Episode 27: Excuse Me on the Tier
First Aired: June 5, 2019

Victoria Waters: [00:00] Soy Victoria Waters, Secretaria de Prensa del Departamento Correccional de California…

Translator: [00:04] I’m Vicky Waters, Press Secretary for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, and this episode of Ear Hustle contains language and descriptions of graphic violence that may not be appropriate for all listeners. Discretion is advised.

Victoria Waters: [00:17] …se aconseja discreción.

[Keys clinking, inaudible voices, synth. Then, low chatter.]

Voice: [00:30] Hey, what the fuck is this? Be quiet!

[Chatter fades beneath NIGEL]

Nigel Poor: [00:38] So Earlonne, I went to reception recently. It’s the first time I’ve been there.
Earlonne Woods: [00:42] Reception.

Nigel: [00:42] Mhm.

Earlonne: [00:43] I haven’t been there since 1999.

Nigel: [00:45] Oh, thank God.

Earlonne: [00:46] And trust me, it’s a whole different world.

Nigel: [00:48] Oh man, it really is. And... okay, so reception is where you go from county jail after you’ve been sentenced and before you’ve been assigned to a prison where you’re gonna start doing your time. Is that right?

Earlonne: [00:56] Right, right. Everybody in the California prison system first passes through reception. And this is the place where...

Nigel: [01:05] Oh my God, guys must be terrified. I mean come on.

Earlonne: [01:06] I mean, you have everybody from everywhere. Like level one, level two, level three, level four. They segregate them later, but at reception, everybody is together.

Nigel: [01:15] It’s chaos, right? I mean that was my feeling.

Earlonne: [01:17] It’s different. It’s prison 101. This is the beginning of the orientation to the penal system.

Nigel: [01:23] Right, so if you’ve never been in before, your mind must be blown...

Earlonne: [01:28] If you’ve never been in before, you’re trying to go through all those stories you heard about this place in the county jail. ‘Cause people try to get you prepared in the county jail, they tell you all these crazy stories that don’t help.

Nigel: [01:40] Well, there is a reception center at San Quentin [music starts], and it’s just one of the handful of reception centers in California. And at San Quentin, there’s about a thousand guys there at any given time, waiting to be assigned to their actual prison.
Earlonne: [01:51] Right, but they’re not on the main line at the prison. They’re not part of that population. And when you do see these guys, they’re under escort. Just like the guys on death row, the officers don’t want you to look at ‘em.

Nigel: [02:04] Right.

Earlonne: [02:06] So you gotta turn your back when the reception center people walk by.

Nigel: [02:07] It’s so weird when you see that, like guys stop and turn and face the wall.

Earlonne: [02:10] Yeah, that’s the way they want it, but you know I’m always gonna look.


Earlonne: [02:16] That’s what I do. I peeps. I peeps! I’m a looker. [NIGEL laughs] And you know, the cold part about reception is you don’t get out much. You get a little yard time, you go to the dining hall twice a day, but other than that, you’re locked in a cell.

Nigel: [02:29] Mm. That’s gotta be tough.

[Chatter comes up, fades underneath NIGEL when she starts speaking]

Nigel: [02:36] I was actually really nervous to go in there, because I had heard all the rumors about how out of control reception can be, and I really didn’t know what to expect. And, yes. It was… intense. So, I wanna play just a little bit of tape to give listeners an idea of what it’s actually like at 10 o’clock at night in reception.

[Tape starts. Inaudible shout becomes a rowdy call-and-response.]

Earlonne: [03:14] That’s the shutdown routine that happens every night.

Nigel: [03:17] Every night.

[Call-and-response resumes]

Earlonne: [03:22] And you know, Nige, it’s broke down by race in prison. You know this?
Nigel: [03:27] Mhm, oh yeah.

Earlonne: [03:28] So that's how it is in reception as well.

Nigel: [03:30] Okay.

Earlonne: [03:31] And each race gets a chance to say goodnight to their brothers, their comrades, and all the other races. The ones you just heard are the Norteños.

Nigel: [03:37] The northern Mexicans?

Earlonne: [03:38] The northern Mexicans.

Nigel: [03:39] Okay. And then when the shutdown routine is over, goodnight all.

[Call and response resumes, ends abruptly. Echoes.]


Nigel: [03:50] [Laughing] Crickets.


[Theme music starts]

Nigel: [03:57] You're now tuned in to San Quentin's Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia. I'm Nigel Poor, a visual artist, now podcaster. I've been working with the guys at San Quentin State Prison in California for about eight years.

Earlonne: [04:08] And I'm Earlonne Woods, a former resident of San Quentin.

