



Episode 52: The Bells
Air Date: December 23, 2020

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas: [over the phone] This is Rahsaan "New York" Thomas. I'm a writer, an advocate, a director, a producer, a podcaster and this episode of Ear Hustle contains language that may not be suitable for all listeners. Discretion is advised.

[music comes in]

Nigel Poor: This is our last episode of the season. And Earlonne, it's a big one.

Earlonne Woods: Indeed. We're gonna end the season with stories about the COVID outbreak in California prisons.

Nigel: Earlonne, this has really defined the year. [Earlonne affirms] ... San Quentin has been on some version of lockdown or modified program since March. So, we've produced this last season from the outside.

Earlonne: Yeah, we can still occasionally talk to guys inside on the phone. But we're not able to be in there and see the people we really care about.

Nigel: And honestly, we're really worried about then. E, I think in the ten or eleven years I've been working with people inside San Quentin, this was the first time the wall between me and them just feels impenetrable.

Earlonne: I feel you.

Nigel: Yeah man, it's unnerving.

Earlonne: It's like there's this wildfire going on inside and we're just watching it from a distance. [Nigel affirms]

Nigel: Since March, there have been over 34,000 confirmed cases of COVID in California prisons. 111 incarcerated individuals have died. And even now as we record this on December 21st, things are getting worse. The surge that's happening outside is happening *inside* too. Across California prisons, there have been over 9,000 new cases in the last two weeks. [music fades out]

Earlonne: And it's gotten close to home. Back during San Quentin's outbreak, my brother got sick. And our colleague New York did too. And when we talk to the guys in there now, they're hearing about lockdowns, quarantines, modified programs— they don't know what's going on. So, I mean, shit, they're scared. [theme music comes in]

Today on the show, we're gonna tell stories about how the pandemic has affected incarcerated people and their loved ones...

Nigel: ...And stories about what it's like to get out of prison in the middle of a pandemic.

Earlonne: I'm Earlonne Woods.

Earlonne: I'm Nigel Poor. And this is Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia. [theme music comes in louder, then fades out]

[over the phone] What's happening, dawg?

Carlos Mesa: [over the phone] Oh, you know, doing the shtizzle.

[as narrator]

Earlonne: This is Juan "Carlos" Mesa. Listeners might remember him from our CO's episode. He was the guy with the Captain Crunch hat.

Nigel: Carlos is out now, but he was still at San Quentin when COVID broke out in the spring.

Earlonne: Yep - right at the end of May. That's when prison officials fucked up and bussed a bunch of incarcerated men from a prison in Chino to San Quentin.

Nigel: Some of those guys had COVID. And soon people at San Quentin were getting sick.

Earlonne: Carlos says pretty much the first thing that happened inside was the CO's keyed the doors... which means they went door to door locking people in.

Nigel: So, nobody was leaving their cells. [music comes in]

Carlos: I still got up in the morning. I wake up at four in the morning, period. And I would go about just trying to figure out ways to occupy my time... writing letters, find things to cook, just little things.

Nigel: And I know we've said this before – but if you haven't spent time in prison, you really need to visualize just how small this space is that Carlos is spending his day in.

Earlonne: Yeah, at San Quentin, there's really only enough floor space for one person at a time. So, if your cellie's standing up... you gotta be on your bunk. [music fades out]

Carlos: I have to lie down because I can't sit up straight on my bunk because I'll hit my head on the ceiling. So, for me, it was really like lying around and trying to just make the day go by without worrying too much about if I'm going to get out of that cell or not.

Nigel: From the beginning, people inside were feeling unprepared. They didn't think prison staff was supplying enough masks or cleaning supplies. And just like out here, nobody knew exactly what the protocol should be.

Earlonne: So, guys were doing what they always do... improvising.

Carlos: Man, there was one guy, man. He had the face mask. He had on gloves. He found a paper suit in the garbage that he put on and walked the tier in that. It was the best. Like, *man, you're going overboard on this*. Like, *I love you for that*. My favorite was the old man. So, I had an old man that use to live down the way. He's about 500 years old and he wrapped his whole head in a towel... had on like these gloves, you know,

like Mickey Mouse gloves, right? And he'd have his coat on buttoned all the way up. And he just shuffled everywhere. But he had on shower shoes the whole time. That's the whole thing. You got all this other protection, but he got on his shower shoes.

Earlone: Which are flip flops. [both laugh] [Carlos affirms]

Nigel: I mean, Carlos can joke about it now, [Earlone affirms] but E, I remember we talked to guys inside and they were really terrified.

Earlone: Absolutely. I mean, in prison all you can do is watch what's on the news and you try to figure out what's going on. You can feel cut off from information, you know? So, guys were getting scared and angry.

[to Carlos]

Nigel: Did anyone's behavior change or get really erratic?

Carlos: I mean, of course people are getting upset. Rattling the doors, you know, yelling, 'Fuck you! What is this?' There was a sense of panic at one time where we were sitting there, and we didn't get a shower. It's time to start yelling, 'Hey, it's shower time and we're going to demand it.'

Nigel: And what would people be yelling?

Carlos: Um... phone time. 'Hey, motherfucker, it's phone time'... type shit. Or 'Aye, where's my fucking shower?'

Earlone: What was their response?

Carlos: Uh, 'Showers will be in five minutes.' We're like, 'Fuck five minutes! I want my fucking shower now.'

Nigel: Did you yell too?

Carlos: Of course. Of course. Because if I say, 'Hey man, may I please have a shower?' in a respectful voice, I will not be heard in prison.

