

# Seeing through the fog

## Sexual-assault victim rebuilds life with power of the pen

By Chris Hopfensperger

Editor

**Editor's Note:** The sections of bold text in the story are excerpts of poetry written by the subject, Leslie Worrell.

**"I wrote myself into the sleepest play. What an odd, odd chapter: Grandpa Ate All the Children All the Children of the world Yellow Red Black and White five four and Twelve. He ate them mercifully whole with nothing to drip down his chin and no one suspects the bulge above his belt are just pre-pubescent stocking stuffers no one no one suspects, because eating children is the perfect crime..."**

Leslie Worrell's grandfather devoured her childhood when she was 4 years old. But she remembers. She remembers bits and pieces of a youth hidden in the fog of her mind. A fog she created. Sometimes the mists break, and she sees through the cloud. She sees, and she writes. Words. Sentences. Phrases. They flow from her fingers, but they come from her soul. They come from her past, from when her grandfather stole her childhood and left her with deep, dark memories that will haunt her forever. "I remember talking to a cousin who was my same age about him touching us and not liking it, and I hadn't even been in kindergarten at that time," she said. "I remember being warned by a family member, by an aunt, that he was a dirty old man and to be careful." The warning wasn't enough. She remembers fondling. She remembers fearing. She remembers hating. In dreams. In nightmares. In therapy. The memories come back to her. But in a society that demands details — times, dates, places — she sees only glimpses through the fog. Not everything is shrouded in mist. Not everything is so distant. Adolescence is vivid. Concrete. Ten years old. Her mother's new boyfriend kisses her sexually, even in front of her grandmother. Junior high. Football players spy on her while she is changing in the locker room. Fifteen. A man exposes himself to her while she is walking alone just after dark. High school. Leslie moves in with her father to escape the chaos of her mother's home. But there is no escape from the trauma. Her classroom is filled with boys. Nothing but boys. Boys who make fun of her for having large breasts. She goes to the principal's office to change classes. "He brought me in, and he locked the door, and he said, 'I can rape you right here, and it will be your word against mine.' He said, 'I want to know if you've ever fucked anyone,' and I hadn't, and he

wouldn't believe that." The defense she has built up crumbles. Collapses. Falls. "Even though I was very outspoken about some things and appeared to be very rebellious, when an authority figure who was male locked me into a room and started out that way I was completely 5 years old." For three months, the story is her own. Secret. Silent. Alone. "I finally told another girl at school and come to find that it happened to nine other girls. "I went home and told my parents, and my stepmother said it wouldn't have happened if I wouldn't have worn tight sweaters."

**"You poured your anger and self-hate into me until I grew heavy and plodding. They thought I ate, but I was only pregnant with your experience your regret your bitterness you..."**

Leslie's self-worth plummets. Her vulnerability skyrockets. The assaults continue. Older men. Older men coming on to a younger woman. Older men grabbing her butt. "I was just a walking target for that sort of thing. I used to think there was something about me that was giving sexual vibes to old, fat men." College. A year at the University of Kansas. She loses it. Can't cope. So she seeks help. She leaves. She heads for Lincoln. There is no family in Lincoln, and that is all she asks. But she can't find an end to the pain. Nineteen. Drinking — drunk — with an older man. He assaults her. He gets angry because she doesn't like it. Sex, like her childhood, is distant. "I remember times just laying there and letting it happen. And it's not that I didn't say no. It's not what I really wanted to happen. I've had many times where I felt like I just laid there and did it to get it over with." It isn't rape, but it isn't enjoyable. She finds herself emotionally helpless. She strives for attention sexually. She wants power sexually. "But at the same time, I was heavy, and I felt intimidated by that. And at the same time I was afraid of being sexually attractive because I was scared I would lose control." Sex leads to feelings of confusion. Sex leads to feelings of disgust. Sex leads to therapy. "I started therapy because I was having relationships with older men, and I didn't necessarily even like them. And I couldn't figure out why I was doing it. And I just felt really gross. And I couldn't figure out why I was acting out sexually with the people that I was." Therapy is a good thing. Not an enjoyable process. A helpful one. But questions still go unanswered. The fog remains. The darkness of her childhood swirls around her. "I remember writing down, 'I hate my grandfather,' and then I erased it because I couldn't come up with an explanation." And then, he calls. Her grandfather. "He called me out of the blue at 8 o'clock one morning. I became hysterical. I hung up the phone. I just

couldn't talk to him. I was just hysterical because I thought he was going to come get me. Then I started dreaming, and then I started writing."

