

A student shares her terrifying story

From *Scope* (1999)

Melissa Miller, 15, hid behind a truck while seniors Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold sprayed bullets and threw pipe bombs into the parking lot of Columbine High School. On that tragic afternoon last April, Eric, 18, and Dylan, 17, killed 12 students and a teacher, wounded 23 students, and then killed themselves. Many have said that Eric and Dylan, in seventh and eighth grade, kids called me names, pushed me against the lockers, and snapped pennies at my head. I was miserable and lonely. Every night, I cried and begged my mom to let me go to another school.

So, I understand what it's like to be picked on. But I can't understand why anyone would turn to guns. Guns are not the answer. I learned that on April 20, 1999. That day was definitely the worst day of my life.

Not a Prank

I was in the Columbine parking lot when I heard the first explosion. I thought it had to be a firecracker—some kind of senior prank. Then, I looked up and saw the backs of two guys in black trench coats. They were standing at the top of the hill near the rear entrance to the school. It was Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. I didn't know their names then, but I'd seen them around. My friends and I would move out of their way in the halls. They scared us.

As Eric and Dylan turned around, I saw that they had guns. I still thought it was a prank. I figured the rifles had to be paintball guns. Eric and Dylan had no expressions on their faces. They showed no emotion—not anger, not hatred.

Then, they opened fire. Bullets struck students on the sidewalk, in the parking lot, and on the hill. My friend Anne Marie was standing on the sidewalk right below them. It looked like they shot her in the stomach. She doubled over and then fell on her back. Her knees flipped to the side. She didn't get up. She just stayed crumpled on the ground. That was what made me realize—oh, my God!—it was no joke. It wasn't red paint on the ground. It was blood. Dylan was trying to get back at students who had mocked and bullied them during their four years at the Littleton, Colorado, high school. Below, Melissa—who knows how it feels to be picked on—shares her ideas for how students who feel alienated can turn things around without violence. She also tells the dramatic story of her escape from the shooting.

I was terrified. I quickly ducked behind a white truck. I did not dare look up. Crouched behind a tire, I was scared to move an inch.

Then, a silver cylinder landed about five feet from me. I could smell the burning and see smoke coming out of both ends, so I covered my head with my hands. I didn't know it then, but it was a pipe bomb. In seconds, the bomb exploded and shrapnel rained down

on the pavement around me. Somehow I didn't get hit with any shrapnel. Just a few seconds later, there was another pipe bomb, and it came even closer to me. Again, by some miracle, I wasn't hit at all.

Eric and Dylan opened fire again. It didn't sound the way gunfire sounds in the movies. Each shot was like a dart hitting a dartboard. Nothing sounded the way you'd expect. No one was screaming or yelling at them to stop. It was actually really quiet.

A boy who'd been shot in the leg (I don't know his name) got up and ran away. Blood spurted through his fingers as he held onto his wound. Before he reached safety, he looked back over his shoulder at the gunmen. His eyes were so large, and filled with pure terror and pain.

The look on his face will haunt me for the rest of my life. I just hope it's a look that no one has to see or give ever again.

Eric and Dylan had stopped shooting. They'd gone inside. I started to run away. Then, I hesitated. Should I try to help Anne Marie? She was lying there, still not moving. I decided that the best thing would be to get real help.

As the gunshots rang out inside the school, I ran across the soccer field. At the same time, this unbelievable stream of people, of panic, came out of the cafeteria. That's when the screaming started. Everyone was screaming. To get off of school grounds, I had to make it over a tall chain link fence. Somehow—don't ask me how—I just sailed over it. I was like Xena. The best way I can describe it is that I was on a mission. I was running so fast that I could barely breathe. I thought my heart was going to pop.

Finally, I saw a house with an open garage. I ran in. There was a phone, so I called 911. The house belonged to an elderly couple who let me in and helped me contact my parents.

As I waited to be picked up, I watched the news. I cried and cried as ambulances took my friends, including Anne Marie, away. (For days, I didn't know if Anne Marie was alive or dead.) On TV, I could see my bookbag lying in the parking lot where I'd left it.

Memorial items for Columbine: wreath with angel Beanie Babies, and book made by a first grade class I didn't get my bookbag back until June. When I did, it brought back all of my fear. My bag had been trampled on as students ran for their lives. My hairbrush was broken, and all of my books were damaged.

A Place to Belong

Eric and Dylan ruined so many lives. They were outcasts, but violence is never a solution. In junior high, I was tortured. I didn't wear the right clothes, and I didn't have the right hair. I had zero friends. But when I started at Columbine, I changed my situation. I joined the marching band and made tons of friends. Now the people that were so mean to me in junior high are signing my yearbook and giving me hugs in the hall.

I found a place to belong. If you're an outcast, you don't have to resort to violence. Join a club. Columbine offers clubs like the outdoors club, the Bible club, the chess club.

There are tons of activities that you don't have to be an athlete or the smartest person in the world to participate in. High school doesn't have to be so terrible.

If Eric and Dylan had tried to turn their lives around, maybe 12 of my peers wouldn't be dead maybe Anne Marie wouldn't be learning to walk again.