

A Lonely Girl

by ReadWorks



HUCKLEBERRY FINN.

Melanie doesn't like to be in public. It's an effort for her mom to even get her to go to school. Sometimes, on the bad days, she decides she can't handle being in the classroom for six whole hours. On the bad days, her mom lets her stay in bed as long as she reads something useful. This has resulted in Melanie having read all of Shakespeare's plays and sonnets, much of 19th-century French literature, some 19th-century Russian literature, and Mark Twain's collected novels and essays. These are the books Melanie's mom thinks are useful. They teach Melanie about the complexities of the human heart, but not necessarily how to have a conversation with a boy her own age.

On the bad days, Melanie's mom brings her a sandwich, a glass of apple juice, and some peanuts for lunch. She sits on the edge of Melanie's bed and looks at what she is reading that day.

"Getting through the Twain all right?" her mom asks.

"It's okay," Melanie says. She maneuvers the food to her mouth and tries to breathe deeply and

calmly, like her doctors have taught her. But calming her face long enough to take a bite is an almost impossible task. Her mouth twitches frantically, and the small bite of sandwich inside falls out.

Her mom sighs, impatiently. "Oh, come on Melanie," she says. "Certainly you can do better than that."

"Mom, just leave me alone!" Melanie shouts. In her mind, the words flow smoothly out of her mouth, the tone familiar in its annoyance. Listening to the words as she speaks them, however, is a lesson in deciphering. Sometimes the twitches affect even the words she tries to speak.

"I'm sorry," her mom says. She pats Melanie's knee. Melanie hates the welling of pity she sees rise up in her mom's face. Tears come to her eyes, a vein pops out of her forehead, and Melanie knows exactly what she's thinking- *my daughter is so pathetic*.

Melanie has a problem with tics. The problem began to develop when she was around eight years old. Suddenly one day, her right eyelid began to twitch uncontrollably. Then she felt the impulsive need to roll her eyes in a circle exactly eight times. And then her left eyelid began to twitch. And then the impulse to roll her eyes again. And so on, and so on. Soon the eyelid twitch had moved down to the corners of her mouth, and her impulse was to yawn eight times instead of rolling her eyes eight times.

Her parents had been totally alarmed and took her to doctors and specialists. Melanie was poked and prodded; she had blood tests and gave urine samples. Was it neurological? Was it social? The doctors, looking politely puzzled as Melanie twitched and yawned and rolled her eyes, as her parents looked on in fear and amazement, were unsure how to respond to this little girl with the movable face. Finally one of them recommended a child psychologist, and all of a sudden, Melanie had a diagnosis.

Melanie was seated in the waiting room with a pile of educational magazines in front of her, and she was asked to wait for a few moments while the doctor had a quick chat with her parents. She leaned back on the chair, closed her eyes, and tried to ignore the party that her muscles seemed to be having on the contours of her face.

When the door to the psychologist's office opened, Melanie was invited back inside. She sat on a blue couch across from her parents. Her mom was holding a tissue to her eyes, and her dad was leaning back with his arms crossed and forehead creased.

"Melanie, Dr. Jones has some important information," Melanie's mom said.

Melanie looked at Dr. Jones, who was young and seemed kind. "What's wrong with me?" she said.

"Well Melanie, there's nothing *wrong* with you," Dr. Jones said. "But from what I have observed, and from what your parents have been telling me, I believe you have what is known as 'Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder' and a syndrome called 'Tourette's.' Neither of these disorders will keep you from living a totally healthy and fulfilling life. However, I recommend, if it's okay with you, that we begin to think seriously about how we can help you manage your tics. What do you think?"

Melanie tried to compose her face but felt the muscles in her left eyelid contract, as if she were winking.

After six years of therapy with Dr. Jones, the nature of her disorders has shifted. Now Melanie does not feel the need to yawn or roll her eyes-or do anything, for that matter-eight times in a row. It's

definitely an improvement. However, the tics seem to have become worse. Now Melanie's cheeks push up into her eyes, her forehead crunches, and her lower lip juts out from under her upper lip, as if she was a Neanderthal. Her eyelids have not stopped twitching, but now she also squeezes her eyes shut impulsively. Sometimes she will feel unable to open them for an entire minute.