[as narrator]

Nigel: At the beginning of June, there were two active cases of COVID. Two weeks later, there were 200. By the end of June, over 1500. Carlos says people were yelling 'man down' all the time. [music comes in]

Carlos: There were just so many. They were carrying people out like it was a war zone. You know, as soon as they would leave, they would call them right back and there'd be another older gentleman going out... there'd be another person going out. There'd be a person going out in a wheelchair. There'd be a person waiting down there with medical staff. I mean, it was just nonstop.

Earlone: I think the guys inside started to feel like it was inevitable, you know?

Carlos: Well, we were like, 'Let us out then. We you already got it. I don't know why you keeping us locked up. We're already contaminated. Why can't we go outside? They say fresh air is the best thing for us. There's no stopping it. You guys brought it in here already. Let us at least die walking the yard.' [music fades out]

Earlone: And pretty soon, Carlos was sick too.

Carlos: I was trying to go to sleep one night, and I had an amazing pain in my upper back and neck. And I couldn't get rid of it. It was like somebody was pushing on my nerves. And then I caught a fever. It felt like my brain had swelled and I had this pressure in my head that I could not relax. And it was like my blood pressure went up drastically. And I was just like laying there like, *oh, this is what it feels like to die - okay.* I actually sat in there looking and I'm like, *man, basically I'm in a giant coffin with a bunch of other people. There's no going anywhere. I have to sit here and wait for my death to come.* [music comes in] And the truth was like, we were never as scared or uncertain as when COVID started taking people out. Like, we'd been through mad amounts of violence where we had seen it and we weren't scared for our own safety. This was the only time we were like, really like, *we're going to die, and we can't escape it.* [music fades out]

Nigel: Carlos had been found suitable by the parole board. He had a date to get out, but he thought he might not make it that long.

Carlos: I was sad because I never got to see my family free. I never got to walk out those doors. I was happy because I had done everything that I could to get out. I had followed the rules. I had done all what I was supposed to do to get out so my family would know that I finally got it right. So, they could walk away with that – a sense of pride that I finally did... get my life straight.

Earlone: Carlos did make it out of San Quentin. But he's still thinking about all the guys he left behind.

Carlos: Like, that's the toughest thing I deal with every day. [pauses] I don't deserve to be out. Like, that's how I feel. Like, I got out. But I feel like there's a lot of guys in there that deserve to get out, that need to get out, that I love with my heart... so much. And they're just... they're going through that madness and it sucks. [sniffs]

Nigel: Yeah...

[music comes in]

[to Carlos]

Earlone: Now, I know this might be joking, but did you write your own eulogy?

Carlos: You know, I did! [Earlone laughs] You think I'm gonna let somebody else talk for me? Heck no! They might say something drastic. Nah, man.

Nigel: Can you give us the highlights? What were you gonna say?

Carlos: Um, let's see... I think the first thing I said was "I was dreaming when I wrote this. Forgive me if it goes astray."

Earlone: Damn, a Prince lyric?

Carlos: Exactly! You know I did. [both laugh] [music fades out]

[to Belinda]

Nigel: And what about makeup?

Belinda Morales: Ha! This.

Nigel: Can You describe this?

Belinda: That's signature. So, my eyelashes. Yeah. Um... eye shadow, eyeliner, you know... like a chola. [laughs]

Nigel: The good eyebrows.

Belinda: Yeah. I had the line.

[music comes in]

[as narrator]

Nigel: This is Belinda Morales. and I think the one word I'd use to describe Belinda is... glamorous. [Earlonne laughs] She's dressed to the 9s. Nails done, eyebrows, hair, makeup. And when she talks, she's really magnetic and expressive.

[to Belinda]

Earlonne: So, could you tell us the story of how you and Marcos met?

Belinda: Um...

Earlonne: Look at the smile? [Belinda laughs]

Nigel: I know, I love that. She's just like beaming now!

Belinda: Yes, yes. Yeah, he kind of had that effect on me.

Belinda: I was like fourteen years old and he was fifteen. I was on my way to the corner store because we wanted to see who was going to come and take us to go cruising down Whittier Boulevard. [music fades out]

Earlonne: This was the late '70s in east LA, not far from where I grew up.

Belinda: See, the way that it would happen back then is that the homeboys would come with their bombs and we would load up and we would go cruising down Whittier Boulevard. Everybody would partner up. Well, I didn't have a partner. So, I said, 'Ah, I'm just staying.' I had a bag of Fritos. And Marcos was sitting on some steps that we passed by and he said, 'Are you gonna eat those by yourself?'

[as narrator]

Nigel: Belinda's first impression was that Marcos looked like kind of a square. And that was definitely not her type.

Earlonne: Not her type at all because Belinda liked *cholos*.

Belinda: So, *cholos* back in the day were what you would call gang affiliated... gangbangers. He was not a cholo. He wasn't one that stood out that wore khakis and Pendletons and headbands. That wasn't him. [music comes in]

Nigel: On this particular night, everyone was headed out to Whittier Boulevard. But Belinda hadn't found anyone she wanted to go cruising with.

Earlonne: So, she headed over to the party house in their neighborhood. Soon, Marcos showed up. And they found themselves alone in the living room.

[to Belinda]

Nigel: Do you happen to remember what you were wearing?

Belinda: Probably a tube top with some in tube strap sandals, a grey pair of socks, some khakis with a black belt, and probably a blue and black stripe Pendleton. Back then, the liquor of choice was either Red Ripple or Boone's Farm. So, I was drinking some Boone's Farm. [music fades out] And he was handing me the 45s to put on the record player. And um... there was the song, "The Bells."

