

DIARY

*of a
Teenage Empath*

THE AWAKENING

Jeannette & Folan

Highly sensitive and empathic creatures are the intuitives of their tribe. They see, feel and instinctively know more than their brothers and sisters — and if their insight were heeded, the world would be the better for it.



Suite 300 - 990 Fort St
Victoria, BC, V8V 3K2
Canada
www.friesenpress.com

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1. Fiction

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*For Nathalie, whose profound wisdom, magnanimous heart,
and steadfast friendship nourish my life*

Hey

Before you get into reading my diary, I thought you might also want in on my empath playlist.

You've probably not heard any of these tracks before. The artists are relatively new - not your typical mainstream variety - but they're GENIUS!

If you're anything like me, music is as important as air or water - only more powerful. It's like a drug. Lately, these songs have become my drug of choice.

You can listen directly at empathdiary.com. Links to downloading the songs are also there. Enjoy.

Jenny

*Were our senses altered, and made much quicker and acuter,
the appearance and outward scheme of things would have
quite another face to us, and be inconsistent with our well-being.*

John Locke, 1854

Preface

Until a few months ago, I thought there was something wrong with me. I couldn't shake myself out of my own head. Trapped inside was a jumble of noise, static, and flashing images, like I was staring out the window on a high-speed train flying past scenes of my own life. Only it wasn't my life. The visions that flickered in my mind were of me, but not in the context of any familiar events I'd experienced. Some of the images were completely imperceptible, and those I could see clearly, those I could understand, were completely disturbing. Images like being stuck inside a dark well, walking through a labyrinth of hot coals, falling from the highest branch of a tall tree, and being lost in fog so thick for so long that I finally dissolved into it.

When I was released from these visions and could engage in normal activities, I began having routine panic attacks. I couldn't tolerate being in a crowd, being touched, being near certain people, or sometimes just being.

I read somewhere that our thoughts control our feelings, not the other way around. In my case, it didn't matter. It seemed I wasn't in control of either. I could be thinking about lying on a warm beach surrounded by laughing children yet feel a rush of sadness so overwhelming, I cried. Other times I would be feeling completely neutral, with no thoughts at all, and then suddenly the idea would occur to me to cut off all my hair. Thankfully, I didn't. Thankfully, I'd been able to keep my outward behavior under control, even if everything inside of me was out of control.

The journey I took to discover what was happening to me led to some of the most magical moments of my young life. But it also led me to wonder if magic wasn't just another form of insanity.

J+N



Part I:
The Awakening



June 1

The symptoms I experienced all pointed to some kind of mental illness. At first my parents suspected that my behavior was due to a teenage crush or hormonal imbalance. They would give me half a hug then shoot each other a look that conveyed more mockery than concern. But then they discovered the row of deep paper cuts on my arm, and four hours later, I was sitting in Dr. Foster's office. Most of Dr. Foster's questions were related to thoughts of suicide and self-harm. I told him I didn't have any of those thoughts or feelings. He asked what I was thinking when I gave myself the cuts. I considered lying, telling him some girls at school dared me to do it or that it was the new fad instead of tattoos and piercings. But I never liked how a lie felt. It was too much like wearing someone else's clothes that were three sizes too small. So without weighing the consequences of the truth, I said, "Just wanted to make sure I was still here."

At the end of the session, he handed my parents a prescription for some anti-anxiety meds. They seemed relieved, like the dentist just told them he could save the tooth and a few Aspirin would stave off the pain. But I told them on the drive home that I had no intention of taking a drug that the doctor said would affect my central nervous system and cause umpteen side effects; especially not from a guy who'd spent only a sum total of fifty minutes with me. Besides, I knew a few kids at school on the stuff, and they walked around like zombies half the time.

My mom wasn't swayed. She said that if she saw any signs of self-harm or depression, she wouldn't give me any choice but to take the meds. I knew there was no point in arguing. Once she decided on a path, she wouldn't deviate from it, even if you pointed out that it led straight to hell. So it seemed my options were to pretend to be 'normal' or become a zombie.

June 8

Over the course of the next week, I worked on my acting skills, trying to be like I used to be before being became a struggle. I played upbeat songs on my guitar, cooked colorful meals, and generally did my best impersonation of a finalist in the Miss America pageant. But it was clear to me — even if my parents were fooled — that my comfort zone was getting smaller. I wondered if the day would come when the only time I didn't feel anxious would be when I showered or slept.

It wasn't so much that I was anxious — well, that's not entirely true. I felt a low grade of anxiety that hummed in the background like our antiquated refrigerator. But more intense were the feelings of either being disengaged from everyone and everything around me or being so 'plugged-in' that I felt like a circuit board about to overload and disintegrate in a single 'poof.'

For now, the one thing that kept me going was the calendar. Only one more week of school, and then I could enjoy an entire summer of solitude. The thought of starting high school in the fall with hundreds of kids I'd never met before was as comforting as a woolen blanket infested with lice. The thought of being alone just floating around in my pool for two and a half months, however, was divine.

It was this thought that had me caught up in a reverie during my history class and made Mr. Gerard holler my name not once but three times before I replied. Everyone began to laugh, but I didn't care. My grades were better than any of theirs, even on my worst day. As if in agreement with my thought, Mr. Gerard gave me a subtle wink before dismissing class.

