Episode 28: Respect the Paper
First Aired: June 20, 2019

Alan Alda: [00:00] I'm Alan Alda, and this episode of Ear Hustle may contain some language that's inappropriate for some people, so discretion is advised. But do listen.

[Chatter, plates hitting a table. Then, a light whistle, and footsteps that continue under the dialogue.]

Orrin “Artwork” Hutson: [00:23] There's a lone man struggling to walk across the frozen tundra. Each step is labor intensive. The wind is whipping. [Whistle mimicking the wind] Lightning. [Mouth-made lightning sounds.] In a world where care packages were sent directly from home and everyone had a knife, even if it meant hiding it in their butts. Porn. [Lightning effect] It was sent… through the mail.

Voice: [00:57] [Distant, echoing] The mail!

[Theme music starts]


Nigel Poor: [01:12] I'm Nigel Poor. I've been working here with the guys at San Quentin for about eight years now.

New York: [01:17] Together, we're gonna take you inside…
Nigel: [01:19] …and back out, post-incarceration.  

[Theme music continues]

New York: [01:30] On this episode, we’re staying inside the walls of San Quentin, and we’re talking about something near to my heart.

Nigel: [01:35] And something that gets talked about on *Ear Hustle* a lot, so we figured it deserved its own episode.

New York: [01:40] You’re going to hear some stories about mail.


New York: [01:45] Packages.

Nigel: [01:46] Anything the post might deliver. Then we’re gonna hear some guys read some favorite letters they’ve received.


[Theme music ends, muted synths begin.]

Nigel: [02:02] So, New York.

New York: [02:03] Yes.

Nigel: [02:04] I’m standing in line at the post office near my house. It’s a really long line. The guy behind me says, ‘Are you here to buy stamps?’ I’m like yeah, I’m buying stamps. He’s like ‘Don’t worry, I’m just gonna give them to you.’ And—

New York: [02:16] Wait a minute, wait a minute.

Nigel: [02:17] I know.

New York: [02:18] Give away stamps?

Nigel: [02:19] I was like no that’s okay, I’m gonna buy some. And he was like really pressing me. ‘No no no, don’t buy them, I’m gonna give them to you.’ And so in my mind I’m like [Clicking sounds] why does he wanna give me stamps? He’s super insistent. And so he finally says, ‘You know what? Just go out to the car, ask my girl out there, she’ll give you some stamps.’ [Laughs] So at this point I just felt kind of embarrassed, so I’m like, okay, I’m gonna go do it. So I got out of line, I went out to this car, and there’s this woman sitting there. And I was like, ‘I know this sounds crazy, but the guy inside said just come out here and ask you for stamps.’ [Both laugh] And she opened up her glove compartment and there were so many books of stamps in there. She’s like, ‘Sure,
here, take it.’ She gave me a book of stamps, I said thank you and I started to walk away, but the guy that was inside came out and we started talking and I realized there are two places where you’re gonna find a lot of stamps. One is the post office.

**New York:** [03:06] And the other…

**Nigel:** [03:07] Is in prison. [New York laughs] So I realized this guy must have just gotten out of prison. So we start chit chatting, and yes, that was the case.

**New York:** [03:16] Sounds like an awesome guy.

**Nigel:** [03:18] He was like a friendly teddy bear.

**New York:** [03:19] Have him send me a couple of books, Nige. I could use some stamps.

**Nigel:** [03:22] Hey man, I was not gonna get greedy.

**New York:** [03:23] Alright, fair enough. But it is true. If you walk up to anybody in prison, most likely they got stamps. Stamps are like our currency in prison, ‘cause we can’t have cash, we can’t have dollar bills and nickels and quarters and anything like that. All that is contraband. So we rely on stamps. Officially, we’re allowed to have two books. 40 stamps. So when you ran into that guy at the post office, he had way more than that. He had to be stacking stamps.

**Nigel:** [03:47] Right. So all this got me thinking: how much is a stamp worth in prison? And don’t answer, New York, okay? [New York pretends to stutter] Because we’ve got Eric Womak to tell us.

**New York:** [03:56] Eric’s been in prison for about 25 years. He’s seen it all.

**Nigel:** [04:01] And he told us what a guy can get for a single stamp.

**Eric Womak:** [04:05] Anything. Anything that costs money.

**Nigel:** [04:06] Like what?

**Eric:** [04:07] You can get coffee, you can get food. A stamp, they’re worth a noodle. Even though they’re worth 45 cents. It’s just how the currency goes.

