



NEW YORK
TIMES
BESTSELLER

TRUE GRETCH

WHAT I'VE LEARNED ABOUT LIFE, LEADERSHIP,
AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

GRETCHEN WHITMER

Thank you for downloading this Simon & Schuster ebook.

Get a FREE ebook when you join our mailing list. Plus, get updates on new releases, deals, recommended reads, and more from Simon & Schuster. Click below to sign up and see terms and conditions.

[CLICK HERE TO SIGN UP](#)

Already a subscriber? Provide your email again so we can register this ebook and send you more of what you like to read. You will continue to receive exclusive offers in your inbox.

For my daughters, Sherry and Sydney

Prologue

When my siblings and I were little, our grandmother Esther Whitmer, whom we called Nino, gave us three pieces of advice: Work hard. Don't get married until you're at least twenty-eight. And never part your hair in the middle.

We all grew up to be very hard workers. None of us married before twenty-eight (although my sister Liz barely made it, marrying right at that age). And I don't know what to tell you about that third one. Seriously, part your hair wherever you want. What business is it of my grandmother's?

Nino, who was my dad's mom, didn't know everything, but she knew a lot. Born on a small farm in Ohio in 1913, she lived one hundred years, right through the whole roller-coaster ride of the twentieth century and well into the twenty-first. She lived to see two world wars, depressions and recessions, humans setting foot on the moon, and the dawn of the computer age. Nino used to tell us that the world had changed more in her century than during any other in history. She was probably right. And even if she wasn't, it's not cool to argue with your hundred-year-old grandmother.

She and our grandfather Dana Whitmer, who we called Dano, lived in Pontiac, not too far from our home in East Lansing. This meant I got to spend a lot of time with her, and we became close. Nino was an elementary school teacher, and she used to send me letters with math problems. I'd work through them, then mail my answers back. Though she wasn't able to turn me into a mathematician, I loved getting those letters, our special little tradition.

Nino set a great example for us. She was smart, strong, and funny, a fashion rebel who wore white jeans year-round long before Anna Wintour said that was okay. She drove until she was ninety-eight, and her last car was a cherry-red Oldsmobile convertible. (I'd be reluctant to give up driving, too, with a car like that.) Her neighbors called her the "flower lady," because she put pink flowers in every window of her house and planted them in the park across the street. And she taught us that you can always find something good in a person. "Even the meanest person might have pretty eyes," she used to say. That advice stuck with me—the determination to always look for the good in any given person or situation.

So, my grandmother had a big effect on me. I've tried to emulate her in many ways, and apparently that now includes offering advice. It's not that I think I'm the be-all-end-all, or wiser than anyone else—far from it. I share

the opinion of my dad, Dick Whitmer, who told a reporter during one of my early campaigns that “Gretchen knows she’s not special.” Thanks, Dad! Actually, I knew what he meant—that I don’t think I’m better than anyone else. He’s the one who taught me that, after all.

But I have lived through some strange and difficult events, particularly in the past few years: Revealing on the floor of the Michigan Senate that I’d been raped in college. Governing through pandemics, armed protests, and polar vortexes. Learning that certain members of a far-right militia planned to kidnap and assassinate me. It’s hard to find the good in these situations, but following Nino’s example, that’s what I’ve tried to do. And I want to share what I’ve learned.

I’ve been lucky enough to serve the people of Michigan for more than twenty years, first as a state representative, then as a state senator, a prosecutor, and now as governor. And while my grandmother bore witness to most of the twentieth century, I’ve spent the first quarter of this century watching as the arc of our politics has bent uncomfortably toward incivility and strife.

Traveling around the state and beyond, I often get the question, “How do you stay positive in light of everything that’s happening?” The world feels very heavy right now. War is raging in the Middle East and Ukraine, xenophobia and hatred of “others” is on the rise, and political rhetoric has turned apocalyptic. But we have to find a way to keep moving ahead. We have to figure out how to do the next right thing, whatever that may be. And yes, the phrase “do the next right thing” is from a song in *Frozen II*, but the sentiment is real, and it’s one we desperately need these days.

That’s why I decided to write this book: to put a little light out there in a damn dark time. If I can tell a story that will make you think, or lighten your load, or even make you laugh, that’s what it’s all about.