As I headed to the cafeteria for lunch, I noticed a cluster of people in the hall. Getting closer, I realized there was a fistfight going on between two guys. I didn't know either of them, but since they stood a foot above everyone else and were wearing their jerseys, I figured it was a safe bet they were on the basketball team. My chest immediately tightened and a

feeling of dread swept over me. Instinctively, I averted my eyes and turned around to take the back hall out to the garden area, where I could eat my bagged lunch in peace.

Surrounded by the trees, flowers, and birdhouses, I immediately felt tranquil again. This space had become my sanctuary over the last two years, and it made me a little sad to think I wouldn't have it to escape to next year. Though I was sure Trinity High School would have its own sanctuaries, this one occupied a special place in my heart. It was not only the place I came to most days for lunch, but it was also where I became an avid reader, where I studied the clouds, and where I had my first kiss and first heartbreak — if you can call it that after only three weeks of dating.

As I sat there nibbling at my sandwich and carrot sticks, I contemplated the transition from junior high to high school. By size alone, it would be the equivalent of thriving in a small pond versus surviving in the open ocean. I'd been lucky, getting through the past couple of years relatively unscathed. I had a small circle I hung out with, more study buddies than personal friends, but they were all going to West High School next year, so my only hope was that I could blend into my new high school like a sole on the bottom of the sea floor.

Back home, things were stiff, but not as bad as they were a week ago. My dad mostly acted like nothing happened, while my mom covertly monitored my every move. She watched how much I ate, how often I went to the bathroom, which shows I watched on TV. She even checked on me in the middle of the night to make sure I was still breathing. On a few occasions, even though I knew she meant well, I found myself holding my breath as she hovered over my bed. I had to admonish myself to breathe until finally she would tiptoe away back to her own troubled night of sleep.

June 14

Somehow, between good acting on my part and ignorance on my parents' part, I was able to make it through the end of the school year without any 'episodes' and without any meds or visits to Dr. Foster.

My graduation party, however, which was originally planned as a huge backyard BBQ for seventy friends and family, including my dad's entire office staff, had thankfully been downsized to a Sunday brunch at the local country club for immediate family only. This included both sets of my grandparents, my father's only sister, and her son, Ryan, and my mother's sister, otherwise known as my crazy Aunt Maggie.

I had never questioned why she was referred to as 'crazy.' I only knew that since I was a kid, she'd pretty much been excluded from most family events. The last time I saw her, I was probably nine or ten years old, and I remember she had a way about her that was mystical, but not in that dark, creepy way. She was light and carefree — and yes, a bit eccentric. But I felt a kinship with her more than the other few members of my immediate family, which was why I insisted she be invited to my graduation party.

Upon seeing her there, I felt for the first time in a long time a reason to celebrate. She wore tight black leggings and a short, dress-length chiffon-style top printed in a splash of vibrant colors. When she opened her arms to greet me, the fabric billowed out like angel's wings. As we embraced, instead of my usual pang of anxiety, it felt like home.

Feeling so immediately connected to her made me resent my mom for having kept her from being a part of our family all these years. I could understand why they weren't close. My mom's stoic nature and general closed-minded attitude was a stark contrast to Aunt Maggie's open-minded, expressive, holistic nature. But that wasn't a good enough reason to have kept Aunt Maggie from her only niece, who would probably have benefitted a great deal from her wisdom and friendship. Now that I was old enough, I would make sure that changed.

For now, I simply enjoyed a day in her company. Though I knew it was rude, I almost completely ignored my other relatives, choosing to spend the time absorbed in her stories of travel and adventure.

June 21

The summer began exactly as I'd hoped. Lots of sun and little interference from my parents. Being an only child in the age of 'helicopter parenting' usually meant extreme turbulence and confrontations on every front, hovering over every aspect of life, including friends, music, clothes, activities, diet, and dating. These were the challenges of most kids I knew in school. Thankfully, my parents missed the sign-up for helicopter parenting and instead opted for the oblivious parenting course — or at least they did until my cutting incident.

I could understand why it had freaked them out. It freaked me out, too. But I wasn't kidding when I told Dr. Foster that I did it because I needed to make sure I was still here. For weeks leading up to that time, I'd felt like I was breaking apart; like my atoms and molecules were separating and dissolving into the air — or maybe being absorbed by other life forms around me. I simply didn't feel solid anymore.

When I cut my arm and watched the skin separate and the tiny drops of blood come to the surface — when I felt the sting of pain and watched as the flesh inevitably healed — it comforted me. I knew by witnessing and feeling that process that I was a solid, fully functioning human being just like everybody else.

Although I kept my promise to my parents and hadn't cut myself again, I couldn't keep from thinking and feeling that something in me still wasn't right. Changing my outside behavior didn't seem to change whatever was happening inside. I thought about it being a physical

illness — because I definitely had physiological effects — but really I was concerned with my mental stability. Was I going crazy?

