

# MELANIE

By Mary Jo Hazard

*April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month. Child abuse is defined as: “Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation; or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm.”*

Several years ago, I worked as a therapist in a child abuse treatment center. I counseled victims of physical abuse, sexual abuse and traumatic loss. Melanie was one of these children.

Melanie’s mother circled the block in her car honking the horn and screaming “Mel-an-ie, get out here. Get the f... out here.”

The little girl curled into a ball on my lap and covered her ears. I wrapped my arms around her and rocked her back and forth. We were in my office in a child abuse treatment center waiting for the police. I kept my eyes on the door, took a few deep breaths and prayed they’d get her quickly.

Three years earlier, Melanie’s brother died. He was six years old. His mother told the police he killed himself because he was sad. The police investigation was inconclusive, and the boy’s death was labeled suspicious. A family courts’ judge ordered the family into long term counseling to keep an eye on the two remaining children.

I’d been Melanie’s therapist for almost a year. At first, she refused to talk. If I spoke to her, she’d crawl under a table, jam her fingers in her ears and stick out her tongue. Coaxing her out was impossible.

For weeks Melanie sat under the table while I read stories out loud. One day when I was almost finished with a book, a grubby hand reached up and grabbed it. “What a dumb story to read to a little kid,” she said, standing up. “I’ll pick out my own.”

Just like that, trust was established. Melanie began to relax and enjoy our sessions.

That afternoon, she’d raced into my office and slammed the door. “I want you to write a letter,” she said, dragging a chair over to my desk.

Melanie liked to dictate stories. It distanced her from the trauma she’d experienced and gave her control.

She climbed into the chair and whispered. “Hurry, cause my birthday’s next week. I’ll be six. Now write.”

*I’m running away tonight. I tried last night, but I fell asleep. I don’t wanna kill myself. Leave your window open. I gotta come in at night ‘cause I’m scared of the dark. I’ll stay under the back porch in the daytime. Maybe if you don’t have another kid in here,*

*I can come in and talk.. And maybe you can leave me some of your lunch, if you don't eat it. If it rains I could stay in your closet, you could take out stuff. Okay?*

Sobbing, she flung herself at me.

I notified the Clinical Director, and she called the police. When Melanie's mother found out she left the building screaming obscenities..

We waited. An hour later, the police arrived. One of the responding officers told me he remembered the family. He'd been on duty the night her brother died and he'd never forgotten it. The policeman promised Melanie he'd take her to a safe place--she didn't need to stay under the porch behind my office.

Before Melanie left, I bent down and gave her a kiss. She looked into the mirror over my desk at the lipstick mark on her forehead. "Kiss me again," she said, throwing both arms around me. "I look so good with love."

**Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453)**

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