Nigel: [04:12] I think that's worth saying twice.

Earlonne: [04:14] A former resident of San Quentin.

Nigel: [04:17] [Laughs] Right on. And together, we're gonna take you inside...

**Nigel**: [04:24] Yes.

[Theme music comes back up, transitions into peppy synthy music]

**Nigel**: [04:42] Earlonne, this is our first episode of season four, and a lot has changed. For you, for me, and for *Ear Hustle*.

**Earlonne**: [04:49] Sure has, ‘cause at the end of 2018, about seven months ago, my sentence of 31 years to life was commuted, and now I’m free.

**Nigel**: [04:59] Because of all the changes, we’ve been gone a while, and I really wanna thank longtime listeners for hanging in there and give a super warm welcome to new listeners.

**Earlonne**: [05:07] Indeed. This season is gonna be different because I can’t really get back into San Quentin, not that I’m trying to. [NIGEL laughs] You understand that, Nige?

**Nigel**: [05:18] I do miss working with you inside, but here’s the good thing.

**Earlonne**: [05:22] Okay.

**Nigel**: [05:23] We are now professional colleagues on the outside. And speaking of that, I’m guessing some listeners would like to know what you’ve been up to.

**Earlonne**: [05:28] I’ve been up to all kinds of stuff.

**Nigel**: [05:30] Like what, like what?

**Earlonne**: [05:31] Like fighting to lose the weight that’s been finding me. [NIGEL laughs] Somehow it’s finding me, you know? I still get my eat on.

**Nigel**: [05:39] Well, beyond eating, we have been working hard on getting the season ready—

**Earlonne**: [05:43] [Overlapping] Season four. We’ve been working hella hard.
Nigel: [05:46] And here’s how it’s gonna work. [Underscoring starts] *Ear Hustle* is still a podcast out of San Quentin prison, and we’re still gonna be telling stories about life behind bars. But I’m gonna be working with a new co-host on the inside.

Earlonne: [05:55] And you will hear from him later in this episode, but I got the flow right now.

Nigel: [06:00] And you’re not going anywhere!

Earlonne: 06:02 I’m gonna be working on stories about men…

Nigel: [06:04] And women…

Earlonne: [06:05] When they get out of prison. There’s a lot of people leaving prison in California these days, and they gotta find work, they gotta find a place to live, they have to reconnect with their families, and they have to—you know—[Singing] ‘let’s get it on…’ [NIGEL laughs]

Nigel: [06:20] I was gonna say ‘Are you talking about dating?’ but it’s pretty clear you are.

Earlonne: [06:23] It’s pretty clear, yes yes.

Nigel: [06:25] So some episodes will be about life inside, some about life outside, and some a combo platter.

Earlonne: [06:32] And since this is the first episode of the season and so much has changed for us at *Ear Hustle*, we thought it should be about transitions.

Nigel: [06:41] Exactly. And that’s why this episode is about reception.

Earlonne: [06:44] Right.

Nigel: [06:44] And guys at the San Quentin reception center… well, they could end up at San Quentin.

Earlonne: [06:48] Or may not.

Nigel: [06:50] They could be shipped to any other prison in the state, right?
**Earlonne**: [06:51] Right. You usually spend about 90 days in reception, and it’s an experience that guys remember for the rest of their lives.

**Nigel**: [06:59] Do you have strong memories of it?

**Earlonne**: [07:00] Hell yeah, ’cause I spent 120 in the reception center.

**Nigel**: [07:03] Ooo, you got an extra month?

**Earlonne**: [07:05] But, no no no no no, it worked out.

**Nigel**: [07:07] Why?

**Earlonne**: [07:08] Because the first person that classified me classified me with 60-something points which made me a level four. The second person that came back and reclassified me gave me 43 points.

**Nigel**: [07:18] Oo, level three.

**Earlonne**: [07:20] So I was level three for two years before they figured it out. [NIGEL laughs]

**Nigel**: [07:24] So after you got out, Earlonne, we went out to the yard and asked guys in the general population: what was reception like when they were there?

[Chatter, percussive noises]

**Male Voice 1**: [07:37] Reception is the place where everything filters through to the opening of the zoo.

**Male Voice 2**: [07:42] You’re given a little bag of powdered toothpaste, a little toothbrush, a cup, a spoon, and you’d be lucky if you get a couple envelopes and a bar of soap.

**Male Voice 3**: [07:54] Hey, what color you wear in reception?

**Male Voice 4**: [07:55] Orange.
Male Voice 3: [07:56] Right on.

Male Voice 4: [07:57] That shit looks stupid, too.

Male Voice 3: [07:59] It makes it look like a pumpkin suit.

