[Snap Judgment]

**Glynn:** I know you've had this experience where something that you love ice cream, lemonade, maybe your mom's homemade brownies. But for some reason, it just doesn't hit the same way. Almost like the brownie is broken or something. But it's not the food. The brownie is exactly the same as it's ever been. Or maybe something you've hated your whole life. Like, I like pickles. All of a sudden, you can't get enough pickles. No. Pickles didn't change. You did. A change of circumstance alters how we experience the world. And today on Snap Judgment, we're going to explore our sensations. After one of the biggest life changes there is, incarceration. We proudly present The Five Senses.

My name is Glynn Washington, and my advice is to taste everything like you still can, especially when you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

Now, you know we love some Ear Hustle here at Snap. It's a show from PRX's Radiotopia, that's created by the people from San Quentin State Penitentiary, featuring stories from San Quentin State Penitentiary. They're Snap family. And the first episode of their 10th Season, congratulations, the first episode focuses on how prison can mess with your senses. The things you see, touch, taste, feel. And today, inside San Quentin, Ear Hustle begins with the world of sound.

[bullfrog croaking]

**David:** Sometimes, I remember it was so quiet early morning that I could hear frogs croaking. I didn't know what it was at first, but it sounded familiar. And it was springtime, I know that the bay is just right outside of West Block, and you could throw a stone and hit the water from the top of the building, if you get on top of the building. I'm not trying to escape. Put that in there. I believe there were bullfrogs. I love nature. So, I'm a little bit familiar with some of the different sounds. And there were dozens of them. I mean, there were lots and lots of frogs out there. And that was really cool.

[keys jangling]

**New York:** Every morning around 3:30 AM, I can hear the guards opening up the doors.

[keys jangling]

Not only do you hear them keying each door like, click-clack, click-clack, click-clack, as they walk through between doors, you hear the keys jingle, ching, ching, ching, ching, ching, ching, ching, ching, ching, click-clack, ching, ching, ching, click-clack, ching, ching, ching. Click-clack, ching, ching, ching. So, I'm hearing that at 4:30. And it pretty much wakes me up every morning.

[yard noises]

It's 12:30 on a Wednesday, and we're out on the yard at San Quentin State Prison. Nigel and I are here and we have our eyes closed. What are you hearing, Nyge?

**Nigel:** Ooh. I just heard the sound of bird wings kind of flapping. Must be taking off from the cement ground. I definitely hear guys talking. I think some people are playing handball, so I hear the sound of a ball hitting the wall. And what sound just came up? It's really nice. Do you hear that?

**New York:** I just heard the sound of a saxophone, but also heard a New York City sound.

**Nigel:** What was that?

**New York:** The sound of a plastic bag blowing across the concrete abandoned.

**Nigel:** Oh, wow.

[laughter]

I just heard a gate open.

**New York:** I'm hearing somebody with a metal cane or something. I hear a cane scraping.

**Nigel:** Ooh, coming up behind us. Yeah, that's right.

**New York:** What are you smelling?

**Nigel:** Okay. [sniffing] I smell dirt. I smell heat coming off of the cement. A dusty smell. A dusty smell. How about you?

**New York:** At first, the yard smelled fresh. But then, I went around, shaking my head from left to right, taking deep breaths. And I smell something weird, I can't really identify.

**Nigel:** Wait a second. I just did what you said, and I turned my head to the left. [sniffing] I smell like a food smell, like something that was microwaved in cardboard and then like sat out for a long time so everything's hard in it. When was the last time you kept your eyes closed on the yard?

**New York:** I generally don't keep my eyes closed on the yard. This is probably the first time.

**Nigel:** How's it feel?

**New York:** Uh, ironically, it feels safe and comforting somehow, like I'm doing yoga somewhere in the yard.

**Nigel:** Oh, that's nice. But should we open our eyes and see what's actually around us?

**New York:** Yes.

**Nigel:** Okay.

**New York:** Three, two,-

**Nigel and New York:** One.

**Nigel:** I think it was odd when I opened my eyes, all of a sudden, I saw there were about 40 guys walking right towards us.

