Mina Hadjian: [00:00:00] Hi, I'm Mina Hadjian. And I'm Chief and Editor of RøverRadion, Norwegian Prison Radio. [Speaks following statement in Norwegian, with same statement in English overlaid]. This episode of Ear Hustle contains language and subject matter, including a graphic description of suicide, that may not be appropriate for all listeners. Discretion is advised.

[00:00:22] [Abstract industrial sounds, whirring, cranking metal, chains, door closes shut and fade out]

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: [00:00:29] I remember first day on death row. As a brand new cop, you know that they're all there for committing very, very heinous, violent acts and the people that have created people's nightmares and horror stories. As soon as you open the first door, that guy walks out of the cell. It's not just one of 'em. It's a whole building of 'em. How can that not be intense?

[00:00:54] [Quiet synth version of opening theme begins]

Nigel Poor: [00:00:56] You're now tuned into San Quentin’s Ear Hustle from PRX’s Radiotopia. I'm Nigel Poor, a visual artist, now podcaster. My inside co-host Rahsaan “New York” Thomas will not be hosting this episode with me because San Quentin is now in lockdown. You will be hearing his voice on the tape asking some questions though. But to tell this week's story, I've got this guy here.

[00:01:20] [Synth fades out and melancholy piano version of theme begins]
Earlonne Woods: [00:01:21] I’m Earlonne Woods, a podcaster and former resident of San Quentin. And together, we’re going to take you inside and back outside again.

[00:01:30] [Opening theme intensifies with addition of percussion]

Nigel: [00:01:41] On this episode, we’re talking about what it's like to live with a death sentence and beyond.

[00:01:46] [Opening theme continues]

[00:01:57] [Sound of chain dragging followed by abstract industrial sounds that fade out into an echo]

Watson “Al” Allison: [00:02:04] Around 2:30 in the morning two of the sheriffs just came and told me, “hey, we finna transfer you.” Waiting on them to return, you could hear them dragging chains and handcuffs and stuff down the tiers. They were on the way to come get me so, uh, I got all chained up and one side of the cell they put on leg shackles with, uh, padlocks. With each step the lock would bang against your ankle. Man, that's a– it’s an annoying pain. When I got to the bus, I was actually the last guy on. The regular guys were already seated when I come up on the steps. One of the sheriffs let the other one know, uh, he said, “nd of the row” and I asked him, actually, what did that mean? He said, “well, a death sentence the end of the row.”

[00:02:52] [Voices chattering interrupted by louder voice calling out command, followed by repetitive banging sound]

Al: [00:02:55] We got to San Quentin. It was after dinner. Two guards came and got me and took me up to the fourth tier. I looked around and said like, “Man. I'm actually here. I am one that could actually be put to death at any time.

[00:03:09] [Medium paced synth with hopeful tone begins]

Earlonne: [00:03:11] There are over seven-hundred people on death row at San Quentin. They’re not part of the main line though. So, you rarely see him, except maybe when they're being escorted to Medical, or something like that. We’ve said this before death row is a prison within a prison.

Nigel: [00:03:26] Here's what's odd about that. There's a lot of guys up there, but there hasn't been an execution at San Quentin for thirteen years since 2006. That's when a federal judge ruled that the way California put people to death, the particular mix of drugs used in lethal injection, was unconstitutional.

Earlonne: [00:03:45] A few times in the past decade California voters have narrowly voted to keep the death penalty. In fact, in 2016 voters passed a measure to speed up the appeals process for people on death row.

Nigel: [00:03:57] And man, that shocked me because, basically, voters wanted people to die faster after they were sentenced. But earlier this year, the new governor, Gavin Newsom, unexpectedly called for a moratorium on executions in
California. That didn’t do away with the death penalty or with death row. It just means he pushed pause.

Earlonne: [00:04:16] With that moratorium, you think the death penalty in California was on his way out [Nigel affirms]. But if you look at history, one thing’s for sure, public opinion, laws and policies, are always changing. Meanwhile, the residents at San Quentin experience the issue very personally.

Lonnie Morris: [00:04:33] After each execution is an eerie quietness, like something is missing.

Earlonne: [00:04:38] That’s Lonnie Morris. He’s been in prison for forty-two years. Thirty-eight of those years in San Quentin. He was there when execution started up again in 1992 after a twenty-five year pause.