**Nigel:** [04:15] One soup, one stamp?

**Eric:** [04:16] [On the verge of laughter] One soup.

**Nigel:** [04:17] [Laughing] Okay.
Eric: [04:18] And a shot of coffee if you want to. We have coffee that goes for a soup. So if I wanted to go to the coffee man, I could get either coffee or a noodle.

[Music comes up behind Nigel]

Nigel: [04:29] So one stamp gets you a shot of instant coffee or a package of soup. Not bad.

New York: [04:34] Well, not bad if you like Folger’s. Folger’s is the most popular coffee in this prison.

Nigel: [04:38] Would you say it’s the best way to wake up? With Folger’s in your cup?

New York: [04:41] I think that’s a freakin’ rumor, Nige. [Both laugh]

Nigel: [04:43] Well honestly, I have not had Folger’s nor the soup. Because as we’ve said many times on this podcast, volunteers and free staff like me are not allowed to share food with the guys inside. Or actually anything. I can’t even give you a stamp.

New York: [04:58] Nope, nothing.

Nigel: [05:00] But stamps aren’t just currency. They’re also used as, you know, stamps.

Eric: [05:06] We are the last people that write. Nobody writes anymore in the streets. It’s text messages or computer or a laptop. We are the only people that write. Pen and paper is gonna be a museum.

Nigel: [05:16] How many letters do you write like a month or something?

Eric: [05:19] When I was first arrested, I wrote a few times a day, all week long.

Nigel: [05:26] A few times a day?!

Eric: [05:27] Yes.

Nigel: [05:28] Whoa. So how many letters were you putting in the mail?

Eric: [05:31] Probably about four or five. I got—

New York: [05:34] A day?

Eric: [05:35] A day.

New York: [05:36] How many were you getting back?

Eric: [05:37] The same amount.
New York: [05:38] What?

Eric: [05:38] I got a mother, I got five sisters, I got a daughter, friends. I have every letter anybody’s ever wrote me. Since ’94 of January.

Nigel: [05:48] Whoa. So how many letters do you have?


Nigel: [05:56] So are they… are they some of your most prized possessions?

Eric: [05:59] Oh yeah. I can see everybody growing up while I was stuck in here. I gotta say my daughter had a *Lion King* bike with a *Lion King* helmet when I first came to prison. She has two kids now.

[Music starts]

New York: [06:15] When she was 12, Eric’s daughter sent him a father’s day card. On the front, there’s a polar bear rocking some shades and sipping lemonade.

Nigel: [06:23] The claws of the polar bear are painted pink with glitter, so it’s kind of a girly bear. And on the front of the card it says ‘What makes such a cool daughter?’

New York: [06:36] And on the inside, it answers with, ‘A way cool dad, of course. Happy Father’s Day.’

Nigel: [06:40] Nice.

Eric: [06:41] Now also written in the card, it says ‘I love you and I will never forget you. You are my only father, and it will stay that way always.’ She also sent me a picture, and she wrote this inside the card too. It says, ‘This picture where my tongue is out is ‘cause my friends made me laugh.’

[Shuffling with the letter blends with buzzing sound effect, then clattering noises.]

Tim Hicks: [07:09] Hey dad, I miss you around here…

Nigel: [07:10] This is Tim Hicks reading a letter from his son Josh.


Tim: [07:17] ‘Momma told me you was in the school. Dad, I know you are in jail. Mama don’t know that DeAnte told me. He said you was doing something bad. I’m 10 now, dad. Momma gave me a party. Dad, I love you, and no matter what, you will always be
the best dad. DeAnte said he love you too. Love, Josh.’ Like, damn. You know what I’m saying? Like, I had lied to him and told him I was in college. Away. But when he bust me out, I had to just—I dropped a couple tears on that, you know? Like, shit, he found out. You know what I’m saying? Like damn, you know? [Sniff] I can’t lie to him no more.

[Shuffling, buzzing, footsteps, door closing]

**Terry Kitchen:** [08:19] At mail call, they yell ‘Kitchen.’ I said ‘T67-2383,’ he said, ‘You got mail.’ I said thank you. You guys don’t know what that means to me. I’m swallowing right now, ‘cause… yeah.