My ongoing symptoms, if that's what they could be called, included erratic thoughts, moodiness, intolerance of loud noises and crowds of people, a fear of violence, and anxiousness. According to my Internet research, these fit a variety of psychological conditions, including general anxiety disorder, panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, and bipolar disorder. The suggested course of treatment for all of them was a cocktail of pharmaceuticals and therapy. Somehow I didn't think that was the right path for me. And while I'd be okay talking through my experiences with a qualified therapist, I couldn't imagine there was one qualified for this; one who would understand me. I mean, this wasn't an issue of my parents being abusive, not loving me enough, or giving me enough attention. I didn't have a complex about my body or looks or intelligence. I wasn't paranoid. I didn't feel my needs weren't being met. What I felt was that something external was affecting me internally, and that whatever it was, it was beyond my control.

July 13

I was ecstatic to hear that Aunt Maggie had decided to come for a visit in two weeks' time, yet I seemed to be the only one excited about the news. Dad discreetly rolled his eyes while Mom began wringing her hands and sighing heavily every few minutes. They both implied that their indifference toward her was nothing more than a personality thing, but I suspected there was more to it than that. I believed something significant had occurred that resulted in the chasm between them.

July 26

On the day Aunt Maggie came it had threatened to rain, but as if in response to her arrival, the sun was soon shining. And as if in gratitude, she wore a yellow and orange sarong and a smile as bright as I'd ever seen. She embraced me the same way she had at my grad party. I could tell it made my parents uneasy, and while it was not my intention to push their buttons, I would not deny myself the pleasure of every moment with Aunt Maggie.

Each morning as I awoke, I found her sitting quietly in our sunroom, meditating. After a while, we would share breakfast together and chat about the local vegetation, artisans, and my plans for high school. Our talks were always easy, and most especially hopeful. I sensed there was never a negative or worrisome thought in her head — quite the opposite of what I had experienced with my own parents, who seemed to perpetually live in a reactive state of task-driven defensiveness and fear. Work, bills, money, schedules, commitments, obligations, and a general sense of dread for all the 'what-ifs' in the world. Somehow, Aunt Maggie had achieved what most people try but fail to do: live a positive life.

At the end of the first week of her visit, I decided to ask about the trouble between her and my parents. Rather than jump straight into the fire, however, I warmed up with something safer.

“Tell me more about your work, Aunt Maggie. What’s the best thing about being a travel writer?”

“You mean besides being adventurous, and luckily, highly lucrative?” She gleamed with delight and added, “It’s been a life beyond my expectations. I’ve travelled the world, experienced many cultures, and met fascinating people. I’ve published a few books, learned a few languages, and now am able to enjoy a more spontaneous lifestyle, going where I want to and writing when I want to for a few select magazines. All in all, I couldn’t have asked for more.”

“Why have you never married? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“No, I don’t mind at all,” she replied with a wave of her hand. “Do you want the soundbite version or the miniseries?”

“Miniseries, please!” I said, clapping my hands in childlike delight.

“Then we’d better refill our teas and move into the sunroom.”

Once we had taken our seats overlooking the back porch and maple trees, she took a sip of her tea and let out a small sigh. “Did your mother ever tell you that I was engaged once?”

I shook my head. “They never tell me anything that happened before I was born.”

“Well, they did their share of living,” she said with a wink. “But that’s not my story to tell. My story,” she continued, “started in my last year of college. I had dated a bit, but nothing serious. Then out of the blue my senior year, this tall drink of water named Rick showed up at one of the campus events. It wasn’t surprising I hadn’t met him before. My major was journalism. His was psychology. There was no reason for our paths to have crossed. Anyway, we started dating, and before you know it, we were graduating and Rick asked me to join him in Phoenix, where he was doing a research project over the summer related to his grad courses about communication through sensory differentials, or something to that effect.

“I had planned on going to grad school, too, but thought I would first take some time to explore the world. You know, backpack across Europe or build houses with Habitat in Mexico.”

I nodded enthusiastically, imaging myself doing the same thing after graduating high school. As if reading my mind, she said, “Do it. The sooner, the better. You won’t regret it. As for me, I figured that Arizona was as good a place to explore as anywhere, so I said ‘yes’ to Rick, and off we went.

“His project took up a considerable amount of time, so I would usually head off in his car Monday morning, spend five days hiking the Grand

Canyon or make my way to Sedona or Yellowstone or Tahoe and be back in time for pizza and beer on Friday night.”

“So what happened? How did the engagement break off?” I asked greedily. “Did he end up meeting someone else? Did you meet someone else?”

“Relax, Jenny,” she soothed with a teasing sparkle in her eye. “You said you wanted the miniseries version, so sip your tea, take a deep breath, and zip it.”

The suspense was making me anxious, as if I already knew the end of the story, and it wasn’t a good one. But I did as I was told. “Sip it and zip it.” I smiled.

“A few months had passed, and everything was going well. Better than well, for me, anyway. I was off doing what I wanted to do, and when we saw each other on the weekends, it was pure joy and laughter, sex, and intimacy.” She let out a long breath as she said this and closed her eyes in reverie. Whatever scene she was playing out in her mind made her eyelids flutter and my own pulse quicken. When she finally opened her eyes, she stared into mine and held my gaze as if she were swearing me to secrecy. A moment later, she snapped back into gear and picked up the story.