Male Voice 5: [08:00] Be prepared for that 23 hour lockdown. That’s what you need to be prepared for.


Male Voice 7: [08:14] It wasn’t cool at all. I didn’t like it. I had a cellie with a shit bag. And I was like, ‘Man, they’re really torturing me.’ I know I did wrong and all, but damn.

Nigel: [08:26] We wanted to hear more stories about reception, so we also brought guys down to the media center to hear from them.

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas: [08:34] It’s my first time being locked up, and somebody who’s just really cool, a guy that took a liking to me, just started telling me how jail works. He said ‘when you go inside, show no fear. Do not stay in your cell. Go in your cell, put your property down on your bed, and come right out. Go see who’s on the tier and make yourself known. If you go into your cell and hide, they’re gonna think you’re scared.’ And he also told me, ‘Don’t accept charity in prison. Don’t let nobody give you a candy bar, don’t let nobody give you anything ‘cause there’s always strings attached.’

Nigel: [09:04] Can you tell me that story… so what does it mean if somebody leaves a candy bar on your bunk?

New York: [09:08] Oh, that’s a setup.

Nigel: [09:10] Will you explain that?

New York: [09:12] The theory is you’re just coming to prison, you don’t have any property. If you eat the candy bar, then you owe them, and you have no way to pay with money. And so they expect you to pay with a sexual favor. Booty bandits—let’s just call ‘em what they are, booty bandits. Guys that are in there trying to turn young, naïve prisoners out, try and make them their prison… property?
Nigel: [09:37] So you knew that going in.

New York: [09:39] I was scared to death, that’s like my worst nightmare. To be raped or something like that. Worst nightmare.

[Dialogue fades underneath NIGEL]

Nigel: [09:45] That is the voice Rahsaan Thomas, aka New York, and he’s actually talking about reception in New York state, which is where he first went to prison.

Earlonne: [09:54] And there’s also something very special about this New York character.

Nigel: [09:59] Yes there is!

Earlonne: [09:59] We are proud to announce that New York is our new cohost for season 4.

[Hip hop beat hits suddenly]

Nigel: [10:03] Oh yes.

Earlonne: [10:05] Brooklyn’s in the house indeed.

Nigel: [10:08] I am so glad to hear you celebrating him now, because during the job search, you put him through hell.


Nigel: [10:17] And what about me? You had to make sure I—

Earlonne: [10:18] [Overlapping] And you too, you too, but I had to make sure we straight.

Nigel: [10:20] So this season on Ear Hustle, we’re gonn have three hosts. You and me when we’re talking about life on the outside, and me and New York when we’re doing stories inside. And we can’t all be together, because obviously you’re not going back into San Quentin anytime soon.
Earlonne: [10:34] Nah.

Nigel: [10:35] And New York can’t come out. So listeners are gonna hear me magically toggle between you and New York.

[EARLONNE makes a “whoosh” sound with his mouth, he and Nigel laugh]

Earlonne: [10:48] Longtime listeners might remember New York from previous episodes, because he’s been in a few. [Voice of sports announcer comes up underneath him] The first time he was on was to talk about how he set a record when he ran the San Quentin marathon for the first time.

Crowd Voice: [11:01] Come on New York! Let’s go baby, come on!

New York: [11:02] It took me six hours, 15 minutes, 23 seconds. I got the longest marathon time at San Quentin state prison.

[Transitions to audio of NEW YORK from the marathon. He’s gasping]

I survived. I’m still alive. Lieutenant thought I couldn’t do it, Chiuy thought I couldn’t do it…

[New York fades out as music starts and Nigel finishes a laugh]


Nigel: [11:25] Well, it’s time for you and me to talk more about reception.


[Music stops]

Nigel: [11:30] Okay. There’s another guy listeners are going to be hearing from this season. He’s coming on as Ear Hustle producer.

Nigel: [11:38] Yep, new guy number two.

New York: [11:40] And like anybody who’s ever been to a prison, he had to start in reception, and he remembers it quite well. In fact, it’s stained on Yahya’s brain.

