



Episode 60: Home for Me Is Really a Memory
Air Date: June 9, 2021

Robin McCarthy: My name is Robin McCarthy and I am an *Ear Hustle* listener. This episode of *Ear Hustle* may contain content that's not appropriate for all. Listener discretion is advised.

[transition comes in – abstracted sounds and tones, including an automated voice heard on phone calls from San Quentin State Prison]

Leslie: [over the phone] ... Actually, a portrait from my shoulders up. One of those posed pictures... and I'm maybe like two. And I have very bright eyes, and I have a nice smile. And it's really reminding me of how much love I felt at that time. My favorite thing was to ride on Dad's shoulders when we would go somewhere. Every year we'd go, after the Rose Parade, to where the floats were... where I would always get on his shoulders above everything and see all this scenery. And this picture reminds me of that. There's real contentment in my face. Of course, I wish for her a different life, the young person. I'm trying not to cry. It's a... good thing to hurt this way. [laughs]

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: This is Leslie. She's in her seventies, and in prison at the California Institution for Women in Southern California.

Earlonne Woods: I had first emailed Leslie in January to see if she'd be willing to talk to us. She wrote back and said she would, although she admitted she didn't know quite what a podcast was.

[to Leslie, speaking over the phone]

Earlonne: Yes, how you doing? This is Earlonne. And I'm gonna introduce you to Nigel Poor. Nigel Poor, that's Leslie. Leslie, Nigel.

Nigel: Hey Leslie. Leslie, nice to meet you.

Leslie: Yes. Oh! Hi! Nice to meet you too! I'm pretty nervous. And um...

Earlonne: Don't be!

Leslie: So, do you wanna to talk first?

[music comes in]

[to Earlonne]

Nigel: Oh my God Earlonne, I was nervous too. [Earlonne chuckles] You know I have phone phobia, right?

Earlonne: Yes.

Nigel: This was not easy for me. My hands were sweating.

Earlonne: No... definitely.

[as narrator]

Leslie is different than a lot of people we've talked to on this show. [Nigel affirms] For one thing, she's been in prison a *really* long time.

Nigel: Oh yeah. Over fifty years. And Earlonne, we have never talked to anyone on the show who's been in prison that long now.

Earlonne: Nyge, that's longer than I've been alive.

Nigel: Yeah. I mean, think about it – when she first went to prison, Nixon was president. Do you even remember who Nixon was?

Earlonne: All I know is two fingers...

Nigel: Exactly [laughs]

Earlonne: And a criminal.

Nigel: Leslie's been in prison through *ten* different presidents. And Earlonne, that is a long freaking time.

[music fades out]

Earlonne: After that first call, we got into a routine. For five months, she'd call us several times a week. Close to fifty phone calls! Each just fifteen prison minutes long.

Nigel: It was interesting scheduling her. Monday, Wednesday, Friday – we always had to make sure that we were near a phone, because there was no way we were gonna miss a call.

Earlonne: Nah. And she was very punctual.

Nigel: [amused] Early, I would say! [music comes in]

Earlonne: We wanted to talk to her because we wanted to know what it's like to spend that much time.... all of your adult life, in prison.

Nigel: So today on *Ear Hustle*... Leslie's story: Trying to build a meaningful life behind bars.

Earlonne: I'm Earlonne Woods.

Nigel: And I'm Nigel Poor. This is *Ear Hustle* from PRX's Radiotopia.

[theme comes in, then fades out in silence]

Nigel: Growing up, Leslie had a kind of picture book early '60s childhood. She lived in the Southern California, in the suburbs. It was all sun and fun. They had a pool. It just sounds like something out of a TV show, really.

Earlone: Right. Her family was close. They were liberal, folk-music types. Into music like... I don't know Nigel, like what? [Nigel chuckles]

Nigel: Oh, like, The Weavers, Pete Seeger... you know, like, [singing] *If I had a hammer....* [Pete Seeger's "If I Had a Hammer (The Hammer Song)" comes in] [Earlone chuckles]

[speaking on the phone]

Leslie: And then would go to things that were called "hootenannies" [chuckles]... where everybody would go and sing along with everybody... [crosstalk]

Nigel: [crosstalk] Oh really? [chuckles]

Leslie: Have you ever heard of those?

Nigel: Yeah, of course. [laughs]

Earlone: No!

Leslie: Where a bunch of people go, and everybody would sing and clap their hands.

Nigel: Sorry, Leslie, you know we're gonna ask you to sing something for us now...

Leslie: Oh, God. [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: Can you...?

Leslie: [signing] *Daylight come and me wanna go home... Day-o... something.... Daaaay-o!*

You know that one?

Nigel: Oh, totally!

Earlonne: Yeah, see, I know that one.

Leslie: You know that song?

Earlonne: No, just that little part you said, [singing] *Daylight come and you wanna come home...* [sings tune]

Leslie: Yeah! And then you scream out 'Day-o!' Yeah. Then you go, [singing] *Day-o!* [laughs]

Earlonne: [singing] *Day-o!*

Yep.

Leslie: And make it really loud.

[as narrator]

Earlonne: When Leslie was a little kid, she had this fear that would keep her up at night. [music comes in] I mean, all kids have something, right?

Nigel: Oh, totally.

Earlonne: Leslie's fear was that one day she'd just be snatched up and taken away from her family by some strange man.

Nigel: Like, *Boogeyman*. Right out of a movie.

[speaking on the phone]

Leslie: When I would walk down the street at night, and our streets were suburban, so they were pretty empty... but I would run full speed to my parents. One time on this one street when I was walking back to our house, I'd go pick up their milk bottles. There was a small dairy down there, and this guy stopped me and asked me where... he said, 'Where's Tuck Road?' And I stood on the side, and I yelled to him. And he said, 'Come a little closer. I can't hear you.' So I dropped the bottles and I took off full speed. So maybe it came from that...