**New York:** Yeah, because the yard felt so empty when we closed our eyes. And now, a flood of people coming out down the stairs from the building units hitting the yard.

**Nigel:** Yeah. It's weird we didn't pick up on it, you know?

**New York:** Yeah, like being in prison, it affects your senses in a lot of ways. Some senses you start to forget about, like they recede into your memory. Other ones you wish you could just turn off.

**Nigel:** I'm Nigel Poor.

**New York:** I'm Rahsaan “New York” Thomas.

**Nigel:** Today, the Five Senses of Prison Life on Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia, Season 10.

**New York:** We're still here.

**Nigel:** Smell-around Sensor-- what do they call it? Smellorama?

[Ear Hustle theme]

**Boots:** San Quentin, when I first got here, I was 23. And I walked into reception over in Badger section and it was just powerful. None of the sounds that you hear are the stuff that you want to hear. Music in reception center just doesn't even exist. No TVs, no radios. You become more sensitive to things like keys jangling. I don't know what it is, but when a male officer is instructing someone, giving an instruction, the demand, that voice, even if you can't see, you can only hear the voices, you know who is who.

**Nigel:** Can you tell me any good sounds inside prison? Are there any good sounds?

**Boots:** Yes. So, there's a guy on the second tier in West Block, down towards the back bar who plays guitar. He's a white guy, but you would think just by hearing what he plays that he's some black guy from Louisiana somewhere. His blues are just like it's raw and crisp. It's really emotional stuff. I dig it.

[guitar playing]

**Boots:** Your mom, your sister, your wife, your girlfriend, your boyfriend, partner, your kids, you don't have that. You don't have any affection, physical affection, tactile affection. I think that the empty void is a lot of times what turns men into monsters.

I saw something a few months ago when I was coming to work, on my way to work. I guess one of the lifers had gotten found suitable for parole. And this correctional officer walked up, "Hey, man, I heard." Grabbed him and gave him this huge bear hug. And I'm seeing a cop and an inmate hugging each other. I'm like, "What dude? What-what is happening here?" I was so shocked, like, I think I talked about it for like three days before I processed and analyzed it, like, "What is wrong with me that this is so shocking?" Two human beings. One of them is proud of the other, one of them is proud of himself. They're just celebrating literally this life changing, this life-giving news, and they're celebrating it. And to me, it was shocking.

I know I should be ashamed to say this, but I have gotten out a number of times. After seven and a half years in the youth authority, two and a half years in prison, six years fighting a life case. So, I've gotten out after long periods. And it takes forever to get used to sitting and laying down on a mattress.

When you go home tonight, just stop-- before you even sit down, just stop. And experience the sensations of lowering yourself onto a mattress, sitting down, feeling your weight sink into it a little bit. I am telling you that my first several days, like I have to sleep on the floor. I have to lay down a couple of blankets and just sleep on the floor because it takes that long to get used to the softness. The comfort, it's not comfortable it's so comfortable.

[PSA in background]

**David:** I think, in here, I look for things to remind me of what it was like outside of prison. And things to look forward to when I get out of prison and seeing nature. And these things I realized that the world hasn't stopped. It's still going. It's still going to be there when I get out. It's very calming and soothing to me. And so, I'm really thankful that here at San Quentin, we have a beautiful hill and a mountain where we can see a lot of nature. Every morning when I come down from the top of the stairs, we can look over and see a little bit of the bay. And then at the bottom of stairs, you look over and you can see the hillside where you can see deer. Sometimes, a coyote or a fox. There's a lot of birds flying overhead and on the yard and the geese on the yard. This morning there were about a dozen geese when we came down to work. There's about two or three dozen out there right now. We have osprey that I've actually seen carrying fish from one part of the bay to the other part of the bay. Hawks. The other day I saw a hawk, just swoop down and snatch a pigeon right out of the air right above the yard.

We have pelicans that fly in the V formation. Sometimes, a hundred pelicans. A great blue heron. There's usually just one, they fly alone. Cormorants, egrets. And just here on the garden, we have finches and sparrows. We have the swallows that build the mud nests up on the top of the housing units, the cellblocks. And so, they build nest out of mud every year.