“Usually, when we reunited on Friday evening, we would get some takeout and stay in bed until Sunday.”

As soon as she said this, she started getting that faraway look on her face, so I bellowed out, “Earth to Aunt Maggie!”

“Yeah, sorry. From now on, I’ll fantasize on my own time.” She continued, “On Sunday afternoons, we would meet up with his research partners at the local sports bar and hang out until the pool of money ran out or someone decided to get a game of flag football going.

“On one particular Sunday, we were playing a game out in the front yard where a few of Rick’s colleagues shared a house. About halfway through the game, one of the guys kicked off, and Rick caught the ball.

Of course, couples weren't allowed on the same team, so I charged across the field at him with the intention of flagging him into oblivion, but instead of running away, he dropped to one knee, which in professional football means 'fair catch.' As far as I knew, we were playing pub rules, not pro, so I said, 'What the hell are you doing? To which he replied, 'I'm calling a 'good catch' ... and you're it. Will you marry me, Maggie?'

"He dropped the football and from his jeans pocket he presented a beautiful band of white gold with a small diamond and two emerald baguettes. Even a hippie girl like me appreciated the luxury of such jewels. Plus, the choice of stones had a special meaning for Rick and me."

"Really?" I asked, my eyes nearly popping out of my head, pleading with her to tell me more. "What was it? It sounds sooooo romantic."

"No can do," she said, shaking her head with conviction. "Some things are meant to remain strictly between two people." Although I knew she was referring to her and her lost love, Rick, when she said 'two people,' she gestured between us, and I couldn't help but feel again like she was admonishing me to keep some secret she was about to share.

"After a romantically brutish proposal like that, of course I accepted. The game immediately came to a halt, and we all walked down to the pub to have a proper toast to the engagement. I couldn't help notice, however, that while some of the group were sincerely delighted for us, others took a step back from the circle, glancing down at the floor and whispering to each other with critical looks at Rick and me.

"I tried very hard not to let them diminish my joy. After all, I didn't know them that well. They weren't my friends; they were Rick's research partners, which is the exact thought that made me stop in my tracks as Rick and I walked back to our apartment. I didn't beat around the bush. 'Rick,' I said, 'have you ever had a romantic affair with

anyone on your team? Or perhaps has one of them expressed an interest in you?’

“He turned to me and said, ‘I have not had any kind of relationship with anyone since I met you. If there is someone with an interest in me, they have not, thankfully, brought it to my attention. Now what’s this all about, anyway? Not getting cold feet already, are you?’

“‘Of course not,’ I told him. ‘But the way some of your colleagues were acting after you proposed, it’s obvious they aren’t happy with your choice of bride.’

“The look on his face was a mix of relief and frustration. He said, ‘Maggie, it’s not my choice of bride they protest. It’s my choice to get married now, before I’ve even started grad school, let alone be published or achieve anything in my field.’ And then I said, ‘I don’t understand. Why should they care when you get married or what you achieve? What’s it to them? I thought this was just some warm-up project to keep you ahead of the curve.’

“He said, ‘Well, in fact, as it turns out, we are way ahead of the curve, and they are looking to me to take the lead on it. When school starts, our project hours will automatically be cut in half. Adding a new wife to the mix, especially such a sexy one, might put a strain, so to speak, on my focus and time.’”

I could see my aunt getting lost in the memory, and it felt sometimes like she was inviting me to peek at the pages of her diary. More than just words, her story came to life for me, so much so that I could feel my pulse quicken as I imagined this gorgeous man ‘strained’ against me.

My aunt finally recovered from her trip down Fantasy Lane and picked up the story again.

“What I didn’t understand,” she said, “was what the big deal was over a pre-grad research project that, as far as I could tell, wasn’t being mentored by a professor or funded by the university, the government, or a private company. Which is exactly what I said to Rick just before he

turned and walked away, muttering something that sounded a lot like ‘Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.’”

“Oh no, Aunt Maggie, that must have been awful. Was that the end of it then?”

“Of course not!” she shouted. “All you young people think about is ending things at the first sign of an argument or conflict. Relationships take work! That’s no guarantee they will last, but not working on them is a sure guarantee they won’t last. The quicker you learn that, the happier you’ll be.”

“What about your relationship with my mom?” I couldn’t help myself. The timing was too perfect not to bring it up.

To my amazement, she fired back, “Yes! That’s exactly what I’m talking about. It’s the perfect example of a no-guarantee relationship.”

“So what happened between you and my mom? I mean, you’re here now but...”

“That’s another story — kind of,” she said with another wave of her hand. “Do you want to hear the rest of the story about Rick or not?”

“Of course.” I nodded eagerly.

“Right. So after all apologies were made and we engaged in a sufficient amount of make-up sex, I thought everything was back on track. Weeks passed, grad school was starting, and I decided to find a job in town, at least for the first semester, until I knew where and when I would return to school.”

I was about to interrupt her again to ask how she could consider going somewhere else for her grad school when she was newly engaged but thought better of it. She clearly wasn’t a ‘little wifey’ type of woman, and I guess, if I was honest with myself, no matter how much I wanted a relationship, I wouldn’t change my course of direction in life for romance either.