Nigel: Wow. Yeah.

Leslie: ... the fear I had just escaped.

[music comes in]

[as narrator]

Earlonne: Leslie did well in school. She had a lot of friends, and she was elected homecoming princess... twice.

Nigel: But when she was fourteen, her parents got divorced. Leslie started rebelling. She started doing drugs – first weed, and then she got into LSD.

Earlonne: When she was seventeen years old, she got pregnant. Her mom insisted she have an abortion.

[music fades out]

[speaking on the phone]

Leslie: I was determined not to. And they were illegal in those days, but I turned against her very strongly after the abortion. [Nigel affirms] She was not aware of how much damage it had done to me. That's really a painful time for me.

[as narrator]

Earlonne: People have to remember, abortions were illegal. So it's not like you went to a clinic or a hospital.

Nigel: No. It had to be arranged secretly. And there was so much stigma around it.

[to Leslie, over the phone]

Do you ever think about how different things would be if you hadn't had that abortion?

Leslie: Um... I used to. [Nigel affirms] I used to. Every now and then I do, but it's so far away from what life ended up being. And that was what really led me in a different direction. It just kept leading down a path I couldn't see. [Nigel affirms]

I called mom and I said I was dropping out. She wouldn't hear from me again. And I was going to just go away.

[as narrator]

Earlonne: Leslie stopped going to school and started hitchhiking around California.

Nigel: In the Summer of 1968, she was crashing with friends in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood in San Francisco. [music comes in] A friend invited her to take a pilgrimage to meet her guru, on a ranch north of L.A. That guru was Charles Manson.

Earlonne: Three weeks later, Leslie moved to Spahn Ranch to join Manson and his followers.

Nigel: As Leslie tells it, this is the period of her life when she completely lost touch with her old self, her relationships with her family, *any* vestige of the person she used to be.

[music fades out]

[speaking on the phone]

Leslie: Everything that I had been taught was being represented in the opposite. [Nigel affirms] Which for me at the time, because of my feeling that Mom had totally turned on me... [Nigel affirms] I was very receptive to letting go of the institutions that we were raised on. That make us civilized. And at that time, I only cared about acceptance in the group. [Nigel affirms] And acceptance by him. And I just surrendered. So when he was talking and carrying on, I believed him. I felt that I was welcomed and I fit in. [Nigel affirms]

I think that in certain points in people's lives, they can be susceptible... to undue influence. [Nigel affirms]

Leslie: And you know, it really hit me that I didn't have an older person I was confident enough... [Automated voice cuts off Leslie and says, "You have sixty seconds remaining."]

Oh, my God.

Nigel: Wow, this goes so fast.

Leslie: ... that I was confident enough then to talk to. That really hit me. [pauses]
... Are you there?

Nigel: Yep, yep.

Earlonne: Yeah. We're here.

[pause]

Nigel: Ugh. Did we lose her?

Earlonne: Hello? Yes... we lost her.

[music comes in]

Nigel: In August of 1969, Manson and his followers committed seven murders over two nights. They killed complete strangers, basically at random.

Earlonne: The first night they went to the home of the actress Sharon Tate. The second night, they killed Rosemary and Leno LaBianca at their home.

Nigel: Leslie wasn't there the night of the Tate murders. She was back at the ranch.

Earlonne: But she was among the people Manson picked to go on the second night.

Nigel: Another member of the group stabbed Rosemary LaBianca to death. But Manson's instructions were for everyone to take part. Leslie was told to stab the body. Which she did. Multiple times.

[music fades out]

Nigel: Earlonne

Earlonne: Hmm?

Nigel: This murder was a *huge* part of my childhood. I can't express enough how much this was in the news when I was growing up. And it seared itself into my brain. I was actually really afraid of these women and of Manson.

Earlonne: Mm. I was born in '71, so I seen the movies later – that's how I knew about it, yeah.

Nigel: Yeah, well that was the thing. There was a book about it, there was a movie about... you just couldn't get away from it. I mean, it was in the news for years.

[as narrator]

Earlonne: Leslie was arrested at the end of 1969.

Nigel: She was tried along with two other women who together became known as “The Manson Girls”. In 1971 all three were sentenced to death.

[to Leslie, speaking over the phone]

How would you describe who you were then?

Leslie: I was a very weak individual. I had no independent thoughts, and when I did, I criticized them because that meant I wasn't completely loyal to the group... and to him. [Nigel affirms] I was also torn. And... [hesitates] afraid of facing what I had done. It's not like I didn't remember the crime, but as I sobered up and understood... and began to understand, 'cause it it's a lifelong process, really, finding ways to live with taking someone's life, I remember I would start to have more sober flashbacks. And I was afraid of being overwhelmed by them. And I remember the psychiatrist at the time telling me that your mind gives you what you can handle. [Nigel affirms] And just start letting it come.

Nigel: I don't want to ask you for details, but can you just broadly say what was coming up in your mind that was hard to think about?

Leslie: Um... the house. The murders.

Nigel: Mm. OK.

Leslie: You know.

Nigel: Yeah.

[as narrator]

Earlonne: A year after Leslie was sentenced to death row, there was a big shift. The Supreme Court of California actually abolished the death penalty.

Nigel: Of course, it didn't last. It was reinstated just one year after that.

Earlonne: But during the period that executions were outlawed, a bunch of people on death row had their sentences changed... including Charles Manson, Leslie, and the other Manson Girls.

Nigel: They became "lifers."

Leslie: The real change came when the death penalty was abolished. Because that hadn't been part of what Manson had talked about. I think it was easier to not deal with what I had done. And when the court abolished it, then it was: *Ooh, I'm going to have to live with what I have done.*

Nigel: It sounds like what you're saying is that you felt death row made you feel accountable, and you could accept it. But when you got off death row, it opened up this whole other life that you weren't sure you should have – or weren't sure how to deal with? Is that what you're saying?