**Nigel:** [08:31] This is Terry Kitchen. He loves getting mail now, but he felt different about it years ago when he first went to Juvie.

**Terry:** [08:38] I got a visit at the Juvenile Hall center, and I told all my family members. I said if you guys want to write me, write me once a year. You know, that’ll still make me happy. Or anytime that you go to the gas station, pick up a card and say, ‘Just thinking of you.’ I was 14.

**Nigel:** [08:57] A few years later, Kitchen was transferred to his first adult prison, High Desert.

**New York:** [09:02] It’s near the Nevada border, and for those of us in the system, it has a reputation.

**Terry:** [09:07] When I first arrived at High Desert I was 18 years old, and it says, ‘Welcome to High Drama State Prison. Once you here, you never leave.’ [Distant voices] The yard was a place where there’s no such thing as fistfights. It’s all about stabbing. So the tension was always thick in the air. It was just bad. There was like a war zone.

**New York:** [09:34] Kitchen had one mental escape from the constant violence: cartoons.

**Nigel:** [09:38] He told us when he was a little kid that he never watched much TV because he was always outside playing.

**Terry:** [09:44] But as soon as I got locked up, I watched all the cartoons from Bart Simpson to superheroes, Static Shock, Bugs Bunny and all that. [Laughs] It made me feel like I was still a kid, even though I had to grow up real fast to survive.

**Nigel:** [10:01] One day, Kitchen’s beloved TV broke.

**New York:** [10:04] But in prison, there’s usually a fix-it man for this kind of thing.

**Nigel:** [10:08] I hear that.
**New York:** [10:08] Yep, you can always trade something to get something done.

**Terry:** [10:11] And once he was done fixing it, he put it outside my cell door.

**New York:** [10:17] A correction officer walking the tier saw it, and then…

**Terry:** [10:21] He took my TV. That kinda set me over. I said, 'I’m gonna ask you to give back my TV, but I’m telling you right now. If this dude don't give back my TV, I might do something stupid.'

[Somber music]

**New York:** [10:37] Kitchen was hot.

**Nigel:** [10:37] Yeah. The CO had every right to confiscate the TV, because it shouldn't have been on the tier, and Kitchen knew that.

**New York:** [10:45] He damn sure should have.

**Nigel:** [10:46] But losing his TV was the last straw. He was gonna confront the CO and demand his TV back.

**New York:** [10:53] And getting in a CO’s face is something you really don't wanna do.

**Terry:** [10:57] I was just fed up. I wanted, you know, this whole environment that I was going through at the time to just end. They’re gonna kill me. Most likely they'll kill me. I made my peace with that. I’m about to write my sister, say my goodbyes. I just wanted them to know that I love ‘em. I tried. [Chuckle] So.

[Music starts]

**Nigel:** [11:25] Not long after Kitchen mailed his letter, he got one back.

[Sound of paper unfolding]

**Terry:** [11:33] Alright, this letter’s from my sister Myisha. Wednesday, March 16th, 2005. ‘I’m not gonna do my normal greeting, I'm gonna get right to the point. You are not gonna die in there, no matter what you are thinking about right now. We will never give up on you, and you better not either. Remember, God will not put on us more than we can bear. I could not help but cry when I heard the words in your letter, and seeing what you were thinking. Things will get better no matter what you are saying now. You will come home, and when you do, I want you to hear out of your mouth, ‘You was right, my best beautiful sister in the whole wide world.’ Okay, so practice that, because I want to hear those exact words. Love you always, Big Sis.’ [Sound of paper folding, then rhythmic beeps]
By now, it should be clear. Mail is absolutely essential in prison for maintaining relationships with loved ones. Mail is sacred.

Keep that in mind as we go back to Eric, the guy who told us about how much stamps are worth. He talked to us about a cellie who did something so weird—

For real.

That Eric still doesn’t know what to make of it.

Nige, I don’t know what to make of it.

It’s a total headscratcher.

About a year ago, Eric went to the hospital for a heart problem. And when he got back, six days later, his cellie told him he was moving out.