[Swirl of distorted voices, keys clanking, echoes]

John “Yahya” Johnson: [11:53] When I first walked into the Carson center—uh, San Quentin’s reception center in Carson—the first thing that I smelled was the stench of smoke, and it was pungent. It reminded me of a forest fire. And I thought, ‘Damn, is it a fire going on around?’ because it was just smoky. But then the other thing I noticed was that people were going about like normal business. I walked to the cell where I was, I went in and made the formal introduction to the cellmate that I had, and that was the first thing I asked him. I’m like, ‘Why is there smoke coming out of individual cells?’ And he said that those were individuals who liked to burn wicks. And I’m like, what is a wick? And he said it was a long piece of toilet paper that was rolled up into a tight rope and hung on the wall and burned so people can have access to light their cigarettes. And I said okay, no wonder why the building is smoky. There’s a ton of wicks being burned in the building. [Pause, ambient sound] Another interesting thing was that I used to smelle exotic foods. [NIGEL reacts] I’m like, where is this food smells coming from? I’m talking about Chinese food, Mexican food, different kinds of food. We’re in reception. We don’t have hot pots or anything, so where is this coming from? And so my cellie said, ‘Well, you have guys who have cafes.’ And so I was like, how are they making the food smell this good? It smells like diner food, greasy spoon food. And he said, ‘Oh, what they do is they take the cookie sheet on the bunk that we sleep on and they scrape the paint off of it’ [Scraping sounds] ‘and it’s actual metal like a grill, a real thin piece of metal. Then they take this fire bomb…’

Nigel: [13:32] Remind us what the fire bomb is.

Yahy: [13:34] You take toilet paper or a sheet and you wrap either/or into a cone, and then take a can, and you sit the cone on top of the can, and it shoots a fire flame straight up like a Bunsen burner. And when you put it under the cookie sheet, it heats the cookie sheet on the bed into a grill. So these guys are doing chop suey, putting the rice from the cantine, the noodles and the fish together with the peppers, and actually making cuisines to sell and to feed their homeboys.

[Plunky music starts]
**Nigel:** [14:09] Okay, that's impressive that you can actually take that sheet of metal on your bunk and turn it into this giant frying pan.

**New York:** [14:07] Or 'gangsta grill.'

**Nigel:** [14:19] [Laughing] 'Gangsta grill!' [NEW YORK laughs too] Okay, so you can make this grill, and then you cook these snacks to share with your neighbors.

**New York:** [14:24] Yeah, guys in prisons are geniuses. And the guys that have been in reception for a while, they pass on their tricks to the new guys that are coming in.

**Nigel:** [14:30] Nice.

**New York:** [14:31] But most guys that come through reception, they don't remember it as a place of good food or good smells.

**David Ditto:** [14:37] The cockroaches, the heat, the sweat. Noisy, smoke everywhere. Couldn't sleep, couldn't rest. It was miserable. It was really miserable... [Fades underneath NEW YORK]

**New York:** [14:48] That's David Ditto. Before coming to San Quentin, he was in reception at Chino State Prison, which is right outside of Los Angeles.

**Nigel:** [14:55] And when he was there in 2012, there were problems. With the plumbing.

**David:** [14:59] The toilets didn't work.

**Nigel:** [15:01] So what would you do if you had to go to the bathroom?

**David:** [15:03] [Sighs] It got so bad, I had to actually make a makeshift toilet in the middle of my cell, in the morning when my cellie was asleep, and use it and wrap it up and put it out with the trash. Be careful where you throw it.

[Swirling music]

**Nigel:** [15:24] 'Be careful where you throw it.' He wasn't kidding.
New York: [15:26] Not at all. And I have a serious story about that back from when I was in reception. And it happened when I was walking in a single-file line with a group of guys on our way to chow. [Light chatter in the background] And we’re all wearing the state green uniforms, and about maybe five guys in front of me, something comes over the tiers and splashes him right in the head. And it’s feces. He gets shit all over his face, on his head. And the craziest thing about it is nobody laughed at him, he didn’t take it like no big deal, he just wiped it off as best he can, he looked up a little bit, and he just kept walking like nothing happened, straight to chow. And I was looking like, ‘Wow,’ like, ‘What the hell?’ But the craziest part was the next day, I went to chow again, and at the breakfast table, they were talking about how the guy who threw the shit was found stabbed to death in his cell. And that’s when I realized like, ‘They are not playing. This is real. This is prison, this is no joke. And I can live or I can die here.’ And it made me even more hyper-vigilant. More scared. More worried.

[Transition music: distorted sounds, doors opening and closing]

Nigel: [16:44] Let’s go back out to the yard.

Male Voice 8: [16:50] I’m not gonna lie, it be going down up there. It was alarm like six times a day, somebody getting got off on.

Male Voice 9: [16:55] Well, I just stepped into the arena and I was 17 and a half and they let me know that I was a damn child. You know, I wanted my motherfucking mama.

Male Voice 10: [17:04] The first thing I heard when I walked right into reception, ‘New booty, come to the gate!’ I was like, ‘Aw, hell no, I’m gonna get raped!’ I was terrified, and I went to the cell, and he was like, ‘Oh, nah, they’re just messin’ with you.’ I was like, ‘Well, they sounded serious man. They sounded serious.’ I wrote letters home to everybody, I cried a little bit. Didn’t wanna admit it, but I did.