["The Bells" by the Originals comes in]

I like to dance. I love music. I like to dance. And so, I told him, 'Come on! Let's dance!' And he got up and danced with me to "The Bells." And then we kissed after that. [music fades out] From that moment, we were really inseparable.

[as narrator]

Nigel: The two of them had these nicknames for each other: Puppet and Santita.

Earlonne: Like he was her puppet – she could get him to do anything she wanted.

Nigel: And *Santita* - "little saint" - was kind of a joke. Because Belinda was always up to something but never got caught.

Earlone: Belinda said her family was pretty heavily involved in gang life. But Marcos was different from all that.

Nigel: Yep, he was only fifteen, but he seemed grown up. He lived by himself. And actually, he was in a gang too, but somehow he seemed to exist outside of it.

Belinda: He didn't tolerate certain things and he didn't need a neighborhood in back of him to show that he was who he was. My life back then was not a good life. So, here comes this boy who was man-like and he was like, 'Everything's going to be okay. You just stick with me.'

Nigel: So, Belinda and Marcos have this heady, whirlwind teenage romance. I mean, they are totally in love.

Earlone: But things at home, and with the gangs, were getting too intense and it was clear they were gonna get into some real trouble unless they left LA.

Nigel: So, Belinda went to live with her mom in Arizona. And Marcos was going to go live with family he had in Texas. The plan was that Belinda would join him there later.

Earlone: But three days after he got to Texas, their plan fell apart. [music comes in]

Belinda: I guess his cousins had had some problems with other people and he got into a fight on the school bus and he stabbed one of the boys and the boy died. And he was only fifteen years old. And they tried him as an adult. That was basically the last time I saw him... 'cause I knew he wasn't getting out. [music fades out]

Earlone: Marcos spent thirteen years in prison. He and Belinda lost touch.

Nigel: When Marcos got out, he got romantically involved with a woman who was a drug addict. And soon, he started using too. One night, a fight started at his house, and Marcos shot someone.

Earlone: He was incarcerated again, this time to life without the possibility of parole.

Nigel: Belinda spent some time in prison too. Then eventually settled down, got married and had kids.

Earlone: But in the back of her mind, there was always Marcos.

Belinda: I never forgot about him. My relationships... I used to always compare them to him. Everybody, everybody knew Puppet... because of the stories that I had of things that we did when we were younger. My kids used to say, 'Ohhh, there's Puppet. There's Puppet.' And I used to tell them, 'He should– he would have been your dad. That would have been your dad.' He was never, never very far from my thoughts.

Nigel: Belinda's brother was also incarcerated. And Earlonne, I didn't know about this until I started spending time in prison, but a lot of family members basically become experts in the law.

Earlonne: Yeah, you need that. I mean while you're in custody you can't go and do the research yourself all the time. So, your family members come through you when they go and do the research and send you the copies of the cases that you need.

Nigel: Oh yeah, I mean, and that's what Belinda was doing: trying to find information to help with his case.

Belinda: I will looking through this case, Ryan versus Martinez. And... even when I'm reading the Bible, I always go from one scripture to another, to another, to another, just so... to get, grasp the concept of it. So, I was doing that– I was in Ryan versus Martinez. And then I seen this case and it said "Trevino." And I just was like, *no. No, that can't be him. That's in California.* So, I researched it and I went to the inmate locator and his name was in there! [music comes in]

Don't judge me. I was married at that time to a *really* good man. And I cannot say anything bad about this man because he helped raise my children. It's just that it was Marcos. That's all.

Nigel: Belinda says it was her husband who encouraged her to reach out to Marcos.

Belinda: I said, 'I wonder if that's really, really him.' He says, 'Well, you never know unless you reach out.' And I looked at him... I remember looking at him and I said, 'You don't really want me to do that.' [music fades out] And, um, I remember him saying, 'I told you I'd make you happy.' And I wrote him. I said: "I don't know if you're this guy. I said but my name is Belinda... they used to call me Sant–..." like it was the first time in forever.

Earlonne: And Marcos... wrote her back.

Belinda: I saw the writing; I immediately knew it was him. I left that letter on my desk... I'd say for two or three days. And my husband at that time, he said, 'Well, are you going to open it?' And I knew if I opened it, it was going to change everything and it did.
[music comes in]

Earlonne: You know what I love, Nyge?

Nigel: What's that?

Earlonne: A cliffhanger.

Nigel: Oh yeah, and this is a good one.

Earlonne: We'll come back to Belinda in a bit and find out what happened with her and Marcos. [music fades out]

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Cole Bienek: Hello, my name's Cole Bienek and I got out on July 27th this year. [birds chirping in the background] I ended up getting out a little early because of the COVID releases and I think I got fast tracked through there.

Nigel: When COVID hit the California prison system, prison officials realized that they really needed to give people inside more space to socially distance.

Earlonne: Yeah. They shoulda realized that a bit faster though, Nyge. [Nigel affirms] 'Cause prisons have been overcrowded for years. [Nigel affirms]

Nigel: So, over the last ten months, the state has released more than 11,000 incarcerated people – men and women who were within a few months of completing their sentences, and a few who had medical issues got out a little early.

Earlonne: Cole is one of those guys. He spent his last five years at the California Medical Facility: a prison east of here over in Vacaville. When COVID hit, they let him out two months early.

Nigel: Yeah, Earlonne, of course that was great; but then, almost as soon as he got out, he was exposed to COVID in the transitional house he was staying. So, he was sent to a Travelodge in San Francisco to quarantine.