Lonnie: [00:04:51] The first person they executed when they started the executions back up in California was a gentleman by the name of Robert Alton Harris. On the night that Robert Alton Harris was to be executed, they locked us down. I was in my cell. So I started, from the time I locked up, I started to kind of, I hate the term, but what we call the death watch, you know what I’m sayin’? You know, watching the news and see how this situation was going because we knew that his lawyers was gonna try to get an injunction against the execution, right? Every news channel was, you know, tuned to it. When the United States Supreme Court said no more stays, that was like, oh my god. They just said, “I don’t care what you come with, he dyin’ and he dyin’ before sunrise this day.”

[00:05:43] [Quiet, atmospheric synth tones begin]

Lonnie: [00:05:43] I didn’t know Robert Alton Harris, but the process was something that I knew that this was gon’ be heralding the death of other people that was on death row.

[00:05:43] [Quiet, atmospheric synth tones continue, followed by abstract industrial sounds]

Al: [00:06:05] I thought it would be relatively quick. Five, six, seven years, somewhere around in there. And when I there, I met guys that have been there, uh, since like ‘78, just waiting around.

Nigel: [00:06:21] This is Watson Allison. We heard him earlier. He goes by Al and in 1984, he was sentenced to death for felony robbery murder. [Speaks to Al] Were you people’s nightmare?

Al: [00:06:32] Um...some. My, um, the victims of my, my life crime, yes. I was.

Earlonne: [00:06:44] Al had been on death row for more than four years when he got his first date. What’s called a death warrant. It was one of several he’d get.
Al: [00:06:53] I was on the yard. “Lieutenant wanna talk to you.” He sent for me to come out. “Come in.” And um, he told me the governor just issued, just issued a death warrant for you. So...you want to sign it? I'm like 'nah, I refuse to sign it.' But, it's gonna go on whether you refuse to sign it or sign it.

[00:07:13] [Somber synth music begins]

Al: [00:07:15] There was a choice: cyanide poisoning or lethal injection. So, you make your own choice or, uh, staff members make, make the choice for you if you decide not to choose.

[00:07:30] [Somber synth music continues]

Nigel: [00:07:34] And, oof, this is a gruesome question to ask— I'm sorry. Did you select how you were gonna be executed?

Al: [00:07:41] No, I didn't don't do that. The, uh, the guards and the lieutenant.

Nigel: [00:07:46] Do you know what they chose?

Al: [00:07:46] Um, cyanide poison.

Earlonne: [00:07:50] The gas chamber.

Al: [00:07:50] Yes.

[00:07:52] [Percussive synth music with low, repetitive beat begins]

Nigel: [00:07:55] In 1938, the gas chamber replaced the gallows. To hear more about this history, we have to reopen a book that some listeners might remember from a previous episode.

Earlonne: [00:08:04] The San Quentin Story by Clinton T. Duffy. It was published in 1950 and it's about Duffy’s experience at San Quentin as he moved up through the ranks and finally became the warden. [Percussive synth music with low, repetitive beat ends]

[00:08:15] [Eerie, atmospheric synths begin]

[00:08:17] [Narration simulating voice of Duffy] I remember seeing the dumpy little riveted steel cell the day it was delivered at the San Quentin docks on a barge. It weighed somewhat over two tons without its grim accessories and the state paid a Denver firm five thousand sixteen dollars and sixty-eight cents for it.

Another ten thousand dollars was spent installing the gas chamber. And a small pig from a prison farm was the first victim when its ineffable efficiency was tested. [Eerie, atmospheric synths end in an echo]

Nigel: [00:08:50] So, man, when you, when he called you and you found out what he wanted, w-what happened to your body when you heard that?
AI: [00:09:00] Um, I went numb for a minute. A lot of anxiety, uh, nervousness. I'm saying, "okay, this is uh... I'm like, okay, I got pretty much sixty days before it actually happens."

[00:09:15] [Eerie, atmospheric synths begin]

[00:09:19] [Narration simulating voice of Duffy] The manual of operations lists twenty-one separate steps for the technical operations alone and the equipment recommended by the manufacturer and kept on hand includes funnels, rubber gloves, graduates, acid pumps, gas masks, cheese cloths, steel chains, towers, soap, pliers, scissors, fuses, and a mop.

Nigel: [00:09:48] Do you remember how the CO, was he nervous? Did make eye contact?