Leslie: I was relieved [Nigel affirms] that it was abolished, [Nigel affirms] but I also knew that abolishing the death penalty gave me a huge responsibility...

Nigel: Mm. OK.

Leslie: ...to atone. [Nigel affirms] To learn to live with what I had done. And a lifetime of living with the murders.

[as narrator]

Nigel: After this phone call, we got an email from Leslie. [reading]

Somewhere inside of me I realized that I would have to answer for the murders of Mr. & Mrs. LaBianca. I would have to answer for my disrespect of the judicial system, and answer for the fear society felt because of me. At the same time, I felt I was given an opportunity to create a new life where I would do my best to not harm people and be as good of a human being as I could. It would be the beginning of amending for all the harm I had caused.

[music comes in]

Nigel: Eventually, Manson's crimes started to fade from the headlines.

And Earlonne, to me, *this* is the part of Leslie's life that I really wanted to focus on. I was just so curious about how you rebuild a life knowing that it is probably going to take place entirely behind bars? Like, who do you become? How do you deal with the guilt? [Earlonne affirms] And how do you get yourself back?

Earlonne: Right.

Leslie spent the first four years of her prison sentence basically in isolation. She and the two other Manson girls she was in prison with were kept away from the general population.

Nigel: Leslie says what she remembers from this time is a feeling of like a void.

Leslie: If someone would say to me, 'What's your favorite color?' [Nigel affirms] I didn't have that.

Nigel: Mm.

'What's your favorite this or the other? I didn't have that. I became anorexic. And I didn't even really know that that's what I was doing, but I lost this tremendous amount of weight. I was down to 98 pounds.

Nigel: Oh, wow.

Leslie: And I weigh 145 pounds, so, the administration and the medical department were going to start taking action if I didn't eat more. And I think it was just depriving myself, you know? Anyway... it was rough.

[music comes in]

[as narrator]

Earlonne: Meanwhile, a small group of people around Leslie was trying to help her return to the person she'd been before she met Charles Manson.

Leslie: It was the effort of a lot of people like the associate warden, my mom and dad, the officers. When I would get my one hour of yard, I would sit and talk with the officer. He would talk about life. [Nigel affirms] A life that involved car payments and things like that to regather me into the day-to-day world that people lived. [music fades out] He helped ground me. It probably today would be considered inappropriate, but I think at the time, it was a group of administrators and other people that just wanted to really focus on helping me get my mind back.

[music comes in]

[as narrator]

Earlonne: Leslie's mom came to visit, and the two of them started really talking again.

Nigel: And Leslie's mom came up with this really good idea. She started bringing in boxes of family photos for Leslie to look through.

Earlonne: Yep. Ones from growing up, like she was telling us about before.

Nigel: Right. And they were these really simple reminders of reality. A reality that was very different from the twisted one she'd been living in.

[music fades out]

Leslie: I noticed that I lived my whole life by saying, 'Well, this was before him. This is during him, and this was after him.' And I was fragmented. [Nigel affirms] I didn't want to live my life like that. I wanted *my* life.

It was a really slow process. It took close to three years.

Nigel: Oh...

Leslie: And I didn't even know that my mind was really moving away from all of Manson's rhetoric and his philosophy and all.

[as narrator]

Earlonne: Eventually, Leslie found she'd gotten so far away from the whole Manson way of thinking that when she heard people talking about that stuff, it was like another language.

Leslie: And at some point, two of the people that had lived in the group came to the isolation unit. And they started talking all of the language that was used at the ranch. And I don't know it anymore. I can't remember it. And I'm glad for that.

Nigel: Yeah.

Leslie: They started kind of spewing all this stuff. I was listening to them, and I realized: *Oh man, I'm nothing like you. I'm not into your philosophies, your words.* And at that point I knew that I no longer had the thinking [Nigel affirms] that I had come to prison with... [automated voice interrupts call and states, 'You have sixty seconds remaining'] ... Oh!

Nigel: Leslie, we'll send you questions for Wednesday.

Leslie: OK.

Nigel: Is that good?

Leslie: [indistinguishable] Yeah.

Nigel: Great to talk to you.

Leslie: Yeah, you guys too. This was really tough. [Nigel affirms] I'm having compassion for who I was... and it gets to me. Well, it is... it's been a real rough go.

Nigel: Mm.

[music comes in]

Leslie: Self-forgiveness. [Nigel affirms]

[no response from Leslie]

Nigel: Did we lose her?

[as narrator]

Five years into her sentence, Leslie was transferred to the mainline of CIW. Her world totally changed.

Earlonne: She went from this very quiet, isolated environment, to all the noise and energy of a prison yard.

Nigel: And you know that's chaos.

Earlonne: All day. All day long

[music fades out]

Leslie: I was very nervous when I first came to the main yard.

Nigel: What were you nervous about?

Leslie: How the people would accept me. How the women would accept me. We were told, I don't know if it's true or not, but we were told that the other women in the prison didn't want us in the main yard.

Nigel: Mm.

Leslie: I remember when I turned the corner and saw the yard, how full of life it was... the main yard just looked like a lot of a lot of freedom. And it was huge. And it was a little scary. I would dread going to the dining room. [music comes in]

Nigel: Why did you dread it so much?

Leslie: Because of the huge amount of curiosity, and being stared at... and the discomfort. I had a couple friends who really made a point of me walking in alone. It was important to them that I go and just sit at a table. They felt that the message would be that I am not hiding.

Nigel: *Oof*

Leslie: That I am there.

[music fades out]

OK. I better get off it's over my time.