So, pour yourself a glass of something, settle in, and if you feel like it, take some time to make some of Nino’s famous clover rolls to snack on while you read. The recipe, from a family cookbook my sister made called “Cooking with Half-Whits,” is on the next page.

CHAPTER 1

Don't Let the Bullies Get You Down

In 1981, when I was ten years old, *Three's Company* was a huge hit on TV. Everybody in my fifth-grade class watched it, tuning in every Tuesday night to see what kind of trouble Jack, Janet, and Chrissy were getting into.

In November of that year, the show introduced a new character named "Greedy Gretchen." Played by actress Teresa Ganzel, Greedy Gretchen was a blond bombshell who wore a spaghetti-strap dress to show off her ample bosom. Unfortunately for me, I had started developing earlier than other girls in my class, so even in the fifth grade, I was already getting kind of busty. Not surprisingly, some of the boys started calling me Greedy Gretchen. Did I hate it? You bet I did. The only thing worse than having boobs suddenly sprout on your fifth-grade body is having hormonal boys point it out every three minutes.

I hated that nickname, but what could I do about it? The boys kept calling me that until middle school, when most of the other girls finally started developing too.

That was the first of many nicknames. A few years later, I went to a summer church camp in West Virginia. Our family wasn't super-religious, but my parents divorced when I was six, and my mom and stepfather used to take us to Cascade Christian Church on the weekends we were with her. For whatever reason, the youth group took an annual trip all the way to West Virginia, so that's where I was the summer after I got my braces off.

We were playing a game that involved running all over the place, and at one point another girl tagged me. But instead of just tagging, she pushed the hell out of me (so much for *church* camp), and I went flying face-first into the cement. The impact knocked out both of my front teeth, scraped up my hands, and opened a big gash on my knee. We were out in the woods, in the middle of nowhere, and with blood gushing out of my knee the counselors had to improvise, using maxi pads to clean it up. When I finally got to the hospital, it took thirty stitches to close the cut, and the doctors sent me home toothless and in a wheelchair.

So, I returned to Michigan with a busted face and a torn-up knee, and my dad—who'd just paid thousands of dollars for braces to fix the gap between my now nonexistent front teeth—could only shake his head. "Gravity Gretchen," he called me, and the nickname stuck. I had always been a klutzy

child, banging into things and falling, and even though that girl had pushed me, this episode served to cement my reputation. But unlike when the boys nicknamed me “Greedy Gretchen,” I didn’t mind “Gravity Gretchen.” It was funny because it was true. And because my dad laughed when he called me that, it helped me learn how not to take myself too seriously.

People gave me other nicknames over the years: “Stretchin’ Gretchen,” “Fetchin’ Gretchen,” and much later, “Big Gretch,” which you’ll read about a few chapters from now. But there was one nickname in particular that managed to propel me into the newspapers—though, in fairness, the coverage came about not so much because of the nickname itself, but because of who gave it to me.

“That woman from Michigan.” That’s me! Then-President Donald J. Trump bestowed this very special name on me in the spring of 2020—though what he actually said, speaking to Vice President Mike Pence at a White House press conference, was “Don’t call the woman in Michigan.” It was his latest salvo in a battle that had been brewing between us for weeks, ever since Covid-19 began shutting down the country and growing numbers of Michiganders were dying.

In the early days of the pandemic, the White House didn’t take it seriously enough. As hospitals overflowed and makeshift morgues filled up, governors scrambled to get basic medical supplies such as masks, surgical gloves, and ventilators. Detroit was hit particularly hard, along with New York City, Chicago, and New Orleans. We hoped and expected that the federal government would help, but instead, the president pitted the states against each other in a cruel *Hunger Games*-style scramble for equipment.

After I pointed out the lack of a federal strategy to combat Covid during a March 16 interview on MSNBC, Trump took to Twitter the next morning to chastise me. “Failing Michigan Governor must work harder and be much more proactive. We are pushing her to get the job done. I stand with Michigan!” he tweeted at 6:27 a.m. *Well, good morning!* So I tweeted right back: “Now that I’ve got your attention, Mr. President—attack tweets won’t solve this crisis. But swift and clear guidance, tests, personal protective equipment, and resources would.” This exchange set the tone. And then it got worse.