AI: [00:09:53] No, mm-mm. It was business, you know, just business. No emotion expressed. You know, I mean, I was sent there to be executed. You know, I think it was like June thirteenth. That was, I think 1989. [Eerie, atmospheric synths continues]

[00:10:14] [Narration simulating voice of Duffy] The chemical supplies include sodium cyanide eggs, sulfuric acid, distilled water, and ammonia with a discount if they're bought in quantity. We pay about fifty cents for a pound of cyanide, enough to execute one man. But other expenses, including the executioner's fifty-dollar fee, the prorated time of the warden, guards, doctors, and technicians. And such things as new clothing for the prisoner to wear for his death, bring the cost of the average execution to one hundred and fifty dollars. [Eerie, atmospheric synths ends]

Nigel: [00:10:58] So when, when you knew you had this expiration date, what changed in you inside is a person?

AI: [00:11:04] Well, I strive to talk to, uh, like my son, couple individuals that I really cared about that were still in my life, and just, you know, try to get me in order spiritually. Time seemed, uh, seemed to speed up. Seemed like the days were going past faster. Coupla, coupla psychiatrists came to see me and just to check on my mental status. I had actually sat with my mom and my sister and signed some paperwork, where after the execution was done to have my body released to them for cremation and a burial service. My mom, my sister, and my lawyer were very emotional and it affected me.

[00:12:00] [Atmospheric synths with hopeful tone begin]

Nigel: [00:12:03] So what's so scary about dying?

AI: [00:12:06] Well for myself, it's facing the unknown. You know, you hear a lot of stuff about the hereafter, condemnation or paradise. You know, okay, where am I
gonna go? Where am I gonna land? So, because I do believe that there is a hereafter. So, it's all about am I going this way or that way?

**Nigel:** [00:12:32] Where’d you think you were gonna go?

**Al:** [00:12:33] Um, I think I was going down under. [Atmospheric synths with hopeful tone end]

[00:12:35] [Somber toned music begins]

[00:12:43] [Narration simulating voice of Duffy] *I am sorry to say that many of the thousands of citizens I have conducted through the prison actually enjoy standing in the death house. And often are bored with any other phase of prison life. Men visitors are generally awed by the cold surgical neatness of the little green room where the gas chamber squats and look away self-consciously when we explain how the executioner's lever drops the cyanide into an acid bucket beneath the condemned man's chair. But many women listen with a curious sort of rapture and scores of them have walked right into the nine-foot chamber itself and sat down in the metal chair just to see how it feels.*

[00:13:33] [Somber toned music ends and fades into abstract industrial sounds ending in a sharp metal sound]

**Abu Qadir Al-Amin:** [00:13:40] May the fourth, 1970, I was sentenced to die in the gas chamber in San Quentin.

**Earlonne:** [00:13:47] This is Abu Qadir Al-Amin. He was high on heroin when he killed a security guard in 1969. We wanted to find out from him what death row was like back then in the 1970s.

**Nigel:** [00:14:00] What was it like acclimating to life on death row?

**Abu:** [00:14:03] Uhm…I didn't really acclimate. I began to work on what I felt were my character defects and I didn't wanna die in the condition that I was in that led me to be there in the first place. I read a lot. I studied, I read history, I read science, math. I read books about faith. And also, I exercised. And I used to fast a lot. I would eat one meal every other day. I kinda was not willing to enjoy the comforts that existed there.

**Nigel:** [00:14:39] Really? This is the first I've ever heard anyone say that. What was comfortable there?

**Abu:** [00:14:42] Well, we had our own special kitchen that cooked just for people on death row. Uh, maybe some mornings we'd have steak and eggs. You know, I didn't have steak and eggs in the free world. So, we would have steak and eggs and, you know, toast and juice. And I saw people getting big bellies up there and gettin' comfortable and I said man, they fattenin’ us up for the kill.
Nigel: [00:15:13] Steak and eggs, Earlonne? Did you ever have steak and eggs in prison?

Earlonne: [00:15:16] Hell [Drawn out for emphasis] no [Laughs]. I had to wait ‘til I got out of prison for that one.

Nigel: [00:15:21] I remember that meal.

Earlonne: [00:15:22] But back in the day, food in prison was way better. Not just for the guys on death row, but for everyone. Nowadays death row get the same food as the main line. And let’s just say, you only eat it because you have to.

Nigel: [00:15:36] Yep. And by the time Al got to death row in the 1980s, steak and eggs were long gone. [Electronic, atmospheric synth ends]

Nigel: [00:15:42] [Speaking to Al] Can you describe your world there?

Al: [00:15:45] Isolated, dreary. Lot of loneliness, sadness. That just came–became routine.

Nigel: [00:15:53] So, what do you think when people say, “I’d rather die than spend my life in prison”?