[Slow transition music]

New York: [17:31] We’ll be right back after this break.

[Music continues]

Nigel: [17:52] So we’re talking about reception, the place where guys go when they first enter the prison system.
**Louis Brackett**: [17:57] I think the thing that was most difficult for me to deal with in reception was the noise.

**New York**: [18:03] This is Louis Brackett. He recently went through reception here at San Quentin.

**Louis**: [18:08] They were just so loud. They’re talking to this guy down here, this guy over here, this guy up here, this guy over here. Like, ‘Hey, what’s up homie? Good morning!’ ‘Ay, I sent mine, bro,’ ‘Alright, I’ll send mine right back.’ And they’re just doing that all day, and it was just driving me crazy.

[Inaudible yelling, cut off my metallic sound effect]

**New York**: [18:28] So right now, I see you have a watch on. How do you tell time in reception? Ain’t no watches over there, right?

**Louis**: [18:35] So, yeah. There’s not…

**Nigel**: [18:37] Wait… what do you mean? There’s no time in reception? [LOUIS laughs, says “No”] Wait, what do you mean? Explain that. [LOUIS laughs again]

**Louis**: [18:42] The time the judge gave you.

**Nigel**: [18:44] Seriously? There’s no clocks there?

**New York**: [18:45] There’s no clocks.

**Nigel**: [18:46] Intentionally?

**Louis**: [18:47] There’s a clock down by the desk, but that’s it. You cannot see it from your cell.

[More loud chatter]

**Nigel**: [18:55] So in reception here at San Quentin, you don’t know what time it is, it’s noisy, and you can’t really see who’s making all of that noise.

**Louis**: [19:03] Yeah. Um, what’s crazy is you can hear all these guys, but you can’t see them. So unless you know their voice, you don’t know who they are.
Nigel: [19:09] That’s insane!

Louis: [19:10] It’s really insane. And like, if somebody curses you out, you don’t know if they’re big or small [NIGEL laughs], if you should turn the fade down, if you should take the fade, you don’t know what to do! You don’t know who just cursed you out, so you’re like…

Nigel: [19:20] It may be better to just stay quiet in there.

Louis: [19:22] I think that’s my advice. [He laughs, chatter starts again and then abruptly stops]

Jeff Atkins: [19:27] Last time I was in reception was February of 20… this is 19. 18… 17. [Fades under NIGEL]

Nigel: [19:34] Jeff Atkins is a professional musician. He’s been in prison before, back in the 1990s. And this was his… second time in reception?

New York: [19:43] Second, third… I’m not sure, Nige. But he’s definitely what I’m gonna call “a returning resident.”

Nigel: [19:48] Okay, so this is maybe his third time in prison?


[Distant voice says something inaudible, then “More than three times”]

Nigel: [19:54] Lonnie just let us know it’s more than three times. [NEW YORK laughs] So what that tells me is he really knew what to expect.

New York: [19:59] Yep, and that was no TVs, no radios, and very limited phone calls.

Nigel: [20:05] Apart from reading, there’s no entertainment except what guys can come up with themselves.

[Chorus of voices shouting]

New York: [20:12] Yeah, reception’s a whole lotta boring.
**Nigel:** [20:14] It sure sounds like that.

**New York:** [20:15] Aw, heck yeah. But Jeff says the last time he was there, there was something going on every night.

**Jeff:** [20:22] Anywhere from after chow, which is usually around 6:30, 7, after the evening meal, they kick it off. Some guy will start rapping or they’ll have a comedy show, they’ll do skits. They’ll do commercials.

[Distant sound of someone freestyling]

**Nigel:** [20:41] And people actually pay attention? It’s not all chaotic and crazy?

**Jeff:** [20:44] It is crazy. While this is going on, there’s deals being made. You know, ‘I got a shot of coffee for two stamped envelopes, where you at?’ And you yell out your cell number and the runner will come and deliver your products.

[More freestyling]

**Nigel:** [21:04] So New York, this is what they call ‘Showtime at the Apollo.’

**New York:** [21:08] Yep. So, the thing about reception, it’s not really a nice place, but guys make the best of it, and showtime gotta be the absolute best thing about it. Guys with musical talent can shine, comedians can tell their jokes, it’s like a freakin’ variety show.

**Nigel:** [21:20] But remember, you can’t see how’s performing.

**New York:** [21:23] Oh yeah. [NIGEL laughs] You can’t see anything.

**Nigel:** [21:25] And Jeff took advantage of that relative anonymity.

**Jeff:** [21:30] So when I first got there, I figured I’d play a little trick, right? I did a Randy Travis song, right? And Randy Travis, of course, is a right country singer, right?

