Yard Talk [00:00:00.01]: Little, itty, bitty stuff. Asked us for a favor and he kicked us out.

Male [00:00:05.09]: All right, we need quiet now. We're fixin' to record.

Yard Talk [00:00:06.13]: Kick us up out of here. You know I did.

Male [00:00:08.04]: You are now tuned in to San Quentin's 'Ear Hustle' from Radiotopia.

Earlonne [00:00:13.07]: The following podcast contains language that may not be appropriate for all listeners.

Female [00:00:18.06]: [pleasant musical beat] Thanks to MailChimp for supporting 'Ear Hustle'. MailChimp is the world's largest marketing automation platform. 15 million customers from small e-commerce shops to big online retailers use MailChimp to reach customers and grow their business. Whether you need to sell your products, share some big news, or tell a story, MailChimp makes it easy to create email campaigns that best suit your message. Get started free at MailChimp.com. MailChimp, build your brand, sell more stuff.
Ron Self [00:00:48.20]: Having spent all my adult life in the Marine Corps, Special Forces, been in combat, raised in military schools, I thought, you know, "OK." You know. "Prison, how bad can that be?"

Nigel [00:01:01.01]: That's Ron Self, an inmate at San Quentin. He's serving 25 years to life for attempted murder and conspiracy to commit murder.

Earlonne [00:01:07.13]: He's been locked up for 20 years. His first stop was Corcoran, a level four maximum security state prison in California.

Ron Self [00:01:14.05]: We arrive on the bus and we get off. We go through processing. A part of processing is it's the reception area where they issue you your state blues and whatnot. And, I meet this guy. He's a native American like myself and his name's Duck [chilling music] and I stick my hand out. He may as well spit on me. This guy is just evil. I mean, he just, he scared the shit out of me. I mean it is not often that things or people scare me, but this man actually scared me.

Earlonne [00:01:42.16]: Ron was in receiving and release, or R and R, which is basically the intake into the prison system. It's where you get your I.D. card and your prison number, which will follow you through your whole incarceration, and it's where you go through a litany of questions to find out where you will be housed.

Ron Self [00:01:57.06]: It just felt like the whole time I was in R and R this guy wanted to kill me. It was like I couldn't get processed fast enough to get out of R and R. So, they finished processing me out. I go to the building, which is like a mile-long walk in chains. You know, guns out on the rails and an electronic door opens. I walk into the building. The door closes behind me and then another door I hear pop open and that's the cell I'm going to, and the door opens all the way and it's Duck, the guy that's
looking at me like he wants to kill me. And I just, my heart dropped. They said go into that cell and close the door behind you. "OK. I can deal with this." But no matter what I did in the cell, it was wrong. I mean, he would yell. He would scream. He threatened to kill me. I would sleep with my back to the wall and one eye open, if you would call what I did sleeping, and sometimes he would just get down out of the bed in the middle of the night screaming, acting like he's going to kill me. That one six-month period felt more like 60 years.

Earlonne [00:03:05.03]: The moral of Ron Self's story: In prison, it matters who your cellmate is. [heavy, choppy beat] I'm Earlonne Woods.

Nigel [00:03:16.02]: Earlonne is serving a 31-year to life sentence for attempted second-degree robbery, and he's the co-host and co-producer of 'Ear Hustle'.

Earlonne [00:03:24.08]: And that's Nigel Poor. She's a visual artist and works with incarcerated men here at San Quentin, and she's the co-producer and my co-host, and together, we're going to take you inside.

Nigel [00:03:41.08]: [snapping beat] Earlonne, this is our first episode, so it's probably a good time to tell everybody what ear hustling means.

Earlonne [00:03:47.11]: Ear hustling is prison slang for eavesdropping, listen into something that may not be your business, and today we're going to hear about cellies.

Nigel [00:03:55.19]: It's a big deal in prison who your cellmate is, isn't it?

Earlonne [00:03:58.22]: Huge. Ask anyone around here and they'll have a lot to say about their cellies.

Yard Talk [00:04:04.11]: We always wash our hands, like, "Wash your
hands, man. Like, no, you can't get none of my chips until you wash your hands."

Earlonne [00:04:10.13]: That's what we're calling Yard Talk, when we take a microphone and ask bunch of guys questions about whatever topic we cover. We'll hear some more of that later.