[00:16:05] [Soft atmospheric synth begins]

[00:16:10] [Narration, simulating voice of Duffy] I had determined never to witness an execution. I kept this resolve until October second, 1937. At nine o’clock that morning, the baby-faced murderer had been found driving on the floor of the death cell screaming that he had swallowed poison. Dr. Stanley went to work on him with a stomach pump. But when we reached the cell, Northcott was still trembling and sobbing that the rope was going to hurt. “I never have heard anyone complain about its hurting,” Dr. Stanley said quietly. “I want a blindfold over my eyes,” Northcott cried. “Let me walk slowly.” Warden Holohan, pale and plainly suffering, nodded to the guards. They quickly tied a black bandage around the boy’s eyes and the death march began. [Slow, somber music begins] I hung back as we entered the high gallows room. On the top floor of the crumbling furniture factory. And Warden Holohan turned his eyes away from the rope. Northcott stumbled and sagged and the guards carried him up the steps. I heard him weeping and he said, “say a prayer for me, please.” Warden Holohan raised his right hand, a tired and unwilling hand, and it was over. [Slow, somber music ends]

[00:17:43] [Voices chattering in the background, sound of a page turning, followed by a book slamming shut]
Al: [00:17:46] One of my best friends, he was my neighbor. You know, we could talk about anything seem like. And we was talking, it was on a Sunday. And so it got to be like dinnertime and so he beat on the wall and he told me, “ah man, the rope it'll work.” I'm like, “man what you trippin’ on?” And he said, “the rope, bruh, it'll work.” And I'm like, “man, look, kickback. We holla in a minute.” And, uh, at the time I wasn't eating desserts. So, the guard came up to fix our trays and I told him I'd give him my dessert and he gave me my dessert. And it's only like four or five more cells on the tier to feed. So, he fed those guys and we turn around, boom, the alarm went off. And I stuck my mirror out and the guard was opening his door. And um, when he opened his door, he was swinging back and forth on it. And he was gone. [Atmospheric tones begins] Um, he just did that. And, it was like my stomach or something had been ripped open. [Atmospheric tones continue with simple drum beat]

Earlonne: [00:19:05] There are suicides down on the main line too. [Nigel affirms] Guys just give up. But, one thing they don't have is a constant threat of execution…

Nigel: [00:19:15] …or a stay of execution. On death row, you get a date and you think you're gonna die in sixty days and then you hear something else. And it's got to be emotional chaos. And I wonder, like, how did they deal with it?

Earlonne: [00:19:27] Ionno. [Atmospheric tones fade out]

Al: [00:19:31] After about twenty-seven, twenty-eight days, I think I got the news that all stay had been granted. And, um, I fell back into my regular role, normal routine. Seemed like the days just pretty much all blended into each other. I quit using calendars. I would know just, like, if I write a letter, I'll put June 2019, right? But as far as the actual dates and stuff, I quit using calendars many years ago. I still don’t use ‘em. [Soft synth tones begin] As far as death row life, um, you’re in your cell a lot. You may go to yard from like maybe nine, eight, nine o’clock to about twelve o’clock. Pretty much twelve, twelve thirty the whole program’s over. So, whatever you have going on in your cell, you’re back in there. I had a routine where I worked out like about three times a day. I just burn off energy, you know, relief, to actually stay balanced. [Soft synth tones end]

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas: [00:20:36] Lemme ask you this: I know in visiting, if you on death row, they put you and your family in that cage. [Al affirms] Can you describe that cage, the visiting room cage?

Al: [00:20:44] About four foot— four foot by maybe five foot. The visitors would already be in the cage when I get there and they would see me get handcuffed and everything else and let in. Um, you bring all of your food in with you. If they need to go to the bathroom or something, I would have to be handcuffed and taken out of the cage first before they would let them out.
New York: [00:21:07] How does it feel to be on a visit where your family has to literally get in the cage to see you?

Al: [00:21:12] It's hard, really. You know, but they love you enough to do this for you. I used to refuse visits because I didn't want certain people going through those experiences. I put myself here. I'm responsible for this so I don't want you suffering. And having to say goodbye to him because goodbye is really, it's final. [Abstract industrial sounds with voices chattering in the background, followed by the sound of chains and door closing]

Lt. Robinson: [00:21:43] I definitely remember the day that I stood in front of this man's cell.

Nigel: [00:21:47] This is Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the public information officer at San Quentin and the guy who signs off on every episode of this podcast. That was also Sam we heard at the top of the episode.

Earlonne: [00:21:57] He was telling us about his time as a CO on death row where he first met Al. And Al made an impression.