On Thursday, March 26, I requested that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) declare a federal disaster in Michigan, which would release funds for our state. At least seven other states had already

received this designation, and I wanted to make sure Michiganders got the federal dollars we needed. Trump didn't like it. He called in to Sean Hannity's show that evening, and amid a rambling forty-minute interview, he said "And your governor of Michigan, I mean, she's not stepping up. I don't know if she knows what's going on. But all she does is sit there and blame the federal government. She doesn't get it done." He took a moment to complain about Washington governor Jay Inslee, then came back to me, saying, "We've had a big problem with the young, a woman governor from, you know who I'm talking about, from Michigan." Did he not know my name? Or was he just acting like he was too far above me to speak it?

I decided to help him out. "Hi, my name is Gretchen Whitmer, and that governor is me," I tweeted, shortly after the Hannity interview aired. "I've asked repeatedly and respectfully for help. We need it. No more political attacks, just PPEs, ventilators, N95 masks, test kits. You said you stand with Michigan—prove it." I had been governor for only a little over a year, and getting into a fight with the president wasn't something I was keen to do. I did it because I was scared. Michiganders were dying, and I had to do whatever it took to get the federal government's attention and help.

The next day, March 27, was the day Trump talked about me at the White House news briefing. Once again complaining about how governors were too demanding, and not "appreciative" enough, he relayed advice that he'd supposedly given to Vice President Pence. "I say, 'Mike, don't call the governor of Washington. You're wasting your time with him. Don't call the woman in Michigan'... You know what I say? If they don't treat you right, don't call."

And then it was off to the races for That Woman from Michigan. People jumped at the chance to tweet about it, talk about it, even make T-shirts and bumper stickers with it. My team sent out emails quoting the nickname, instantly turning it from a liability into an advantage. One woman even got an image of my face and the words "That woman" tattooed on her leg. And when another sent me a blue T-shirt with the phrase stenciled in giant white letters, I wore it during a video interview on *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*.

To this day, people are still selling That Woman from Michigan stickers, mugs, shirts, candles (scented with "lime, rose, geranium and musk"), pillows, trucker hats, and even nail polish (handmade, toxin- and cruelty-free, in Traverse City). So, it was not only good for me, you could argue that it's

been good for Michigan's Etsy community. And it only happened because I refused to let the president define me. I took his insult, flipped it, and made it my own.



That's the secret to dealing with bullies: You take their weapon and make it your shield. Every time Trump gave me a nickname, I made it my own. On March 27, 2020, he tweeted, "I love Michigan, one of the reasons we are doing such a GREAT job for them during this horrible Pandemic. Yet your Governor, Gretchen 'Half' Whitmer, is in way over her head, she doesn't have a clue. Likes blaming everyone for her own ineptitude!" Oooh, "half-Whit." Good one! Good enough to put on the cover of our family cookbook, where it makes me laugh every time I see it. (Liz and I now call our kids half-Whits too, since they're half-Whitmer.) And hey—at least the president finally learned my name.

Sometimes bullies need a taste of their own medicine. In late 2011, when I was in the Michigan State Senate, the Republican majority passed a supposedly anti-bullying bill. They named it "Matt's Safe School Law," after a fourteen-year-old student named Matt Epling who took his life after upperclassmen hazed and assaulted him. Matt was one of my constituents, an honor roll student and a sweet kid whose fellow eighth-graders voted him "Best Smile" and "Best Personality." His suicide was shocking and tragic, and it would have been entirely appropriate to honor his memory by naming a true anti-bullying bill after him.

But at the last minute, the Catholic Church, among others, pressured the bill's authors into adding language exempting people who bully for a "sincerely held religious belief or moral conviction." Seriously? This made a complete mockery of what the bill was supposed to do, giving anyone a free pass to bully if they claimed to be religious. Matt's dad, Kevin Epling, said it "tarnished the memory" of his son. In a floor speech, I tore into the stupidity of it, saying "Not only does this not protect kids who are bullied, it further endangers them by legitimizing excuses for tormenting a student.... After the way you've gutted it, it wouldn't have done a damn thing to save Matt! This is worse than doing nothing! It's a Republican license to bully."

That phrase gave my team an idea. We printed up a big cartoon of Senate Majority Leader Randy Richardville, showing him holding a driver's license with the words "License to Bully." I didn't have any personal beef with Randy, and in fact we were good friends. But this seemed like the best way to draw attention to the sheer callousness of the bill they were trying to push through. And it worked. The Republicans changed tack, adopting the House version of the bill, which condemned bullying full stop—no exemptions.

