

The cold stung my skin, even though I'd rubbed a protective layer of balm on my cheeks. Our breath mingled and condensed in a cloud of vapor. Doug and I grabbed hands and ran across the parking lot. He opened the driver's door and I scooted across the bench seat as quickly as I could. My long wool coat did not slide well. Doug climbed in after me and cranked the ignition, which caught immediately. His mustard-colored Volare was dilapidated, but a good starter. Who cared if the passenger door no longer opened? This was January in Minnesota.

Wordlessly, we listened to the engine rumble. Time was running out and yet another church had failed to meet our hopes. The sermon had been lackluster. There'd been zero women in leadership. Nothing had clicked. We wanted more than a wedding venue, we wanted a church home.

I unwrapped my scarf to speak. "Maybe next Sunday we should try that Christian Reformed Church my mom keeps suggesting."

"Are you serious? I thought you were never going back to the CRC!"

"I know. But we're running out of options." The windshield cleared as the defroster churned and huffed. "Maybe I didn't need to abandon them entirely."

"*You* abandon *them*?" Doug spoke with uncharacteristic anger. "You needed them and *they* abandoned *you*!"

"I know. I know." I'd told him about the crime I'd endured, and how alone I'd felt. How nothing made sense and no one could help. But there was something I couldn't express, to him or to anyone, the feeling of damage that could never be repaired. "But we're not finding anything better, so maybe it's time to go back. To try again."

Doug shook his head as he put the car in reverse but I knew he would do as I asked, even if he had reservations. He knew I missed the comfort of the church — the church which had been my cradle. As we pulled out of the parking lot I laid my gloved hand on his knee and played a silent game of pretend. I couldn't go back in time and undo the crime, but maybe I could slip back into my old life as if that awful night had never happened. After all, I had a fiancé now. Maybe I could lay my questions to rest by pretending that no violent act had ever spurred them.

The next Sunday we headed to that Christian Reformed Church. As before, I tugged at my wool coat and slid across the frigid seat. Under my coat I had on the same church-going outfit I'd worn the Sunday before, and the Sunday before that — a bias-cut plaid skirt and a purple batwing sweater. Doug was wearing his puffy down jacket, a pair of corduroys and a pullover sweater. He never seemed to get as cold as I did. I teased that his mustache kept him warm.

As we entered the church Doug whispered, "We should have dressed better." The men were wearing dark suits and ties and impeccable white shirts. The women had on dressy dresses, and carried expensive-looking handbags.

"Like we even have those kind of clothes," I whispered back.

This sanctuary was more modern than the churches I'd attended growing up. The dais was raised, with seats curving around. A prelude was playing, but it was recorded music rather than an organ. Even though we'd arrived early, we ended up sitting closer to the front than I would have chosen, right underneath the pulpit. On the other side of me was a woman about my age. She had her husband on the other side of her; their small child was sandwiched between them.

Opening the bulletin, I read that today, January 22, 1984, was the eleven-year anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*. In response, the service would address the sanctity of life. I was immediately filled with foreboding. I remembered the 1973 decision vividly. I'd been a sophomore in a Christian high school in New Jersey at the time. Many of our mandatory chapel services had been devoted to the evils of abortion. We had been required to debate the subject in Bible class, although pity the student who was assigned the wrong side. Busloads of high schoolers went down to Washington, DC to march with placards showing pictures of aborted fetuses.

The early part of the service was standard fare — hymns and the reading of the Ten Commandments before a prayer of confession. The preacher was an older white man wearing a well-cut gray suit. His slicked hair showed the ridges of a comb's teeth. He made precise, symmetrical hand movements as he spoke.

The scriptures included verses from Deuteronomy, "Choose life," and First Timothy, "Women shall be saved by childbearing." The preacher railed against women who sought abortions, painting them as cavalier and comfort-seeking. The sermon bore no surprises, but as I listened something strange happened. I could no longer control my thoughts. My mind went back more than five years, to the night of the crime. I once again entered the emergency room and felt the bright lights of the examining room. I saw the nurses' heads, bent over my pelvis. I felt the scraping of the comb, and heard the crackling of the paper envelope as the doctor collected hairs for the rape kit.