Nigel [00:04:22.25]: San Quentin is not a maximum security prison.

Earlonne [00:04:24.24]: Nope.

Nigel [00:04:25.21]: So that means we can spend the day working down here in the media lab.

Earlonne [00:04:29.00]: Pretty much.

Earlonne [00:04:30.09]: And obviously you're not in your cell all day, but you do have to spend time there. I've seen the cells here, but most people haven't. Can you explain how big they are?

Earlonne [00:04:40.10]: How big is the cell? It is like 4 by 9, 4 feet by 9 feet. So, if I got my back on one wall, I could touch the other one. And, within that space, you have two bunks. You have a toilet and a sink that's side by side. You have two lockers, one locker above the top bunk, one locker in the back of the cell. And then, each cellie has their appliances and property. I'll put it like this, you can't walk by each other. One person either got to sit on his bunk and the other person can walk by. It's like a little public storage.

Nigel [00:05:16.11]: You know, I hate to say it. I know I have seen closets that are bigger than that.

Earlonne [00:05:22.14]: Of course.
Earlonne you've been thinking a lot about cellies recently and not just because we're doing a show about them.

Right, because my cellie just got out of prison after serving 22 years, and we were cellies for like 3 years. And, about a half hour to a hour after he left, they gave me a new cellie.

But it's possible your new cellie could be temporary if you find someone else you’d prefer.

Sometimes guys at San Quentin can choose their cellies. Right?

Usually, they'll just throw someone in a cell with you, but they do have this thing called moves of convenience where you and another guy can go to the officer and say, "Hey, look, man, we are compatible. Can you move us together?" And they'll do it, like they did for the next guys we're about to hear from, Eddie and Emile. And here's Eddie.

I've been incarcerated for 20 years on a 26 to life sentence. I've had some bad experiences with cellies. I've had a situation where got into a fight, stayed up. I had to stay up all night because I didn't know if he was going to keep going, sleeping in the bed with my boots on.

Emile: I've been locked up for 20 years, since I was 18.

That's Emile. He's actually Eddie's younger brother. 2001, I'm in High Desert state prison. I've been I've
been doing time for like three years at this point, and I'm in there with my brother, and I'm thinking to myself, "We're brothers. We should we should live together. We should cell up." Right?

Eddie [00:06:49.24]: For sure. I love my brother, and I wanted to be cellies with him because there was nobody else in the prison that I loved that much. You know? Family sticks together. You know.

Emile [00:07:01.01]: In an environment where nothing is safe, right, and it's like, "Hey, what could be better and safer than that? You know, living with your brother. Right? So, he moves into my cell.

Eddie [00:07:11.01]: I was happy. I was, I kind of felt relieved, you know?

Emile [00:07:14.20]: We did it!

Eddie [00:07:15.20]: To be able to just exhale, you know, just relax for, for a moment in prison.

Emile [00:07:22.22]: That's like one of the biggest things in prison, is you miss your family, so to be able to have your family with you is bittersweet, but it's still sweet. [upbeat music]

Earlonne [00:07:34.02]: So, Eddie and Emile got what they wanted. They got to cell up together, but just like roommates on the outside, they still have to figure out how to live together and it's smart to start thinking about this before you move into a tiny cell together.

Nigel [00:07:47.03]: Get a new cellie.

Yard Talk [00:07:47.16]: So, when I get a new cellie, the first thing that I look at first is what age they are then what is their disposition, because you know we, we have to have, I mean you always look at it from that fact that I
don't live in here by myself.

Emile [00:08:00.04]: The first few nights were great and then it wasn't.

Eddie [00:08:05.13]: I didn't really know my brother like I thought I did.

Emile [00:08:08.22]: He's still Seventh Day Adventist. Right? And he's like devout. So, the Sabbath, you're not supposed to watch television, but I watch television. But he didn't want to have to hear it, because he didn't want to have to hear it on the Sabbath. [piano music] So, he asked me to use my headphones, right? Which was, in theory, wasn't like a horrible request, but my headphones are like 3 feet long, right, in that space between my bunk and my television is like 3 feet long, right, 3 1/2 feet right on the corner of my bed with my head hanging off it. "Man, I'm not going to do that.