One year, it was so quiet on the yard because of the pandemic, that they were coming down and grabbing the mud right off of the yard, which is cool to see them flying around grabbing the mud and building their nests. There were, I think, 50 nests just right there on the wall, the big wall outside the yard.

**Nigel:** Have you been in one of those prisons, like High Desert or Soledad where there's just desert everywhere?

**David:** Ironwood.

**Nigel:** Ironwood. What is that like?

**David:** It's a desert, but there's tarantulas, there's lizards, there are bats. We had bats flying around outside of the yard with the big bright lights. They attract moths, and the moths attract birds that feed on moths. There's nighthawks. A guy might have a pet snake. In the desert, there's wildlife too.

**New York:** What are you missing?

**David:** Oh, my goodness. Where do I start? [chuckles] The glimmer of the water over the ocean as I walk across the beach. Seeing wild rivers flowing and hearing them and stepping into them feeling the cold water on my feet. Seeing a forest from the inside out is a beautiful thing.

**Nigel:** What are the things you wish you didn't see?

**David:** Well, we all take showers with men. And if you look at the wrong spot, you learn right away, "Ah, I got hit on the eye, man." Don't look there. So, you learn. The bathrooms here, I mean, [toilet flushing] even on the yard and up here, outside of work.

**New York:** The refreshing sounds of a toilet flushing in prison.

**David:** They don't have guards, so you're just right next to each other.

**Nigel:** When I walk through the yard, I very purposely avoid looking at the toilet.

**David:** You have to, right?

**Nigel:** I always feel bad for the guy. But I always feel like it must be so humiliating to-- some person's walking by and just looks at you going to the bathroom. But do you think you just get over that?

**David:** Well, thank you for that, Nigel. We're in a spot. Yeah, 99% of us are not trying to be seen going to the bathroom. But here, yeah, everyone walking by, guests, volunteers, teachers, if they just glance over, they see something they don't want to see.

**Nigel:** Some guys will stop and try to talk to me by the bathroom. And I'm like, "Can we just move on?" How long do you think it takes to get used to going the bathroom in front of other people?

**David:** It took me a long time. Yeah.

[scintillating music]

**Ryan:** You get used to seeing patterns.

**Nigel:** Can you explain that?

**Ryan:** For instance, if I would be on a crazy yard in High Desert and I would notice one person every day just work out in a certain area. And then one day, I would notice him somewhere else, and immediately red flags would go up like, "Oh, wait, this ain't right. He's not right there. He's over here." You notice that. You notice, "All right, this person is always playing chess," or, "This person is always playing cards," "This person is always working out." "This person is always doing other things." So, you notice these things. And then when you realize that one of them is off, it sends alarms, signals to your brain, like, "Wait, hold on, something's up," and I was right, something bad was about to happen. Like I said, your senses are attuned. They have to be if you are on a violent yard. If you're oblivious to it all, you might become a victim yourself.

**Arbuckle:** It's hard being like this with one eye to walk around. Then, I'm on a second tier, almost fell a couple of times.

**Nigel:** Kevin Arbuckle has been in prison since 2010. He has glaucoma. He's blind in one eye and only has partial vision in the other.

How do you get down all the stairs?

**Arbuckle:** I hold onto the rail, tap with my stick, try get to the next step to find out where the end of it is.

**Nigel:** Are people helpful?

**Arbuckle:** Some people helpful, some of them don't. You got a step to get in the shower. So, guys see me coming in, they say, "Hey, OG, you got it? You got it, OG?" I'm like, "Yeah." I hold on to the rail and do the best I can do. It's hard to get around in a crowd of people. I wouldn't even participate in coming out here to the yard. Unless I come and do laundry or going to the program somewhere and stuff. Other than that, I stay in the cell.

**Nigel:** You don’t go out to the yard?

**Arbuckle:** No.

**Nigel:** Oh.

**Arbuckle:** Because I don't want to go out because I don't have nobody really right there to help me, protect me, or be around with me. It'd be fine if I had two or three people with me, that I can walk around and go over here, sit down or be somewhere or whatever, but not just by myself.