Upon reflecting on the last six years, Melanie isn't sure if she's made progress or not. Part of her is proud. She is mostly able to be in school (if she sits in the back), and she has even been able to make a few close friends who accept her just the way she is. Another part of her has never stopped being frustrated with her handicap-it is a handicap, even if Dr. Jones encourages her to call it a *handican*-and has never stopped seeing herself as somehow lacking or deficient.

Melanie's mom gets up and leaves the room, closing the door softly behind her. Melanie wonders if her mom is scared of her. Sometimes she gets the feeling that this is the case; that her mom, not quite knowing how to treat her, simply pulls away because it's easier to pretend that Melanie is healthy and fine.

Melanie sighs and puts the plate on her nightstand. The half-eaten sandwich will sit there for the rest of the evening until her mom comes in to get it. Melanie is allowed to stay in bed and rest all day on the bad days, on the days she can't control the twitching, and it is too exhausting to try to stop it.

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck is not the leader of the pack, nor is he necessarily the smartest. But, Melanie thinks, turning the page as Huck and Jim, a runaway slave, chat about life on an isolated island in the Mississippi, Huck is definitely the most complicated. He deals with the questions of what is right and fair, even against a backdrop of slavery and in the context of self-sufficiency.

Melanie looks out the window and puts the book down again. She feels a bit like Huck: trapped and free, confused and strong-willed. Her "penchant for twitches" (as her dad says) makes her life so difficult, and there are so many people who think they know the best way to protect her. Melanie suddenly wishes she could be just like Huck and run away from all the bumbling adults in her life.

There is a knock on the door, and her mom comes in again. She puts Melanie's clean, folded laundry away in the dresser, then stops at Melanie's bed and gives her a kiss on the forehead.

"I love you so much," she says.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What does Melanie have a problem with?

- A. peanuts
- B. tics
- C. 19th-century French literature
- D. Neanderthals

2. One of the main conflicts in the story occurs between which two characters?

- A. Melanie and Huck Finn
- B. Melanie's mother and Dr. Jones
- C. Melanie and Melanie's father
- D. Melanie and Melanie's mother

3. Read these sentences about Melanie from the story.

"Her 'penchant for twitches' (as her dad says) makes her life so difficult, and there are so many people who think they know the best way to protect her. Melanie suddenly wishes she could be just like Huck and run away from all the bumbling adults in her life."

Based on these sentences, what can be concluded about the way Melanie feels about the adults in her life?

- A. Melanie is frightened by them.
- B. Melanie is frustrated with them.
- C. Melanie is curious about them.
- D. Melanie is pleased with them.

4. Why might Melanie be upset with the adults in her life?

- A. They do not think that there is anything wrong with her.
- B. They do not know how to treat her.
- C. They make her read books she has no interest in.
- D. They make her eat food she does not like.

5. What is a theme of this story?

- A. revenge
- B. jealousy
- C. loneliness
- D. fairness

6. Read these sentences from the story.

"'Mom, just leave me alone!' Melanie shouts. In her mind, the words flow smoothly out of her mouth, the tone familiar in its annoyance. Listening to the words as she speaks them, however, is **a lesson in deciphering**. Sometimes the twitches affect even the words she tries to speak."

Why are the words Melanie speaks **"a lesson in deciphering"**?

- A. The words are easy to understand.
- B. The words are difficult to understand.
- C. Melanie is speaking in a foreign language.
- D. Melanie is speaking in a loud voice.

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence.

Melanie no longer feels the need to yawn eight times in a row; _____, her cheeks now push up into her eyes.

- A. however
- B. as a result
- C. most importantly
- D. as an illustration

8. What does Melanie see in her mom's face after her mom says "I'm sorry."?

9. Describe what Melanie's mom does when she comes into Melanie's room at the end of the story.

10. Why does Melanie's mom tell Melanie that she loves her? Support your answer with evidence from the story.
