



Ruined

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Forthright, compassionate,
and expertly crafted—everything
readers should want from a memoir."
—*Kirkus Reviews*

RUTH EVERHART

{a memoir}

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *RUINED*

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—*KIRKUS REVIEWS*

Ruined is one of those memoirs that sticks to your heart, helps you understand the power of a story, and gives you a framework to understand God when terrible things happen. Honest and beautifully written, Ruth's story will help readers discover the love of God in unexpected ways.

—MARY DEMUTH, AUTHOR OF *WORTH LIVING*

Mostly I wish this book never needed to be written. But it did, it was, and it's powerful. With heart-wrenching honesty and a refusal to leave the chaos, Ruth Everhart shows us the raw courage necessary to emerge both wounded and healed. Alternating between fury, hurt, fear, and rage, we journey with her to find God and her way back to life.

—NANCY ORTBERG, AUTHOR OF *LOOKING FOR GOD AND SEEING IN THE DARK*

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*Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois*

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Designed by Dean Renninger and Julie Chen

Edited by Stephanie Rische

The author is represented by Chip MacGregor of MacGregor Literary, Inc., PO Box 1316, Manzanita, OR 97130.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Everhart, Ruth, author.

Title: Ruined / Ruth Everhart.

Description: Carol Stream, IL : Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2016.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015045856 | ISBN 9781496413925 (hc) | ISBN 9781496413161 (sc)

Subjects: LCSH: Everhart, Ruth. | Christian biography. | Rape victims—Religious life. | Rape—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BR1725.E925 A3 2016 | DDC 277.3/083092—dc23 LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015045856>

Printed in the United States of America

22 21 20 19 18 17 16
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Dear Reader:

The story you are about to read is true. The events depicted include violent situations and vulgar language that typically don't appear in books we publish. But after careful consideration, we decided to include some descriptions and dialogue that, though potentially offensive, are accurate, help to capture the intensity of the events in an authentic way, and give a truthful illustration of the human condition.

Some of the names have been changed to protect the identities of those involved.

PART 1
THE CRIME

November 5–6, 1978

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the
shadow of death, I will fear no evil.*

PSALM 23:4

*Even in the valley of the shadow of death,
two and two do not make six.*

LEO TOLSTOY

1

IT HAPPENED ON A SUNDAY NIGHT, even though I'd been a good girl and gone to church that morning.

My older sister, Mary Lynn, had picked me up and then dropped me off after the service. She went home with her husband and young son, but I couldn't join them. I had studying to do. I was working on a paper about Buddhism for my World Religions class. The problem was that I couldn't grasp what I was reading. At the center of all things there is a great emptiness? I could hardly conceive of such a thought. Wasn't God at the center of all things? I'd been taught for as long as I could remember that God was sovereign—that nothing happened outside His will. I had no pocket in my mind that could hold a concept like Buddhism.

I lived in a house off campus with five friends: Marty, Teresa, Cheryl, Karen, and Lisa—all of us seniors at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. After supper some of us housemates sprawled across the living room, talking. Thirty-seven years later, I can't say with certainty what we talked about. We may have ranged from Spinoza to Descartes, because Marty and Teresa loved philosophy.

No doubt Cheryl talked rapturously about Spain, because she was planning to spend her spring semester in Seville. And I'm sure I at least mentioned the name Jim—casually—since I was trying to figure out if he and I were friends or something more. Karen and Lisa had each spent the weekend with their parents, who lived in the area. At some point that Sunday Karen returned, but Lisa called to say she was staying with her folks one more night and would see us on Monday.

We were a talkative, opinionated bunch. We cooked and ate supper together most nights and discussed every subject imaginable. Could radical Christian community actually work? Would the Bob Dylan concert be worth the ticket price? What happened with the recent Camp David Accords anyway? And whose turn was it to buy groceries?

On that particular Sunday night, in our house on Alexander Street, we must have talked about groceries, because our cupboards were bare, and that mattered. The intruders were hungry. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

It was early November. I was the youngest of the group, not quite twenty-one. Graduation was still safely distant, some six months in the future. My main goal was to leave every door open. Everything seemed possible.



