

“My Words” by Hannah Rials. A flash fiction piece. .

Damaged. Traumatized. Broken. These were my words. People thought this when they saw me, so I started to think them about myself. Thirteen years ago, my stepfather left a mark on me. I couldn't go anywhere without feeling like everyone knew. I was marked. It was prominent. My past, my stepdad, was bigger than me.

That had been my mindset for six years after I found my voice. The feeling of being exposed, of thinking everyone could see into the darkest holes of my past, filled my head. About five years ago, I started wearing the baggiest clothes I could get my hands on. And if I could bear the summer heat, my clothes were long sleeve. I got it in my mind that the clothes could cover up everything I thought people could see about me. And for a little while, that made things better. But my clothes were just a Band-Aid.

I'd stopped my therapy a few years back. I didn't feel like talking anymore, or drawing. That's all I'd been doing for two years, and it had gotten me nowhere. So I stopped going, ignored the calls from my therapist. My mom should've made me go, but after being oblivious to her husband for three years, she felt like she didn't have a right to have an opinion about my life...when I still needed her to.

The more I covered myself up, the darker my mind got. I couldn't escape thoughts of him. He followed when I went to school and into my dreams. I couldn't stop thinking about how I threw up afterward, how I cried, but my mom never heard me. Then I thought about my mom—how she would tiptoe around me, how she thought out every word profusely, how she would just randomly apologize to me, never letting me move on. We'd be watching TV, and she'd just whisper into her hands, “I'm so sorry.”

But nothing she said helped. It just reminded me of all the pain. Nothing anyone said helped. So I sunk deeper and deeper, until it was almost too later. I knew he was in prison, but at night, I'd start awake, look to my window, and I swear, he was standing there, watching me, waiting.

I'd never gotten my license, or any driving material for that matter. So I walked everywhere. I didn't mind. I knew back roads and cut through woods to avoid the public eye. I know now that there's no way they knew about me. People are oblivious, and they don't want to see behind my mask. But I didn't know that then. Sometimes, I had places to go, though that wasn't often. Mostly it was just to school and back. But sometimes, I'd just walk with no destination in mind.

One day, when the image and memories of my stepdad were stronger than normal, taking even more of an effect on me, I somehow ended up at the Children's Advocacy Center where I'd been taken after I'd finally told my grandma what my stepdad had been doing to me for three years.

The Center isn't what you'd think—an old, blue house with a tall tree in the front yard and cobblestones leading up to the door. It looked like it could be in a fairy tale. I stopped, looking at it, remembering the people who helped me—the officers, the kind interviewers and therapists, and the nice lady who colored with me. And I started to cry, regretting holding everything in for three years. I was so tired of holding it in. I missed my therapist. I wondered if she was still there, helping other kids like me.

Half of my brain, the darker half, told me to keep walking. But there was a smaller, stronger part that moved my feet along the cobblestone path and opened the door. A feeling of safety washed over me the minute I stepped into the waiting room. This had always been a safe place. There was no one in the waiting room, but I saw a volunteer working at the desk. After a moment, she glanced up at me and smiled. Another moment, and the woman with the nice smile that colored with me walked down the hallway, stopping when she saw me. She hesitated before smiling kindly and opening the door for me. “Hi, there! Can we help you?” I don’t know why I thought she might’ve remembered me.

I stood there, hesitating, fighting the two parts of my brain. “I-I don’t know,” I said. Tracy was her name, I remembered. “I hope so. Is...is Katherine here still?” I asked, looking nervously at the volunteer. Her gaze made me want to leave.

“She sure is. Would you like to see her? I don’t think she has an appointment right now.” Tracy eyed me like she knew what was going on. Maybe she did remember me after all. I nodded and followed her up the familiar, old, rickety stairs. We turned to the right, where I used to turn to the left. All the memories from this place came rushing back—all the tears, and talks, and anger. I stopped, ready to turn back. But then Katherine came out of her new office and immediately recognized me. She saw me.

“Margaret!” She seemed so excited to see me, and I suddenly felt very ashamed of my baggy, long-sleeve t-shirt, of the jeans that hid everything, of my unkempt hair. And I regretted the three years that I’d ignored the help she’d offered me.

And I started crying, right there in the hallway. And I ran to Katherine and hugged her. It was the first time I’d hugged someone in three years. I cried until I ran out of tears. Slowly, Katherine led me into her office and closed the door, shutting out the nightmares and visions, the fear and worry and shame. And I told her everything. And for the first time, talking helped.

That was five years ago. I’m twenty now, and I’ve gone to therapy every week since that day. I still cry sometimes. And I still feel the mark that my stepfather left on me. But now, I have a purpose. When I walk, I have a destination. And now, I have new words for myself—healed, loved, peaceful. I’m a lot of things, and my past has made me into who I am. A student, a friend, a musician, an employee. But most of all, I’m a survivor.