Eddie [00:08:37.26]: He was watching soap operas and soap operas was like a trigger for me because I remember hearing 'The Young and Restless' tune. Dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum and there'd be straight violence in the household, right. My father used to get on my mother and he would say, "You're watching them soaps and being a lazy," you know, woman, and beat her up.

Emile [00:09:03.14]: I didn't really understand what he was going through. Right? I thought like he was just trying to convert me and make me observe the Sabbath and shit. so it just pissed me off, like, "Dude!"

Eddie [00:09:12.17]: I was like, "Man, you need to change that channel."

Emile[00:09:14.12]: I'm a grown ass man and this is my television. I don't give a fuck how you feel about it.

Eddie [00:09:20.01]: And I was like, "I can't believe you watching that soap!
Right. Really, bruh?"

Emile [00:09:24.09]: And so he turns my television off, right. And I'm like, "Dude, back up." I turn the television back on, right. I'm like, "Have you lost your mind?"

Yard Talk [00:09:34.08]: The rule is don't touch my stuff. Don't look through my mail. Don't look at my pictures. Do not put your hands on my shelf, because if you do, that's like the ultimate form of disrespect because it's, it's...

Emile [00:09:46.09]: So, he's pissed, because you know, in his mind, I'm not respecting his space and respecting his Sabbath. So, you know, he declares like a passive aggressive war on me, and he stopped showering. [heavy beat] And when I call him on not showering, right, he keeps bringing up this watching television on the Sabbath shit, right. And I'm like, "Bro." In my mind, I'm getting hella frustrated 'cause in my mind, I'm like, "Man, what the hell does one have to do with the other? Man, you have to shower. Man, it's not the same thing." So, not only did he stop showering, but he stopped like using deodorant. He wasn't using deodorant because, you know, in my mind, I guess it just made the warfare more potent, right.

Eddie [00:10:25.21]: That is so not true.

Emile [00:10:29.06]: But on the other hand, right, he does have this thing about like deodorant and like conspiracies of like chemicals and...

Eddie [00:10:38.29]: They say the aluminum in the antiperspirant deodorants and stuff will cause like memory loss or Alzheimer's when you get older, and I was like, "Why would I poison myself like that?"

Emile [00:10:49.05]: He wants to "be natural" and "it's just a natural smell" and "what's the big deal". It's a big deal. Let me tell you.
Earlonne [00:10:55.09]: In such a tight space, Nigel, smells are a big deal.

Nigel [00:11:01.26]: Ugh. Yeah. So, I've heard.

Yard Talk [00:11:05.07]: That, that was one of the reasons why I'd never cell with a like dude over like 250 'cause you know them bowel movements, boy, are going to light up everything. I remember we were sitting on the yard, right. We seen this one big old dude, right, walking by and I'm like, "Man, can you imagine being in a cell with him when he's dropping a bomb?"

Emile [00:11:24.13]: Oh, another thing we argued about was smoking. I smoked.

Eddie [00:11:26.27]: I didn't smoke. And so, he was smoking cigarettes. They were legal. They were selling us tobacco in a canteen. If you smoked, you would smoke and blow the smoke out the door or blow the smoke in a vent or blow the smoke in a toilet or something like that, right, to get rid of smoke for your non-smoking cellie. And one day, I guess we had got into an argument. The next thing he said was, "You know what? If I want to smoke, I'm gonna smoke on my bunk. I ain't going to no door or nothin'." He just lit up right there on the bunk. [smooth beat]

Emile [00:11:56.15]: It wasn't really about, "Fuck him." It was like [imitates smoking a cigarette]. "Yeah, this is my moment. I need my space to have something in this place."

Eddie [00:12:11.05]: And I was like trying to hold it in, trying to hold it in, and it was just eating at me, and then we just clashed in the cell.

Emile [00:12:17.06]: And he was like, "Man, you're trying to kill me! You're killing me with this. You're going to kill me with cancer!" And I would just
kind of, I was very dismissive, like, "Man, shut the fuck up with that shit, man. God, man, we are in prison for life, like you know, I have 67 years to life. You have 27 years to life. Man, I am smoking this cigarette."