Politics can feel like blood sport these days. Luckily for me, we Whitmers have a thick skin and a short memory. We're good at turning insults into humor and quick to laugh at ourselves—and that's the best way to disarm bullies. You can trust me on this, or I'm not That Woman from Michigan.

A Note on Gallows Humor

If you've read this far, you know how much I love humor. But what the Whitmers *really* love is gallows humor. The darker the better.

Once, when my brother Richard was little, he was mouthing off to my mom while they were driving in Grand Rapids. She got fed up, pulled the car over, yanked him out, and gave him a spanking right by the side of the road. By chance, she happened to have pulled the car over at a funeral home—and to this day, every time my sister or I drive past that funeral home, we snap a picture with our cell phones and text it to him. No comment, no text, just the picture.

After some in a right-wing militia plotted to kidnap and kill me in 2020—a shocking turn of events that you'll read about in a later chapter—I would talk about it on the campaign trail. “What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. So I guess I'm strong as hell now!” At the 2022 state Democratic convention, I decided my walkout song should be “I'm Still Standing,” by Elton John.

My favorite moments, though, have been with my friend Rich Brown, who served as a state representative and is now the clerk of the Michigan House. Rich is hilarious, a longtime fixture in state politics who always has a smile for everyone. He's a big guy, tall and burly, but the most noticeable thing about him is that in place of his left arm, which he lost in a freak lawnmower accident as a child, he's got a prosthetic hook. When we were serving together in the House, I'd say, “Well, I'm the chair, but Rich is my number two. He's my right-hand man!” And people would look utterly aghast, like *What in the hell is wrong with this woman?* Then Rich would say, “Yeah, and don't piss me off, because I've got a mean left hook!”

My mom was the queen of finding something funny even in the darkest of times, and she passed that skill along to Richard, Liz, and me. Sherry Whitmer was a hardworking and successful lawyer, an assistant attorney general in Michigan who wore her accomplishments lightly and never took herself too seriously. Her laugh was infectious, and so loud it once got us kicked out of a restaurant. I was a bit of a hellion as a teenager, drinking and getting suspended from school, so we clashed hard in those years. But after I left home for college, we were able to appreciate each other more, and we became very close.

In 2000, she was diagnosed with glioblastoma multi-forme—the same kind of deadly brain tumor that later took the life of John McCain and Beau

Biden. After her first surgery, we hugged and cried, and then I climbed onto the hospital bed next to her. It was the most terrifying, heartbreaking, wrenching time I can remember.

As we lay there together, she said, “Well, Gretchen, at least I know you’ll be the best senator there ever was.” Then she paused. “Or, wait—you’re running for the House.” And we both just cracked up. It was insanely funny, and we ended up laughing so hard we could hardly breathe. Her husband (my stepfather) walked in, expecting to find us weeping, and looked at us like, “What the hell?”

When the doctors told her she had only four to six months to live, she was scared.¹ But somehow, she still found ways to laugh. One of her favorite dark jokes was inspired by the 1990 movie *Kindergarten Cop*. Arnold Schwarzenegger plays a police detective who goes undercover as a kindergarten teacher. At one point, he puts his head in his hands and complains of a headache, and a little boy suggests he might have a tumor. “It’s NAHT a TUMAAA” Arnold barks back, and we all found that so hilarious, we used to say it whenever one of us had a headache. When Mom got sick, she took to saying, “It’s NAHT a TUMAAA! Oh wait—it actually is!”

It’s so important to be able to find the light, even if the light is a dumb, filthy, or totally inappropriate joke. I still laugh when I think of that moment with my mom. It beats remembering the really sad moments, which we’ll all have so many of in our lives.



Baby Liz and me with our beautiful mom, 1973

1. ¹ In typical fashion, my mother thoroughly outperformed, living another eighteen months.

CHAPTER 2

Never Give Up

I love listening to music, but there's one song that I can't bear to hear. Sinéad O'Connor's "Nothing Compares 2 U" is hauntingly beautiful. It was a huge hit in 1990, playing on the radio constantly when I was a freshman at Michigan State University. And that's why I can't stand hearing it. Because it takes me right back to the traumatic event that happened to me that year, when I was raped by another student.