“I was lucky to find a good-paying job during the day at a vet’s clinic. I always had a way with animals, and it meant that I got to see Rick most

nights, too, though he also spent some nights with his research group. This went along at its own blissful pace until around early November when Rick began missing our weeknight dinners and started spending more weekends with the research team, never including me on the Sunday afternoon pub parties or football games. I shouldn't say 'never,' but there was a noticeable decline in our one-on-one relationship, if you know what I mean."

Got it. Aunt Maggie was a sex-crazed young woman and not afraid to admit it.

"Again, I wondered if his interests had swayed to someone else, and one night, I'm embarrassed to say, I followed him from the campus to the house where we used to play football — the one where three of his research partners lived."

I sensed the story was about to turn into a bad reality TV show. "What did you find?"

"Nothing, really. Or at least nothing that I could make any sense of. I saw them through the kitchen window. The whole team was sitting around the table, and it looked like they were just ... meditating. But it was very strange; even a little creepy. I stood there a few minutes and finally, feeling completely foolish, went home."

"That was it?" I asked in astonishment. "So what was it that caused you to finally split up?"

"It was my fault, really," she said with resignation. "After my 'peeping tom' incident, I started asking him questions about his research project. He must have sensed I had ulterior motives and found a way to dodge most of my questions, which only made me more apprehensive. It went on like this for weeks until finally it was time to go home for Christmas, and Rick was supposed to be going with me so we could officially announce our engagement to my family.

"A few days before we were to leave, Rick decided that their research project had reached a critical point, and he didn't feel he could spend the

time away. I tell you, Jenny, as I live and breathe, I could feel my heart sinking and the entire world shift on its axis. I have never been a needy woman, but that night, I begged him to change his mind. I knew somehow that if he didn't come with me then, he would not come with me ever."

"And did he?" I asked as my heart beat erratically and my palms sweated in anticipation of the answer.

"No. He did not." She sighed heavily and took a sip of her cold tea while staring vacantly out the window.

I stared out the window, too, looking at the sun-dappled leaves on the maple trees and feeling a sense of loss for a man I had never met. I tentatively reached out to touch her arm, and as if sensing it was there, she reached out, too, and held my hand in hers.

"I'm so sorry," I finally whispered.

"It's okay," she whispered back. "It just wasn't meant to be. But the magical moments we shared together for almost two years were the most authentic of my life. So it took some time to grieve that loss, and..."

She didn't finish her sentence, but it seemed she wanted to say more. After a few minutes, I hesitantly asked, "So Aunt Maggie, how did it actually end? I mean, did you go home and tell your family you were engaged, or did you break it off before you left?"

Shaking her head, she said, "Although he didn't want to, I broke it off before I left."

"And did you tell anyone what you'd been through when you got home?"

"Well, that's the second part of the miniseries. When I arrived home, I tried as hard as I could to avoid the subject of Rick and instead focused on the family being together for the holidays. Of course, everyone asked how he was and tried hard not to bring up the fact that they expected him to be there with me. But they knew something wasn't right.

“On Christmas Eve, when we all gathered together for dinner and the tree-lighting and gift exchange, your mom, who was then only dating your father, reached into her stocking and pulled out an engagement ring. I had only met your dad once before, very briefly, but I could tell he was petrified as he got down on his knee and asked her to marry him in front of the whole family. I remember it like it was yesterday,” she said, laughing.

It was hard to imagine my dad being that romantic. I’d never seen him do a romantic thing in my life, except maybe the time he made a horribly under-cooked cake for my mom’s birthday years ago.

“Obviously,” my aunt continued, “she accepted, and the Christmas celebration quickly turned into an engagement party. Your dad, not being privy to the fact that Rick was supposed to have been spending the holidays with me, started asking about him and how his research was going. I thought he was only being polite, trying to make conversation, so I kept my answers vague. I certainly didn’t want to spoil the festive mood by announcing the break-off of an engagement they never knew about to begin with. But then he brought up the name of one of Rick’s partners, explaining how he had gone to school with her and how he had kept in touch with her.

“I remember bracing myself for whatever he was about to say regarding ‘her.’ Was she interested in Rick? Or maybe she’d told him about Rick and me being engaged? While my head was swimming in defensive alarm, he asked I how felt about Rick’s work being so controversial and whether I supported him in his passion for quantum psychology. For a moment, I felt as if I was floating outside my body. I had never even heard of quantum psychology — which, by the way, is a form of modern psychology that aims to discover who you are by acquiring multi-dimensional awareness — so anyway, I didn’t know how to respond or what to think or how to wrap my head around the fact

that a near-stranger knew more about my fiancé's — or ex-fiancé's — work than I did when I had been living with him for over a year.”

“So how did you respond?” I asked.

“Honestly, I don't remember,” she said. “The only memory that vividly sticks with me about that moment is how your mother responded when she overheard our conversation.”

This was it. I knew that whatever Aunt Maggie was about to say next would be the reason the relationship between her and my mom deteriorated. After a moment of staring out the window and turning her tea mug slowly around in her hands, she quietly said, “Well, maybe Maggie has finally found the perfect guy. Someone as cracked-up and insane as she is.”