And I said, ‘Alright.’ [Single laugh] ‘You’re leaving? Okay.’ I didn’t think nothing of it. I said, well you know, I always told my people, if you don’t hear from me in seven days, something is wrong. So I go call on my people. My little sister. She tells me what was going on, I couldn’t believe it. He actually went through my mail, took my sister’s address, and wrote my people.

So, you were in the hospital, he went through your mail…

Through my property.

Took letters. He got the address of your sister?

Yeah.

And he started writing to them.

He sent her an eight page later, back to back, double sided paper.

A crazy long letter.

Basically trying to get at her, and ask for money, and… ?

Yeah, what’d he want?
Eric: [13:49] He tried to make them not mess with me and he wrote all types of lies. He told them everybody's after me, I owe everybody. He told 'em I was gay. And just made everything he could make up.

Nigel: [14:00] What the heck? He was hoping they would reject you or something, and that he would have a new family?

Eric: [14:05] [Overlapping] Yes. Leave me and—I don't know. It was so crazy to me, too. I don't know what the justification for it was or what was his goal, but it just was so bizarre. To steal somebody's stuff and to contact their people, in prison, is a death sentence.

[Slow, creaky music]

Nigel: [14:28] Eric had an honest-to-God real prison dilemma on his hands.

New York: [14:33] Yeah, this was very serious. In prison, you're expected to enforce the rules. I'm talking about penitentiary justice here. The unwritten code that most guys feel they have to follow, whether they agree with it or not.

Eric: [14:47] I wanted to do something seriously, because I was so overwhelmed with emotions and so much, you know, disrespect. I'm mad. I had to really think in my heart, 'Hey, what you wanna do?' You wanna go with the penitentiary police system? Or do you wanna just leave it alone?

Nigel: [15:07] Did you feel pressure from other people to respond with the penitentiary rule?

Eric: [15:11] Yes. I thought about it and I thought about it, I kept on saying, you know, I've been in prison 25 years. So the only thing I could think of is, 'If I do this, I'm never getting out.' You mean to tell me you jumped on a guy 'cause he wrote your people? Why didn't you just call to the police? It messed with me and it kinda hurt me. I cried 'cause I didn't wanna do nothing and my partner tell me, said, 'It's wrong, what he did. Leave it alone.'

[Music]

Nigel: [15:43] So New York, what happens when someone doesn't enforce penitentiary justice, and how come Eric didn't have to?

New York: [15:48] Well, San Quentin is a prison where it's not as turned up. In other words, it's safer here than in other institutions. But normally in prison, respect is the only thing that protects you. If they don't respect you, it's open season.

Nigel: [16:00] So you're gonna be bullied, basically?
New York: [16:01] Heck yeah. It be—everybody be getting at you. Feeling like you’re not gonna defend yourself. There’s not gonna be repercussions. But I’m with Eric though. Like, either way. Because I’d rather have the respect of my family than have the respect of a bunch of people in the prison yard. Had Eric done something crazy, he would never go home.

Eric: [16:18] So I was really frustrated, but so what I did, because it was the best weapon I could use, I told everybody that I met. ‘Hey, you know that guy I was in the cell with? He’s a dirtbag. He took mail from my set, it’s not laying out, and wrote my people.’ And that, the shame of just that, was worse. So everybody kinda like cut him off.

[Music]

Nigel: [16:48] We really tried to get this guy on to tell us his side of the story.

New York: [16:53] He wouldn’t talk to us about nothing.


Nigel: [16:59] We’ll be right back after the break.

[Music continues. Then, sound of crumpling paper, creaking.]

Orrin “Artwork” Hutson: [17:15] It would take me several drafts for one paragraph. You know, it was a construction, rather than write a letter. It was a composition. I would compose and arrange. It was an arrangement. It was like I a symphonic type of fella.

New York: [17:31] This is Orrin Hutson, aka Artwork. We heard from him at the top of the podcast hearing about the lone man struggling to walk across the frozen tundra.

[Nigel and New York make wind sounds, Nigel laughs]

Nigel: [17:44] I don’t know what to call him. A performer, storyteller.

New York: [17:47] I call him an artist and a comedian, and he’s incarcerated here at San Quentin, and he’s a character.


New York: [17:52] He told us about his unusual way of writing letters.