[automated voice comes in and states, 'You have sixty seconds remaining']

I'll speak to you on Monday.

Nigel: Definitely.

Leslie: OK

Earlonne: Bye-Bye.

Nigel: Bye!

Leslie: Bye-bye.

[music comes in, indicating scene switch to a new day]

[over the phone]

Nigel: Hello?

[automated voice comes in and says, 'This is Global Tel Link, you have a prepaid call from... *Leslie* (spoken by Leslie) an inmate at California Institute'...]

[as narrator]

Earlonne: So, Leslie was there – on the mainline, where there was more freedom.

Nigel: But it also meant she had to face the full reality of spending the rest of her life in prison.

Leslie: My mom, she's a very loving person, but she also was very clear on what I was facing for the rest of my life. And at one point when I began to try to find ways to make myself a victim, she was very clear: 'You put yourself here and you're going to need to figure out how you're going to live with it.' From the very beginning, she was a power force to help me figure out how to do a life sentence... [crosstalk]

Nigel: [crosstalk] How–

Leslie: She did it with love. [Nigel affirms] She did it with caring, but making sure I found ways to live with what my life was becoming... which was prison for a really, really, really long time.

[music comes in]

Earlone: Education became really important to Leslie. She got a bachelor's degree, and master's. And she started teaching other incarcerated people, becoming a mentor to many of them.

Nigel: And beyond her education, she also really got into what she calls "hand work" – making clothes, doing fine bead work, watercolors, all kinds of creative stuff. I mean, she was engaged all round.

Earlone: And all the while, she stayed in touch with lawyers who were working on her case. And then, in 1978, Leslie got some good news.

[transition comes in – abstracted industrial sound collage, including an automated voice that says, 'Say or dial 5 now']

[to Nigel]

Here's Leslie. Hold on.

Nigel: OK.

[beep, beep as number is dialed followed by an automated voice that says, 'Thank you for using Global Tel Link']

Leslie: Hello!

Earlone: Hello

Nigel: Hi Leslie, hello!

Leslie: Well, how are you guys?

Earlone: We are well. And I'm just a little stiff, but I'm okay.

Nigel: He's been roller skating like crazy. [crosstalk]

Leslie: [crosstalk] You must really like roller-skating. [everyone laughs]

Nigel: Yes.

[music comes in]

[as narrator]

Earlone: In her emails to us, Leslie would give us these little glimpses into what her day-to-day life in prison was like – and how these phone calls were affecting her.

Nigel: Oh yeah Earlone, I was always so excited when you told me there was an email from her.

Earlone: Like, here's one we got from her this one time...

Nigel: [reading]

You know what I would like to be doing? You know those little boats you tootle along with your feet on pedals? They're usually in small bodies of water like Echo Park. Yep – me and the ducks keeping each other company.

Earlone: And another time, she wrote, [reading]

Speaking with you guys has really given me back some spunk. I was starting to slump a bit.

Nigel: [reading]

Went to a farewell gathering this afternoon. Did a little dancing. It was fun. I always break into the old school. I really like the two-step where you do a lot of side-by-side spins, like the swing. But everybody that can do that is in a walker now.

Earlone: [reading]

Every time I hang up, I remember something or a story to tell. There was an event during the time we could wear our own clothes when Teddy Pendergrass was coming to perform for the women in the auditorium. I was on closed custody so I couldn't go out at night. I sat in the dayroom and watched the women walk by as they went to the concert. I couldn't believe it. It was like they were going to the Academy Awards... formal with spike heels and all.

[music fades out]

Nigel: I remember after one of those emails, we had a phone conversation where you told her you'd been picking up roller-skating again. And Earlonne, of course, I wanted in.

Earlonne: C'mon!

[to Leslie, over the phone]

Nigel finna get her some roller skates. [Nigel laughs] I seen her little flower [Leslie affirms] ... you know, she got some little flower designs she tryna get. [Leslie laughs]

Nigel: So maybe someday the three of us can go roller skating together.

Leslie: Oh man, I'm gonna have to have a lot of pads, geez. [Earlonne and Nigel laugh] One fall and I'm Humpty Dumpty.

Nigel: We'll hold you between us. [laughs]

Earlonne: We'll bubble-wrap you up. [Leslie laughs]

[music comes in]

Nigel: Well, I saw a video of Earlonne skating. He's actually pretty good.

Earlonne: Naw, it- Look... [crosstalk]

Leslie: [crosstalk] I bet.

Earlonne: See, the problem with me is I'm a daredevil, right?

Leslie: Right.

Earlonne: And I'm not that young... I don't have that young body no more that can take that abuse.

Leslie: Looks like you're about thirty... in your thirties.

Earlonne: I'll be fifty in August.

Leslie: Fifty?

Earlonne: Yeah.

Leslie: Wow!

Earlonne: I'll be fifty in August. So, you know.

Leslie: Wow!

Earlonne: But I act like I'm out here twenty-two. 'Cause I got a theory though. I got a theory. And the theory is... I spent twenty-seven years in prison, so if you minus twenty-seven from fifty, you probably gonna have twenty-three. So I have twenty-three street years. So I'm only gonna be twenty-three. When Leslie get out, she's gonna be twenty-one. [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: Twenty-one. [laughing] OK, but Leslie, let me just... [crosstalk]

Leslie: [crosstalk] Yeah, yeah. In bubble wrap

[music fades out]

[to Earlonne]

Nigel: Earlonne, I love those chitchat days where we didn't have an agenda. Where we could just...

Earlonne: Just chop it up, talk about whatever, listen to her, telling us about what she likes, what she enjoys. It was cool.

Nigel: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, 'cause when we started this, I couldn't imagine how we were going to do a complete story over the phone. We're usually we're sitting across from somebody. And you develop a connection really quickly. But over the phone, obviously it takes a while to break through that – the way you're constantly interrupting each other, and that voice coming in all the time. It's frigging awkward.