*What if I had gotten pregnant? What then?*

The thought made my heart beat so hard that I felt nauseated and lightheaded. I bent my head low to catch my breath. Doug squeezed my hand but I didn't look at him. If I saw the compassion on his face, I'd erupt in tears. By now the preacher was thundering: Repent! He called for judgment on the heads of those who sought abortions, on all those who disregarded the sanctity of life! My head was bent but my will pushed back. *He doesn't know. He has never passed through that valley of shadows.*

Part of me wanted to walk out. What would that be like? I had never walked out of a church. I continued to clutch Doug's hand, but considered standing up. I would say, Excuse me. Everyone would turn and look at the stranger, at the woman with the contorted face.

Part of me wanted to wait. The preacher might deviate from the script. He might pause and add a parenthesis, a footnote. "Except, of course, for pregnancies caused by rape." He would say this in a grandfatherly tone. It would be a concession. It wouldn't be enough, of course, but it would be something, a nod to the complexity of being female, to the reality of having a womb, to circumstances this man could never possibly know. That concession would give me the tiniest

space to inhabit. With that I could manage to remain sitting in this sanctuary. I could continue to occupy this space with my body, my female body with its brutalized past.

At last it came. The preacher used many words to set up the question, but it boiled down to this: Should a woman who becomes pregnant as the result of rape be permitted to have an abortion?

His answer was strident and certain and scolding. This was not a footnote, but the pinnacle of his message: "No! Absolutely not! That child had been conceived by the will of God!"

I suppose he went on to quote Bible verses but I can't pretend I heard. I could no longer hear anything. The blood pounded through my head, creating a roar in my ears. I was familiar with this ironclad notion of God's sovereign will, a doctrine which could be twisted to mean such monstrous things. Nothing that happened could ever be outside of God's will: no war, no birth defect, no atrocity. God willed all these calamities.

Before I experienced brutality, I could even believe such a doctrine.

But now?

I confess that there are many things I do not know about God. Like the Psalmist, I don't know how God charts the stars in the heavens. I don't know the course of the sea monsters who sport in the deep. I don't know where the whirlwind blows. And I certainly don't know if God is pleased, overall, with the humans God made to walk upon this earth. But I do know that God is good. I know that God is love. And I know that God did not will for me to be raped.

My being raped was not God's will, but the rapist's. How did the preacher not know this? By definition, rape is violence wreaked upon a woman's body against her will. Two human wills struggle and one prevails. How do people of faith ignore such a fundamental fact? We are set down in a world where human wills collide and crash. Call it sin. Call it the legacy of sin. Call it slavery, or patriarchy, or domination. Call it principalities and powers. Call it what you will, but show some humility!

My reaction to the preacher was not composed in careful sentences. Some of the things I know took years to put into words, and more years to speak them aloud. But that Sunday morning, I knew enough. I knew that *if* my rapist had impregnated me, and *if* I had been forced to carry that pregnancy to term, and *if* I had been forever tied to my rapist and his violent act by the most enduring bond humanity knows -- an umbilical cord -- I *would have been* ruined forever. My ruination would not have been a dark valley to pass through, but a state of being, complete and irreparable.

Finally the preacher pronounced the benediction. As people stood to leave, I turned to the woman beside me and asked, in a voice I sought to control: "Do you think most of the people here agree with the preacher?"

She looked surprised at the question. She glanced at my reddened, quavering face and said "Of course." Then she collected her beautiful purse and her handsome husband and her well-behaved child, and they exited the row in the other direction.

My fury impelled me out of the church and into the mustard-colored Volare and across the bench seat. My vapor-breath felt like power. I was breathing fire. When Doug got in and

slammed the car door I said: “I am done with it, Done with it, Done with it!” And with that, I slipped out of my childhood church the way a snake sheds its skin. What I had once lived in was behind me, lifeless and dead.

I had always wondered if it hurt a snake to shed a skin. Suddenly I knew that it did not. The new skin had been forming underneath the old in an invisible calculus of growth. The new skin might look smooth and vulnerable, but it was tough.

Doug eased the car out of the parking lot and I looked ahead. Some day we would find the right church. Meanwhile I no longer needed to explain myself, or my past, to anyone. I would simply refuse to make God into a monster. I would refuse to hate the skin God gave me. I would live in that skin and love it. I would love the God who gave me such vulnerable, tough woman’s skin.

Ruth Everhart is a Presbyterian pastor and the author of “Ruined,” which received a 2017 book award from Christianity Today. You can find her at [rutheverhart.com](http://rutheverhart.com) or on Twitter @rutheverhart.