


THE TRIUMPHANT NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER!

three little words

A Memoir

A black and white photograph of a young girl with curly hair, wearing a white dress and large white angel wings. She is standing in a doorway, looking towards the camera. The background is dark, and the lighting highlights her and her wings.

**INCLUDES
READING
GROUP GUIDE
AND BONUS
MATERIAL**

ASHLEY RHODES-COURTER

the day they stole my mother from me

Two days compete for the worst day in my life: The first is the day I was taken from my mother; the second is the day I arrived at the Mosses' foster home four years later. Three weeks before I lost my mother, I had left South Carolina bound for Florida with her, her husband, and my brother. I was three and a half years old and remember lying on the backseat watching slippery raindrops making patterns as they plopped down the car's windows.

My infant brother, Luke, was in a car seat, which nobody had bothered to belt in, so it squished me into the door when his father took a sharp turn. Luke had a heart monitor, but it must not have been on him all the time because I remember using it on my favorite toy: a Teddy Ruxpin bear.

Until Dustin Grover came along, we shared a trailer with my mother's twin sister, Leanne, who had dropped out of school to help support me. Even though the twins

looked completely different, they were interchangeable to me since Aunt Leanne spent almost as much time with me as my mother, and I never minded when one left and the other took over. I loved to nestle by Aunt Leanne's side. She would rake my curls with her fingers while talking on the phone to her friends.

My mother was only seventeen when she gave birth to me. If she and my aunt were anything like most teenagers, they probably were more interested in hanging out with friends than changing diapers. Nevertheless, they worked different shifts and took turns caring for me. Their trailer became the local hangout because there was no adult supervision.

"Turn that down," my mother yelled one afternoon. I was watching cartoons, trying to drown out the teen voices by raising the volume higher and higher. "I said, turn that down!"

"Well, if you would shut the hell up, I could hear the damn TV," I said. My mother and her friends burst out laughing.

I was an intuitive two-year-old soaking up language and behaviors from a crew of rowdy adolescents who were trying on adult attitudes and habits. I got attention by acting grown up, and my mother bragged about how early I was toilet trained and how clearly I spoke.

My mother had a carefree attitude. She was too self-absorbed to fuss about my safety. Although she always strapped me in my car seat, her battered truck did not have seat belts. Driving down a bumpy South Carolina road, the unlocked door popped open. I tumbled out, rolling a few times before landing on the shoulder. My mother

turned the truck around and found me waving at her. I was still buckled into the seat.

When my mother began living with Dustin—whom everyone called “Dusty”—the whole mood in the house shifted and Aunt Leanne wasn’t around as much. Dusty was like an ocean that changed unexpectedly with the weather. One moment he could be placid, the next he turned into choppy waves that broke hard and stung. I cowered when he yelled. Since my mother was busy with me, she did not always have the perfect hot meal her boyfriend expected ready the moment he walked in the door.

“Can’t you even bake a damn biscuit right?” he yelled after he saw the burnt bottom on one, sending the pie tin flying like a Frisbee.

I hid under my blanket as I always did when the fighting started, hoping it would protect me from their nasty words or physical brawls. I peered through a hole at a single object—like a shoe—and tried to make everything else disappear.

I remember when my pregnant mother awoke from a nap and found my aunt and Dusty sitting close together watching television. She caught them tickling and laughing. My mother screamed at my aunt, “How could you? He’s the father of my baby!”

“You sure of that?” my aunt screeched back before she slammed the screen door behind her.

After that, she was gone for weeks, and I missed her so much that I would curl my hair around my own fingers and pretend it was her doing it.

Not long after that, there was a new baby: Tommy. My mother brought him home in a yellow blanket and let me

**IT ONLY TAKES THREE LITTLE WORDS
TO BREAK FREE FROM THE PAST.**

"Sunshine, you're my baby and I'm your only mother. You must mind the one taking care of you, but she's not your mama." Ashley Rhodes-Courter spent nine years of her life in fourteen different foster homes, living by those words. As her mother spirals out of control, Ashley is left clinging to an unpredictable, dissolving relationship, all the while getting pulled deeper and deeper into the foster care system.

Painful memories of being taken away from her home quickly become consumed by real-life horrors, where Ashley is juggled between case-workers, shuffled from school to school, and forced to endure manipulative, humiliating treatment from a very abusive foster family. In this inspiring, unforgettable memoir, Ashley finds the courage to succeed—and in doing so, discovers the power of her own voice.

Visit the author at her website:
rhodes-courter.com



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