**Nigel:** What do you worry about happening if you go out to the yard?

**Arbuckle:** Anything can happen. A fight can break out or I can bump into somebody or something, you know what I am saying? I could be walking one minute and trip.

**Nigel:** So, you spend most of your time in your housing unit?

**Arbuckle:** In a cell. It's dark. I just sit there and watch TV all day. Go to breakfast, come back, come down, and try to get on the phone. Come back upstairs, come back, go to dinner, come back, go to my bunk, and that’s it.

**Nigel:** That sounds lonely.

**Arbuckle:** It's hard. It's hard on me in a little bitty space. It's hard. Just sitting up on the bunk all day in a little bitty cell like that. Always got to pay attention. I don't care whatever prison I go to when they do the unlocks because I never know who's coming in on me or whatever. I always got to be cautious, so I always be right there on my bed. Only way when I feel comfortable after 8:45. That’s when they're locking down.

**Nigel:** That's when you feel safer?

**Arbuckle:** That’s when I feel more safe, so that way I can get out of my shoes and can relax a little.

[yard sounds]

**Nigel:** We've talked about two senses, hearing and seeing. So, how many more to go?

**New York:** Three more to go.

**Nigel:** Mm-hmm.

[ambient noises]

**Glynn:** Right after this break, the smells of San Quentin State Prison, when Five Senses, the Ear Hustle Spotlight continues.

[upbeat music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, The Five Senses, our Ear Hustle Spotlight. Today, we're tagging along with Ear Hustle inside San Quentin State Prison, to explore the five senses. And next up, the sense of smell. Snap Judgment.

**David:** I have really bad gas, and I apologized once to my cellie after weeks because he never said anything, never complained, which is weird because gas stinks. And I've had actual problems with cellies before where it had actually almost come to a fight, literally throwing punches because I have gas. I have bad gas, and I know it smells but I can't really do anything about it. My cellie actually threatened to beat me up the next time I farted when I was asleep. I can't get up and use the toilet when I'm sleeping.

**New York:** Did you know in prison what you expect to do when you have gas?

**David:** I was told by my cellie who it became a problem with to drink a lot of water. He also asked me to stop eating certain foods.

**New York:** No, no, I'm referring to something else. So, in prison, I didn't know this either. When I came to prison for the first time, I got to Calipatria, and I would pass gas, "Excuse me," like it's no big deal, you're going to pass gas. My cellie, he made some smart comments, but he didn't tell me that the custom is you're supposed to go to the toilet, sit on the toilet, and flush the fart. Time your fart with the flush.

**David:** Yeah. No, I've heard the flush it and I've seen guys try it but with limited flushes, you don't want to lock the toilet out and then you really got to use the toilet and then it's worse than a fart.

**New York:** How many farts you're going to use in five minutes? You get two flushes every two minutes.

**Nigel:** This is not where I thought this conservation was going. [laughs]

**David:** This is not what I had planned.

[PSA]

**Ryan:** I bring up High Desert because that place, I pretty much grew up there. But the food was just so terrible. I remember they would serve like scrambled eggs. And I used to work in the main kitchen too. So, the eggs tasted like how the kitchen smelled. It was terrible.

**Nigel:** Can you describe it?

**Ryan:** Like mildew. I don't know. Every time I would taste the eggs, I would associate the two, and I would like gag, like [makes retching sounds]

**Nigel:** It's almost like a phantom taste?

**Ryan:** Yeah, it's a phantom and it ruined everything for me out there. It ruined all my meals. I could not eat in the kitchen. Every time I tasted something, that's what I--

**Nigel:** It tasted mildew.

**Ryan:** Yeah.

**Nigel:** So, I'm imagining the smell of like a mop bucket.

**Ryan:** Exactly. Just think of a mop bucket with some smelly old mops.

**Nigel:** Do you think you've had long-term damage done to your feelings around taste?

**Ryan:** Well, I could tell you one thing when I get out of here, I'd probably never eat pancakes. I'm never going to eat ramen noodles. I'm never going to eat peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Probably never going to eat scrambled eggs. And I love pancakes. I grew up on pancakes. My mom used to make pancakes. I enjoyed them. Now, I don't even want to see a pancake, to be honest.