At first, I didn't tell anyone. Not my friends, my siblings, my parents—no one. I felt ashamed, even though I hadn't done anything wrong. The assault rocked my sense of the world and my place in it. And I was terrified that I might be pregnant with my attacker's baby. To my immense relief, I wasn't. But if I had been, I at least knew that the choice of how to handle that situation would have been up to me.

Over the years, I revealed the assault only to a handful of partners, including my first husband, Gary Shrewsbury, and the man I married in 2011, Marc Mallory. Other than that, I didn't talk about it, and I tried hard not to think about it. My feeling was that bad things happen to people all the time. Better not to dwell on them, but instead just forge ahead as best we can.

Fast-forward more than two decades later. In 2013, I was serving as Michigan's Senate minority leader, in a government dominated by Republicans from the governor's office through the House and Senate. That year, the Republicans tried to push through a bill requiring women in Michigan to buy extra health insurance for abortion coverage—even in cases of rape or incest. If you got pregnant from an assault and hadn't pre-bought the insurance, well, too bad. You couldn't buy it after getting pregnant, regardless of the circumstances.

This was not only cruel, it was absurd. Did lawmakers really expect women to "plan ahead" for a potential pregnancy resulting from a possible future assault? Passing this law was essentially requiring women to buy rape insurance. It was infuriating.

Polls showed that Michigan voters opposed it too, and Republican governor Rick Snyder had vetoed similar legislation a year prior. But the anti-abortion group Right to Life sidestepped the opposition by gathering enough signatures on a petition to bring the measure directly to the legislature. If the House and Senate passed this bill, the governor couldn't

veto it this time, because it was a citizens' petition. This was a terrible loophole in the law, an end run on women's rights. And the Republicans, knowing there was strong opposition to the bill, decided not to hold any hearings on it, to stifle any dissent. They just wanted to get the thing passed.

Those of us who opposed the bill would have only one chance to speak against it, on the day it came up for a vote. My staff and I prepared a speech for me to give on the Senate floor, whenever that day came. I was angry, and the remarks reflected that. They were personal and emotional, but they did not include the fact that I had been raped. Because no one on my staff had any idea that had happened.

In the Michigan Senate, a bill gets read into the record three times before a vote is taken. The first time, the secretary of the Senate just announces its title—basically a heads-up that it's coming. The second time, the secretary announces that the bill is open for debate. If you want to speak for or against it, you push a button on your Senate desk, which registers your name on an electronic board. Staffers can't push that button—it has to be you. So, if you've popped out to go to the bathroom, or you miss the announcement, or you just don't get to your desk fast enough, the majority party can "call the question," cutting off debate before you get your chance to speak. (When the majority is abusing power, this is a move they regularly deploy.) The third reading is when senators get up to speak.

On December 11, 2013—a date I'll never forget, because it happened to be Nino's one hundredth birthday—the secretary announced the "Abortion Insurance Opt-Out Act." Today was the day, our one chance to try to persuade the Republican side how cruel and unfair this bill really was. Not only would it penalize women who became pregnant through assault, it would also affect women who had miscarriages and needed dilation and curettage (D&C) to remove fetal tissue.

I knew that my Democratic colleague Jim Ananich and his wife Andrea had been trying to have a baby, and that they had, sadly, suffered a recent miscarriage. He and I had already talked about how this law would affect them, since their insurance would no longer cover all the necessary medical treatment upon any future pregnancy loss. Don't get me wrong; I believe that women should have access to abortions and be in complete control of what happens to our own bodies, no matter whether we're trying to get pregnant or not. But I thought that Jim and Andrea's story, involving a couple who desperately wanted children yet would still be penalized by this law, might

resonate with the other side.

After the secretary announced the bill for the first time, I walked to Jim's desk, knelt beside him, and quietly asked if he would be willing to speak on the floor about how the law would affect his family. But the miscarriage had happened very recently, and the pain was just too raw. "I'm sorry," he told me, his face drawn and tense. "I just can't talk about it."¹ I told him I understood, and then stood to walk back to my desk.

And that's when it hit me. Yes, Jim had a personal story that might make a difference if he shared it that day. But so did I. How could I ask him to publicly bare his soul if I wasn't willing to do that myself?

The secretary read the bill into the record for the second time, and I quickly pushed the button on my desk. My name popped up on the board behind a few Republicans who'd already been slotted in—a common tactic by the party in power, putting their people first so they can front-load the narrative. Knowing I had a short window before my turn to speak, I grabbed my executive assistant Nancy Bohnet and communications director Bob McCann and pulled them into the caucus room.

