



Mexico, 1977

"My stepfather, Lane, my brother Luke, my sister Audrey, my mom and me at our house. I still have dreams where I scream at her to leave him."

Q how do you SURVIVE A HOME FROM HELL?

A: You run, literally. Ruth Wariner was raised in horrifying poverty in a polygamous colony in Mexico. Abused by her stepfather, she made a desperate break for freedom when she was 15, a harrowing story she relives in her new memoir, *The Sound of Gravel*. In this exclusive interview, Ruth reveals why she couldn't stop fighting until she and her siblings were safe

Q: Your father died when you were an infant, and your mother became the second wife of another man in Colonia LeBaron, Mexico. What was day-to-day life there like?

A: We were poor even for Mexico, because my stepdad, Lane, couldn't get organized to work a job that paid the bills. We lived on welfare through my mom, since as his second [non-legal] wife, she was technically a single mother. Our house was ramshackle, and scorpions crawled through the walls. No indoor plumbing—not even a kitchen sink—or electricity for years, and my mother was pregnant or recovering from pregnancy most of the time. I shared a bed with my older sister, Audrey, who I later realized was severely disabled. We shook mouse droppings out of our clothes.

Q: When you were 6, your stepfather beat your mother with a belt for questioning his authority. Was that the first sign of trouble?

A: I had always been frightened of Lane and his temper. He smacked us over the head and threatened to whip my siblings and me all the time. I learned early to behave when he was around. I felt powerless and helpless, and I thought kids were supposed to feel that way. Children didn't have a lot of rights, and girls especially didn't have a voice. Beatings were common →

1965

"My mother and father on their wedding day. She was 17; Joel was 42. He was the prophet of LeBaron. She was his fifth wife, and I was his 39th child."



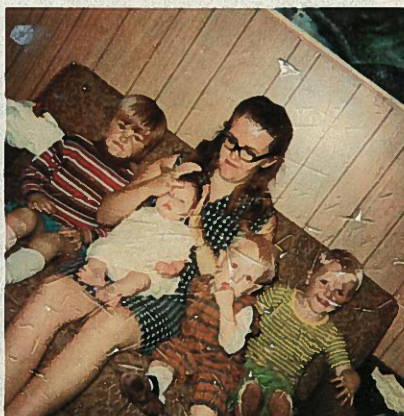
1967

"My father also led another colony in Baja, where this photo was taken. Everybody makes him into a Jesus-like character, but I have my doubts about that."



1972

"This photo was taken not long after my father was murdered on his brother's orders during a power struggle over church leadership. I'm the baby."



1975

"That's my stepfather, Lane, and my mother on their wedding day. She was his second wife, and he later took two more. She had six children with him."



in LeBaron back then—when women complained or misbehaved, their husbands were expected to discipline them to get them back in line. After that night...I realized we were all unsafe with the beast that was the head of our family.

Q: When did you start to realize that not all families were like yours?

A: I had a strong relationship with my grandparents in California...we would move back and forth between Mexico and the States [to maintain welfare benefits], and we lived with them for a while. I noticed that people outside the religion were really nice and seemed to have a happy family life...which I didn't have.

Q: How old were you when your stepfather began sexually abusing you?

A: I was 8, and I told my mom the first time it happened. Lane apologized and promised never to do it again, and she told me to forgive him, but he didn't stop. It was about a year and a half before I told my mom again. I had been too ashamed, and my mom always looked so tired and miserable that I didn't want to hurt her. I finally did tell her [again] when I found out he was abusing two of my other relatives, too. I was 10 or so at that point.

Q: Why do you think your mom didn't do anything to stop it?

A: Powerlessness. She couldn't protect me because she couldn't protect herself.

Q: How did other people in LeBaron react when they found out?

A: Many defended him, although there was eventually a tribunal and he was kicked out, then let back in. Lane's family is still angry with me, like I did something wrong. But you know, in my experience, people tended to turn a blind eye to sexual abuse, because men were seen as superior.

Q: Have you been able to forgive your mother?

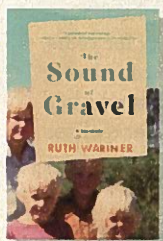
A: Honestly, I'm still angry with her sometimes. There's a part of me that doesn't get it and I don't think ever will—why would my mom stay with him? Why would anyone ever excuse that kind of behavior? But writing about my mother and realizing her lack of belief in herself...I realized that I had inherited some of the same problems. I learned to deal with those things in myself, and I learned to forgive them in her. And I feel like she ultimately paid the price.