Cole: The first night, I mean, I was excited. I was like, 'Alright, cool – motel. I'll go wait out my quarantine in a motel.' And, you know, praying that I didn't actually, even though I was exposed, I didn't get the COVID. And so, I walked in there. It was great. I had my own room. I had a TV and a bathroom with a bathtub. But that first night freaked me the hell out. [music comes in] It was the first time I'd been alone in thirty-two years. I'd done hole time. I'd been single celled. I did, you know, I did all of that. But you're never really alone. You might be alone in my cell but there's people on both sides of me. And there's people walking by all the time. Nobody came– nobody was coming by to check. It freaked me out. I didn't really sleep that night. Everything thing sounded weird. Noises freaked me out. I felt like a little kid. I felt like I was a little ten-year-old alone in my room in the dark. I was kinda mad at myself 'cause here I was, I'm free. I'm out. I have what everybody that I was surrounded with was just wishing for, for so long. And I'm in a motel that I don't have to pay for... and I'm freaked out. [music fades out] I can't even enjoy it. Here I am, the first night I'm on my own, and I can't sleep.

Nigel: After a couple days, Cole took a COVID test and it came back negative. So, he asked the nurse...

Cole: I said, 'Can I leave?' I told her, 'I just got out of prison after thirty-two years and I'd like to go for a walk.' She said, 'Yeah, go ahead!' [ambient outdoor sounds come in - dog barking, soft chatter in the background]

Earlonne: He looked at a map of San Francisco and picked a park about a mile away from the hotel.

Cole: [muffled music comes in] [dogs continue barking in the background] Put my headphones on, put my music on and I jogged there. And there was people all over the grass doing yoga... there were dogs running wild. Went and sat on a bench up at the top by this big giant statue. I took a bunch of pictures, talked to my mom. Um... and I was just– I stayed there for like two hours, just sitting on the bench. That was starting to sink in, Hey, I'm actually out here.' [chuckles] [music and ambient noise fade out]

Nigel: So, pretty much every morning, Cole would get up, ask the nurse if it was okay to leave the hotel... and he kept asking her partly because of the quarantine, but also because he was just so used to having to ask for permission to do anything.

Earlonne: So, every morning, the nurse said he could go. And Cole would head out into the city.

Nigel: But remember, Cole got out of prison months earlier than he expected, right in the middle of this crazy pandemic.

Earlonne: Right. And getting out is *always* overwhelming; but getting out during the *pandemic*... it must have been hella stressful. And hella weird.

Nigel: And that kind of feeling really hit him this one day when he was out exploring another park in the city. [outdoor ambient noise from park comes in]

Cole: I saw all of these families... big family park. Dad's pushing little girls on bikes, and kids running everywhere, dogs everywhere. [kids chattering playing in the park] I just had this, *ahhh I don't belong*. I had this bizarre thought in my head: *Man, if all these people knew me, if they knew me, if they knew what I did, then they would be afraid of me*. [darker ambient music comes in] Because at one point in my life, I was a dangerous person that was looking to prey on people. You know, I went into prison a teenaged, drug addicted, violent kid. When I was locked up, that's where I needed to be. I'm not part of the group of people that thinks that... *I used to be this person*. You know, I'm fifty-one years old. I just turned fifty-one a couple of weeks ago. But all of that stuff is still there. Everything that I did is still in my past. It's hard to shake. And so, it was just a process of having to calm myself down and tell myself, *look, you're not dangerous*. [music fades out]

Belinda: I said, 'It's him! It's him! He's calling me.' She says, 'Well, answer it!' I said, 'What do I say?' She says, 'Mom, say *hello*.'

Earlonne: Nyge.

Nigel: Yeah?

Earlonne: We're back with Belinda and Marcos: Puppet and Santita.

Nigel: That's right. So, where we left off, Belinda had just made contact with Marcos – the man she'd fallen in love with when they were just kids.

Earlonne: Marcos was incarcerated, sentenced to LWOP: life without the possibility of parole.

Nigel: Belinda came across his name in some court documents. And even though she was married – and not sure it was a good idea – she wrote him a letter saying, “Is this really you, Puppet?” And he’d written her back saying it was. Now, it was her turn.

Belinda: I was so nervous to respond that I sent him back his original letter. I didn't do it on purpose! I wrote him a full-blown letter, but because of my– you know, being nervous about it...

[to Belinda]

Nigel: So, you wrote your letter and by mistake you put it in the envelope that he had sent you. And you sent him his letter back. I mean, I would have taken that as like, *oh, she's not interested– she's so not interested, she's sending my letter back.*

Belina: Yeah. And that's, that's exactly what he thought. He told his bunkie and his bunkie said, ‘Man, just write her back! Just get clarification. Write her back!’ That's when he wrote me the second letter and he told me what happened. And that's how I knew to look into the envelope. And I was [chuckles] like, ‘Oh my gosh.’ So, I told him, ‘Call me. Here's my number, call me.’

[as narrator]

Earlone: Belinda was out shopping with her daughter one day when the phone rang.

Belinda: So, I answered the phone. I said, ‘Hello.’ And then, it said something about you have to put money or something like that... so then, I said, ‘Oh my gosh.’ So, I said, ‘If you can hear me, call back! Call back!’ My daughter was laughing. She said, ‘You're funny. You are so funny.’

[to Belinda]

Nigel: So, all those feelings came back... pretty quickly.

Belinda: Oh immediately. It was like my heart was *pump, pump, pump...*

Nigel: They had never gone away.

Earlone: She was fourteen again.

Nigel: Exactly, yeah, fourteen.

Belinda: Yeah. [music comes in]

Nigel: Your husband... the guy that you were married to, I mean, he really set it up for you to do what you needed to do. But he lost you by doing that, right?