**"Some call them 'death' poems. Some say they are too grim and dark to be pleasurable. However, there are those that know. There are those that can feel the breath and life on these words. There are those that know each line is a labored attempt to take one more step when the terrain must be crossed — and feet and hearts are tired and none too trusting. There are those that will read my desire for what lies beyond limited human sight, and what can only be felt on the longest nights..."**

Journals, sentences, phrases. Nonsense on paper. The death poems came in a flood. A catharsis. A purging. "It feels like vomiting." The writing just happens. It is a compulsion. It can't be forced. It can't be controlled. The writing is personal. Sexual. Embarrassing. "I couldn't imagine what I was writing about. I just felt, 'This is so weird,' and 'I don't know where this came from,' but I was just writing all this stuff." The writing is filled with anger. Hate. Incest. Incest, incest, incest. "I felt very compelled to write it. It wasn't that I thought, 'I just need to write about this.'" The memories fill her pages and control her life. Afraid of the nightmares, she can't sleep when it is dark outside. Afraid of her grandfather, she can't lie on her stomach when she does fall asleep. "I didn't sleep on my stomach until I was in my early 20s, because I was afraid my grandfather was coming to get me. I could see him if I was lying on my back." Feeling the fear, she can't stop writing. But Leslie does not write to write well. She writes to help herself cope. To handle the dreams she can't control. To make it through the painful times. "I have a real thing about Christmas — and that's a time when we always spent time with my grandparents — the whole

absurdity of being in the midst of the celebration that's supposed to be geared toward humanity and this love for one another and me being scared and feeling gross and wanting to get out of there.

"I just have this fantasy about going back and ruining their Christmas celebration by talking about incest."

So she writes:  
**"WHO? (they'll cry) Who can enjoy the turkey with all these children chattering pass the grandpa stuffing (the) partridges in a (penis) bearing gifts of incest tinsel and a hundred bleeding (children) Christmas Cheer (s) for incest."**

She writes to be honest with the world. She writes to increase people's awareness. Most people don't think incest is their problem. They think it is a community problem. They think it happens in other families. Incest happens on Oprah. Donahue. Geraldo. Her writing happens to whoever reads it. Makes incest real. Makes it personal. "I did it to describe the event as best I could, to take it out of those objectified terms, to take it out of that distance. Some people find it really gross, or offensive, or dark or weird.

"But that's what incest is — offensive, dark, weird, morbid — and I can't paint it any better than that." Writing helps Leslie. She looks different. She feels different. "I'm ten times better than I was. I don't look like the same person at all." She summons the strength to write her grandfather a letter. She tells him how she feels. Sexually assaulted by him. Scared to death of him. She summons the courage to return her grandfather's call. The call that started it all. "His response was that he didn't hurt me, he loved me. "He said that that letter hurt him. And I said 'Well you hurt me,' and he said 'Then I guess we're even.'"

**"In the silence between your words I will call you In your slumber In your daily games of solitaire..."** "I wrote that poem when I was feeling very powerful, and it's very dark, and I laughed and laughed and laughed after writing it." Writing helps Leslie, and now she hopes she can help the community. "I lock my door. I lock my windows. We keep Mace, but I really know there is no place for me because

