

## BACK TO SCHOOL

My alarm woke me on Monday morning. Christmas break was officially over, and the spring semester of my junior year was about to begin. I wasn't looking forward to school, because being around other people was difficult. I looked normal enough, but I didn't feel like everyone else. Well, I guess I felt exactly like everyone else. At the same time. That's why school was so difficult. I was an Empath.

After turning off my alarm, I stumbled through the dark hallway toward the bathroom. I nearly tripped over the meowing cat on the way. "Shush, Kitty!" I mumbled as I closed the bathroom door.

After I showered and got dressed, I fed the cat and went downstairs to grab a toaster pastry. I sat on the overstuffed ottoman in front of the fireplace and warmed my toes as I ate breakfast. This was the best part of my day, especially on a cold January morning. There were no strong emotions coming from my mom or the neighbors to break my solitude. My cat wondered by with a little "mew" and I was thankful that animals' emotions didn't affect me.

I thought about going back to school and my palms started sweating. Lexington High School was one of five schools in Lexington, Kentucky. There were thousands of teenagers at the school, and most of them were overwrought with emotions and hormones. Dealing with that many emotions can wreak havoc on an Empath.

After I ate, I went back upstairs to get ready for school. I had wavy hair, so I had to make time to force it to be straight or curly. Otherwise, it just looked like I didn't brush it. I put contacts in my eyes. By nature, my eyes were a slightly different color every day. I called them aqua. This morning, they were more blue than green.

When I was putting on mascara, my mom came out of her room. We looked similar and were often mistaken for sisters. My mom enjoyed that more than I did. She had her wavy, light brown hair pulled up into a bun. She had glasses on, making it harder to see her golden hazel eyes.

"Jen, make sure you pack your soccer gear for this afternoon," my mom said to me on her way downstairs. She was a software engineer at a corporation that had its headquarters in Lexington. Though my mom could wait to go into work at 9:00, she usually tried to go to work when I left for school. She said that she wanted us to have more time together.

If my mom was going downstairs and gathering her stuff, I needed to hurry. I dabbed on some lip gloss and hopped down the stairs, feeling good.

As I reached the bottom of the stairs, I felt a wave of anger wash over me. I got a flash of my neighbor yelling at his son. I growled to myself and went into the kitchen where my mom was packing a lunch. "Mom! That's MY yogurt!" I yelled at her. "Why do you always do that?"

"Jen, don't start!" she said in an exasperated voice.

I stomped around and started slamming drawers and cabinet doors in frustration. First my mom yelled at me about packing my soccer gear. Like I'd forget! Then she took my stuff! I shook my head and slammed another drawer.

"Jen! Straighten up right now! What is your PROBLEM?" my mom asked, starting to get angry.

"You're so selfish! Why do you take my stuff?" I glared at my mom.

"Jen, look in the refrigerator before you accuse me of something. There's plenty of yogurt." My mom gave me a stern look as she zipped up her lunchbox. She went to the entry as she said, "I'm going to work. Make sure you turn off the fireplace before you leave."

I heard the side door close and the garage door being opened. As I went in the living room to turn off the fireplace, I felt a wave of frustration and concern rolling off of my mom. I could feel that she was only concerned about me. I felt like crap.

That's how my "ability" worked. If someone nearby had a strong emotion, whether they were in the room, in an adjacent room, or even in a nearby building, then for a second that same emotion would consume me. Often, the remnants of it affected my relationships. I yelled at my friends and family for nothing because someone else was angry. Or if I was yelling at the angry person, their increased anger escalated through me.

The only good thing about my ability was that I could always read someone's intentions. It wasn't such a good thing this morning. Now I felt guilty for hurting my mom unnecessarily. I pulled out my phone and texted a quick apology to her, feeling better as I did so. I picked up my soccer backpack and school bag, and went out to catch the bus.

## BUS STOP

My school district didn't pick kids up at home, and my bus stop was a block away. While I walked, I put on my headphones and concentrated on my steps and listening to my music. That was my best coping mechanism for blocking my Empath ability. By concentrating on the music and focusing on how it made me feel, I was able to keep the emotions of others at bay. I could sense those emotions shimmering around me, but I didn't have to feel them. I had gotten better at keeping up my concentration when I tried. But at times like this morning when my guard was down, I could still be consumed by someone else's feelings.

I first started getting the "benefits" of my abilities when I was 13 years old. As if I didn't have enough unpleasant surprises at the onset of puberty! I got angry for no reason. I started crying or was suddenly in a great mood. At first, the emotions were scattered and I thought that

they were my emotions. My grandmother had given me a brochure on managing teenage hormones.

To my advantage, I could also feel people's intentions toward me. If someone had malicious intent, I could feel it.

As my awareness increased, I noticed that people experienced more anger and sadness than happiness. Or maybe those emotions were the strongest and could more easily overcome me. As I got older, I began to detect emotions farther away and in more detail. Now, at 16, I could read people on purpose, if I wanted. But mostly, I worked hard to block that information unless I sought it out.

The worst part about my ability was that it made me feel lonely. Even when I was with friends, I didn't feel like I fit in. I'd hinted around very carefully to my mom, my dad, my best friend, and other family members, but no one seemed to be waiting for me to speak up so they could let me in on the big secret: that I wasn't alone in my ability.

I made it to the bus stop and saw my best friend, Serena waiting. I pulled out my earbuds and stuffed them in my pocket. "Good morning, Serena. You ready for this Anatomy test?"

Serena rolled her eyes, "When are any of us ready?" Our junior science class was actually Advanced Anatomy and Physiology. Serena and I were both Science Magnet students who had to apply and take tests so that we could take harder classes. Whose bright idea was that? Oh yeah, our parents. "You know that half the class is going to fail the test and Mr. Perez is going to have to curve the grade again," she said wryly.

