

# From Chaos to Courage: A Girl's Story of Adversity and Magic in 2001

Trigger Warning: Sexual Abuse, Eating Disorder, 9/11

I was 11 in the hot summer of 2001. I was a skinny girl, very earnest and socially awkward. It was the start of Harry Potter mania, a thing in which I greatly participated (I'm a Ravenclaw, if that tells you how dorky I was). However, that was the summer I lost almost everything. Instead of getting my Hogwarts letter, I was sexually abused.

The summer was hot, full of time spent in the pool getting sunburned with my sisters, bit by mosquitoes, and flirting with boys online. I even got my first period. eBay was popular, and I spent hours buying Sailor Moon items online. Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets had just landed in my hands. In my childish wonder, I hoped I'd get a belated Hogwarts letter. I also believed I was safe in my house with an older male. I was mistaken on both counts.

I won't say the details of what happened one late summer night. The nuances aren't important, but the fact that it happened is. It was a crime against a human, a minor, a *me*. The abuse became ongoing and the effects on me became immediately obvious. I lost all my religious

faith, starved my body, and closed myself off from everyone and everything. I returned to school after that summer completely traumatized and frozen mentally.

On September 1st, something even bigger happened to shake my worldview: 9/11. The towers were destroyed, along with thousands of people. I had seen the twin towers on TV but didn't know their names until that day in science class when I was told our country was under attack. Post-911 was scary and things were changing so quickly. I couldn't trust people and now I felt I couldn't trust the world.

We all know what happened after that September day. Mayhem. War. Death. Everything leading up to the world we live in now, 22 years later.

But no one seemed to know what happened to me. I too was facing a battle. Depression, low self-esteem, and starvation stemmed from what was now continued abuse. I fought for my survival, albeit with less grace than I'd hoped for at times. Years of 500 calorie days and not telling a soul what was happening. I lost my mischievous, red-haired childhood love (who I'll call Ron) along with some of my health and ultimately many years to mental illness. It was the dark ages for me.

If you've seen Season 4 of Stranger Things, you saw Max literally running for her life while pieces of the Upside Down crash all around her. She was going through a very hard time and didn't know if she wanted to live. She withdrew from everyone and became a shadow of her former self. When she runs and saves herself, I cry every time because that's exactly what I did: struggle for my life, my identity, and run and run.

“I’m still here.” I got on medicine, worked hard with many therapists, went to college and then to grad school. I traveled from Paris to Ecuador to Japan. I even got Ron back in 2020. We just celebrated our third-year anniversary. I’m a writer, a public health professional, and someone who loves to help other people and animals.

I’m not the same person I was. How could I be? After many years of therapy, that year doesn’t hurt me as much. But on midnights like this, I can still go instantly back to being that messy, uncertain, dark-haired girl who was pleading with the universe for things to change. 2001 was the hardest year of my life, but it didn’t defeat me—hope is hard to kill.