Earlonne: Yep. And each one of those calls was like only fifteen minutes. [Nigel affirms] So as soon as she accepts and you get to talking, you on a timer. And you got to get past the, *Hey, how are you doing-s*. You know what I'm saying?

Nigel: Oh, I know. And there were so many things we needed to ask her about. Including, the six months she spent as a free woman in 1978.

Earlonne: After seven years in prison, Leslie's appeal lawyer finally scored a victory. Her conviction was vacated on grounds that she had received ineffective legal counsel in her first trial.

[music comes in]

Nigel: Leslie knew her next trial would likely send her back to prison. But for a short time at least, she was out on bail.

[to Leslie, over the phone]

What did what was it like to have that freedom for six months? I mean, it seems like it would be a blessing, and then also like a curse because you had to go back.

Leslie: Mm... it was it was wonderful. I remember going out on a pier and smelling, you know, the life... of the... um... I don't know what they're called...

Earlonne: Mussels? Oysters?

Leslie: Oysters, maybe... Mussels! Mussels. [Nigel affirms] Feeling the ocean. Everything was so alive...

I pretty much knew that it wasn't going to be permanent. So I really held on to as much as I could. I knew that I would be going back to prison. [music fades out]

Earlonne: What was the best part of being out?

Leslie: Oh. I think the best part was holding and hugging my relatives. And I was equally aware of the fact that I had made it where the LaBianca children would not be able to do that. So everything was kind of bittersweet.

Nigel: Mm. Yeah.

Leslie: I always was very aware of what they were not able to do. [music comes in] And I think my family was too. [Nigel affirms]

[as narrator]

Nigel: In July of 1978, at the retrial, Leslie was found guilty of two counts of first-degree felony murder and sent back to prison where she's been ever since.

Earlonne: Four years later, Leslie came up for parole. She was denied.

Nigel: The board cited the seriousness of the murders and told her she still lacked insight into the crime itself.

Earlonne: Three years after that, she came up for parole again. And was denied. The board denied her again in 1986, and '87, *and* '89.

Nigel: In all, she's been denied parole sixteen times. E, it's weird; I've met so many guys in San Quentin who've served less time for murder. In fact, some of them have been on our show.

Earlonne: Yep. We've talked to a guy who served nineteen years for double murder. Another did thirty-one years. Another got out after thirty. But Leslie, has been in for *fifty* years.

Nigel: Yeah. The notoriety of Leslie's crime puts her in a whole different category.

[speaking over the phone]

Leslie: All the other lifers that were doing the time I had done were leaving, and I was staying. I had determined that I was just going to spend the rest of my life in prison. And I understood that I needed to make that a good life. [Nigel affirms] Because people that live their lives to win the lottery and they never do, only half lived. So I determined that I was going to have to find a way to have a full life here.

Nigel: Yeah.

Leslie: You know?

Earlonne: Right.

[as narrator]

Nigel: Leslie followed up in an email. [reading]

I worry sometimes that I am institutionalized, but I don't think so. I think I am someone who turns lemons into lemonade. It is how I survive. If I spend too long on what these years have been, it breaks my heart. If I keep moving forward it's easier to deal with. I am so fortunate that I still have a kind heart and I am not consumed by anger. It keeps me alive.

Leslie: How do I have a full life if it's here? How do I, at the end of my day, say, *This ended up being a good life...* regardless of where it is, right?

Nigel: Yep.

Earlonne: Right.

Leslie: And I'm at CIW and we have grass when it's not a drought. We have trees. We have flowers. We have beauty around us, like, birds, all different kinds, like the geese fly overhead on their way to the reservoir not far from here. There's so much. Mountains, we have mountain ranges. So I focused on those things. Being incarcerated is, if you use it right, is a lifetime of introspection. [Nigel affirms] It's a different kind of life. But it's certainly one that is a life.

One thing that I was able to see that I hadn't really thought about before is how my guilt - in a healthy way - that my guilt overlays everything that I do in my life. I measure it - *How will this affect the LaBianca family?* [Nigel affirms] You know what I mean?

Nigel: Yeah.

Leslie: I thought of it with Mom. [Nigel affirms] I always remembered that Mrs. LaBianca's children did not have her.

Nigel: Yeah, yeah. I hear you. It comes up a lot when we talk.

Leslie: Yeah. Yeah. It's always there. It's very humbling to have participated in something so horrible. [Nigel affirms]

One of the things that has always been hard is when people say, 'Oh, are you one of them?' [chuckles] It's like, Oh god. One of *them*. That's been a real common thing to have happen. Back in the '70s and '80s, I didn't know how to handle it. I became embarrassed and ashamed... very self-conscious. Now I just tell people, 'Oh, I don't talk about that. That was fifty years ago.' And I don't so there with people.

[as narrator]

Nigel: The first wave of obsession with Charles Manson had faded in the '70s. But it never totally went away.

Earlonne: And in the early '90s, it started to reemerge.

Nigel: A few bands had put songs of his on their albums, and kids were wearing t-shirts with his face on it.

Leslie: One of the major networks was wanting to do an interview. And at first, I was really hesitant because I didn't want to cause more pain to the relatives of Mr. and Mrs. LaBianca. [Nigel affirms] But when I realized that people were actually kind of redefining who he was, I felt that I really wanted to talk about who he was and his abuses. And what he really represented.

[music comes in]

I guess somehow he found out that I was considering, and he somehow managed to get in a letter through the prison system. He was threatening me and being very abusive if I did this. And when I realized that he really didn't want me to do it, then I thought: *No, I need to go ahead and do this and say it.*

Nigel: Wow.

Leslie: So then that happened. But when I knew it was something he really didn't want, then I knew I needed to do it.