Belinda: You know, one day I was talking to Marcos on the phone and he was in the car and Marcos said this... he says, 'Is he okay with you talking to me?' I said, 'Him and I have already discussed this.' And that was before we, like, rekindled... you know what I mean? We were just talking. But I *knew*, I knew.

Nigel: Well, I'm just gonna tell you this: if you had the same facial expression when you're talking to him on the phone you have now, I mean, your husband had to know you were in love with him. It's so clear.

Belinda: Yeah.

Nigel: Belinda knew she had to follow her heart and be with Marcos which meant... she had to leave her husband. [music fades out]

Belinda: I became mean with him in hopes that he would say, 'I'm done with you.' But that was just not his character. He raised my kids. My grandkids... that's their Papa. And this was truly— *is* truly, truly an amazing man. Any woman— I was lucky to have him. He accepted all my flaws. You would think that that was enough. I knew what I was doing was wrong. I knew it. Because he didn't deserve it. But Marcos... I was always in love with that man. There was nobody who could match up to him. Nobody.

Nigel: So, I just want to ask this question about love. So, you said that you loved your husband... and you love Marcos. What is the difference in those two kinds of loves?

Belinda: When you have love for somebody you can do all the things that you normally do. Like you cook for 'em, clean for them, you know... hug 'em and all these other things. But when you've got a soulmate... it's just... like you say, you see my face? I never had that face with my husband. [voice breaking] My kids never saw this face before. So, I went to my daughter and I said, 'Oh *mija*. I'm so sorry.' And she looked at me and she goes, 'Mom! It's okay to be happy!' [music comes in]

[as narrator]

Earlonne: At the time, Marcos was incarcerated at Pleasant Valley State Prison in Coalinga, about a ten-hour drive from Belinda's house.

Nigel: Belinda went to see him.

Belinda: I remember the first visit. I cried all the way home. It was... one of those happy cries. [Nigel affirms] Like, I couldn't believe that I had found him. I remember him walking in and I felt my— my knees felt wobbly. And I really, really felt butterflies in my belly. I was like, 'This is *that* guy. This is him.' I mean, there was no thirty-eight years in between us. Like, we were just little... and now we were big. That was it. But those thirty-eight years never happened. We were Puppet and Santita again— all over again. Just now we were grown up and we were Marcos and Belinda. [music fades out] He told me he was LWOP. And I knew that. That didn't matter. I lived a whole lifetime without him. [voice breaking] And if I had so much joy that everybody else could see it, [pshaw] why would I want to do anything else?

[to Belinda]

Nigel: How often were you able to visit?

Belinda: A lot.

Nigel: How many miles did you put on your car? [chuckling]

Belinda: I took airplanes. [Nigel affirms] I rented vehicles, I ... everything. I got there. It didn't matter. [music comes in]

Nigel: When you started hearing about COVID, what was going through your mind and his mind?

Belinda: So, I was one of the disbelievers. I said, 'This is the government's way of just trying to control people from doing things.' I said, 'It's just a common flu that everybody's going to get.' I said, 'People die from the flu all the time.' And then, they started dying in prison. And I told him, I said, 'No, no, no, no. People are really, really dying from this.' He says, 'I'm okay.' He says, 'I'm wearing— I'm doubling up.' I said, 'I know, but you don't have no hanatizer. You don't have nothing to keep your environment sterile.' I said, 'And then, you don't know who has it and who doesn't have it.' He says, 'Well, nobody on my yard has it.'

[as narrator]

Nigel: This was in March 2020. Belinda was about to move so she'd be a lot closer to Marcos. And then the pandemic hit the prisons, including Chino where Marcos was.
[music fades out]

Belinda: And then... all of a sudden, one of the CO's had it. And then, two of the COs had it. It just went like a rampant fire. One day they had COVID and then people were dying. [music comes in]

Nigel: Marcos was already at risk – he had chronic lung disease and lupus. Soon, he got sick.

Belinda: I heard his voice and I told him, I said, 'What's wrong with your voice?' He says, 'You know how I get when I sleep in front of the fan and I my nose gets stuffy... I slept in front of the fan.' And I said, 'No, no, no.' I knew. It wasn't just that. But I didn't want him [getting emotional] to know how scared I was for him.

Earlone: A few days later, she got a call from him.

Belinda: He says, '*Mija*, I'm just calling you real quick to let you know that I had a little bit of fever, so they're going to quarantine me for fourteen days and I'll call you as soon as I get out.' And I remember praying and praying. [pauses] And then, I had like this... feeling of relief inside of me. And I had wrote him a letter and I told him, "God knows the desires of our heart. I don't think he brought us together all this time, just so that we can be taken away from each other. We're going to be okay." I think like on the 30th that I wrote that letter. *He's going to be fine. He's a strong man. He's not going to leave me alone.* June 3rd... [pauses] I got a call. And I knew. [pauses] And I said, 'No. No.' This isn't real. This is not real.' [crying] I was waiting to wake up. I just wanted to wake up.

[to Belinda]

Nigel: Is there any way to describe how your grief feels?

Belinda: [crying quietly] It feels like half of me is gone. I try to stay busy as much as I possibly can. As long as I don't really have to... think about time without him. I'm okay.

[ambient noise from inside Belinda's home]

This one here, this is my signature one.

[as narrator]

Nigel: In the living room of Belinda's house, there's a whole wall that's dedicated to Marcos – a painting he did, little gifts he gave her, his cane ... and there's this photo of the two of them. [voices chattering in the background]

Earlonne: Yes. She's got this huge smile on her face. He's standing behind her and he has his arms around her.