Artwork: [17:57] You learn to respect the paper. So what you do is you take a pencil, you whittle it down, and you get it to its finest point, and you write extremely lightly. All uppercase, very clear, very neat, you know. Now from there, then I would trace over it
with ink, then I would erase the pencil, you know. Then I'd write a paragraph, I'll stop. Couple more paragraphs. 'Cause you don't want no accidents, 'cause it'll take you 17 days to get a whole page, you know what I mean? So it's crucial that you get things correct.

**New York:** [18:34] So describe, like, the perfect letter.

**Artwork:** [18:36] I don’t know what the perfect letter is. I just told you I’m single. I ain’t figured that shit out yet, you find out, tell me. Shit.

**Nigel:** [18:48] So Artwork is single. A lot of guys court women through letters, but he hasn’t gotten his dance card filled yet. New York, I’m gonna turn that question back on you. What is the perfect letter?

**New York:** [18:59] I don’t know what the perfect letter is. I have a few lady friends that write me, but I’m stuck in the friend zone with all of ‘em, I can’t get out of the friend zone to the end zone. [Both laugh]

**Nigel:** [19:07] Yeah, that’s a tough one.

**New York:** [19:08] But at least they write me back.

**Nigel:** [19:11] And you know what? With every new letter, there’s hope.

**Artwork:** [19:15] ‘Cause you don’t open a letter saying, ‘Hey, I ain’t never getting out of jail, can you still love me anyway?’ You know what I mean? You open a letter with the optimistic stuff. You go over everything. You go your favorite color, your favorite music, what your political leanings are. You go over all this stuff, but it eventually comes down to, ‘Well nigga, when you getting out?’ [Music] A lot of guys will lie. They’ll say, ‘Aw baby, I’ll see you in a year.’ And then in a year, ‘Well, I got in trouble, they gave me 18 more months.’ And they just drag her along, you know what I mean?

[Clatter, echoes]

**Nigel:** [19:54] So Jesse, how long have you been in prison?

**Jesse Vasquez:** [19:56] So now it’s 18 years, almost and a half.

**Nigel:** [20:00] Jesse Vasquez doesn’t have to drag anyone along anymore. His sentence was recently commuted, and he’s about to leave San Quentin.

**New York:** [20:07] That lucky mother-sucker. [Nigel laughs] And when a commutation happens, the press will usually cover it, and sometimes they’ll put your picture in the paper.

**Nigel:** [20:13] That’s what happened to Jesse, and it opened the floodgates.
Jesse: [20:17] That’s when the first letter came. It’s like this automatic dating service, you know? Soon as they said I was gonna go home, right? I started getting all these letters. I got like six of ’em now.

Nigel: [20:28] From six different women that are excited you’re getting out.


New York: [20:32] The letters were from women he used to know, from 5th grade all the way to high school.

Nigel: [20:36] Now all these women are coming out of the woodwork, hoping to support you when you—be with you?

Jesse: [20:42] Yes. Well, it sounds like they wanna actually do more than support me, you know? So all these letters, they all got pictures in ‘em. And the pictures that they were sending me, they were just like, ‘Oh well, here’s me when I was an ugly duckling, and here’s what you’re looking for now. This is what you can have when you get home,’ you know? Kind of an advertisement type thing. I’m like damn.

Nigel: [21:01] So they’re like sexy pictures?

Jesse: [21:03] Yep. So then I get this letter from one girl, and it was 12 pages long, front to back. Talking ‘bout how she missed me. But I ain’t seen her since I was 15 years old. I ain’t heard from her since I was 15 years old.

Nigel: [21:17] And so what was in the letter?

Jesse: [21:19] Well for one, she said that, ‘Oh, I saw your pictures when they did the commutation, aw you’re cute, maybe we could hook up when you get out.’ I’m like alright, cool. But then it’s like the heartache I’ve been through. She’s got like four, five kids, right? Kids ain’t got no dad, been struggling, you know. And maybe you can help when you get out. So that was one. Then another one I get—

Nigel: [21:45] There’s another woman.

Jesse: [21:46] Yeah, there’s another woman. And I’m like, ‘Man, who the hell is this,’ right? And then I look at the picture and I’m like well, okay, she’s not too bad looking, right? But at the same time I’m not looking… [Voice continues inaudibly under Nigel and New York]

Nigel: [21:54] But to be polite, of course he reads the letter.