With so little time, I had to get right to the point. I told them I had been raped in college, and that I was considering talking about it in my floor speech. Then I asked what they thought.

Nancy immediately said, "Don't do it. It won't change any votes, and you'll be making yourself vulnerable." Nancy, who had been with me for my whole political career—and is with me to this day—is a strong and politically savvy woman. She knew the Republicans would vote party line, no matter what I said in my speech. Beyond that, she genuinely cared about how this revelation might affect me. She was looking out for me.

I turned to Bob, whose face was ashen. "I don't have any advice," he said. "I can't even put myself in your place. You should do whatever you think is right."

We headed back into the chamber, and soon enough, it was my turn to speak. I walked up to the lectern, my prepared speech in hand, still unsure what to do.

"Thank you, madam chair," I said. "I rise for my 'no' vote explanation." Then I began reading my remarks.

I rise in opposition to the so-called citizens' initiative before us that

would require Michigan women to pay for a separate insurance rider to cover abortions, regardless of the circumstances surrounding their pregnancy.

Apparently, the holiday season of goodwill toward men reads more like *your* will toward women, as the Republican male majority continues to ignorantly and unnecessarily weigh in on important women's health issues that they know *nothing* about.

As a legislator, a lawyer, a woman and the mother of two girls, I think the fact that rape insurance is even being discussed by this body is repulsive, let alone the way it has been orchestrated and shoved through this legislature.

And for those of you who want to act aghast that I'd use a term like "rape insurance" to describe the proposal here in front of us, you should be even more offended that it's [an] absolutely accurate description of what this proposal requires. This tells women who were raped and became pregnant that *they* should have thought ahead and bought special insurance for it....

I've said it before and I will say it again. This is by far one of the most misogynistic proposals I've ever seen in the Michigan legislature.

I delivered my remarks as deliberately and forcefully as possible, letting my anger show. In the back of my mind, though, my thoughts were spinning. For twenty-three years, I had pushed down the awful memory of what happened to me in college. I never in my life imagined talking about it in a public forum. Yet suddenly, in the course of one short speech, with TV cameras rolling, I had to decide whether to reveal my deepest secret to the world. Once it was out, there was no turning back.

My mouth went dry. It was terrifying to think of opening myself up, of telling this room full of mostly men about being assaulted as a young woman. (At that time, there were more men named "John" than women in the Senate, five to four.) Yet, the longer I spoke, the more I realized I had to do it. With only a few minutes left of my time, I put my papers aside and began speaking off the cuff. "I have a lot more prepared remarks here," I said, "but I think it's important for me to just mention a couple of things."

I spoke briefly about a woman named Jenny Lane, who had written a letter opposing the bill. I mentioned having "a colleague" whose wife's pregnancy went awry and required a D&C, taking care not to name him. Finally, I gathered my courage and began speaking the words that I had never

imagined saying in public.

I'm about to tell you something that I have not shared with many people in my life. But over twenty years ago, I was a victim of rape. And thank God it didn't result in a pregnancy, because I can't imagine going through what I went through and then having to consider what to do about an unwanted pregnancy from an attacker. And as a mother with two girls, the thought that they would ever go through something like I did keeps me up at night.

At the mention of my daughters, my voice broke. I was fighting back tears, but after taking a moment to compose myself, I went on.

I thought this was all behind me. You know how tough I can be. The thought and the memory of that still haunts me. If this were law then, and I had become pregnant, I would not be able to have coverage, because of this. How extreme—how extreme does this measure need to be?

I am not the only woman in our state that has faced that horrible circumstance. I am *not* enjoying talking about it. It's something I've hidden for a long time. But I think you need to see the face of the women that you are impacting by this vote today. I think you need to think of the girls that we're raising and what kind of a state we want to be, where you would put your approval on something this extreme.

When I finished my remarks, the chamber was absolutely silent. I quickly turned and walked away from the lectern, my heart pounding. Had I really just said all that? Would it come back to haunt me somehow? It would be on TV and in all the newspapers, that much I knew. With a shock, I realized that I needed to call my dad right away, so he could hear it from me and not from news coverage. My mother had passed in 2002, so she would never know about the assault. And even though my daughters were just ten and eleven, I told them too, as forthrightly and calmly as I could. I didn't want them learning it from school friends whose parents might have been discussing it.