[to Belinda]

Nigel: Can you describe it? 'Cause people won't be able to see it.

Belinda: So, I'm like in his arms, wrapped around me and it's like, I don't want to be anywhere else.

Nigel: You fit so nicely there.

Belinda: I did. [Nigel affirms]

["The Bells" by the Originals comes in while Belinda sings along.] [music fades out and then Belinda sings "The Bells" acapella]

[music comes in]

Earlonne: San Quentin prisoner Richard Stitely died June 24th from complications related to COVID-19.

Nigel: Joseph Cordova died July 1st from complications related to COVID-19

Speaker 1: [over the phone] Manuel Alvarez passed away on July 3rd from COVID. Manny was a big kid. I recall when you told us when he first came into the United States as part of the Mariel boatlift, there were free Coca-Cola's there. And he drank so much that he [chuckles] became violently ill. And another time he had Metamucil and it was sweet, and he couldn't help himself. He had a sweet tooth. And he ate so much of it, he became ill as well. That was kind of who Manny was.

Nigel: Scott Thomas Erskine died July 3rd from complications related to COVID-19.

Speaker 2: [over the phone] Dewayne Carey passed away on July 4th, 2020 from complications of COVID-19. He was very skilled at playing Yu-Gi-Oh. Yu-Gi-Oh is a Japanese card game and you make your own decks. He was highly skilled, actually. He was one of the best. I barely ever beat him... but there was a lot of us who tried.

Earlone: Joaquin Diaz died July 5th from complications related to COVID-19.

Speaker 3: [over the phone] Okay, I'm speaking for Gerald Johnson who passed away July the fifth, 2020... complications from COVID. Gerald was a diabetic. I was a mentor for diabetics. And one thing everybody knew about Gerald was... everybody knew that Gerald could not utilize the needle for the insulin. And as an older fella, you know, we would think that he could, but he just couldn't do it. So, the nurse would always come out there... you know, everybody was always having fun and clownin.' And she's, 'You should know better... you should be able to do this!' and 'Come on over here!' And she would inject him 'cause he would literally get on his knees and stick his arm through the window... if they didn't want to come around. But most of the time they would just come on out. But he couldn't do it for nothin' in the world. It just wasn't in him. He would laugh while she was doing. She would laugh and everybody was laughing. The staff was laughing. Everybody would laugh. He just couldn't do it. But he's a good dude... he was one of the good guys.

Earlone: David John Reed died July 7th from complications related to COVID-19.

Nigel: Francisco Ramirez died July 11th from complications related to COVID-19.

Speaker 4: [over the phone] My dad, Daniel Eugene Ruiz, passed away July 11th, 2020 at 12:30 p.m. due to COVID-19. We'd always get together like on the weekends. 'Cause I have two other brothers as well, and then three other sisters. We'd all eat out with my dad and we'd just all barbecue... put the music on. He could sing! He could sing better than me. I mean, he's not like Teddy Pendegrass or anything like that. Earth, Wind and Fire, "Keep Your Head to the Sky," that was like one of our songs that me and him really, really like a lot, you know.... um, yeah.

Speaker 5: [over the phone] I just want to talk on behalf of Darrell Gautt. He died on July 12th from complications to COVID-19. And Darrell was a really close person to me. And I've known him for years. He was my confidant and we used to talk a lot. And you know, he had had patience with me, and he had patience with everybody that was around him. He was very thoughtful, and he listened to everyone that... you know, the ones that talked to him. But he was quiet and reserved. And you had to really get to know him before you really seen the person that he was. He was a loving brother. It's

like all of us, he come through here and he had changed his life, you know. And his walk was with Jesus. And that's what Darrell was. He was a true believer of God and a nice gentleman. And I'm gonna– he's very much missed here.

Nigel: John Stevens died July 14th from complications related to COVID-19.

Speaker 6: [over the phone] Jeff Hawkins passed away on July 15th, 2020 from COVID. Back when Jeff and I were teenagers and we had first started getting to know each other, we went out into the car port where my mom had her car parked and there were some covers. And there was like four doors and they were open, and we were sitting there with our feet hanging out. And we took blankets out there and we just sat there with our feet hanging out of the carport... all night long. And we just talked. We talked about some of the things that he had done to get himself in trouble. We talked a lot about his parents. We talked about school and how I was trying to get him to go back to high school. And we just talked all night long. I remember that. It was just him and I. And then my mother came down and said, 'What do you guys doing?' [laughs] And it was daylight out. I do remember that night. I remember that night like it was yesterday. [voice cracking]

Speaker 7: [over the phone] Troy Ashmus died on July 20th from complications of COVID-19. Now, I've always personally been afraid of spiders. And so, I was pretty amused when Troy showed me his pet spider collection. Living on death row, he had captured three rather large spiders and put them in these big plastic soda bottles. And he was very proud of them. I remember him showing them off to me. And he fed them insects that he captured in his cell. And so, I really enjoyed visiting with him, standing outside his cell. And I didn't mind his pets as long as they stayed in their bottles. And he had him for about a year, until one day one of the guards decided to search his cell and he threw away all his pet spiders. I saw him in late June, a few days before I received a positive COVID-19 test myself. And by that point, the virus was spreading really quickly in the prison. And hadn't yet reached his housing area, but within a day or two, men there started getting sick too.

Speaker 8: [over the phone] John Beames passed away July 21st from COVID-19. JB was a really warm person. When you would go to see JB, JB was concerned about how you were doing. That's primarily what he wanted to focus on. First JB was one... joked around with everyone on his team. Wanted people to feel at ease. A lot of clients that I represent are focused, and justifiably so, on their own difficult situation; but that wasn't true of JB.