New York: [21:58] And everything looks cool. She’s stable. She isn’t looking for someone to help her with her kids. So he writes her back.
**Jesse:** [22:04] I get a letter about a month later, a response. And now it’s like, ‘Hey, you know what? You can come stay with me on the weekends and we can hang out.’ And then I’m thinking, okay, no. That’s not gonna work for me. That’s just overstepping my boundaries about healthy friendships and stuff like that. Especially, you know, you haven’t seen me for about 18 years and a half.

[Door opening, creaking, papers shuffling]

**Kirk Davis:** [22:35] This is a letter from my girl. Quick little note you see in the pink writing. Pink, red, purple, black.

**Nigel:** [22:42] And this is Kirk Davis.

**Kirk:** [22:45] This is how the letter starts. ‘Now if I slap the fuck outta you, I’mma be raw. Bitch, you better call me now. You know I’m crazy. You got five seconds to pick up a damn pen, pencil, marker, crayon, some type of lead, hit a motherfuckin’ paper, tissue, soap, something. Send a sign from God. Wish upon the damn stars. Oh my God, I’m finna cuss your stupid ass out soon as you call me. I ain’t heard from you since last week. Like, the fuck going on? Are you okay? And if you is, and just not calling me, I will slap you smooth the fuck outta your Nikes. I wish I could slap you so hard. Your ass is grass and I’m the lawnmower. Bitch, why the fuck haven’t you called me? I’mma fucking flip my wig if you don’t call me in the next three days. So by Saturday. Or I promise, I promise bitch, I’mma beat you up. But I love you and miss you. I love you daddy. Yo ti amo, Papí. Love, Shrimp.’ [Stifled laughter] She be serious too. It didn’t happen before. She is kinda crazy, you can tell by the letter.

**New York:** [23:58] Why didn’t you call?

**Kirk:** [24:00] Oh, we was on lockdown. We was on lockdown, couldn’t get on the phone, and she ain’t know. And then I get this. I start reading it, I’m just sitting there smiling, laughing. [Chuckles] Cracking up. I like it. I feel like that’s a lot of love right here in this letter.

[Metallc whirling synths, sound of closing door]

**Artwork:** [24:25] See, the thing is this, right? Crazy people don’t think they crazy. They think they’re regular and everybody else crazy. And that’s where I differ a little, ‘cause sometimes I read back over this shit and I be like, ‘Man, that’s crazy. You can’t say that shit to her.’ And you know what really had me aware of this? My mom. I would write my mom and she would send me my letter back like, ‘Man, look at this shit you just sent me. Why are you talking like this? I know I used to beat you, but damn, if you’re gonna ask for some money, at least say something nice first.’ So I got to be careful, can’t just be real, you know.
[Buzzing sound effects, door shutting. Then, jaunty guitar music. With each item on the following list, the voice migrates throughout the left channel.]

**Lee Jaspar**: [25:06] Unauthorized items within inmate mail: Musical greeting cards. Padded envelopes or cardboard containers. Videos, CDs or cassette tapes. Cardstock, sketch pads, construction paper, or colored paper.

**Antwan Williams**: [25:22] [Voice migrates throughout right channel] Authorized items within inmate mail: Incoming mail must weigh less than 13 ounces. Checks slash money orders with inmate’s name and CDCR number. Writing paper, white and yellow lined only. 40 postage stamps or 40 pre-stamped envelopes.

Lee: [25:38] Cash.

Antwan: [25:40] Letters.


Antwan: [25:43] Photographs no larger than 8x10.

Lee: [25:45] Photos, drawings, magazine articles, and/or pictorials displaying frontal nudity of either gender are not allowed.

[Conclusive door-shutting sound effects, then low-whirring electronic music.]

**Nigel**: [26:04] New York, true or false? Guys use the mail to get people to send them stuff.

**New York**: [26:10] That is true, that is definitely what I do to get packages and stuff like that, but mostly I use the mail to express my love, Nige. [Both laugh] ‘Dear Loved One, I love you so much, and I just happen to be out of food right now, so I was wondering if…’ [Nigel laughs loudly] Why’re you laughing?


**New York**: [26:28] [Laughing] You have to express your love.

Nigel: [26:29] Subtle.

[Chatter in the background]
**Michael Williams**: [26:33] I just got to the level four from reception, and it’s my first time in prison. So you know, they come through and they’re passing out mail, and police come around. And he comes to the door and he’s like ‘Williams!’ I’m like, ‘Yeah,’ and I look up, and he’s sending this envelope in through the side of the door. First piece of prison mail I ever got, and I was excited about that letter too.