Nigel: How did it feel when you got a letter from him?

Leslie: It was really awful... and creepy. And I believe I turned it over to the investigators in the prison. [Nigel affirms] I wasn't gonna... it wasn't okay, you know.

Nigel: No [meant as an affirmation to Leslie's statement]

Leslie: And it wasn't okay that made it through the system. And to me...

Nigel: It just reminds me of when someone's in an abusive relationship and a person shows up at their house, it's such an invasion. Like something you thought you got away from. [Leslie affirms]

Nigel: Leslie, why do you think people were continually intrigued with him?

Leslie: I don't know. I don't know. [Nigel affirms] I can't answer that. I don't know.

Earlonne: How did you learn that Manson had died?

Leslie: A friend of mine actually came and told me. I guess it was on the morning news or something. But anyway, she's the one that told me she heard had died.

Earlonne: And what were your thoughts or feelings behind it?

Leslie: I felt a sense of relief, you know? [Nigel affirms] Because he was a human being that really... he was just mean and cruel, and he continued to hurt people with his words that had lost so much of their lives in mourning the victims.

[automated voice comes in, 'You have sixty seconds remaining']

He was just... but yeah, anyway. [Nigel affirms] I felt it was important to work through hating him because when you hate someone, they're as alive in you as if you had another emotion for them. And so I worked very hard to just remove him out of my immediate life. And all he represented was the hardest part of my life to live with.

Nigel: I think we're going to get cut off pretty soon. Are you still there?

Leslie: OK!

Nigel: So I just want to say, thank you!

[music comes in]

Nigel: Earlonne...

Earlonne: Mm.

Nigel: Some of these calls were gutting. I mean, they just... they knocked me out. I felt so bad.

Earlonne: Yeah, man. They went deep. Just to places you just didn't expect or...

Nigel: I know.

Earlonne: Especially her.

Nigel: I mean, we had to ask her really hard things. And you know, this is the other thing about the phone calls, if we were talking in person with somebody, there's this way of showing empathy and comfort. On the phone, it's cold.

Earlonne: Right. It's definitely a hard way to interview a person 'cause I can't see you... see how you respond and see your facial... I don't know when to jump in. It was a trip.

Nigel: It was hard. You had to use your voice. That's the only thing you have is your voice.

Earlonne: And after those calls, if they cut off or whatever, I get an email from her explaining, like, you know, that was a hard call, but she appreciated it. It made her look at something different.

Nigel: Yeah.

[music fades out]

[as narrator]

Earlonne: In April of 2016, after forty-five years in prison, Leslie went before the parole board a seventeenth time.

Nigel: And this time... the board granted her parole.

Earlonne: Three months later, California's Governor Jerry Brown reversed the board's decision, denying her parole.

Leslie: The governor's reversal meant simply that I would be staying in prison and go to the board again. And I don't know, maybe it's because the Governor is further away. I try not to judge those that make those decisions because that's not my place.

[as narrator]

Nigel: You would think it must have been so heartbreaking after all those times to be granted parole, only to have the governor reverse it.

Earlonne: But Leslie looks back at that moment, the fact that the parole board granted her, as a really positive thing.

Nigel: Glass half full.

Leslie: The greatest affirmation I ever had was when the board finally found me suitable. That was an outside affirmation.

Earlonne: Mm.

Leslie: The board after close to twenty-some hearings to say, 'We recognize who you are today' was just amazing. And I think they were very courageous people to do that. It was more the recognition of who I have become. And that meant absolutely everything to me. It came with the recognition that I am not my past... that I've worked very hard and just having an acknowledged, it made me I think more self-assured. My voice became stronger after that.

[music comes in]

[as narrator]

Nigel: Four times now Leslie's been granted parole by the board, then had it pulled by California's governor.

Earlonne: Twice by Jerry Brown. Twice by Gavin Newsom.

[music fades out]

[to Leslie]

Nigel: The first time that I was going to say the first time, the board granted, you, you know, your parole, did you think it was going to get taken by the governor?

Leslie: I tried not to think about it. I watched other people getting the opportunity to go home, but I know I'm not... that's not how I'm treated. [Nigel affirms] And that's just the... I certainly hoped he would. But it didn't happen. When the reversals come, I just know that I need to continue with my life, and that hopefully someday I'll be able to get out of prison.

Earlone: How long ago do you feel you got to the point where you were rehabilitated?

Leslie: Um... Oh man, we have two minutes left. [Earlone chuckles]

Earlone: Or we can save that one for the future.

Leslie: Yeah. It's a process, isn't it?

Earlone: Definitely.

Leslie: I don't really have a specific time. [Nigel affirms] First there was breaking off from the group in Manson's thinking. And then there was coming to terms with the reality. But I would say it's been a long time that I have felt it. But every time the board would say, 'Unsuitable' and 'Look into this...' and 'Look into that...', I took it to heart. And I followed through. And so there's layers and depths of who we are as people.

Earlone: Right.

Leslie: But I have been working and feeling like I've been rehabilitated for decades.

Nigel: Yeah. Yup.

Leslie: Rehabilitation is refamiliarizing yourself with what was before, right. You re-habitate. Oh, I'm going to have to get off of the phone. Oh, man... Can I talk to you about that on Wednesday?

Nigel: Yeah, absolutely.

Earlone: Definitely. Definitely. [pause]

Yeah.... I think she gone.

Nigel: Oh, OK.

[music comes in]

[automated voice comes in, 'This call and your telephone number will be monitored and recorded. To accept this call (beep is heard as number is dialed). Earlone says, 'I like to cut 'em off', referring to the automated voice. Automated voice continues, 'Thank you for using global Tel Link.'

Leslie: Hello!

Nigel: Hey!

Earlonne: Hello Leslie, how are you?

