



SPiRIT

It wasn't My fault

by Sheryle Kee

PRAY Jesus, you warn us to look at ourselves before we judge and blame others. Help us take responsibility for wrongs that are our fault and recognize what is not our fault. Amen.

Sheila arrived 20 minutes late to pick me up, then drove recklessly to make up for lost time. Sitting in her noisy Focus, I listened closely to catch the staccato clip of her words. Sheila talked even faster than she drove.

Sheila hastily explained her New Year's Eve plans as she pulled the car into the driveway. Her husband Gary appeared in the doorway with their two sons. Todd and Michael were four and two with dark curly hair and brown eyes.

Staring at Gary in the doorway, I was glad I had on my new royal blue sweater that matched my blue eyes and had worn my hair down—it made me look three years older, my friends told me. I hoped he would notice.

He was definitely good-looking. He leaned nonchalantly against the screen door, wearing a lopsided grin, faded, tight-fitting Levis, tan cowboy boots scuffed at the toes, and a strong cologne. I swallowed an old piece of Wrigleys and settled my hands deep in the pockets of my new junior varsity cheerleading jacket. I hoped he didn't notice my nervousness.

As Sheila listed my instructions, I kept thinking about Gary. I hoped I'd have a husband who looked like him someday. All the boys I knew were awkward and mean and had been that



way as long as I'd known them. I couldn't imagine Gary was ever as gangly in a pair of Levis as the boys in seventh grade.

Todd and Michael lived up to their reputation. No toy or game held their attention for more than 15 minutes. I wound up making

Michael take three time outs and letting Todd eat peanut M&Ms until he complained of a stomachache. They fell asleep side by side on the floor shortly before midnight, even though Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve blared loudly on the television. Watching their tiny chests rise and fall in slumber made me sleepy, too; I wasn't used to staying up late, even if it was New Year's Eve.

I hoped Gary and Sheila would stay out past 1 a.m., so I could earn enough for the new

sweater I wanted. But just as I was deciding which color to choose, headlights flashed into the living room window.

The door slammed noisily. Gary and Sheila entered the living room. I worried that Sheila would be angry about the M&Ms and the blaring television; maybe she wouldn't even pay me the full amount or ask me to baby-sit again.

Before I could explain, a sharp, pained look crossed Sheila's face. She dashed to the bathroom; the sounds of coughing and spitting followed. Sickened by the sounds and smell of vomit, I waited nervously to go

home. When Sheila opened the bathroom door, she smiled and excused herself, walking tentatively but quickly toward the master bedroom.

I followed Gary to the car. His long legs swayed when he walked, and he almost tripped when the heel of his boot stuck in a crack in the sidewalk. I couldn't smell his cologne anymore. Buckling my seat belt, I hoped the ride would go quickly.

He drove at an alarming speed, even faster than Sheila. Neither of us offered any conversation, and the silence lulled me into tired numbness. Suddenly, Gary slammed on the brakes at a stop sign on the highway.

The noisy hum of the motor interrupted the complete stillness. The Ford was the only car on either road, yet Gary made no movement to lift his foot from the brake. I stared blankly at the stop sign and wished he would say something.

He sighed and looked at me from across the seat. "I'll bet you haven't gotten a New Year's Eve kiss yet," he drawled. "I'm going to be your first."

Stunned, I tried to laugh off his comment as a joke. I'd never even been kissed before, much less threatened with such a brutal proposal. Even though the car was dark, I could feel his eyes on my hair, my face, my body. I felt very conscious of my tight-fitting sweater and long blond hair.



Suddenly he laughed and stepped on the accelerator. He must have been teasing, I realized. After all, Gary had been a friend of the family for almost eight years, and he'd known me since I was five. He couldn't have meant anything.

Several minutes later, the car pulled into our driveway and slowed to a halt. I was very relieved to be home. The roll of bills Gary placed in my palm felt unnecessarily thick. I knew it would be enough for the sweater. I unbuckled my seatbelt and turned to thank him.

As I moved, he grabbed my shoulders, pulled me roughly toward him, and kissed me. I felt the rigid unfamiliar outline of his bones and teeth crushing my mouth. I struggled to get from under him, but his grasp was steely. Hard. The stench of stale alcohol filled my nostrils. I wanted to gag at his closeness. His hot tongue pressed between my clenched lips; I

bit my own tongue to keep from crying or vomiting.