**Nigel:** Okay, 15 years ago, if you could have brought one taste in with you, what would it have been?

**Ryan:** One taste?

**Nigel:** Yeah.

**Ryan:** Steak, I guess. [laughs] I like some meat.

**Nigel:** What associations do you have with that taste?

**Ryan:** Just family gatherings and being with loved ones, always barbecuing. Man, I really don't want to get into it, but it's just having something cooked rather than preheated.

**Nigel:** Wait a minute, why don't you want to get into it?

**Ryan:** Because I can't even-- honestly, I almost can't even remember what it tastes like. I can remember that I like it, but I can't sit there and give you those details. It's like I lost them.

**Nigel:** And when you say you don't want to go there, is it because you don't want to open those feelings, or you just can't remember?

**Ryan:** Ah, honestly, I feel like I'm forgetting things. To be honest, even though being in here, I'd always want good food. But it's like I'm forgetting things, I'm forgetting how that tastes. Yeah, it's kind of sad, but that goes with being incarcerated for a long time.

**Nigel:** Yeah. I wonder if it's sad or it's protective, or it's adaptive. I don't know.

**Ryan:** I would go, [sighs] man, a long time without calling family members. I don't want to really think about them. It sounds kind of cold, right? I don't want to think about them. I don't want to stress on what they're doing. It's like I close them off. Some people reach out to the families every day or have that connection. For me, I guess I unconsciously tried to sever connections. And then now, ever since my mom passed away, I tried to reestablish those connections with my family. But I think it's almost like it's too late because they have moved on without me. And so, I'm trying to get back in their lives, I don't see my place in it.

**Nigel:** You just did that very emotional story with us about last memories. Did it bring back any smells or sounds or tastes for you?

**Ryan:** It brought up-- I try to remember what my house smelled like. And that, I don't know, I forgot. But I remember how my mom smells like. It's crazy because I was at a visit and someone was wearing perfume somewhere and I had to walk past it or something, and I smelled it and it immediately conjured up a memory of my ma. And I didn't say anything. I didn't say anything at all. I just went on with my visit.

I'm not one who believes in ghost or paranormal activity. I smelt that and I'm like, "Oh, she's here." That's what my brain is telling me or some part of my brain, and the other half is like, "No, she's moved on. She passed."

[somber music]

**Reggie:** I think it was in 2019, they had started giving us oranges. They started giving us citrus. And it had been a while since I had peeled the orange. When I peeled that orange, the citrus, it lit up the whole cell. I tried to break every wedge without breaking the skin in between. I did my best. Sometimes I succeeded, sometimes I didn’t. It was like a reminder. It let me know that I'm getting closer to freedom. That I'm getting closer to going home. It was small, it was subtle, but it was something that gave me a glimmer of hope. And the touch of having that peel stuck in my nails and pulling it from under my nails, I just realized how long it had been since I actually peeled an orange and ate an orange.

**Nigel:** How long do you think it had been?

**Reggie:** Let me see, 2019, probably like 20 years. It was a little bit over 20 years.

**Nigel:** Did you eat that orange fast or slow?

**Reggie:** I ate it slow. That’s the only way you're going to enjoy it.

**Earlonne:** Thanks to David Ditto, Andrew “Boots” Hardy, Ryan Pagan, Kevin Arbuckle, and Reggie Thorpe for speaking with us for this episode.

**Nigel:** Thanks also to Tony de Trinidad.

**Earlonne:** This episode was produced by me, Earlonne Woods, Nigel Poor, Rahsaan “New York” Thomas, and Bruce Wallace, with help from Tony Tafoya and Rhashiyd Zinnamon.

**Nigel:** It was sound designed and engineered by Earlonne Woods, with help from Fernando Arruda and Bruce Wallace.

**Earlonne:** It features music by Lee Jaspar, Antwan Williams, Rhashiyd Zinnamon, Fernando Arruda, and David Jassy.

**Nigel:** Amy Standen edits the show. Shabnam Sigman is our managing producer, and Bruce Wallace is our Executive Producer. And we want to mention, this episode about Prison and the Five Senses was the idea of our beloved former executive producer, Julie Shapiro. Thanks as always for the inspiration, Julie. We really miss you.