Earlonne: Siverin Whitney died July 24th from complications related to COVID-19.

Speaker 9: [over the phone] Eric William Warner died July 25th of coronavirus. We all call him E. In any situation where other friends of his or other inmates would come to him with a problem... legal or emotional, spiritual... he would help anybody that needed help. And at the end of everything, even when the problem is bleak, Eric will always say, 'God will bless.'

Nigel: Joseph C. Townsel died July 25th from complications related to COVID-19.

Speaker 10: [over the phone] Johnny Avila died on July 26th of complications related to COVID-19. I knew Johnny well. For the whole time I'd worked at San Quentin, he was a regular member of our Catholic community on death row. And what I really remember most clearly about Johnny was how important family was to him. He spoke a lot about his parents. His mother was aging and worried about her health. I accompanied him as he went through the process of his father's death. And his brother also died in the past couple of years and he took it really hard. He had a cousin on death row there at San Quentin who he was very fond of, and he was always... kind of looked out for him. But he was just a really... a family-oriented person who loved his family and felt very much connected to them.

Speaker 11: [over the phone] Orlando Romero passed away from complications of COVID on August 2nd. While on death row, Orlando became a very accomplished self-taught painter. He then taught others to paint. During lockdowns, they'd line up to show him their work. When COVID hit and before he was sick, he began sharing his precious art supplies with them. 'It's important,' he said, 'to keep the men busy while they're scared.'

Earlone: Ralph Ruiz died August 2nd from complications related to COVID-19.

Speaker 12: [over the phone] Kory Saunders passed away August 3rd complications of COVID-19. We went to elementary school together. And we were talkin' about him going home... he was gonna go home next month. When the pandemic hit and I come down and check on him, 'Man, you good?' ... 'Yeah, I'm good, I'm good, I'm good.' Maybe like two weeks later, I come down to check on him and his cellie tell me, he's like, 'Oh yeah, man, your boy Sanders... yeah, he passed away.' I went back to my cell, you know, like I dropped some tears, like, *my boy gone*. Kory was a cool dude. He always put somebody before him. If he got two soups, you need a soup, instead of him giving you one, he gon' give you two. He was that type of person.

Earlone: Alan Biesel died August 6th from complications related to COVID-19.

Nigel: Pedro Arias died August 9th, from complications related to COVID-19.

Speaker 13: [over the phone] Sergeant Gilbert Polanco passed away August 9, 2020 due to COVID-19 symptoms. So, Sergeant Gilbert Polanco and I along with a couple other officers at San Quentin, we formed a little fishing group together. It was supposed to be on a small scale - about four or five officers - just throwing in a few bucks. Going out having a good day. You know, we work a stressful job. And... Gilbert never does anything on a small scale. [voices chattering in background] Everything Gilbert touches ends up being a big deal. And... now we're making t-shirts. We're soliciting businesses for help. And we try to get first responders, any local force responders, and staff from San Quentin just to get out and enjoy some outdoor time. We're going to hold our third derby next year as soon as COVID can lift hopefully. And we are renaming it "The Bobby G. Gilbert Polanco San Quentin Third Annual Fishing Derby." You know, we really miss him, and we wish that he was still here with us.

Speaker 14: [over the phone] John Brown, AKA Mac Brown died of complications from COVID-19. Everybody knew John Brown as "Spanky." Well, you know, when you first meet some people, they either look you up and down or wonder or don't have too much to say to you. And Spanky would talk to you as if he'd known you all your life. He was a good person. And may Allah be pleased with him. But, you know, I just... wow.

Speaker 15: [over the phone] On September 25th, 2020, Michael Hampton passed away due to COVID 19 complications. It was a time where we were in the kitchen, we were working together, and I was doing inventory and we just got a full truck inventory that they just dropped on us. I was just so frustrated because we were shorthanded. And we got so much product to take care of. And he was there even helping and he lended a hand and he was... it was just a frustrating time for me. And he identified it and he pulled me to the side, and he was like, 'Look, man, take your time. It's going to be all right. We ain't going nowhere.' [laughs] You know, 'Breathe.' He was just there for me, man. [music fades out]

Earlonne: Twenty-eight incarcerated people and one correction sergeant have died so far at San Quentin due to complications from COVID-19.

Nigel: 111 people incarcerated in California state prisons have died of COVID. And that number continues to grow. [abstract industrial transition sound comes in]

[over the phone] Hello?

New York: [over the phone] Hey Nyge!

Nigel: Hey New York!

New York: Hey Nigel. The whole crew's here, huh.

Nigel: Aw, man.

Earlonne: The whole crew.

Nigel: Well, nice to hear everyone's voices.

New York: [crosstalk] Same here. Right on.

Nigel: Um, can you tell us a little bit what the mood is like right now with San Quentin?

New York: Uh... it's kinda disgruntled. People feelin' like... the older guys especially should have been released so we could be socially distanced and be safe. We're kind of discouraged that there's some good people that we know that were over sentenced through the three strikes law and different things... and have died of COVID. Me personally, I learned to embrace my struggle. So, instead of seeing this as a hardship, I feel like God got a meaning for all this. And I've been embracing it. And since I've had that philosophy, things that look really bad, turn out to be really good. And even with all the martyrs we had this year, it feels different because normally we have all these people die and nothing comes with this. No change, right. So, the deaths this time is going to lead to some real big changes, man. Generally, there's a lot of pressure to reduce the population. [Nigel affirms] And so, I think that the prison system is going to be different after this.

Earlonne: No, it's definitely good to hear you're optimistic.