Q: You were taken out of school at 14 to look after your younger siblings. What was that like?

A: I was relieved. There was a new baby in the family at least every 18 months, so I'd missed a lot of school helping my mother. I was always behind. It was worse than cleaning diapers and babysitting.

Q: How did you get through the abuse and deprivation on a daily basis as a child?

A: I kind of escaped into my own mind. I spent a lot of time daydreaming...but I didn't dream beyond LeBaron until I left there.



SOUL SURVIVOR

"Writing the book was part of my forgiveness process," says Ruth. "There were happy times there, too."

Flatiron Books, \$28

1980

"I was 8 the year Lane started abusing me. It continued until I was about 13."

1981

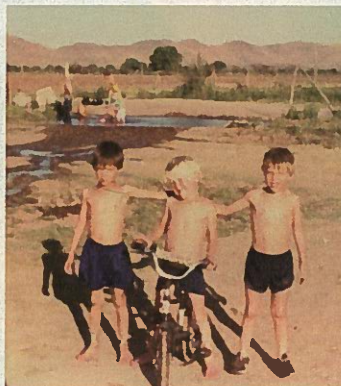
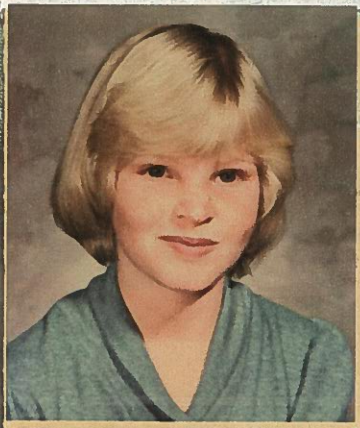
"Mom had left Lane after he beat her and moved us to California to live near our grandparents. We had a fun, loving home until she let him back in."

1987

"Alex, Micah and Junior were all Lane's sons, and Micah was my brother, too. This is the week our world ended in tragedy. I blame Lane for what happened."

1989

"Christmas at my grandmother's two years after we ran from LeBaron. I'm on the far left. We weren't afraid anymore."



Q: What finally pushed you to run?

A: After my mom was gone, I had an instinct to bolt. My mom's house was in such bad shape, and there was no way in hell I would live there under [my stepfather's] authority. For a while, one wife would take us in here, another would take us in there. And then I realized that another of my relatives was being abused by Lane.

Q: How did you get out?

A: One of Lane's wives was trying to break away, too, and agreed to help us. She called my grandmother from the general store—most of us didn't have our own phones. My brothers Matt and Aaron were already living in California, and Matt drove down to get me, my brother Luke and my younger sisters Leah, Elena and Holly. [Audrey was under care elsewhere in the U.S.] The night we left, we were all frightened that Lane or one of his relatives would catch us—people from LeBaron drove between there and the border all the time. I had to make sure the kids kept their heads down so no one would see them. We stayed with Matt at first, but a week later, Lane showed up. We moved to my grandmother's, and she and an aunt became our legal guardians.

Q: How was it adjusting to your life outside of the colony?

A: I started school again, and it was hard. I didn't know anybody and was incredibly lonely.

My sisters weren't even in school yet, and Holly was just a baby. I got my GED, and at 19, I took over raising them. [Luke, who has special needs, lived with an aunt and uncle.] I worked in the office of a wrecking yard for \$6.75 an hour. I wasn't thinking, *I'll be something*. It was just *We need to survive and stay together*. When I was 21, I realized I didn't want to be poor and started taking classes at a community college and later got my graduate degree. I was 29 when I started teaching.

Q: Do you ever go back to LeBaron?

A: I've been there three times and don't plan to go again. It's traumatic for me.

Q: How are you doing today?

A: It took years of counseling for me to realize that I mattered. I had a tremendous amount of resilience, but I hadn't learned to take care of myself. I'm so grateful for my education, because it taught me to question what I wanted. When I left Colonia LeBaron, I had no idea I could recreate my life the way I have. I found purpose taking care of my family. ♦



2009

"My wedding day with sisters Holly, Elena and Leah. I felt settled, like I was crossing into a new phase where I wasn't going to have to take care of everything alone anymore."