**Earlonne:** We do indeed. We’d also like to thank Warden Ron Broomfield. And as you know, every episode of Ear Hustle has to be approved by this cat here.

**Ron:** Ear Hustle, welcome to Season 10. And just as I get going my phone rings in the background, but I am focused on you. So, with that, I will say that in our 10th Season, Episode 1, that I do approve this episode.

**Glynn:** Thank you, thank you, thank you to the whole Ear Hustle team at PRX's Radiotopia. Know that Ear Hustle's new season just kicked off season 10 featuring brand-new stories never heard on the show available right now, wherever you get your podcasts.

[upbeat music]

Now, when Snap returns, a conversation like you've never heard before. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

Welcome to Snap Judgment. My name is Glynn Washington. And if you go through the whole situation of getting processed to enter the San Quentin State Prison. If you go through the gates, or pass the yard, thousand steps you will arrive at the Media Lab. It's where the Ear Hustle team makes magic inside the prison. End right next door to Ear Hustle, right there, close enough where each team can hear each other loud enough to ask folks to, "Please be quiet, we're recording right now," right there, is another audio team, Uncuffed. And at Uncuffed, recorded both at San Quentin and Solano State Prisons, incarcerated people have real conversations with each other. Not just about how they got where they are, but also about what they're doing going forward. It's an amazing project. We're going to drop you to one of those conversations right now. Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

**Thanh:** We got a few fellas in the room right now. Let's start to my right, man. Introduce yourself.

**Nate:** My name is Nathan "Nate" McKinney.

**Thanh:** Oh, yeah, A Plus Nate, back in effect. Go ahead.

**Edmond:** We've got Edmond Richardson here.

**Shakur:** And Tommy "Shakur" Ross.

**Thanh:** Shakur Ross, and this is Thanh Tran. I just want to say I love my job. God, we get to do what we love down here, really talking and really sharing experiences. And we're here today for one of our greatest of all time. A plus, golden standard, Nathan McKinney. Come on, y'all. Nate the Great. [crosstalk] Buddy, snap it up, snap it up, snap it up, snap it up, snap it up. You see that? Nate, go ahead, man. I know you got some news for the people.

**Nate:** Well, just recently, last month as a matter of fact, about 30 days ago, I was found suitable.

**Thanh:** What does suitable means? Hold on.

**Nate:** Suitable means that I no longer present a risk to public safety, in terminology wise.

**Thanh:** Mm. For those who don't know, if you are sentenced to life in prison in California, you have to go through a Board of Parole. And if you get found suitable, what that means is that you have a chance of coming home. Nate, tell us what the process looks like.

**Nate:** I think that most people can identify with is like the night before Christmas, if you're a kid, and you want a present. And that present to me is freedom, that suitability. And it's hard to sleep, it's hard to reconcile the peace of mind with the anxiety attacks that I was having, to use the 'I' statement. I had to address issues that needed to be addressed, and I don't know how they were going to be received. I'm going to have to explain or connect the dots, what happened to me on that particular day that I committed to live crime, and where I'm at now. And what brought me to the point where I had hurt people.

**Thanh:** Was there any rituals or something that you did that night or that morning? Did you pray? Some people got their pocket Bible. Did you got anything shake up for you?

**Nate:** I have family members that were in my corner. They said they were praying for me, and, of course, it was evident, I had to pray for myself. But for the most part, it was just filled with the taboo of the unknown, not knowing what's going to happen, is all this for naught? You know what I mean?

**Thanh:** Absolutely. Man, just hearing Nate's story, what's coming up for y'all over here, man? I see Shakur shaking his head, Edmond is looking lost like he always looks. [laughs] So, what’s coming up for you, Shakur?

**Shakur:** I can definitely relate to your story, because I went to the board in 2016, and I got a seven-year denial. So, I definitely can relate to the anxiety. I definitely can relate to sitting in a holding cell and wait for them to call my name so I can go in with the anxiety and of not knowing.

**Thanh:** I like that a lot. Ed, what’s coming up for you, man, just hearing about Nate the Great, having to take that Green Mile stroll, man?