New York: Let me clarify too, right. We still dying, bruh. We still dying. It's some changes gonna be made. But the change I want to see is probably not going to happen for another... God knows how many.

Nigel: New York, I want to ask you a question about optimism because I swear, some of the most optimistic people I know are in prison.

New York: Yeah. I think you have to be. 'Cause once you give up, you buy in to the fact you're never going home. [Nigel affirms] But if you buy into hope, like I pretty much

have. My record's not perfect, but it's good enough where I can get a second chance. [Nigel affirms] I don't know when it's gonna happen. It might be two years from now, but it feels like a real possibility. And so, it shifted my thinking. I'm actually working out now trying to get some abs. I don't want to go home with this body. [laughs]

Nigel: I have one more question I want to ask you. This is a little hard for me to ask, but it's really been on my mind... do you feel like we abandoned you?

New York: No! You guys included me as best you could. In fact, you let you contribute... like to be a low budget producer, running around, gathering these people and getting stories that we could call in with. You allowed me to be a cameo on every episode... you kept my name alive. You actually gave me credit for producing stuff I had nothing to do with. [all laugh]

Nigel: Oh, it's so great to talk to you.

New York: I miss you guys, man.

Nigel: Yeah, we miss you too.

[music comes in]

Nigel: Before we get to the credits, we want to acknowledge that this final episode of our season. And this caps off a really crazy and challenging year.

Earlone: Ohhh, a crazy year. [Nigel affirms] 2020? Yeah 2020... never expected, never seen it coming.

Nigel: God, it's been a tough one. But Earlone, the cool thing about a year ending...

Earlone: Yes, yes, resolutions again. [Nigel affirms] We get to re-whoop it, yes.

Nigel: And I love resolutions. So, share with me just one of your resolutions for the year.

Earlone: Ah, of course. I've been thinking hard on this one Nigel. [Nigel affirms] And it's technically a repeat from last year. Lose some weight.

Nigel: Ah. [laughs] Okay, well [Earlone laughs] you know I will definitely be there to support and join in with you.

Earlonne: Thank you, I appreciate it.

Nigel: And I'm going to throw one at you that I want you to join me with. I want 2021 to be the year of gratitude for all the people in our lives that we care about. *And* also, a time to remind listeners how much gratitude we have for them for being part of this journey with us.

Earlonne: Hey, I love the listeners. I love reading every comment they write.

Nigel: Yeah! We're all on this journey together. And speaking of the journey we've been on, Earlonne, we will be back with Ear Hustle, Season Seven.

Earlonne: Oh man, aye. So, how many seasons is that out here? That'll be four? Yeah. [Nigel affirms] Four for me out here?

Nigel: Yep. So, Season Seven, season four for you on the outside, we'll be back early March.

Earlonne: New episodes and a new year.

Nigel: And you know what else in the New Year? I hope happens in the new year vaccines for everyone. And especially getting vaccines inside the prisons.

Earlonne: True dat, true dat. [Nigel affirms]

Nigel: Yeah. And you know... I don't like things to end, but I have to say, I am ready to close the books on 2020. This year has been somethin' else. We'll be back with you soon.

Earlonne: Until then, we hope all you listeners out there as well as all our friends on the inside, stay safe and stay healthy. [music fades out]

Thanks to Harry Simon, Brian Johnsen, Steve Owens...

Nigel: Santos Ruiz, Troy Dunmore, Debbie Smith

Earlonne: George Williams, Chanthon Bun, Kenneth Evans

Nigel: Rome Watson, Michael Goldstein, Rowmond Brown

Earlonne: Mark Perez, and Dwight Kennedy, for sharing memories of some of the people in San Quentin who have died from COVID-19.

Nigel: Thanks to Mike Romano and Alesha Monteiro for their help with this episode. Thanks to KTVU and the San Jose Mercury News for their reporting on COVID deaths inside San Quentin.

Earlonne: Thanks to the website Mourning Our Losses, which has been gathering memorials for incarcerated people around the country who have died of COVID.

Nigel: Ear Hustle is produced by me, Nigel Poor, Earlonne Woods, Rahsaan “New York” Thomas, John “Yahya” Johnson, and Bruce Wallace.

Earlonne: This episode was sound designed and engineered by Antwan Williams, with music by Antwan, David Jazzy, and Rhashiyd Zinnamon.

Nigel: Amy Standen edits the show, Shabnam Sigman is our Digital Producer. And Julie Shapiro is the Executive Producer for Radiotopia. Ear Hustle would like to thank Acting Warden Ron Broomfield, and, as you know, every episode of Ear Hustle has to be approved by this guy here...

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: [over the phone] So, this is the last episode of 2020. We made it through this very, very difficult year. All the challenges that Ear Hustle went through and getting a season out... man, just everything beyond that. It's nice to get to the end. I'm definitely looking forward to a better situation in 2021. So, with that, I will say for the last time *this* season that this is Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the Public Information Officer at San Quentin State Prison, and I do approve this episode. [theme music comes in]

Earlonne: This podcast was made possible with support from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative: working to redesign the justice system by building power and opportunity for communities impacted by incarceration.

Nigel: Ear Hustle is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX. Radiotopia is a collection of independent, listener-supported podcasts.

Earlonne: Some of the best podcasts around.

Nigel: Hear more at radiotopia.fm.

Earlone: I'm Earlone Woods

Nigel: I'm Nigel Poor

New York: And I'm Rahsaan "New York" Thomas. Thanks for listening all these beautiful seasons. See you next year with Season Seven, God willing.

[music fades out] [Radiotopia jingle]

END OF EPISODE.