My bedroom, which originally had been a sunporch, was just off the dining room. Between my bedroom and the dining room were double French doors with window glass—the kind of doors you could throw open in a dramatic way if you were in the mood for that sort of thing. The room was small, but that was part of its charm. It was big enough to hold everything I needed and nothing more: hooks where I hung my second pair of jeans and a few tops, a desk where I stacked my textbooks, and a single bed with four posts, covered by a flowered yellow comforter.

Best of all were the windows on every side. During the day they

bathed the room in light, and every evening I pulled the shades closed. I never thought to be nervous about those windows surrounding me as I slept. All that breakable glass. Those flimsy window clasps.

That night when I clicked off my bedside lamp, I had no idea that my room would never again feel full of light—not from the gooseneck lamp or from sunlight streaming through the abundant windows or from conversation and laughter drifting through the double doors.

I was sound asleep when I heard Marty screaming. My first thought was that she and Teresa must be clowning around. I sat up in the dark.

At the same moment, I felt someone beside me on the bed—a body pushing against me and pressing something cold and metallic against my temple. He was breathing hard and hissing words in a high-pitched voice. He sounded young and nervous and angry and black. I couldn't comprehend his words, but I could comprehend the danger.

A black ski mask covered the man's head. The whites of his eyes glowed. His dark lips were visible through the mouth hole.

"Get down, b—, get down!"

Time stopped as I tried to think. This wasn't a dream. This was really happening. This man had broken into our house. This man who had broken into our house meant to harm us.

"On the floor, b—!"

What was he saying? What did he want?

Upstairs, Marty had stopped screaming. Someone turned on the kitchen light, which shone through the double doors into my room. I could see Cheryl standing there in the kitchen, all six feet of her. Her hand was still in the air, grasping the pull-chain for the overhead light. She must have heard the screaming and come up from her basement bedroom. Without thinking, I pushed the intruder away, scrambled out of bed, and ran to Cheryl. She hugged me as I let out a strangled cry, my voice high and terrified.

The intruder followed me into the kitchen, yelling. He grabbed me from behind and shoved the gun into my side. The pull-chain was swinging wildly around our heads, and he cursed until he got a hold of it. He gave it a firm tug, and everything went dark.

I heard, rather than felt, a sharp crack. It occurred to me, almost as if I were wrapped in many layers of gauze, that the sound had come from his gun connecting with my skull.

“Get down!” He was furious.

Cheryl and I dropped to all fours. We were both whimpering. He kicked us. “Move!”

We crawled forward, shoulder to shoulder, like animals. My long flannel nightgown kept tripping me, and I had to pull the fabric away from my knees so I could keep crawling. At the doorway we jammed up, so Cheryl went first and I followed. We passed from the worn linoleum of the kitchen onto the rough carpet of the dining room.

“Get down!” This command came from a different voice, one strangely low and rough.

I looked up to see our other housemates—Marty, Teresa, and Karen—enter the dining room, followed by another masked man with another gun. The women looked ghostly in their nighties, barely visible in the faint streetlight that filtered through the curtained windows. The man was as dark as a shadow, dressed all in black, with a ski mask over his head.

“On the floor! Face down!”

My friends dropped to their knees. The two intruders moved around us, kicking our feet and bodies. They would yell “Move!” or “Stop!” at the same time—directions that were impossible to hear and comprehend and follow, so we crawled blindly around, as terrified as insects running from a boot.

“Shut up!” they yelled over and over, even though no one was talking.

When one of them pushed me down with his heel in the middle

of my back, I crumpled where I was. I could hear my own blood pounding in my ears. I buried my face in the carpet, which smelled faintly like soap. We had shampooed the carpets with a rented machine just a month before, for our first party of the semester.

I could hear ragged breathing beside me. We seemed to be lying in a row like sardines, alternating heads and feet. I thought Marty was on one side of me and Cheryl on the other, but I couldn't be sure.

The intruder with the rough, low voice said slowly, as if he were making an important announcement: "This is a robbery. We ain't gonna hurt you."