**Edmond:** I think, for me, just hearing his story, the anxiety that he was going through was transferring over to me. This is something that I'm going to have to go through.

**Shakur:** What's coming up for me is the preparation process. There's a lot of things that go into preparing for board, board prep. You have relapse prevention plans, parole plans, jobs, transitional housing. So, there's a lot of things that that go into pro prep. What was that process like for you?

**Nate:** It was arduous. It was hard just getting ready to go present yourself. And you want to present yourself in the most positive light. So, it's going to take more than just 15 minutes of preparation. It's years of preparation.

**Thanh:** Mm. Nate, it's time again, man, Nate. I'm feeling a lot of emotions just hearing you talk about this stuff, man, because I was here when you got the denial the other time when you went to board, and we were certain you were going home. So, my question to you, Nate, is knowing that this system essentially denied you twice-- They didn't essentially, they did deny you twice and said, "You are not suitable," what were your thoughts? Were these thoughts coming up for you when you were sitting in that boardroom of past failures?

**Nate:** They not only were coming up, they were always in the back of my mind. They were the 700-pound gorilla in the room. You know what I mean? But besides people being very optimistic about what's going to happen to me, always I look back in the room and there that gorilla is. He weighs a lot. You know what I mean?

**Thanh:** How long was each denial real quick?

**Nate:** Well, my first denial was five years.

**Thanh:** Wow.

**Nate:** And then after that I got banned for three. And so, it didn't feel very good at all. It was deflating, it was humiliating, being on a personal level. And it's all the things that that come along with not being successful. But once again, I couldn't internalize it. I couldn't say that I was a failure. I couldn't say that I was successful. I just had to find a way to overcome that. And that's why I just kept pressing on.

**Thanh:** Yeah, man. Even as you're speaking right now, Nate, what's coming up for me too is that there's a certain point when hoping becomes a scary thing. For me, I could speak from personally that I began getting scared to hope for freedom, because of all the letdowns that I've experienced in my own fight for freedom. You get so close sometimes and you're like, "Yes, it's going to happen." And it doesn't. What this is really bringing enough for me, I know we're talking a lot about what we're experiencing. I know the letdowns that I've experienced. I know it killed my family, it killed them. Every time when they thought I was coming home and I didn't, it crushed them. I feel like they were more crushed than I was. Can you speak a little bit about how your family has been on this rollercoaster for these three board dates for you?

**Nate:** Yeah, that's the two-headed monster. The two-headed monster is, they love you, they want you there, they want you present in their lives. They know that you have value, you know what I mean? And they want the world to know you have value. However, when that doesn't happen to them, they feel worse for me than me.

**Thanh:** I definitely hear you on that, Nate. Shakur, I know you've been denied by board a few times too, man. Same question to you, Shakur. How did your family take it? How are you able to continue to push?

**Shakur:** When I got on the phone, and I told my fiancée at the time, immediately she goes into tears. Some of the volunteers who I've worked with here as well went into tears, because they're here. They're able to see the work that we do as individuals. Again, not just for the board but for our own personal growth and development. So, it definitely was a hard experience, not only for me, but for my family as well.

**Nate:** I've only seen my mother cry three times in my life. And that's when they broke in our house when our auntie died, and when her mom died. And they said my mother cried. So, that kind of moved me. My older sister cried and my younger sister cried. And it was like a burden or relief for them. You know what I mean? That this will be coming to an end soon, the pain and anguish and the absence of me being in their lives, not being present. It made me feel good for a change to be able to reveal that news because they were holding their breath when I called after I came back. And I called immediately because I wanted to let them know, because they've been my biggest supporters, is my family, especially my youngest sister. And I just wanted to let them know that this burden that I've put them through that I've caused, this pain that I've caused, it's coming to an end. And we can turn the page and we could begin a new chapter in our lives.