Lt. Robinson: [00:22:04] I remember it like it's yesterday. It was on the fifth tier. One of our protocols before we release maximum security inmates from their cells is, um, you take all their clothing from them all— the items that they're taking out to the yard, are exiting their cell in, and you conduct a visual unclothed body search on 'em while they're locked away inside their cells and I did that. I was— and so sure enough, I'm going through this white t-shirt and I hit this bump. [Laughs] And his eyes got big, threw his hands up like, man, you got me. [Laughs] There was no words exchanged or anything like that. [Piano music with percussion begins]


Nigel: [00:22:50] Yep. They first met on death row, but Al also saw Sam when he was sent to the Adjustment Center.

Earlonne [00:22:56] The AC. It's the hole for death row. It's where you go when you don't follow the rules.

Lt. Robinson: [00:23:02] He had come over for messing up. Al was Al. He'd beat you if he could. He was always involved in nefarious activities. Always respectful, uh, never disrespectful to me. If someone told me that he had been to them, I think I would have been shocked because that wasn't what I got from him. But he was— he was a con. All the way through my time there. [Slow synth begins]

Al: [00:23:29] I stayed in mischief. Uh... rule violations for all kinda madness. [Synth continues with percussive beat added in]
Earlonne: [00:23:37] That kind of madness, affects your visits.

Nigel: [00:23:39] It even affects your family.

Earlonne: [00:23:41] Right. Because when you're put in AC, all your visits are non-contact. It's through the glass. And you talk to your visitors on the phone.

Nigel: [00:23:49] And this is where Al's mom met him one day after driving up from Southern, California. [Synth with percussive beat ends]

Al: [00:23:54] My mom came and told me, “boy, what the hell's wrong with you, you still acting stupid.” So she had came all the way from Long Beach and she had bought a bunch of food and stuff and I couldn't get it. So, she just piled it all up in the window and allowed me to look at it while she talked to me.

New York: [00:24:12] And you're on the phone? [Al affirms]

Nigel: [00:24:14] And what was the food? You remember what the food was?

Al: [00:24:16] Mm...burritos, burgers, fries, sodas and stuff, you know. I like sour candy, so she had bought like gummy worms, and honey buns, all that type of stuff. So she told me well, you know, “you can't eat none of this so I'm gonna give it to other people.” And she said, “man, you continuing to do stupid shit.” You know, and, uh, she was right. “When you gonna grow up?”

Nigel: [00:24:44] [Crosstalk] Was she really angry with you?

Al: [00:24:45] Yes, very. I wouldn't even repeat a lot of stuff she said. But yes, she was angry. I was just tired of all the BS that I was into. And I step back and start evaluating myself. Begin to take another path away from BS, away from negativity.

Nigel: [00:25:06] How old were you at that point?

Al: [00:25:07] I was in... think I was like fifty-one, fifty-two years old.

Nigel: [00:25:13] I was shocked when he said that. He's sixty now, but man, he looks like he's forty.

Earlonne: [00:25:17] Well, that can happen when you don't get a lot of sunlight. [Nigel affirms skeptically] The skin stays fresh.

Nigel: [00:25:22] I don't know. In any case, after twenty-nine years on death row, his case took a dramatic turn.

Al: [00:25:29] I was eatin' a tuna sandwich and some potato chips. Three guards showed up at my door and told me, “hey, the lieutenant wanna speak to you.” And, um, and I got stripped out, I got handcuffed. My heart's pounding, like body's kinda warm. When I get there, he's standing outside his office and he pats me on the back and tells me, “congratulations.” And asked me to come in his office and have a seat.
I'm like, this is all new. And I sit down. He says, “congratulations, man, they just overturned your case.” [Dreamy, synth with hopeful tone begins] So me and the lieutenant, we talked for a little bit and they brought the telephone and let me use it. I called my mom and she was, she was cryin’ and she was she was joyful. When I came out of his office, it was like I was walking on clouds or something. It was like I was in a daze. I was in like a trance or dream or whatever. And next thing you know, I'm back in my cell gettin' unhandcuffed and uh, I just sat on the bunk. I couldn't eat. That night I couldn't sleep or none of that. [Synth continues]

Nigel: [00:26:34] In 2010, a federal judge reversed the original jury's finding that Al intentionally murdered the victim and that he used a gun during the incident and set aside his death sentence. A year and a half later the DA decided not to retry him. He was resentenced to twenty-five years to life.

Earlonne: [00:26:52] After twenty-nine years on death row, Al was moved to a part of the prison called Badger, which is a reception center for prisoners getting processed into the main line.