As soon as I could, I hurried back to my office and called my father. "Dad, I just wanted you to know that I gave a speech on the floor, and it's going to be in the news, but I shared that I was raped in college." It's a truly strange way to have to reveal such a thing to your father, but what choice did

I have? He was stunned, and of course upset for me. My dad and I have always been very close, so this was a tough moment for both of us.

After all the senators who wanted to speak had spoken, and the vote was finally taken, I was devastated to see that choosing to share my painful secret hadn't changed a damn thing. Every single Republican, and one Democrat, voted in favor of the bill, which meant I had pried myself open for nothing. My disappointment flared into anger when a Republican senator walked up to me afterward and said, "I think you're really brave, and I wish I could have voted with you. My wife was raped in college too." All I could think was, *How dare you walk up and say this to me, having cast the vote that you did?* It was one thing if people didn't comprehend what they were voting on. But here was a person who understood, and still chose to vote the way that he did. What hope did we have?

The next morning, I headed to work feeling hollowed-out and depressed. What had been the point of laying my soul bare like that? Then, during my drive, one of my staffers called. We had been inundated by emails and voicemails from people all over the country—and even as far away as Tunisia. My floor speech had been shared all over social media, and hundreds of people, including many who were survivors of assault themselves, had reached out to offer words of encouragement and thanks. It was a relief to realize that a moment I had feared was a waste had instead provided comfort, and might actually become a galvanizing force, for many women.

To my surprise, I was invited to appear on *The Rachel Maddow Show*—not usually something that happens to a state senator. In a short interview, I said we would keep fighting against the law, and that I planned to introduce legislation to repeal it. "Considering the makeup of the legislature, I'm not optimistic that we'll get it through," I said, "but I am optimistic, because I know the people of this state are robustly against this legislation, and I believe if we go to the ballot, we can win. But it's a heavy lift and we've got a big fight on our hands."

I wasn't wrong about that part. The fight would take years but seeing the reaction of women to not just my story, but the stories and speeches of all who fought against that terrible law, was inspiring. I was determined not to give up until we got it off the books.

Over the next decade, we rolled up our sleeves and got to work. We passed a ballot initiative to draw fair districts, so gerrymandering didn't

artificially keep a minority party in power in perpetuity. When I won the governor's race in 2018, we used that momentum to strengthen the Democratic Party's infrastructure, leading to more electoral wins—including turning Michigan for Biden in 2020. And we galvanized voters who cared about reproductive freedom. In 2022, with a constitutional amendment to protect abortion rights on the ballot, voters came out in droves. For the first time since 1984, Democrats won the governorship, the Senate, and the House. With control of the legislature, we could finally repeal that terrible law.

On December 11, 2023, the ten-year anniversary of the day I made that floor speech, I once again stepped to the lectern in the Michigan State Senate. But this time, it wasn't to pry myself open or plead for Republicans to pay attention to the needs of women. It was to announce that as governor, I had just signed into law the final bill of the Reproductive Health Act, a new package of laws that would protect the rights of Michigan's women—and repeal the rape insurance law.

Wearing a fuchsia blazer, surrounded by women, I proudly announced that we were striking down the politically motivated and medically unnecessary laws and restoring personal freedoms for women.

“The moral of this story is, don't stop fighting for what you know is right,” I went on. “There's a warning in the story, too, [to] anyone who wants to roll back our rights: Don't mess with American women. We're tough and we fight back and we will win. You come for our rights and we will work harder to protect them.” It was one of my proudest moments yet in politics.

When I think back to how depressed I felt after failing to sway the vote in 2013, I remember what a wise therapist once told me. “Everyone is a lump of clay,” she said. “When a lump of clay is hollowed out, it becomes a cup, a vessel.” I love the idea that when something is taken from you, what's left behind has a purpose. For a long time, I wanted to ignore the terrible event that happened to me in college. But now I recognize that it also helped to make me who I am, a woman who's willing to fight and not inclined to give up. I'll always be grateful that I could use that bad experience for good.

This chapter opened with a song that I can't bear to hear, and then it just got heavier from there... so let's close it out on a lighter note. I *do* love listening to music, so I've pulled together some of my favorite songs, if you want to give them a listen too. Turn the page for the True Gretch playlist.

1. [1](#). Jim has since spoken publicly about it, and he and Andrea gave me permission to tell this story.