**New York:** [21:40] How did the song go?
Jeff: [21:41] And they’re, they’re politicking. They’re doing the prison politics in there, you know. The whites hang with the whites, the blacks hang with the blacks. So I came out with this [Singing] ‘Oh baby, I’m gonna love you forever,’ and I really put the twang in it. ‘And forever and ever, amen.’ And so all the white guys go ‘Yeah, brother! Sing, brother!’ And I just keep going, and I get to the chorus: ‘I’m gonna love you forever and ever/And forever and ever, amen.’ And so they’d be like, ‘Yeah brother! Yeah! Sing another one, brother! Where you at, brother? I’m gonna sling you some coffee, brother. You need anything else down there?’ I’m like, ‘No, I’m cool bro, I’m cool, alright.’ So I do that. I think I did another, a couple more country songs. I did Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers, I love them...

Nigel: [22:31] [Overlapping] Oh, come on, I gotta hear that.

Jeff: [22:35] Oh, it was, um, ‘Baby, when I met you there was peace unknown/And I set out to get you with a fine-tooth comb/I was soft inside,’ so we’ll just get to the, ‘Islands in the stream/That is what we are.’ And so I’ll tell you… white people are much more appreciative than black folks when it comes to showing their appreciation.

Nigel: [22:57] Really?

Jeff: [22:58] Yeah, I mean the white guys were like, ‘Yeehaw! Yeaaaah brother!’ [Applauding] I mean, it was like a standing ovation. A thunderous—they were beating on the walls, and ‘Yeah brother!’ They were pumped, I mean, ‘Yeah!’ So I knew I had ‘em, right? So I did… I think it was, uh, Michael Jackson. You know, early Michael Jackson. ‘Who’s loving you?’ Right after the...

New York: [23:22] How’d it go? How’d it go?

Jeff: [23:25] ‘When I had you,’ you know, it was, ‘Who’s loving you?’ And they were confused now. They’re like, ‘Wait a minute, brother. What nationality are you, brother?’ [NEW YORK and JEFF both laugh]

Nigel: [23:45] The white dudes were yelling that?

Jeff: [23:47] Huh? Yes! [NIGEL laughs] I wanted to say, ‘I’m a n*****!’ [JEFF laughs] When I told ‘em what I was, right, they were like, ‘Oh! Alright brother. As long as we know.’ Then, now they’re mad at my neighbors. They’re like, ‘Hey! Hey, Ronnie! You were next to this dude and you didn’t tell us anything?’
Nigel: [24:11] Did they ever give you anything? Like, they send you…


Nigel: [24:16] Before they found out? When they thought you were white?

Jeff: [24:17] And even after, to be honest with you. I’m telling you, music is so universal that it was just fun and games to me.

[Buzzy, synthy transition sounds. Inaudible call and response.]

Nigel: [24:39] Most nights around 10 o’clock, the shutdown begins. And this is when the crazy, noisy day in reception comes to an end, with a very specific ritual. And we heard some of that at the top of the podcast.

[Call and response is louder, snaps into a rhythm]

New York: [24:54] That’s the USOs, the Samoan cats doing their shutdown.

[Call and response resumes, ends with an echo]

Here’s Louis Brackett again, remembering what it was like to lead the shutdown.

Louis: [25:15] I would grab the bars and, like, scream at the top of my lungs. You know, ‘Excuse me,’ like, ‘on the tier!’ [His words begin to echo] ‘Excuse me on the tier!’ Just getting that out. And really being that one voice that everybody is listening to every night.

[Rowdy call and response resumes, then abruptly ends, with an echo]

Charles Talib Brooks: [25:38] The first time I heard the shutdown, I loved it.

Nigel: [25:41] This is Talib Brooke, who was in San Quentin’s reception in the early ‘90s.

Talib: [25:46] I love the unity. I love the respect. I love the structure. I really appreciated that. I was like, ‘Man, I don’t believe I’m hearing this. They’re really having a respectful ending to the night. Wow.’ I mean, you could hear a pin drop. That’s beautiful. That’s eerie. That’s power.
Nigel: [26:13] So after the shutdown, what happens if... And everyone respects it. Do the COs respect it?

Talib: [26:19] Absolutely. They respect it.

Nigel: [26:21] And what happens if someone doesn't?