Eddie [00:12:35.21]: Neighbors in the prison, they was thinking that we was killing each other up in there, but it was just a bunch of yelling and screaming and shouting. But, the dude next door, he kind of like was shouted incendiary things through the vent. It was like not homicide, it wasn't homicide, it wasn't genocide, but it was like-

Emile [00:12:52.00]: Fratricide! [laughs] And that used to make Eddie so mad, right. I just, I thought it was kind of funny, right.

Eddie [00:12:59.24]: Wow, he's like going there, like killing your own brother. That's something I would never do. And now he's shouting this through the vent.

Emile [00:13:09.09]: Fratricide! Fratricide! [laughs] Because Eddie felt like Bobo next door in actuality wanted us to kill each other, like literally, like Eddie can be a very literal man, right. That dude didn't expect us to murder each but, you know.

Eddie [00:13:27.24]: When Bobo and my brother were talking in the vent, I assumed that Bobo was trying to drive a wedge between me and my brother.

Emile [00:13:35.00]: But Bobo wasn't the problem. The problem was Eddie and the problem with me. Right. It's like the problem was your ass ain't showering. The problem ain't like Bobo's on the vent talking about fratricide, which is an intellectual joke, right, between philosophers. [warbling beat] He's not a bad guy. He's a good man. But, you know, living with someone in an apartment is difficult enough, but living with someone in a box, like you need to live. You have to be compatible in a lot of different
ways and me and Eddie aren't compatible, and despite, um, you know, not being a great brother when I was young, he does his best today to be a good brother, and I appreciate that, but we'll never live together ever in life. Period.

Nigel [00:14:26.17]: Eventually, Emile moved out of the cell with his brother and moved in with his neighbor Bobo, and they got along fine. It worked out well. So, Earlonne, now that your own cell situation is up in the air, what did you take from that story?

Earlonne [00:14:39.22]: What? The story we just heard?

Nigel [00:14:41.05]: Yeah.

Earlonne [00:14:41.15]: See, there's the type of shit I'm trying to avoid.

Earlonne [00:14:44.07]: What shit?

Earlonne [00:14:44.17]: That, where it's confusion, chaos, and just craziness.

Nigel [00:14:49.25]: Hmm. So, what's your biggest fear about finding a cellie?

Earlonne [00:14:55.03]: I have several fears, but one of them is someone that talks too much, that's always talking. Every time you look around he's talking, talking, talking through the TV shows, talking when you walk in, talking when you get up in the morning. I hate that shit.

Nigel [00:15:10.25]: Your cellie who just left, Cleo Cloeman, who was also known as Black, and from everything you told me, it seemed like he was a really great cellie for you.
Earlonne [00:15:20.14]: Yeah, and I think he feels the same way, because I brought him down here and got him on tape right before he left. [sound of tape rewinding]

Earlonne [00:15:26.27]: The first question is, having me as a cellie-

Cleo [00:15:29.17]: Right.

Earlonne [00:15:30.07]: In the time that we spent in that cage, what is your thoughts on me?

Cleo [00:15:35.12]: Oh, man. I can honestly say first that you as my cellie has been one of the best times in my incarceration. First and foremost, the respect level is 100, is genuine. This is a place where we lay our head, where we 'posed to be comfortable, where were 'posed to feel comfortable when we take a nap and a place to sleep, and when we wake up, we just do it all over again, and we enjoy each other and, most importantly, we leave the penitentiary out of the cell.

Earlonne [00:16:07.03]: If I was to describe Mr. Cloeman over here, I would say he's a well-disciplined person and a great thinker. I know many times, I always come to him and be like, "Hey, man. I need your help on this." [Cleo grunts] And he got his little white board in the cell. [Cleo laughs] He'll bust out the little Sharpie marker, little, little dry marker, and he'll just get to going, you know. He'll get to whatever issues I'm having a problem with. And then, the brother's well versed too, especially when it comes to self-help groups and smart brother men, and that's what I get any, any cool, hella cool, I mean, shit. I don't know what I gonna do when he leaves. To find a brother of your caliber, man, it's going to be hard. I already know that. [sound of tape fast forwarding]

Nigel [00:16:56.12]: OK, so Black's gone. You have a new cellie that the prison put in with you, but you're still going to be looking around. Right?
Earlonne [00:17:04.27]: Actually, it's a trip, because the cellie that I have now is temporary. He's about to leave. I don't want a cellie, but I got to go find one, because if I leave it to custody, they'll just throw anybody in the cell with me, somebody that I'm not compatible with. So, I have to find someone that I'm compatible with. And then, on the other hand, you don't want to tell somebody something, that you want to move them in the cell, and then you change your mind like, "Oh man, I ain't gonna be able do that." You know what I'm saying?