Leslie: I'm pretty good. I'm good.

Nigel: I have a question for you right now. [laughs] How the heck did you eat... you ate two pizzas and a dozen donuts?

Leslie: I don't know! I don't know. Isn't that amazing?

Nigel: Yes, that's impressive.

Leslie: Two pizzas in two days with a dozen donuts

Nigel: That's really impressive.

[as narrator]

Earlonne: So in one of the emails, she talked about eating twelve Krispy Kreme donuts and two whole pizzas that she'd picked up at a prison food sale.

Nigel: Yeah, I don't know how she did it. How'd she get all that in?

[speaking over the phone]

Leslie: I know I don't know how I did it.

Earlonne: I know how you did it.

Leslie: One piece at a time, right?

Earlonne: See, you was looking at them donuts like... *I don't want y'all to go bad, so I'mma take care of y'all before y'all even get to that point.*

Leslie: Yeah. Yeah. [everyone laughs] Exactly.

Nigel: How long did it take you to eat a dozen donuts? Like, one day?

Earlonne: Two days.

Leslie: No. What I did was I had a system.

Nigel: Which is?

Leslie: I ate one pepperoni, one supreme and then a donut. And then I would go out in the backyard, and I would walk like ten times around our little backyard [Nigel affirms] which is a thousand steps. I waited like, every two to three hours, and then I would come back in, and then I would eat another in a pattern.

Nigel: It was basically an eating cycle.

Leslie: Yeah. Yeah.

Nigel: Earlonne, could you do that?

Earlonne: Uh...

Nigel: In two days?

Earlonne: *Ooh!* Two days, that might be a long time. I probably could have... [Nigel laughs] She said Krispy Kreme! [Leslie affirms and laughs] She said Krispy... I probably would have knocked that down in a day, and then just felt guilty for the next two three days. [Leslie affirms] [Nigel laughs]

Leslie: Yeah, yeah. I'm kind of fasting right now. And it's just sort of my metabolism. You know? [Nigel affirms] Menopause has given me a little bit of a belly...

Nigel: Oh, OK! [cutting off Leslie playfully] I'm sure Earlonne doesn't want to hear the menopause conversation, but too bad. He has to. [Leslie and Nigel laugh]

Earlonne: No! I mean, I like education...

Leslie: You should hear it, Earlonne, you should! [Nigel laughs]

Earlonne: I should! Like I said, I like education. I don't pass education up.

Leslie: It's huge! It's huge. [Nigel affirms] Nature is no longer calling out to procreate. So your needs and desires totally change. I attribute a lot of my comfort now to menopause.

Nigel: Oh, tell me about that.

Leslie: So now I'm comfortable but adjusting. [Nigel affirms] I'm adjusting to a face that... like, I noticed under my chin I'm starting to get that kind of hang thing that Dad had. [Nigel chuckles] It's all indicators that life is getting shorter.

[music comes in]

Nigel: Yeah. Oh, that's it's interesting the way you say it – that it's indicators of life getting shorter. I've never heard someone express it that way.

Leslie: Yeah. [Nigel affirms] If I'm fortunate enough sometime to leave prison, I just don't want to be someone that represents that old age is a deterioration. [Nigel affirms] I let the younger women see what's going to happen. [Nigel affirms] I don't intend on dying my hair, or... I'm not going to compete... I was going to say with thirty-year old's, but more like fifty year old's. [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: In the fifty years you've been in prison, how much time did you spend looking in the mirror, and just pondering... your face or your physical being?

Leslie: It depends on the lighting. [laughs] In my cell, the light's kinda dim. Sometimes I'll get in a mirror where the sunlight's coming in and it really shows. And that's kind of freaky [Nigel affirms] to see the amount of wrinkles and stuff. It's like, *Oh wow!*

[music fades out] [as narrator]

Nigel: I asked Leslie to get a hand mirror and sit quietly for five minutes and just look at herself, and think about what she saw. This is actually an exercise I do with my students in class.

Earlonne: This is what she wrote.

Leslie: [reading]

The mirror I looked into is the twelve-inch square on the wall. In it, I see a face that I'm beginning to get familiar with. Gone is my brown hair and youthful gaze

of insecurities and self-criticisms; yet, while the external changes take getting used to, the internal conversation is more affirming. I see in my eyes understanding and acceptance, sorrow and regret. They seek comfort in living a life of amends. But under it all, there is a yearning to be near my siblings and friends. The ache sits right beneath the surface of my quest for redemption. Then I turn from the mirror and decide what I will do today to make my life meaningful.

[long pause]

Nigel: That's really a difficult exercise to do.

Leslie: Um... I think what made it difficult for me was I never really talked too much about the aching to be able to be with my brothers and my sister, and their children. [Nigel affirms] Who are all my friends. I try to not let that sit too close to the surface.

[conversation with Leslie fades out]

[to Earlonne]

Nigel: Earlonne, it was really interesting over the months we talked to her how our relationship changed with her. And we got so much closer, and it was easier to talk.

Earlonne: Mhm.

Nigel: But there was just *one* thing I knew I had to share with her. And I wrestled with it. I was so nervous about it.

Earlonne: How nervous?

Nigel: Mm... enough that it kept me up at night.

Earlonne: Really?

Nigel: Yeah.

[to Leslie, over the phone]

I have a lot of things I've been wanting to say, but I've just been pondering how to say them. Hmm. Okay. So I am I'm fifty-eight, so I grew up in the '70s, and growing up... I hate saying his name, but he was a big part of my childhood fears. And...