Al: [00:27:01] So at that point, they came and packed my property, handcuffed me, took me to the front door of East Block, and took the handcuffs off which was very strange. [Voices chattering in the background] When I got to Badger Section, there was a CO over there, he knew me so when he put me in the cell, I actually backed up to get the handcuffs took off and he's like, “man, what are you doing?” And I'm like, “what?” I realized then that the handcuffs when weren't on. [Soft synth with a hopeful tone begins]

Nigel: [00:27:35] For the first time in almost three decades, Al was out of his cell without handcuffs on. I mean freedom is relative, but that was a big deal.

Earlonne: [00:27:45] So Al got off death row because of a development in his case. He’s now on the main line. But Abu Qadir Al-Amin, who was sentenced to death in 1970, he got off death row under very different circumstances. [Soft synth with a hopeful tone ends]

Nigel: [00:27:58] He got off the row because the law changed. In 1972, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the death penalty. And Abu remembers it well.

Abu: [00:28:07] I do remember that night. We stayed up all night, maybe two nights in a row. It was a atmosphere of exuberance, people excited, people were happy, people were talkin’, you know, just imaginin’ that they were not gonna be under that circumstance anymore. And you know, we'll be, you know, have a possibility of gettin’ out and coming home.

Earlonne: [00:28:31] Abu was resentenced to seven years to life. And after serving eight years, in 1978 he was found suitable for parole and released.
**Abu:** [00:28:39] Well, I'm grateful that, uh, that wasn't my end destination. That I didn't, uh, die there. I owe a debt to the society that spared my life. So, I always think about that. I have to acknowledge that that was a turning point in my life. [Joyful synth begins]

**Earlonne:** [00:29:07] After you got out of prison, Abu became an imam at a mosque in the Bay Area. He also works on criminal justice issues. [Joyful synth continues with percussive beat added]

**Nigel:** [00:29:23] When we come back, we're gonna to hear from Al about what it's like to adjust to life on the main line after death row.

**Al:** [00:29:30] Dudes were talkin’ ‘bout we havin’ chicken on the bone tonight and I'm like, “what’s the big deal?” [Joyful synth fades into silence]

[00:29:43] [Abstract industrial sounds, cranking metal, door closes shut and fade out in an echo]

**Lt. Robinson:** [00:29:50] I think the first time I saw Al off death row was, um, he was over in Badger Section, I think it was. [Speaking to Al] Were you in Badger Section? [Al affirms]

**Al:** [00:29:57] First tier.

**Lt. Robinson:** [00:29:58] First tier Badger Section, near the officer’s podium, right?

**Al:** [00:30:00] Yes.

**Lt. Robinson:** [00:30:00] Yeah, and I think I was just walking through and hear this voice yellin’ at me. [Laughs]

**Al:** [00:30:07] Yes.

**Lt. Robinson:** [00:30:07] Like, “Robbie!” I was like, “huh?” Like, “dude, you ain’t on the row?” [Both laugh]

**Al:** [00:30:11] [Lt. Robinson laughs] Yeah, you said last time, you said, “last time I saw you, you were in the Adjustment Center.” When you get caught by someone, you remember that person. You know, you respect him. Of course, I talk to other individuals about you. [Lt. Robinson laughs] Do not try to beat this guy with nothing in your clothes.

**Lt. Robinson:** [00:30:28] [Laughs] Oh, man.

**Al:** [00:30:29] He’s going through your stuff. We had a little conversation and, um, congratulating me. Think you walked off.

**Earlonne:** [00:30:36] After a bit of time in Badger Section, Al was sent to Solano, another prison in Northern California.
Al: [00:30:42] When I got to Solano, um, it was a lot going on. You got dudes that walk around all night, like zombies. Day sleepers. I'm used to everything coming to my cell: the phone, canteen, everything. Right? So, I have to go to everything. Standing in line, got dudes in front of me, dudes in back of me, dudes on the sides and stuff, sitting at tables just— just interacting. At first, I found myself watching everybody, you know, like some paranoia was in. I used to just go to the shower and I would go eat or use the phone and I'm back inside the dorm. I didn't— I wasn't, uh, interacting. I wasn't used to that. I'm used to just dealing with myself. [Smooth, pleasant synth tones begin]

Nigel: [00:31:31] And then there was that chicken on the bone. Earlonne, did you have chicken on the bone in prison?

Earlonne: [00:31:36] Hell yeah, chicken on the bone— have you ever had chicken on the bone, Nige?

Nigel: [00:31:39] Well, the thing is, you don't talk about it on the outside [Earlonne laughs] because you always have chicken on the bone.