Nigel [00:17:31.29]: Yeah.

Earlonne [00:17:32.23]: Like, you tell a person, "Hey, man, what you doing? You know? You want to move up?" Then, you'd be like, "Oh. I'm gonna go get this dude over here."

Nigel [00:17:38.25]: It's really like dating. I mean, some of the things that you talk, I know.

Earlonne [00:17:41.26]: It's not like dating, Nigel.

Nigel [00:17:44.02]: There are a lot of similarities.

Earlonne [00:17:46.11]: There's- I can't even look at it that way, Nigel.

Nigel [00:17:48.17]: I knew you wouldn't be able to. That's why I hesitated.

Earlonne [00:17:50.03]: No, but it is, it's a relationship. It is a relationship.

Nigel [00:17:52.06]: Yeah. Yeah, and so that's why the idea of dating comes up, because there isn't any other time where two adults are expected to live in such close proximity.
Earlonne [00:18:00.20]: So, you have to be peaceful. You don't have to talk.

[00:18:04.04] Yard Talk (Sha and Dante): What he got? This is what he got over Denzel Washington? This the movies he played in: Booty Call. [laughs] Jamie Foxx is a better actor- Bait. [laughs]
So what? Look, man, he's got to-
See what I'm saying? Booty Call. Fortune with Ricky in it. What was the one?
Ricky from Boyz in the Hood? [laughs] I don't even know the name of that movie.
What was it? Booty Call part 2.
It had Gabrielle Union in it.

Earlonne [00:18:22.11]: Nig, I know I said I don't like talkers, but Dante and Sha, they are cellies and they are chopping it up in a way that is totally compatible, totally acceptable. That kind of talking wouldn't bother me.

Nigel [00:18:34.14]: Yeah. They came down here yesterday and started talking and we had to pull out the recorder. I mean, I just imagine that's what they're like all the time in their cell.

Earlonne [00:18:42.19]: Yeah. Every night, they have their top five. Who's the best black actors? Who's the best basketball players? Who's the best rappers?

[00:18:50.16] Yard Talk (Sha and Dante): Top five, right. Jay Z and Ja Rule in the same category.
Come on, brother. Stop it.
Blue for 2. Ain't blood in my eyes part 2? [laughs]
Bruh. You're vile, bruh.
Blue for 2. Blue for 2. Ain't black back-
Nigel [00:19:06.08]: Those guys clearly get along. They obviously are compatible cellies.

Earlonne [00:19:09.26]: Yup.

Nigel [00:19:10.10]: And, E, I know, ideally, you really want to live alone.

Earlonne [00:19:13.04]: That I do.

Nigel [00:19:15.01]: Well, you won't believe this, but on the way in today, when I was walking in, I ran into Ron Self, who was the guy at the top of the podcast who had that cellie from hell.

Earlonne [00:19:24.06]: Right.

Nigel [00:19:25.06]: And I asked him about his current cell situation, and I wanted to play some tape for you.

Earlonne [00:19:31.00]: OK.

Ron Self [00:19:31.16]: Well, I, I don't have a cellie right now. I don't live with anyone. I'm single cell.

Earlonne [00:19:36.23]: That's, that's the best way to live in prison.

Nigel [00:19:38.22]: How's that make you feel, though?

Earlonne [00:19:40.03]: I mean, it's, it's- I'm jealous.

Ron Self [00:19:43.01]: And the reason I'm single cell is because of my ethnicity, which is American Indian, and I have medical issues because surgeries that I've just had, neck surgeries, arm surgeries, that prevent me
from pulling myself to the top bunk.

Earlonne [00:19:58.17]: I got a shoulder injury, and I can't get a bottom bunk.

Nigel [00:20:01.09]: Man, you cannot catch a break.

Earlonne [00:20:03.09]: [laughs] No, I cannot. I have to be Native American probably.