When I opened my eyes, his face twisted above me like a warped image in a fun house mirror. His hands slid away from my shoulders to push my head closer to his face. My neck muscles were clenched so tightly against the pressure that they felt like they might break. I felt suffocated.

He touched my collarbone with his left hand, and my sweater collar slid from my shoulder. The cold air

in the car chilled my exposed skin. I frantically grabbed his wrist before he could reach down my shirt any farther. I twisted his fingers with both hands until his face jerked back, and he released me from his grasp. If he hadn't let go, I would have broken his hand.

Clutching blindly at the door handle, I tumbled out of the car. As the door slammed behind me, I heard a sarcastic voice say, "Happy New Year!" His ringing laughter lingered in the air as I lay in the driveway, gasping for breath. I felt sick to my stomach.

After a while, I got up slowly and entered the silent house. As I passed my parents' bedroom, Mom's muffled voice called out from behind the door, "How did everything go with Todd and Michael tonight?"

"Fine Mom. Can we talk in the morning? I'm pretty beat."

It is NEVER THE VICTIM/SURVIVOR'S FAULT no matter what she wore, where she was, whether or not she fought back or whether or not she was drinking. THE PERPETRATORS ARE 100% RESPONSIBLE for their actions.

SUNDAY GOSPEL

5th Sunday of Lent

Jesus will not condemn.

NARRATOR 1: Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At daybreak he reappeared in the temple area and when the people started coming to him, he sat down and began to teach them. Some scribes and Pharisees led a woman forward who had been caught in adultery. They made her stand there in front of everyone.

PHARISEES: Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. In the law, Moses commanded such women to be stoned. What do you have to say about the case?

NARRATOR 2: They were posing this question to try him, so that they could have something to accuse him of.

NARRATOR 1: Jesus simply bent down and started writing

on the ground with his finger. When they persisted in their questioning, he stood up.

JESUS: Let the sinless one among you cast the first stone at her.

NARRATOR 2: Again Jesus bent down and wrote on the ground. The accusers drifted away one by one, beginning with the elders. This left Jesus alone with the woman, standing before him. He stood up again and said to her—

JESUS: Where are they all? Has no one condemned you?

WOMAN: No one, sir.

JESUS: Nor do I condemn you. You may go. But from now on, sin no more.

John 8.1-11

We would talk about Todd and Michael in the morning, but I'd never tell her what really happened. If I told her, she'd never understand that I didn't want it to happen. She'd twist it around somehow and make it my fault. She'd say I give these mixed signals to people, that what I say and what I want are two different things.

I knew she had a point. I did give mixed signals sometimes, because I truly didn't know how I felt at any given place or time. I was a young child stuck in a woman's body, and I

knew and understood this about me.

Closing the bedroom door behind me, I switched on the light and looked in the full-length mirror. I'd inspected my image in the same mirror less than six hours earlier, hoping that I'd look good to impress Gary. That image looked different now; my blond hair was tangled and matted, spots of dried blood rimmed my swollen lips, and the collar of my blue sweater was stretched. Thank God Mom hadn't gotten up.

I undressed quickly, throwing the sweater in a corner. I switched off the light and climbed between the cool, soft sheets. Even in the dark room,

It was a long time before I stopped seeing his smiling face on my bedroom ceiling or hearing his seductive, taunting voice in my ears. It was even longer before I realized that his actions had touched a deep vulnerability in me and had left an invisible scar.

I still haven't told my parents about what happened, and I don't think I ever will. The scar is healed. The bitterness, the anger, and the fear are gone. What happened New Year's Eve doesn't hurt any more. It wasn't my fault.

1 in 6 women have experienced an attempted or completed rape; 1 in 33 men

was confused. I didn't always like the way I felt and acted, and I took it out on other people.