**Edmond:** Yeah, for sure. This is Edmond again. Some of the points that you guys were making is they don't see us on our day-to-day work. They don't see how much work that we put in. I know as a man that I've changed. One thing that I learned, you can walk the walk, but they don't care about that. They just want you to be able to talk it. And that's something that I didn't learn how to do. Even though I changed, I wasn't able to articulate how I changed, or this arc of transformation that they talk about. Listening to both of y'all talk about your experiences going into board, that's scary for me, because I don't talk like Nate. Nate to me is hella articulate. He's able to express his emotions, what's coming out for him. He's able to unpack, like what I see. He's able to put his trauma into words and make it relatable to someone else. And for me, that's scary. I don't know how to do that. I don't have that skill set.

**Nate:** You just did. You just did it, [laughs] unbeknownst to you.

**Edmond:** I mean, it's also like, I think, I know a lot of guys have changed. That criminal thinking is gone. It's not a part of their lifestyle. What advice would you give somebody that has these insecurities, that are self-conscious about their abilities to articulate what they learned over the past 5, 10 years of their incarceration? What advice would you give to them in preparing to go to board?

**Nate:** Authenticity, speaking the truth. Speak your truth. Don't make it a rehearsed speech. Don't worry about the group talk. Even though we get compelled to be digressive when we get in sticky situations, but just speak what’s coming from your heart and what you know to be truth and people will receive that.

**Thanh:** I really want to just be in that room with you when they said, "You are suitable."

**Nate:** When we came back on the record, I was trying my best to look calm, but my heart was pounding like the 808 kick drum. I could hear like I was in an old-fashioned blazer with 15-inch woofers in it. That's how my heart felt. But I'm trying my best to look calm. The commissioner, she read through the formalities. When she said that they no longer find me or risk to public safety, my hands went to my forehead, my head dropped, and the gorilla was removed from the room. I was overcome with emotions. But I was sitting there in a state of suspended animation, I was numb. But it was a good number because seeing all the possibilities with things that I could do, including what I'm going to get, including autonomy was just on the horizon.

**Thanh:** What people don't know is that after you go through this arduous process of going through the board, now you got to wait about 120 to 150 days for the governor to decide if he wants to let you out or not. And more often than not, he can pull your date. So, you went through all of this trauma, you think you got this victory, just to find out you really just lost, and you got to do it all over again. I'm praying that's not what's written in your story books. You don't fight three times to get to this part. I'm hoping that you just walk right out of the gates at this point, Nate, because I think I could see you in a tweed suit.

**Nate:** Man, it could be made out of a burlap sack.

[laughter]

**Nate:** I'm going to put it on and wear it like I just got it from Ford or something.

**Thanh:** Nate, what's your last thoughts, man, before we check out, man?

**Nate:** Well, it's kind of bittersweet, just to sound cliché, it's a little bit because I know that I'm leaving behind some great relationships. We're going to be able to cultivate these relationships when we all have autonomy, and it's coming for everybody. You can't keep a good man down forever. And I know it's going to come to fruition, that we're all going to be together and have a one great big party on the outside. But until then, my thoughts, my prayers, my hopes, and my wishes for a good and prosperous life go out to each and every one of y'all. And I thank you for your heartfelt comments. And on that note, I'm out. Love y'all.

**Thanh:** All right.

[crosstalk]

**Edmond:** Nate the Great.

[crosstalk]

[upbeat music]

**Edmond:** What's up, everyone? This is Edmond. Before I get started in the credits, I got a quick update. Since we recorded that conversation, Shakur Ross was also found suitable for parole, and is hopefully headed home in early 2022. We'll check in with him about that in an upcoming episode. coming out soon. You can find Uncuffed on KALW 91.7 in San Francisco, or at *weareuncuffed.org*. Subscribe to Uncuffed in any podcast player. Thanks to the team at KALW Public Media, our sound designer Eric Maserati-E Abercrombie, Ninna Gaensler-Debs, Angela Johnston, Andrew Stelzer, Ben Trefny and Eli Wirtschafter. And thanks to David Jassy for our theme music.

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[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** This piece was brought to us from the amazing team at Uncuffed, created by people behind bars in California prisons. Unfortunately, they recently got some terrible news. They lost their main source of funding that allows them to train incarcerated producers and make this show. So, they're reaching out to listeners to weather this storm. And you can both subscribe to the podcast and learn how you can help, at *weareuncuffed.org*.

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[upbeat music]

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