Earlonne: [00:31:42] [Laughs] Always got a bone on here. But, nah. Chicken on the bone in prison was, like, every Sunday, and then they stopped givin' it out. And then they start just givin' it out on holidays. [Nigel affirms] So ev— when they say chicken on the bone, everybody goin'.

Nigel: [00:31:55] It's something special.

Earlonne: [00:31:57] Very special. It's chicken on a bone. [Smooth, pleasant synth tones ends]

Al: [00:31:59] Yeah, you got the drumstick and part of the breast connected together with the ball. It had been over thirty years, actually, since I'd seen that. [Voices chattering and faint sounds of silverware clinking in the background] And sitting down, eating at a table with, like, me and three other guys, you know, dudes were having conversation over a meal. And I'm a slow eater, so— from being by myself. And everybody's you know, they're eating and talking at the same time and, um, it was strange. [Voices chattering and faint sounds of chewing in the background] When I came out of the dining hall, I just happened to look up. The stars were out there, and so while I'm walking, I'm just— I'm looking up while I'm walking. [Soft, dreamy synth tones begin] just admiring this. And it tripped me out. I forgot all about that type of stuff. I actually realized, man, I haven't even seen the moon and the stars in a long, long time. [Dreamy synth tones intensify]

Nigel: [00:33:00] The moon and the stars, that's gotta be nice when you haven't seen them in like, decades.

Earlonne: [00:33:05] Ooh. I mean, I still to this day, out here, look up at the stars, and the moon, and the water, and be stuck.

Nigel: [00:33:14] Why, does it look different out here?
Earlonne: [00:33:15] It's I mean, it's tranquil. It's like, you don't get to see it a lot. [Nigel affirms] You know, you off to yard before that happens, you know? So, there was those nice moments: chicken on the bone, seein’ the stars. But, there were a lot of things about life on the main line that were difficult for Al.

Nigel: [00:33:31] And while he was still at Solano, he made an unusual request.

Al: [00:33:36] There was a lady there, Miss Chu. So, she called me for an assessment. She was talking to me and stuff. I was real standoffish and I just asked her, “can you send me back?” And she's like, “what?” And I'm like, “man, can you send me back death row?” And she said, “boy, are you crazy? I'm not gonna do that. You're in general population. But what I'm gonna do for you is…” she assigned two peer mentors. They helped me a lot.

Nigel: [00:34:07] Well, what was overwhelming you do you think?

Al: [00:34:09] Um, the movement. Uh, isolation is not good.

Nigel: [00:34:14] Is it harder for you to attach to people?

Al: [00:34:15] Yes, it is. I'm standoffish. I'm guarded. Evasive. You may be watching me, but I'm watching you, you know? Just, just guarded.

New York: [00:34:28] How is it speaking? Speaking to people that you don't know?

Al: [00:34:32] Mm, I'm slow, slow, slow to speak. Uh, I will listen to you and process what you say. I don't just blurt something right out. You know, I'll, I'll– it's runnin' in my mind: what do I want actually wanna say?

Nigel: [00:34:46] Not that long ago, Al was transferred back to San Quentin.

Al: [00:34:50] When I got here, I was kind of excited. Then, I seen some familiar faces with some of the COs and stuff. Like hey, they're all getting ready to retire. And it actually, um, showed me how old I'm getting.

Earlonne: [00:35:06] A few years ago, Al went to his first parole board hearing.

Al: [00:35:10] And I was so quiet in there that the commissioner actually asked me am I gonna say anything? But now, um, today, if I get the opportunity to be back in front of that same commissioner, we can talk. You know, I can– I can open up and express me. [Joyful, fluttery synths begin]

Nigel: [00:35:34] So Earlonne, I know you weren't there, but I have to tell you. It was so hard to get Al to talk to us for this story.

Earlonne: [00:35:40] I mean, I definitely can understand that because, you know, when you have people that's been incarcerated for a long time, they usually don't open up to people.

Nigel: [00:35:50] Oh, yeah. I mean we had like six conversations with him before we even got him down to the media lab. And the first time I met him he was so blank, you know what I mean? Like, he was clearly uncomfortable.
Earlonne: [00:35:59] Yeah. Decades of isolation can do that to you.

Nigel: [00:36:02] But the thing that was really cool over the time, maybe the six weeks that we were trying to get him to do the story, he really changed. And, like, he started smiling and opening up. And one thing that really stood out to me was that I said to him, “you know, it’s really great to see you smile.” And about a week later, he came up to me. He’s like, “can I talk to you for a minute?” And he said. “I wanted to ask you, when you told me that it was nice to see me smile, was that a good thing?”