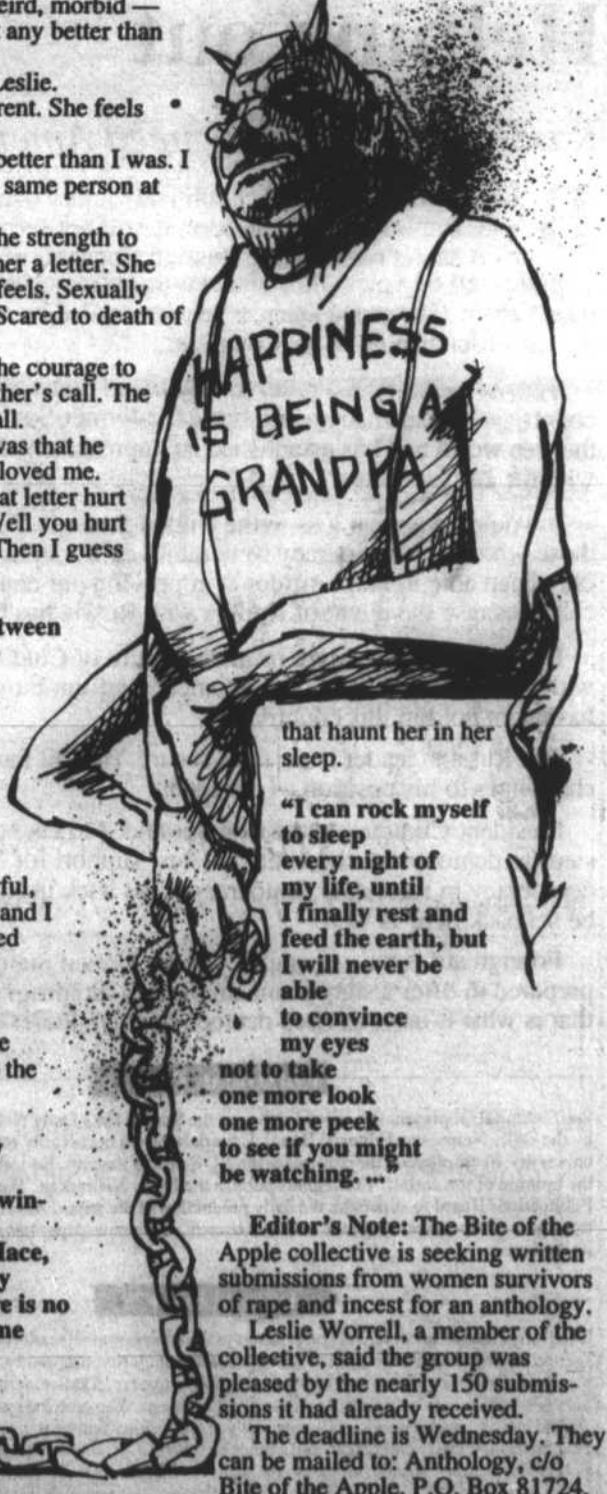
**I am a woman. I bleed. And I've learned that they like that."**

Ideas about sex — and incest — go beyond a person's perceptions. The roots lie deep in society. Some of those roots are poisoned. People learn from the world around them, and they are learning the wrong lessons. They are learning that rape is OK. That it isn't hurtful. They are taught that women who are raped really want sex. That they deserve it. "Where are they getting the messages? They're getting them from the media. They're getting them from how we've been raised and socialized to interact."

The poisons course through television and advertising. Women on TV are concerned about their Ogilvy home perms and finding the right vacuum cleaner. Leslie is not. "I'm really concerned about my reproductive rights and the next president and things like that." She is worried about the lessons violence and sex on television teach people. "That's a cultural problem. That's not a psychological problem. People get desensitized to rape. They get desensitized to violence when they see it constantly." Leslie is working on the future — with juveniles who have been sexually assaulted and other survivors of incest — but she can never escape the past. And remembering is never easy. "It's really hard for me to look back because I have a tendency to want to completely disassociate that I was ever a child. I don't own anything from my childhood." Nothing besides a pair of bronze baby shoes, yellowing pictures and memories

that haunt her in her sleep. "I can rock myself to sleep every night of my life, until I finally rest and feed the earth, but I will never be able to convince my eyes not to take one more look one more peek to see if you might be watching..."

**Editor's Note:** The Bite of the Apple collective is seeking written submissions from women survivors of rape and incest for an anthology. Leslie Worrell, a member of the collective, said the group was pleased by the nearly 150 submissions it had already received. The deadline is Wednesday. They can be mailed to: Anthology, c/o Bite of the Apple, P.O. Box 81724, Lincoln, NE., 68501-1724.



David Badders/DN