**New York**: [26:55] This is my boy Michael Williams. He told us a story about using the mail to get someone to send him a little something something.

**Michael**: [27:05] So I get up and I grab the envelope, and I just saw the first name Karen. And I had a friend named Karen. I hadn’t been writing Karen since I’d been down, so I just ripped it open and I’m reading it, and that’s when it’s just like, ‘Oh, I miss my white knight’ and ‘I’m jonesing for my German lessons,’ and I’m like, wait a minute. That’s when I go back and I look at the envelope, and it’s not her last name. That’s when I see the swastikas and the ‘White Power’ written all over the envelope! And I said, ‘Oh, this is not me.’ And I look and it says ‘Michael Williams,’ but there’s no CDC number, there’s no cell number, and I said, ‘Oh, they got me mixed up with someone else. I kept thinking too like, man, these police are setting me up. They seen all the swastikas on this envelope. But you know my brain gets to twirling, I was like, ‘write her back.’ I’m finna get the snack money.

**Nigel**: [27:59] By ‘snack money,’ he means…

**New York**: [28:00] He means he wants to get her to put some money on his books, so he can buy some zoom zooms and some wham whams, and you know, chips and what not.

**Nigel**: [28:07] But first, he’s got to convince her that he is her white knight.

**Michael**: [28:12] You know, at the time, I was 25 and fresh off the streets and I thought I was a ladies man. I was writing this letter and I said okay, when I get the money, I’mma write her back and say, ‘Aha, I’m black!’

**New York**: [28:27] That was the plan, but Michael quickly realized there were some obstacles between him and his wham whams.

**Michael**: [28:32] I said, ‘Oh, she might notice the handwriting’s different.’ So I put in the letter, I said, ‘My cellie is writing this letter for me, I hurt my hand playing handball. Send me and the woods some snack money.’

**Nigel**: [28:47] Send him and the woods some snack money. I know what woods are, but I’m gonna ask you to explain this one.

**New York**: [28:54] I did some research, Nige.

**Nigel**: [28:56] [Laughing] Okay, good.
**New York:** [28:57] Woods are white people.

**Nigel:** [28:58] Oh really? Tell me more.

**New York:** [29:00] Well, it comes from ‘pecker woods,’ which was a derogatory term that they called poor whites in thee south. But now in California prisons, the word has actually been embraced by a lot of white guys,

**Nigel:** [29:10] So it’s not necessarily derogatory now.

**New York:** [29:13] Right.

**Michael:** [29:15] I learned this word, the woods, you know, ‘the woods,’ and so I said, I gotta put that in there. I said, ‘He’s a good wood.’ And I don’t hear from her for like two months. And I said, ‘Oh, she must’ve figured me out.’ But then I get another letter. Ain’t no money though. And she’s like, ‘Oh, I’ma send you some pictures. I’ve been out, I got a nice tan.’ And she put her phone number in there. And she said, ‘Call me, I cannot wait to hear your voice.’ And she’s still saying, ‘I want my German lessons.’ And I was like, maybe I can sound white. I can call like, ‘Hey dude, what’s going on with you man? Hey bro.’ But I’m caught when she says, ‘Give me my German lessons.’ If I even go to the library and look up some words, I ain’t gonna know how to pronounce ‘em. And I write her back again and I’m like, you know, send the snack money. [Laughs] Send the snack money for me and the woods, we’re just trying to get some snack money. After that, she never wrote back, so I said well, there goes that hustle.

[Low electronic voices, buzzing synth. Then, slow, dreamy music]

**Artwork:** [30:35] Once you’ve been down long enough, you get this sixth sense about stuff. Somehow, you could just feel when the cop was close to dishing it out. ‘The mail!’ [Echoes] Hearing your name called during the mail call is like a small bit of healing for your broken soul. The bottom line was feeling like somebody gave a damn. And so when I was reaching out so much and getting so few responses, it was really messing me up. And then I worked my way down the list, you know what I mean? And the people that are ignoring me are people that I would have jumped in front of a bullet for. Half I didn’t get no responses, I had one chick send me a picture of her burning one of my letters. You know what I’m saying? But you know, I’m tough, and I’m hardcore, and I’m on this yard. This is not the place to say my feelings is hurt ‘cause these people are neglecting me.