But I wasn't completely innocent, either. I had a tongue that could hurt people. There was a certain power in combining sarcasm and cunning with an innocent blond-haired, blue-eyed look. I could get what I wanted, and I knew it. Mom

Gary's warped handsome face smiled at me from the ceiling. Everything that had seemed attractive about him now seemed ugly and evil. His hair, smile, eyes—everything. I wanted to yell at him to go away and leave me alone, but all I could do was pray I'd never see him again. I silently damned him to hell for ruining my royal blue sweater and my New Year's Eve, for bruising my lips, for cheating on his wife, but mostly for being my first kiss.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Why doesn't the author tell her parents about Gary? Would you tell yours? What are reasons for telling or not telling?
- 2 Why does the author take so long to realize what the title of the story says?
- 3 What conflicts like hers have you experienced?
- 4 What helps heal the scar of sexual assault?
- 5 What's unfair about the teachers bringing the woman before Jesus? What punishment does Leviticus 20.10 prescribe?
- 6 What is Jesus' attitude toward the woman's sin?
- 7 What is Jesus' attitude toward sinners?

What is sin?

Sin is the word for actions that break God's law. A crime is an action that is against the law of a nation and carries a penalty for breaking it. How is a sin different from a crime? Breaking God's law is more than breaking a regulation. A serious sin breaks relationships.

The first of the ten commandments states that God and the people are in a covenant relationship: I am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt; you shall have no other gods before me. The second commands no misuse of God's name. The third commands the people to worship God on the Sabbath, to keep up their relationship.

The other seven commandments call the people of Israel to express their covenant relationship with God by keeping relationships with each other—honoring their parents and respecting each other's lives, property, marriages, and reputations. Breaking these commandments breaks the relationships that hold the community together.

Jesus calls us to keep two great commandments; to love God with our

whole selves and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus wants us to see that our relationship with ourselves, with others, and with God are all interconnected. Love, forgiveness, and sharing are right actions that build community among us. Hate, murder, stealing, bearing false witness, and committing adultery are wrong actions that alienate people from one another. To sin or miss the mark, a person must know the action is wrong and yet choose to do it intentionally.

The sin in Sunday's gospel is sexual. Adultery is having sexual relations with a married person who is not one's husband or wife. Adultery is failure to keep one's marriage vows of a faithful relationship to one's spouse.

Sexual sins often make headlines. This gospel story makes us think more deeply about sin.

First of all, if the woman was taken in adultery, what happened to the man who was with her? Jesus challenges those who have brought her to look at themselves. He implies that they are using this woman without recognizing that they, too, are sinners.

Secondly, Jesus suggests that sexual sins are not the only kind of sins. No one should accuse, betray, or judge others. Such accusation, betrayal, or judgment is every bit as sinful as what the woman did. In the end, when there is no one left to accuse her, Jesus treats her gently. He does not excuse her activity; he tells her to go and sin no more.

Sin is the breaking down and destroying of relationships that ought to exist. When we betray others by lying to them, stealing from them, talking about them behind their backs, hurting them physically or emotionally, we are destroying relationships.

What if we lived in a world in which we could have no basic trust in the goodness of others? What if we could no longer drive through the streets

Love is the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.

Catechism of the Catholic Church #2392

of our town, trusting that everyone will follow the rules of the road and that we are safe from a drive-by shooting? What if people did not tell the truth but only what they wanted to say or we wanted to hear?

All our relationships with each other are based on trust. When we betray each other, lie to each other, use each other for our own purposes, we are breaking down relationships that we need to live together in peace. That is sin.

Sometimes it is easier to recognize sin when we are the victims of it. When have I been hurt, physically or emotionally? Been betrayed by someone I trusted? When have I been cheated? When have I felt used? When we reflect on how these experiences felt to us, we can understand how we ourselves have sinned.

The beauty of it all is this: as we begin to recognize what sin is, we have already begun to understand how to mend relationships with God, ourselves, and other people. Only then can we do our part to help create the world that God wants, a world where people live together in honesty, generosity, kindness, respect, and trust. Without this respect, no one in the whole community is safe.

What's Worse?

On a scale of 1-5, evaluate the wrongs you regard as worst. 1 being bad, 5 being the worst.

- Gossiping
- Ruining someone's reputation
- Physical abuse
- Lying about a friend
- Date rape
- Sexual abuse
- Having premarital sex
- Random drive-by shooting
- Dropping a cement block on a car from a bridge.
- Breaking into cars

FAITH in ACTION

- 1 Decide to mend a relationship this week.
- 2 Create as a group an examination of conscience for teens—a series of questions teens can ask themselves about their relationships.
- 3 What have you learned about sin that you think teens need to know?

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