Leslie: Yes

Nigel: It just loomed really large. I remember that movie that came out *Helter Skelter*... and I remember reading the book when I was way too young. And so I just found it so confusing. I mean, he scared me. And I remember just being so confused by these girls that look like me – *How could that happen to them?* And so before I even got the chance to know you, you were part of my growing up experience. And so... when I got the opportunity to talk to you, it wasn't like I was afraid or anything like that, it's just that it came with a lot of experience. [Leslie affirms] And so it's just been really special to get to know you as an individual, and to see who you are and to consider you a friend. So I just to see it as a real blessing that I've had this opportunity. It makes me really happy.

Leslie: Well, thank you. Thank you. It's really... it's really hard being the boogeyman. And that means a lot to me that you have shared that with me and told me. [Nigel affirms] And now that it's turned out to be this good experience. And I'm glad you told me that, you know?

Nigel: [chuckles] Well, I didn't want to make you feel bad. But you know, it's... anyway.

Leslie: Yeah. It doesn't make me feel bad. It makes me feel, um... it makes me feel like there's hope. [both Leslie and Nigel laugh softly]

Nigel: Yeah.

[as narrator]

Earlonne: In one of our last calls, we asked Leslie how she imagines life if she gets out.

Leslie: Well, I used to think about it a little bit more than I am right now. I don't know the world out there anymore. My plan would be for simplicity. [Nigel affirms] I feel like I've gotten used to living with very little and I don't want to get caught up in possessions. I also think a lot about time alone. [Nigel affirms] Like in nature... where the only sounds I hear would be the ocean. [Nigel affirms] Or the trees up in the mountains. I would also like to be able to spend some time in the city. I don't know why, but I love the... rainy streets of the city when the lights are glistening off at the street. I love that. I don't know why that always comes to me after all these years, you know? [Nigel laughs and affirms] It's funny, the images that come. The same thing comes when a screen door is being shut in a farmhouse.

Nigel: Yeah. It's funny, I always think about a screen door shutting. That seems so, um, comforting to me

Leslie: Yeah. Yeah. And peaceful.

Nigel: I just wonder about... how do you think about the idea of home, and has prison become your home?

Leslie: No. I don't think of this as home like the way I would think of a home. I make the most of it, but I don't know how to explain it. Home has feelings of other things for me. [Nigel affirms] Like family and childhood friends. So I make the most of it. But home for me is really a memory.

[music comes in]

Earlonne: What kind of threads do you imagine putting on when you walk out, like what's the first thing you want to wear?

Leslie: Probably to begin with just my jeans and a t-shirt and a pair of Converse to start.

Earlonne: High top or low top?

Leslie: Probably... I'd start with the... I haven't worn high tops in a long time. I'd probably pick high tops.

Nigel: You don't imagine when you get out that you could fall in love and have a relationship?

Leslie: Um, I... you know, that's not a priority for me. [Nigel affirms] I just want to be in love with life. I have so many of my friends that I want to spend time with. I just don't picture myself having someone I'm like – *Where are you going? When do you think you'll be back?* [automated voice interrupts saying, 'This call and your phone number will be monitored and recorded.'] For me, that's too close to incarceration. And I'll be reporting to a parole officer. [Nigel laughs] I don't want to report to another human being.

Nigel: Earlonne has a lot to say about this.

Earlonne: *Ooh*, you on the right track, Leslie!

Leslie: Yeah. Yeah. I've thought about this.

Nigel: You said something that really caught my interest about how you just want to be in love with life. Are you in love with life now?

Leslie: Oh, yeah! Yeah! Like the spring flowers are coming up. [Nigel affirms] And I just am so in love with their variety and the colors and the sweetness. And people... just who they are... and what they're doing. Good books. There's a lot in life to be crazy about. And when I imagine myself out.... smelling the ocean, and all of that. I just think there's plenty out there that I could be in love with. [Nigel affirms] [automated voice interrupts, 'You have sixty seconds remaining'] OK.

Nigel: I feel like we still have so much to talk about. Definitely, [indistinguishable] gotta stay in touch. [crosstalk]

Leslie: [crosstalk] Bye guys. And I'm gonna miss you guys.

Earlonne: Ah, well, we'll be here.

Nigel: Yeah.

Leslie: OK, Cool. I'm getting all sentimental.

Nigel: I know. Me too.

Leslie: Have a good weekend!

Nigel: OK. Bye!

Earlonne: You have a good weekend too and I'll reach out to you.

Leslie: Bye-bye.

[as narrator]

Earlonne: Leslie goes up for parole again in November 2021.

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

Earlone: 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.

Earlone: *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.

[music fades out]

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: This is Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the Public Information Officer at San Quentin State Prison, and I approve this episode.

[music comes in]

Earlone: 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.

Earlone: Some of the best podcasts around. hear more at radiotopia.fm.

Nigel: Uh, Earlone, that was the last episode of the season.

Earlone: Vacation, vacation, vacation!

Nigel: [laughing] You always say that... [Earlone laughs] And it's just not ever gonna happen.

Earlone: [laughing] I get like two days of vacation after. [Nigel laughs] We'll be back with a new season at the beginning of September.

Nigel: Much more from inside San Quentin.

Earlone: Including one project that we've been working on for over a year now. It's going to take us deep into the archives of one of the most contentious moments in San Quentin history.

Nigel: And we're gonna be doing a thirty day challenge that just might require some listener participation.

Earlone: In the meantime, check out our website. We've got our *Ear Hustle* merch there, including that fly, soft, cushy hoodie.

Nigel: And some of the proceeds from the merch go to support Mount Tamalpais College, formerly known as the Prison University Program. And Earlone, you know I love that organization.

Earlone: Yep. Higher education is the shiz-nit.

Nigel: [laughing] Yes, it definitely is the shiz-nit.

Earlone: And if you want to hear what else is going on during the summer, sign up for our newsletter, *The Lowdown*.

Nigel: So, see you all in September.

[music fades out]

[homemade recording comes in of a young child saying 'Nigel, Earlone, New York']

End of Episode.