[Music]

**Nigel:** [31:41] New York, earlier we said that prison is the last place where writing letters is still a practice art. But even here...
New York: [31:49] …it is not what it once was. My own mama won’t write me back. I love writing, Nige. But every time I ask people why they don’t write me back, they tell me things like there’s no mailboxes on the corners anymore.

Nigel: [32:03] It’s true.

New York: [32:05] And then I say, ‘Send me some pictures, send me some pictures.’ And then they’re like, ‘Well they’re in my phone, I gotta get ‘em out the phone on the cloud…’

Nigel: [32:09] People are sitting on them! [New York laughs] They are sitting on their pictures.

New York: [32:13] They never print ‘em out, I never get the pictures. [Sigh]

Nigel: [32:16] I know, it’s really hard. And I’ll tell you, I hardly write letters anymore. It’s all email and fucking Slack, but I did write one recently.

New York: [32:23] Who did you write, Nige?

Nigel: [32:25] Okay, this is really cool. You know how we have listeners send us letters?


Nigel: [32:31] Well we got this letter from a woman whose son is serving time in a prison in Thailand.

New York: [32:34] Ouch.

Nigel: [32:35] Yeah, and this prison is really harsh. They have no TV and no radio. And she actually sends him transcripts of Ear Hustle and he reads them out loud to all the English speaking guys who are incarcerated there.


Nigel: [32:48] So I wrote her back, thanking her for listening and for sending the transcripts to her son. Now that was a letter worth writing.


Nigel: [32:57] I can’t wait until they read that in the transcript. [New York laughs]

[Theme music]

Nigel: [33:05] Thanks to everyone who spoke to us about the importance of mail. Eric Womak, Terry Kitchen, Michael Williams, Jesse Vasquez.
New York: [33:13] And Kurt Davis and Timothy Hicks for reading us their letters.

Nigel: [33:17] Special thanks to Artwork for giving us his take on mail.

New York: [33:20] That was some take.

Nigel: [33:21] Oh yeah. And much thanks to Lee Jaspar and Antwan Williams for reading those prison mail dos and don'ts.

New York: [33:29] *Ear Hustle* is produced on the inside by myself, Rahsaan “New York” Thomas, Nigel Poor, Pat Mesiti-Miller, and John “Yahya” Johnson.

Nigel: [33:38] And on the outside by Earlonne Woods and Bruce Wallace.

New York: [33:42] This episode was scored with music by Antwan Williams, David Jassy, and E. Phil Phillips.

Nigel: [33:49] Erin Wade is our digital producer.

New York: [33:50] Curtis Fox is our senior producer. Julie Shapiro is our executive producer for Radiotopia.

Nigel: [33:56] And we wanna thank Warden Ron Davis. And as you know, every episode has to be approved by this guy here.

Voicemail: [34:03] Voice message at 2:44 a.m. today.

Lt. Sam Robinson: [34:07] [On phone] This is Lieutenant Sam Robinson at San Quentin state prison. There are some episodes of *Ear Hustle* that really amuse me. I try to picture the characters that I’ve experienced in my career here. And I will say that the mailroom piece, the one person who really sticks out to me and is like that every day, is Artwork. He’s a party all by himself. And so bravo to *Ear Hustle*, and I will say, as usual, this is Lieutenant Sam Robinson, and I approve this episode.

[Closing theme starts]

Nigel: [34:41] Check out our website earhustlesq.com where you can sign up for our newsletter, see pictures of people in our stories, and it’s also a place where you can buy *Ear Hustle* sticker packs, mugs, and our brand new t-shirt, which is completely different from the original one. So check it out. Also, follow us on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, @EarHustleSQ.

New York: [35:03] This podcast was made possible with support from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, working to redesign the criminal justice system by building power and opportunity for communities impacted by incarceration.
Nigel: [35:15] *Ear Hustle* is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of the best podcasts around. Hear more at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm).


Nigel: [35:25] And I’m Nigel Poor. Thanks for listening.

[Music ends]

**Artwork:** [35:32] You know, asking somebody to write is like saying I want you to take a chisel and take this stone tablet, take it back and get to work, you know?

**END OF EPISODE.**