Nigel [00:20:09.08]: Yeah. Well, ok, so at San Quentin, guys are celled by race. That's a story for another podcast. But, Ron apparently has had a single cell for quite some time.

Nigel [00:20:19.16]: Tell me what it's like to have that 9 by 4 space to yourself.

Ron Self [00:20:23.09]: Still feels crowded. [laughs] So, I use the top bunk as like a desk, and I have a yoga mat up there, and I, I, yeah I just kind of-

Nigel [00:20:33.25]: But, isn't it- I mean it must actually be a pleasure, if we can use that word for a cell, that you can go back there and you can shut the cell door, whatever, and you can actually be alone in there.

Ron Self [00:20:44.18]: Yeah. It's helped me get in touch with myself in a way that I can go back in there and shut the door and just cry. A lot of guys can't and won't do that because they just, there's no time to be alone here, because you're never alone really. You're surrounded by, you know, 900 people all the time but you're never alone. Having a single cell for any period of time, it's just, it's like a brief vacation.

Earlonne [00:21:10.12]: Yeah, I can dig that. That's the life.
Nigel [00:21:14.06]: So, like, tell me what you're doing now. Like, are you like looking around at guys? Are you checking people out? I know this all sounds like dating.

Earlonne [00:21:20.06]: Yeah, especially the checking people out. Yeah.

Nigel [00:21:21.26]: I know. So, what are you like, what are you doing now when you're walking around the yard?

Earlonne [00:21:25.22]: Well, there's one cat. He's, uh, he's laid back. He's older than me. He's probably like 49. Cool dude. You know he's out the way. He's been locked up like 20 years. So, a person that's been locked up for a long time gets it. You know, it's, it's, it's a professional prisoner.

Nigel [00:21:44.04]: So, what would the conversation be like with this guy?

Earlonne [00:21:46.29]: What do you mean?

Nigel [00:21:48.07]: When you pop the question.

Earlonne [00:21:50.21]: So you're saying, will I court the guy?

Nigel [00:21:52.29]: Yes. Yes. How are you going to court this guy? And then, when do you move to asking that really important question: Will you move in with me?

Earlonne [00:21:59.23]: I be like, "Look here man." Put my Barry White voice on.

Nigel [00:22:02.09]: Yeah. [laughs]

Earlonne [00:22:02.09]: No. Um, I think it is more- She said "pop the question". It's like, look at him get on one knee. "Hey, you wanna move in
with me?"

Nigel [00:22:08.15]: Exactly.

Earlonne [00:22:11.03]: [laughs] Nah. It's more like, "Hey, man. Look here, man. My cellie's fixin' to bounce, man. You good where you at or you want to move up?" You know, that's it. [outro music] And that's it for this episode of 'Ear Hustle'. Our sound designer's Antwan Williams. We also got a few tracks from fellow prisoners David Jassy and Joshua Burton.

Nigel [00:22:38.22]: Pat Mesiti-Miller is our outside production adviser. Our editor is Curtis Fox.

Earlonne [00:22:43.24]: And our executive producer for Radiotopia is the illustrious Julie Shapiro. We also want to thank Warden Ron Davis, and every episode has to be approved by this guy here.

Sam Robinson [00:22:54.13]: This is Lieutenant Sam Robinson. I'm the public information officer at San Quentin State Prison, and I approve this story.

Earlonne [23:31]: 'Ear Hustle' is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of the best podcasts around. Radiotopia is made possible with support from the Knight Foundation. Hear more at Radiotopia.fm. Next time on 'Ear Hustle', the high price one man paid for loyalty to his gang.

Shakur [23:50]: In 1985, I'm in a liquor store, and I see this brother come in and I say, "What's up, homeboy?" And he like, "What that West Side Rollin 60s like?" Now, that was the worst thing he could have said to me at that point because I was at the height of my career as a gangbanger.

Nigel [24:12]: Our website is earhustlesq.com. You can find video, photos, and audio extras there.
Earlonne [24:17]: And you can subscribe to our podcast, sign up for a newsletter, and find out how to send us a question by postcard that we might answer on a future episode.


Radiotopia outro [24:34] Radiotopia from PRX.

Female [24:42]: Thanks for listening and thanks to Adzerk for providing their ad serving platform to Radiotopia.