Talib: [26:23] They get dealt with. Their own race will have to check them, though. Blacks can't check a white, vice-versa. You know, 'Hey man, your folks was talkin' last night,' 'Don't worry, we got it.' And he get boop bop bop bop boop. Have a accident. [He laughs] The next thing you know, he got knots and he learned a lesson. You know, sugar lumps.

[N Metallic transition sounds, plunky music]

Nigel: [26:51] Hey E?

Earlonne: [26:52] What up, Nige?

Nigel: [26:53] From what we've heard, it sounds like reception is boring, smelly, dangerous, a place where you get sugar lumps, [EARLONNE laughs] which sounds so friggin innocent, but clearly... [Laughs] they are not.

Earlonne: [27:04] They are not, they are not. Sugar lumps is those thing you see on cartoons where they get hit on the head and they just swell.

Nigel: [27:09] Oh God. So I'm sure you get sugar lumps and probably far worse.

Earlonne: [27:12] Yep. I'll say this—it's not a place anyone wants to spend very long in.

Nigel: [27:18] Oh God, no.

Earlonne: [27:19] 90 days is more than enough. More than enough, for real.

Nigel: [27:22] Well, and do you think reception actually prepares you for what lays ahead? I mean, most guys are on their way to serving some serious friggin time.
Earlonne: [27:30] Yeah, I mean, it helps you with the prison politics. To be able to understand what is acceptable in prison...

Nigel: [27:36] Okay.

Earlonne: [27:37] …what is not acceptable. What’ll put you on the front line or what’ll get you hurt.

Nigel: [27:41] So it is like prison with training wheels.

Earlonne: [27:44] Prison 101. But there’s probably no way to prepare a person for spending decades behind the bars.

Nigel: [27:51] How could there be?

Earlonne: [27:53] I mean that is crazy. It’s tough, it’s definitely a transition, going to prison. And you know what? Unless you’re in there for life, you’re gonna go through another huge transition.


Earlonne: [28:07] Getting out. It’s the transition that pretty much everyone in prison is dreaming about, but when it finally happens to you, it’s not easy.

Nigel: [28:15] Was it easier for you, do you think?

Earlonne: [28:17] I had a smooth transition. I had a kickback transition, you know. I got out, I had a job, I had a place to live, money in my pocket.

Nigel: [28:27] Well, everyone gets out with some money.

Earlonne: [28:29] You talking about gate money, Nige?


Earlonne: [28:32] When you get out of California state prison, you get a grand total, on a plastic card of $200. The same amount you got in 1973. [NIGEL reacts with pained cries] Back then, you coulda bought a house, a car or something.
Nigel: [28:47] Oh my god, okay, we are laughing about it, but seriously. That is not gonna take you very far, you know, 50 years later.

Earlonne: [28:55] It won’t. I mean, it’s not gonna be much help in 2019. But it is money.

Nigel: [29:01] And how you spend it does tell us something about who you are. So we asked New York and Yahya to go out to the yard and ask guys what they would do with that $200 if they got out.

Yahya: [29:14] What do you plan on doing with that $200 gate money that they give you when you parole?

Male Voice 11: [29:19] I plan on sending my cellie a package, ’cause my cellie don’t have nobody.

Male Voice 12: [29:22] Get me a steak dinner. Get me a nice lemonade or something like that to drink.

New York: [29:28] What could you get in Mexico with $200?

Male Voice 13: [29:31] You can get all new clothes and shoes, and then you can eat at a restaurant. $200 is a lot of money over there.

Male Voice 14: 29:41 I’m gonna get soap, I’m gonna get deodorant, I’m gonna get the boxers, the T-shirts. Then at the end of that, I’m gonna get me a nice bottle of red wine. You know, something smooth.

Male Voice 15: [29:48] One night at a motel and a bus transportation to the welfare department to get me some type of assistance.

Male Voice 16: [29:55] Go to the nearest store and buy me some bubble gum. I haven’t had bubble gum in 17 and a half years, and I like bubble gum.

Earlonne: [30:04] They’re not so far from the mark. I went around and asked people who recently got out of prison what they actually did with that 200.

[From the field]

So, what did you do with that $200 gate money?
Male Voice 17: [30:15] Uh... what did I do with that $200?

Male Voice 18: [30:19] I used the $200 correctly. I didn’t spend any money on drugs.

Male Voice 19: [30:24] The first thing I bought was pistachios.

Female Voice 1: [30:27] [On the phone] When I got out, my money was on a plastic card. I didn’t know how to use it, so I kept it for a while. And then someone told me it was money on there.

Male Voice 20: [30:38] I went and bought a phone and was trying to call my partner ‘cause I didn’t know where the hell I was at. Didn’t know how to use Uber or Lyft, so I was just walkin’ around San Francisco just going in liquor stores. Just buying, you know, juice and a potato chips. Went into this little restaurant and ate some shrimp scampi.

