigel: Earlonne, we've been working on this story for over a year, and even now, there's still so much I don't know. I really have not learned enough from doing this story.

Earlonne: Yeah. There's definitely a whole lot to think about. And honestly, we really don't know how people are going to react to this story.

Nigel: You know, Earlonne, I always think Ear Hustle stories get people to listen with more compassion. At least that's what I hope.

Earlonne: And frankly, that might be hard to do when you're dealing with this subject.

Nigel: Right. This has been tricky territory for us and no doubt for our listeners, so we thank you for hanging in there with us. [soft synth tones and percussion come in]

Earlonne: [00:50:00] Thanks to Daniel, Elijah, and Del for talking with us about this difficult topic. It wasn't easy to find people willing to, and we appreciate you.

Nigel: Ear Hustle is produced on the inside by me, Nigel Poor, Rahsaan New York, Thomas, John "Yahya" Johnson and Pat Mesiti-Miller.

Earlonne: And on the outside by me, Earlonne Woods and Bruce Wallace. This episode was scored with music by Antwan Williams and Rhashiyd Zinnamon.

Nigel: Curtis Fox edits the show. Eri Wade is our digital producer. Julie Shapiro is the executive producer for Radiotopia. 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: Hello, this is Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the public information officers San Quentin State Prison, and I hope that all out there in Ear Hustle land are, well. I get to weigh in on this very, very heavy and thought-provoking episode. For those of you who made it through it all the way to get to me, I applaud you because it was challenging to, to me as well to listen to it. But, yeah, it is what corrections is about. Corrections is challenging and there are many things that are, that are difficult, and maybe during this time it's time for us all to just kind of consider the things that are uncomfortable. So with that, I do approve this episode. [music comes in]

Earlone: 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: Ear Hustle puts out a newsletter every month with extra tidbits about the show and the people who make it. Find out more about that and a whole lot else at earhustlesq.com. The show is also on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook @earhustlesq.

Earlone: Ear Hustle is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of the best podcasts around. Hear more at Radiotopia.fm. I'm Earlone Woods.

Nigel: I'm Nigel Poor.

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

Nigel: So, we are doing this story about sex offenders, right? What advice can you give us for this story? What should we make sure we cover?

Daniel: The thing that you need was a story to understand is it's a crime that is not easily forgiven until we take this and say, look, this is what was created that day. And honestly, look at this, it's not going to change and it's not going to stop because all we're doing is hiding it. And hiding it doesn't make the boogeyman go away.

[00:52:59] **END OF EPISODE.**