Although I didn't think my aunt was exaggerating, I couldn't believe my mother could be so cruel and insensitive as to say something like that. Not to her own sister, not in front of her new fiancé, and certainly not in the middle of a family Christmas celebration. I was speechless. I wanted to apologize on my mom's behalf. I wanted to run and find my mom and yell at her for having crushed my dear aunt's feelings so carelessly. I wanted to make it up to Aunt Maggie somehow, so that she would feel welcome and safe enough here to come and see me again and again and again.

Instead, I started to cry. The tears came in a rush, streaming down my cheeks uncontrollably until the sadness gripped me with such force, I began sobbing and hyperventilating.

My aunt put her teacup down and held me in her arms. “Shhh, shhh,” she cooed softly in my ear. “I know it hurts. I know what you're feeling. But these feelings aren't your burden. They are mine. Let them go. They belong to me, not you.”

I felt the sadness slowly lift, and my sobs give way to a smile and faint chuckles of embarrassment over my highly emotional reaction.

When I pulled away from her, I looked into her tear-rimmed eyes and thought how very much alike we were.

August 8

Saying goodbye to my Aunt Maggie was like letting go of a life preserver in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. She had stayed as long as she could, I understood that, but it didn't make the separation any less emotional. In the weeks she had spent with me (and it was obvious after only a few days that she had come to be with me and not my mother and father), I had grown not only to respect and love her, but also to respect and love myself more, too. How was that possible? That one person could manifest so much goodness in others?

All I knew was that I intended to keep our relationship strong, and also to keep myself strong because of all I had learned from her.

August 10

With only four weeks left before the start of high school, I immersed myself in the rituals I had learned from Aunt Maggie. Each morning I awoke early and engaged in meditation in the sunroom, followed by tea and a healthy breakfast. Every day I felt as if she were there with me, moment by moment, breath by breath.

In the afternoon, things got a bit harder. My parents insisted, quite uncharacteristically, that I get out of the house more and had arranged for me to spend the last weeks of my summer vacation volunteering at the local seniors' home. I wondered if this was punishment for my having formed a deep relationship with Aunt Maggie, but considering how much room they had given us to spend together while she was here, I didn't protest.

Most days at the home, I took the people restricted to wheelchairs out for some time in the garden, pushing them around the grounds as if they were on a Disney holiday. Those who could speak and hear well enough

would make small talk about the weather, the flowers, or the hobbies they had enjoyed in their pre-convalescent lives. Many would simply stare off into the distant abyss of life after death with a look of longing and anticipation in their eyes. Still others would spend the entire time complaining about their aches and pains of recent or long-past medical issues.

When I got home, I usually felt as if I'd been hit by a truck. My body ached as much as my heart did for these discarded souls. The only things that got me through the days were my meditation practice in the morning, playing my guitar, and the knowledge that my volunteering would end as soon as school started.

Thankfully, between Aunt Maggie's visit and my volunteering gig, I didn't have that much time to be nervous about my first day of high school or be mad at my mother about her treatment of Aunt Maggie. I was still angry about it, though, because as Aunt Maggie had later explained, what stung the most is that my mom didn't even try to pretend that what she said was a joke or acknowledge that the remark had been hurtful. Instead, my mom began treating Maggie like she thought she really was 'cracked up.' And what's worse is that my dad did, too. And since he was fast becoming the favorite (and only) son-in-law, the entire family seemed to gravitate toward his point of view on most matters. So instead of it simply being a hole in the relationship with her sister, my aunt found that her relationship with her entire family was turning into Swiss cheese.

With her pain still lingering in my heart, I gave her a call to see how she was doing. No surprise, I found her packing for a month-long hike on the El Camino. A spontaneous adventure was what she called it; a chance to travel someplace new while doing some freelance work for *National Geographic*. But I knew from watching a movie about the Camino on Netflix called *The Way* that people had died walking that trail, and most people took months to train for the hike. Though I knew

my aunt was in terrific shape, I told her I would worry about her until she called me upon her safe return.

In a rather harsh tone, she blurted out, “Don’t you dare worry for me! If you think of me at all, I insist you picture me happy and healthy and at peace with the world. You must be mindful of your thoughts, Jenny. They are more powerful than you realize. Will you do that?”

Though I was taken aback by her serious and stern tone, I promised her I would. She wished me bunches of love and promised to call when she returned.

September 7

As if on cue, the weather on the first day of school was ten degrees cooler, and the clouds looked like they might empty their entire contents onto the school grounds in one veritable dump. The school buses were coming from both ends of the parking lot that merged into a large roundabout by the front doors. The perfected choreography of their movements reminded me of bright yellow worker ants marching off to invade someone’s picnic. The kids scrambling off the buses, however, looked more like a swarm of houseflies buzzing around in all directions, with no evident purpose or plan.

Luckily for me, I didn’t have to take the bus. Since my house was on the east side of River Road, it fell just within the one-mile range of the school, which was deemed walkable by the school district’s transport administration. I was thankful to have the time alone, sans houseflies, but it meant that I had to leave the house a bit earlier — and that meant I had to wake up earlier if I wanted to keep up with my morning meditations. Not generally considering myself a morning person, I knew this might inevitably be a challenge once homework, tests, and extra-curricular activities got into full swing. But for now, I was taking it moment by moment, breath by breath.