When I heard those words, with my face pressed into the carpet's worn nap, I was flooded with relief. They would take our money and leave. Before we knew it, we'd all be in the campus coffee shop telling the story. Everyone would say how lucky we were.

Or maybe we'd never tell anybody. Not even the police. Why should we? So what if they took our money? We had so little—what would it matter? If they would just leave quickly, we could go back to sleep. We could pretend this never happened. Maybe this wasn't happening. Maybe this was only a dream.



I've always been a dreamer—both daydreams and night dreams. I construct whole worlds in my head and live there. When I was seven years old, I had a dream that was so thrilling, and at the same time so comforting, that I cultivated it night after night. I assumed everyone did this—that this was why sleep was so wonderful. Each night I would breathe deeply and slowly until my sleeping body would rise and pass painlessly through the knotty pine ceiling of my bedroom. I would float above the housetops, gazing down at the lit-up boxes where people went about their mysterious lives.

I would rise farther into the night sky until a genial older man appeared at the end of a long table, its gleaming surface stretching between us. The man was dressed like an old-fashioned theater

usher or perhaps Captain Kangaroo, wearing a dapper suit with piping along the edges of the lapel. He had a quill pen, and in each dream, he wrote something in a ledger.

Then I would rise still higher, to the rear of a great cathedral, where the dream deposited me onto plush carpet. I would lay there listening to magnificent organ music and feeling a sense of great peace until a kindly man in a black robe approached me and said, “My child.” When I rose to follow him to the front of the cathedral, I would invariably wake up.



As I lay sardine-style on the floor that night, I wanted nothing more than to rise out of my body and escape through the roof. But what about Marty and Cheryl and Teresa and Karen? Even if I *could* levitate, would I escape and leave them in jeopardy?

The rough, low voice that had announced the robbery spoke again. “In case you’re wondering, it’s for real.”

I heard shuffling movements, punctuated by thumping sounds. When it was my turn to have my head cracked with the gun, I was surprised how much it hurt. Maybe the shock was wearing off.

Then the rough voice said, “You.” There was a stir as someone got up farther down the line—probably Teresa or Karen.

“Don’t move, or she’s dead,” the low voice said. I scrunched my face into the carpet.

Oh God!

But I needed to do better than that. I needed to actually pray. I tried to construct a prayer, but the same words spiraled through my mind, down and down and down—a descent with no bottom.

Oh God, oh God, oh God!

It was a cry of terror and a plea for mercy. It was also wordless repentance for whatever I had done to bring this on. *Oh God!* As the minutes dragged on, I tried to think of other words and to force those words into order, into sentences.

Oh God, no shots . . . God, please . . . Yea, though I walk . . . Oh God, please! . . . Yea, though I walk through the valley . . . God, where are You?

I tried to focus on Psalm 23 and recite it all the way through, as if it were a key, a magic phrase, a talisman that would protect us. With an effort, I began at the beginning. *The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want . . .*

What came next? It was an act of the will to begin again, to keep trying to get through the whole psalm. I couldn't do it properly. The words and phrases twisted out of order, and I felt no solace from them. *He makes me to lie down. . . . Yea, though I walk through death . . . through the shadow . . . through death.*

The intruder still hadn't come back with Karen or Teresa—whoever he had—so I tried again. If I could keep it up, surely all would be well. He would bring her back. Take our stuff. Leave. Any minute now.

The LORD is my shepherd. The LORD.

"You." The voice was unexpected, loud. He kicked my shoulder. "In here!"

I raised my head. It was the first intruder, the one who had accosted me in bed. I couldn't see well in the dim light, but I could tell he was gesturing toward the open French doors, his gun glinting.

Oh God. He knows this is my room.

"Get up!"

I got to my feet. He pressed the gun into my ribs and pushed. I walked backward through the dining room and into my bedroom until I was perched on the edge of the bed. He sat beside me and clamped his arm around my shoulders. The polyester fabric of his jacket was dark and slippery. There was a vaguely chemical odor about him that I didn't recognize. When I shrank away, he tightened his grip. With his other arm, he pointed the gun at my friends on the floor in the other room.

What does he want?