I smiled and rolled my eyes back at Serena. That was the way that our science classes had been since we started at Lexington High School last year. Although there were five high schools in Lexington, LHS was the oldest. Serena and I had gone to different middle schools, though we

had met at various summer camps. We became best friends within the first week of high school. We complimented each other very well. I was athletic and outgoing, and she was bookish and shy. We were both the same height, but she had beautiful straight blonde hair that I envied. And Serena was totally jealous of the way that sometimes I would have straight hair, sometimes it would be curly, and sometimes it was just wavy. She could never get her hair to be anything but straight.

Serena was very emotionally controlled. She was constant and mature. She never got really angry or excited. She thought that she was boring, but I found her to be calming after being bombarded with other people's emotions. Serena thought that I was fun to be around. I was always excited or upset about something. My mom called it Drama (with a capital D!), but Serena called it *joie de vivre*.

While I was lean and muscular, Serena was curvy. However, she was so shy that she didn't notice that guys in school were always flirting with her. I never told her, since most guys weren't interested in my friend's quick wit and good heart. I felt very protective of her.

I'm not saying that our relationship was perfect. I had tried mentioning the supernatural to her twice to gauge whether she would be open or interested in my ability. Both times she completely shut me down. She was mentally closed to the supernatural and was a very logical person. She was caring, and probably would have been sympathetic to my plight. When one of her friends had a problem, Serena always jumped in to help solve it.

Serena and I were distracted by a group that was forming on the adjacent street corner. I was suddenly overcome with jealousy. I blocked that emotion quickly as Serena and I walked over to the growing crowd. There were 2 boys in the middle of the crowd. One was tall and gangly, with shaggy brown hair. The other was short and muscular, and had short dark hair. I

reached out mentally and found that the taller boy was feeling jealous. His intention was to find out what was going on. The shorter guy was just trying to calm his friend down. His intention was to keep a secret for someone else.

I saw the taller guy look over at another guy who was sneering. He was blonde and very good-looking, though he looked like a complete jerk. I could feel his intentions were just to start trouble. The shorter guy said, "I wasn't talking to her, really. She came up to *me*. I'm not interested in her. You know that, Brad." He was circling cautiously away from his friend.

The taller guy (Brad apparently) glared, "You expect me to believe that you weren't talking to my ex-girlfriend when I *saw* you talking to her? I saw her smile and hug you!" His face was turning red and he was starting to shake. I had a hard time controlling my emotions as Brad got angrier.

The troublemaker looked at the shorter guy and said, "Dude, you were hugging his ex-girlfriend? What kind of friend ARE you? Man, you don't touch your best friend's girl!"

I couldn't take it anymore. I ran up to Brad and touched his arm. "Don't listen to this guy," I said, pointing to Mr. hot, blonde, and evil. I stuck my thumb out at the shorter guy. "He's your friend. You have to trust him. You said she was hugging him. Was he hugging her? Maybe she was talking to him about you. Did you ask what he was talking to her about?"

I could feel Brad starting to calm down, but the shorter guy was getting angry. Oops. And Blondie was getting upset that I was ruining his fun. "Dave?" Brad said, looking at his friend.

Dave looked at me and glared. "You stay out of this. You don't know anything!" He looked at Brad again. "You have to trust me. I'd never do anything to hurt you."

Blondie snorted. "That wasn't an answer. Why are you listening to this dumb bitch? Maybe Dave here thought you liked this one," he said, pointing to me. "Though I don't know

why. She's nosy and not even pretty." Several people around us laughed at that. "He probably thought it was okay to go after your girl." That sent Brad over the edge. He lunged for Dave. As they scuffled, people started moving back to give them more room. Unfortunately for me, I didn't get out of the way fast enough and got taken down by a flying leg. I fell hard and scraped my hands on the sidewalk.

Serena helped me up as a few people laughed at me. Thankfully, most of the group was focused on the fight. A couple of guys pulled the warring friends apart, and they stood panting at one another.

I just wanted to cry. Serena and I went back to the other corner as the bus pulled up. We were the first ones on the bus. I plopped down near the front. Serena sat down next to me and began rifling through her purse. As people got on the bus, Blondie walked by with a laugh and said, "Way to start a fight, dumb bitch." He laughed as he made his way toward the back of the bus. I didn't bother to look up. I could hear the laughter around me. I could feel that people had been entertained by both the fight, and by my interference.

Serena pulled out a wet wipe and handed it to me. Like I said, she was a fixer. "For your hands. Don't let that jerk bother you. He was just starting trouble. You were only trying to help." That was Serena, always supportive and prepared.

"I didn't help. After I stepped in, the fight got worse. And look what I got for it. Why do I bother?" I angrily wiped at my scraped hands.

Serena knew not to argue with me when I got this way. She just patted my leg. "Do you want to study on the way to school?"

"No. I'm really not up to it. Thanks, Serena." I put my earbuds back in my ears and looked out the window.

I thought about the fact that soon, I wouldn't even have to ride the bus. My birthday was in July, and I'd had my driver's permit for nearly 6 months. I would be eligible to get my license in a couple of weeks.

I also had a car. Just before I turned 16, my mom and I had watched Craigslist and ads. I had worked and saved money for years, and had several thousand dollars in my account. We found a Buick that was several years old, but without a lot of miles on it. My mom liked it because it was sturdy and well-maintained. I liked it because it was powerful and comfy, with plush seats. My dad had his mechanic look at it. It needed a little bit of work, like new hoses and belts. I wanted to put in a better stereo that would work with my phone. So I was saving for those repairs.

*Soon, I thought. Soon I won't have to ride the bus with all of these emotions surrounding me.*