As I walked into the main hall, I could see a backup of students in line to pick up their schedules. I was fairly confident I didn't need to join them because I had printed my schedule off of the school's student website, but as I stood there in the growing chaos and clamor, I began to doubt myself. Why would so many students not have printed their schedules from the website? Maybe they were in the line to report their attendance? Or confirm they were scheduled for the electives they picked? Or maybe this was the line for freshmen to get their school IDs?

As my confidence plummeted, I looked around for a familiar face but recognized no one. And why would I? Out of a hundred kids in my old class, I'd be lucky to pick out ten of them in a line-up. On top of that, my eighth grade class was only one of five merging into this high school. Plus, the freshmen at this school represented only twenty-five percent of the total student population. Running the numbers in my head, I realized I knew less than one percent of the people here.

Normally, this would have been a comforting thought, but for some reason, I suddenly fainted.

When I came to, three things were obvious to me. One, that I'd just called attention to myself in the worst way imaginable. Walking down the hall with toilet paper stuck to my shoe would be less embarrassing. Two, that there was no reason for me to have just passed out unless something was medically wrong with me. Since I never took those stupid drugs prescribed by Dr. Foster and didn't ingest anything stronger than jasmine green tea, I became concerned as to what might have caused this episode. And three, I was staring up at the most gorgeous face I had ever seen.

"Hi," he said, smiling, revealing a perfect dimple. "I think you're okay, but I'd like to get you to the nurse's office just to be sure." My rescuer offered no name, and since my tongue was glued to the roof of my mouth, I couldn't ask, even if I were able to overcome the mental

fog that enveloped me. With a swift sweep of his arms, I was propped up by his side, being escorted slowly through a parting sea of onlookers.

“I-I’m so embarrassed,” I finally stammered. “I don’t know what happened. Thanks for helping me.”

“No worries,” he replied sincerely. “You probably just got a case of the frosh first-day jitters.”

Great. So he obviously isn’t in his first year, he’s discerned that I obviously am, and that I’m such a spaz, I can’t even handle the stress of the first day of school. Way to make a first impression! As we headed down the long corridor of administrative offices, I tried not to glance up at his handsome face or lean too much into his warm body. Although I still felt a little weak, I noticed a surge of energy building in me. “I think I’m okay now, if you want to go. I mean, you don’t want to be late for your first class.”

“The teachers give everyone a break the first few days. It’s really no trouble.” Again, the sincerity in his voice, his smile, his stunning blue eyes, were so captivating it made me want to be still so I could feel him around me like my plush blanket coming straight out of the dryer on a winter day.

I snapped myself out of my daydream in time to notice him holding open the door for me to the nurse’s office. Two students wearing corduroy pants and Big Bang t-shirts were breathing into paper bags.

The nurse took one look at me and reached for another bag, but my escort grinned and said, “Hey, Mrs. Gillespie, it’s good to see you. Hope you had a nice summer. I brought you a new patient. Her name is Jenny.” As Nurse Gillespie reached over to shake my hand, he reached for the door handle, and glancing over his shoulder, he said, “You’re in good hands. Welcome to Trinity High,” and he was gone.

Between the huffing of the paper bags, the nurse’s stare, and the hasty departure of my white knight, I stood for a moment in a disoriented fog. Did he just introduce me by name? How did he know my name? Had I

told him as we were walking here? Did someone recognize me when I was passed out in the hall? Did I forget I was wearing a ‘Hello, my name is Jenny’ sticker? Just to be sure, I glanced down at my shirt and was relieved to find I wasn’t. But that didn’t ease my troubled thoughts on the matter.

Noticing my uneasiness, Nurse Gillespie came out from behind the desk, wearing white orthotic shoes and hose circa 1950, and gently led me back to a dimly lit room with a vinyl-covered bed. The pillow had one of those disposable slipcovers on it, but thankfully there was no roll of hospital-grade paper across the bed itself. I always hated how that felt, like I was a piece of meat about to be wrapped up in butcher’s paper. She sat me down with such care, I wondered if the look on my face was that alarming. I tried to snap back into my usual benign expression, even added a fake smile for good measure, but she wasn’t buying it. She’d already reached for the blood pressure cuff and was shoving a thermometer in my mouth with the other hand.

After both devices finished registering the results, she shook her head with a smile. “Probably just first-day jitters. Did you eat a good breakfast?”

“Yes,” I replied with more conviction than I intended.

“Do you think you’ll be okay getting to classes, or would you prefer to lie here a while?”

“I’m fine,” I said. “I totally promise.” I wasn’t sure why I added that, but I’d say anything now to get out of there and not be the kid who showed up in the middle of her first class on her first day with a note from the nurse’s office.

“Well, what I really need you to promise me is that you’ll come straight back here if you’re feeling at all dizzy or nauseous, okay?”

She said ‘nauseous’ in that adult tone layered with the mild accusation that a girl who had fainted and was nauseous could only mean one thing.

I almost started explaining that I'd never even been asked for a sext yet but thought better of it as I heard the first-period bell ring.

I got up, gathered my bag, and started bolting out the door, but not before asking her the burning question on my mind. "Who was that guy who brought me in here, Mrs. Gillespie?"