Female Voice 1: [30:55] [One the phone] And my first thing that I bought was some french fries at... Burger King, I think it was.

Male Voice 21: [31:00] I bought me some oats. Some real oats and barley. You know, cereal.

Female Voice 2: [31:09] With me $200, I turned around and gave it back to my friend in prison, and I put it on her bunk. That’s what I did with my $200.

Male Voice 21: [31:19] And some real bread. And some Tropicana orange juice. 100%.

Female Voice 3: [31:26] Um, first thing I did is I came home and I bought things that I needed personally, female-wise.

Aly Tamboura: [31:36] First of all, man, what you gonna do with 200 bucks out here nowadays? Right?

Earlonne: [31:38] This is Aly.

Nigel: [31:39] And he’s quite a talker. [NIGEL laughs]

Earlonne: [31:41] He had a lot to say about his $200.
Aly: [31:44] When I first got out, the first thing, my family met me at the gate and we drove to Starbucks, right? And I ain’t had real coffee for a long, long time. I mean years, right? We was dealing with penitentiary coffee. So we go up there, and I get this Americana. I drank it, and it was good. Know what I mean? I was like, ‘ooo.’ This the first thing I tasted after being incarcerated for 12 years, four months, 21 days, and I ain’t figured out the hours. So we start driving, right? And the coffee kicks in. Bro, I can’t talk. I got like lockjaw. I ain’t had that much caffeine in a long, long, long time. So I get home man, and I just got this energy, right? I’m like getting my bed ready, I’m like happy, I’m getting all my stuff done. I’m like man, coffee’s kinda cool. So bro, I’m gonna tell you, man. I spent my $200 worth of gate money at Starbucks.

[Bouncy music]

Nigel: [32:52] Next time on Ear Hustle, we’re going beyond that $200 and Starbu—

Earlonne: [33:55] Beeeeeep! [Laughs]


Earlonne: [33:00] We’re gonna hear what those first days out of prison was like for two very different guys.

Male Voice: [33:05] Now I’m free, you know? So it’s like… I get to do whatever I wanna do.

Earlonne: [33:11] How do you feel about your chances of success on parole?

Male Voice 2: [33:13] I’ve been in prison almost all my adult life. I have no job history. What am I gonna put down on the application?

[Closing music begins]


**New York:** [33:45] With help from our producer Pat Mesiti-Miller, who also comes into work with our sound design team. This episode was scored with music by Antwan Williams and David Jassy.

**Nigel:** [33:53] Curtis Fox is our senior producer, Bruce Wallace produces outside stories with Earlonne.

**Earlonne:** [33:58] Julie Shapiro is our executive producer for Radiotopia. Woop woop! We wanna thank Warden Ron Davis, and as you know, even though *Ear Hustle* is now doing stories outside of prison, the material from inside San Quentin has to be approved by this guy here.

**Nigel:** [34:14] What’d you think of the first episode?

**Lt. Sam Robinson:** [34:16] I thought it was really really interesting to have Earlonne introduce Rahsaan as the new inside piece, and I’m excited to see how the rest of the season plays on.

**New York:** [34:39] So I need to know, man—do you approve this episode?

**Lt. Robinson:** [34:30] I am Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the public information officer at San Quentin State Prison, and I do approve this episode.

**New York:** [34:38] Yay! [Laughs]

**Nigel:** [34:40] What do you think of his laugh?

**Lt. Robinson:** [34:41] You don’t know if it’s gonna irritate everybody or are they gonna really love it. So I think it’s no middle ground, it’ll be either yeah, we’re all in with the laugh, we love it, or, oh man, this guy… please stop laughing. Please.

[Theme music]

**Nigel:** [34:55] *Ear Hustle* is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of the best podcasts around. Hear more at radiotopia.fm.

**Earlonne:** [35:04] 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: [35:14] Check out our updated website, earhustlesq.com, and thanks to Erin Wade, our digital producer, for all the hard work she put into that. And when you’re there, you can sign up for our newsletter, see pictures of people in our stories, and if you wanna spend a little bit, you can buy an Ear Hustle T-shirt or one of our mugs.

Earlonne: [35:30] Follow us on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook @EarHustleSQ. I’m Earlonne Woods.

Nigel: [35:35] I’m Nigel Poor.


[Theme music ends]


New York: [35:48] [Singing] Come and talk to me, I really wanna meet you, girl [Snapping] I really wanna know your name.

Jeff: [35:57] You did good! Until the last part. Don’t hit that high note. [Both laugh]

END OF EPISODE