Earlonne: [00:36:26] Hmm.

Nigel: [00:36:27] I was like, “hell yeah. Of course it’s a good thing.” [Synth with percussion ends]

New York: [00:36:32] How does it feel to go on a visit now with your family?

Al: [00:36:34] It’s crowded. It’s crowded out there, man. You know, it’s a trip seein’ the little kids walkin’ around playin’. Uh, being able to walk to the microwave and cook some stuff. Actually go to the vending machines and pick out what you wanna eat instead of just tryna, uh, just sit there and talk to people without being in a cage. You know, it's good. And um, being able to walk around with your people and talk to ‘em. Not just isolated to the point where you’re sittin’ in a chair. You can actually get up and stretch your legs, move about a little bit.

Lt. Robinson: [00:37:11] If Al was still the knucklehead that I knew, Al would have never made it back to San Quentin. And so obviously, he turned a corner somewhere. It's amazing what over twenty years will do. [Everyone laughs]

New York: [00:37:30] [Laughs] Oh, that’s a trip.

Lt. Robinson: [00:37:30] ‘Cause like I said, the first day, I don’t think that I would have ever imagined that someone on the row, when I would sit across from them, open cuffs, dialed in from a microphone, inside the prison at San Quentin and have a conversation about it.

Al: [00:37:48] I never thought that I would be in this position at all. I thought, okay, life is going to be over on death row. And, um, mighty grace that it wasn't and then sitting in this position. I never imagined it, man. Never. [Simple electric chords begin]

Nigel: [00:38:10] Are there ever times now where you want to go back?

Al: [00:38:12] Not a chance. [Laughs] Not a chance. Not at all. [Simple electric chords continue with percussive beat and backspins added]

Earlonne: [00:38:29] Thanks to Al and Abu for talking to us about their experiences on and off death row.

Nigel: [00:38:34] And to Lonnie Morris for sitting down with us as well.

Earlonne: [00:38:37] Also, we want to thank Lee Jaspar for reading those passages from Warden Duffy's book, The San Quentin Story.

Nigel: [00:38:44] Ear Hustle is produced on the inside by me, Nigel Poor, Rahsaan “New York” Thomas, John “Yahya” Johnson, and Pat Mesiti-Miller.
Earlonne: [00:38:52] And on the outside by me, Earlonne Woods and Bruce Wallace.

Nigel: [00:38:55] This episode was scored with music by Antwan Williams, David Jassy, and Rhashiyd Zinnamon.

Earlonne: [00:39:01] The remix of our theme song played on this episode came from Ear Hustle listener, Inki, from Iceland. Erin Wade is our digital producer, Curtis Fox is our senior producer, Julie Shapiro is our executive producer for Radiotopia.

Nigel: [00:39:16] We want to thank Warden Ron Davis and we also want to thank Lieutenant Sam Robinson for being in this episode. [Speaks to Earlonne] So what do you think, E? Is he going to approve this one?

Earlonne: [00:39:25] Nah, he might not even approve his own self. [Both laugh]

Nigel: [00:39:28] Well, let's find out. [Music fades out into echo]

Lt. Robinson: [00:39:30] [Over the phone] This is Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the public information officer at San Quentin State Prison. And everyone may be right. You know, I had to weigh in and really consider whether I wanted to approve myself. But nah. After some long, thoughtful, maybe even a few sleepless nights, of course, I do approve this episode. [Click sound of phone being hung up that fades out in an echo]


Voice 1: [00:39:55] I took the gun out my pocket, turned around, put it to his neck, and pulled the trigger. [Opening theme ends]

Voice 2: [00:40:02] There was a bright flash of light, and then, I could feel nothing. [Opening theme comes in with somber tone]

Earlonne: [00:40:12] 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: [40:25] 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 to buy Ear Hustle sticker packs, mugs, and t-shirts, so please check it out. And you can also follow us on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook @EarHustleSQ.

Earlonne: [00:40:41] Ear Hustle is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of the best podcasts around. Hear more at radiotopia.fm. I’m Earlonne Woods.

Nigel: [00:40:51] I’m Nigel Poor.
Both: [00:40:52] Thanks for listening. [Theme music ends]

Al: [00:40:58] Yeah, they ask me “what you look like when you were younger?” I just told them “a little thinner.” [Lt. Robinson laughs loudly, then Al laughs]

Lt. Robinson: [00:41:03] Hey, I think that goes both ways. [Laughs]

Al: [00:41:04] A lil afro…um…


END OF EPISODE.