"That was Nathan. Nathan Leeds, dear."

As I quickly pushed my way through the swarms of students, I repeated his name in my head, forcing the image of his face into my memory so that would be able to pick him out again amidst the two thousand other unfamiliar faces I'd be seeing every day.

I reached my first class and took a seat in the back, looking carefully at the faces of the other students as they came through the door. Immediately, I rolled my eyes at my own stupidity. He wasn't a freshman, so why would I think he'd be walking into this class? Duh.

English, social studies, French, and consumers ed all passed by without incident, meaning that I didn't suddenly drop to the floor in the middle of class, and I didn't bump into Nathan Leeds in the halls either.

Lunchtime was divided up into two shifts: 11:15 a.m. or 12:10 p.m. I was happy to have the latter, because it made the afternoon all that much shorter. Approaching the windowed cafeteria, I felt a pang of disbelief mixed with a bit of panic. Despite the room being nearly as big as a football field, it was filled to capacity with mobs of students clustering and cramming in all directions.

I decided to keep walking past the cafeteria and find some quiet place to eat my Ziploc salad, but when one of the teachers opened the door for me, I got nervous and ducked inside with a nod of thanks. Standing at the top of five stairs that led down to the cafeteria floor, I had a near bird's-eye view of the chaos that ensued. I had never been in an enclosed space with a thousand people before. The noise level was exponentially greater standing in the actual room versus the hallway outside. And the

mixture of greasy food, cheap perfume, and B.O. made me cover my nose and breathe shallowly through my mouth.

As more students poured in behind me, I got pushed down the stairs and into the crowd. I spotted another set of doors at the opposite end and decided to make a dash for them before I was herded deeper into the mob.

I had a nearly clear line to my goal with only a few obstacles to navigate around. I made it past the main set of garbage cans, luckily avoiding the spilled milkshakes and smooshed fries left from the first lunch period. Then I zipped through the first set of tables, hopping over some kid's foot that darted out either intentionally or unintentionally, but either way would have been a face-plant for sure. Starting a small maze through the second set of tables, I thought I was home-free until a flash of something caught my peripheral attention two tables in, and before I could register what it was, I heard my name called.

My head turned in slow motion, my eyes narrowing their focus on the source of the voice. It was him. The guy who'd been on my radar for the past four hours was now twenty-five feet away from me, calling my name. In my mind, I instantly pictured us sharing a casual lunch, becoming friends, becoming more than friends, exchanging birthday gifts, and taking long walks in the snow. In reality, I bolted for the door.

I couldn't believe what a chicken I was. *If he follows me, I'll say I didn't hear him.* But why would he follow me anyway? I didn't even know where I was going. *What if he asks me where I'm going?* I could feel my face begin to flush, and spotting a washroom up ahead, I ducked in and let out a heavy sigh. Most of the stalls were empty. I took the one at the far end and spent a minute looking over the school map I had tucked in my pocket. Past the cafeteria and down the administrative hall was a door that led out to a garden maintained by the school's horticulture club. I wasn't sure if I was allowed to go out there, but it was worth a shot. It was either that or eat my lunch on the toilet.

The staff monitor at the door to the garden greeted me with a somewhat wary look, as if suspecting I might make a run for it as soon as I got outside. Maybe he was a mind reader.

As I stepped into the hedged-in space with a flagstone path and small center fountain, I knew I had found my lunch room. Or maybe not. A bright yellow sign indicated no food or beverages were allowed. Well, I might go hungry today, but at least I found a haven of my own. Just as I wondered why no one else was out here, the door swung open and a group of four — two guys and two girls — came into the garden and plopped down on two of the benches across from me. I tried to check them out without actually making eye contact, and I think they were doing the same to me, which meant that we ended up staring directly at each other in the most awkward way possible. I smiled, and they smiled back, but otherwise they kept to themselves.

By the time last period started, I was starving and a bit light-headed. Fearing another fainting episode, I sat down on the locker room bench and devoured my salad before heading to the gym for P.E. The great thing about living nearby was that I didn't have to get caught up in the mass of girls trying to shower, change, pick up their stuff from their hall lockers, and make the buses before they took off. I could linger behind, shower at my leisure, wander the halls, sit in the garden, or go to the library and study before strolling the .95 miles home.

All in all, I thought everything was going to work out just fine at Trinity High. But then again, it was only my first day.

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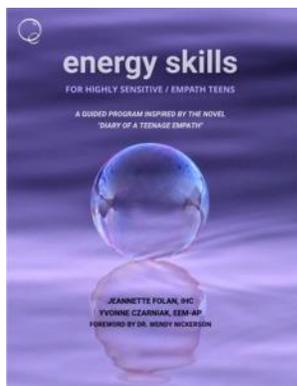
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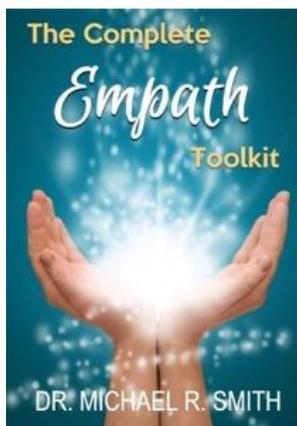
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