

Empath

By Sabrina Sumsion

I feel your pain.

To most people this is a figure of speech. A tired cliché or a hollow utterance meant to make the one who uttered it feel better. For me, it is reality. For as long as I can remember, I just knew things about what others were feeling. I *knew exactly* what they were feeling.

I remember one time when I was around six, I was walking with my mom through a mall. We passed a man. He was normal looking. He had a suit on and he was clean cut. He looked at me and smiled in manner that can only be called pleasant but chills ran down my spine. All I could think at the time was how dark his look made me *feel*. I tried to get my mom to carry me but she swatted away my outstretched hands told me to stop acting like a baby.

She never did understand my strange behaviors. I would come home from school and see her sitting on the couch and ask her what was wrong. She would tell me she had a cold. I could see her rubbed-raw red nose and tissues. I would see the tear marks on her face. I would hear the catch in her throat that could be attributed to a cold. Beyond all that, I could feel the sadness she was trying to hide.

She also misunderstood different events in my childhood like my friend Wendy's death. At the funeral, I was only five years old. In our religion, death was not a terrible event to grieve over. I knew that. She knew that I knew that so my mother couldn't understand why I was crying so hard. When she asked, I replied, "Because Wendy's mom is crying." I didn't come to understand until years later that I was tapping into Wendy's mother's grief.

As a teenager, I nearly drove my mother into the nut house. Hormones flaring along with everyone else's, I never knew which feelings were mine and which were the people's in the halls with me. My teenage years are even now a blur of swings between anger, depression, mania and sexual desire. The intensity of the swings drove me away from people. I still didn't know what really was going on so the emotions scared me. I became the butterfly. I floated from group to group but never let myself become really close to anyone. I was liked but I also had my share of enemies.

Actually, I'm not sure if I really did have enemies or if I just got hit with the vibes being directed at other people. It's not like anyone was going to say anything to my face. I had too many "friends".

I survived high school scene and tried college. I began to understand what was going on by interacting with my roommate. You can spend a lot of time with roommates and I had an extremely emotional unstable girl to room with. If she didn't have drama, she wasn't happy. Eventually I realized that every time she walked in the room, my emotions would match her flavor of the day. If she just got laid, I was feeling pretty good. If she was in a fight with her boyfriend, I was mad. If he dumped her, life as we knew it would cease.

I started testing myself. I would sit in public places and just feel. If you've ever floated in the ocean, you can relate to the sensation. People walking by were the different currents. The darling child holding ice cream in one hand and her mommy's hand in the other drenched me in happiness. The tall slender woman walking briskly, her heels clicking on the pavement in rapid staccato would sprinkle stress as she passed by. The overweight man would splash me with exhaustion. The teenager with spiked hair riding by on a skateboard would spray me with anger.

Usually, I would enjoy my voyages into other's emotions. Every once in a while, a person would walk by and scare me with the violent crashing waves of emotion. The crushing tides would cause me to lose my breath. I would feel like I was drowning and have to flee towards a happier group to regain my composure.

Eventually I learned to harness and focus my experiences. I have a desk job where I crunch numbers and avoid human contact. I still feel my boss's temper flare up but I don't get angry. I simply empathize.

Today, I am at home.

I love being home. It is a place of quiet and serenity. I love sitting on the couch, curling up in a cozy blanket and eating chocolate covered cherries. I bask in the silence and peace. It's my bastion of sanity and peace. At least, it was until the new neighbors moved in. Every once in a while, my neighbors get in a fight and I have to move to the other end of my apartment to avoid their emotions.

Today they are fighting.

I wish they would stop. They are really mad today. Their emotions are so strong that I can't ignore them. I am standing at the far end of my apartment in front of my window trying to get far enough away that I don't feel their feelings but still not leave my inner sanctum.

I consider going to the coffee shop across the street. Even with the people swirling around me, it would still be more peaceful than here. I look out the window and watch the snow swirl past. The weather man predicted a freezing night and he's right. I don't want to leave.

The neighbors are shouting louder. I can hear the muffled voices through the wall. I walk over to the wall dividing our apartments and rest my head on the wall. Maybe I should go next door and ask them to quiet down. Most likely, they don't want to be bothered and they'll direct the anger at me. I sure don't want antagonistic neighbors. I would have to move again and finding cheap apartments in this town is close to impossible.

What about calling the landlord or the cops? Same end result. If they found out it was me that had called, they would make my life hell.

Damn it! I wish they would shut up!

I sit on the couch and struggle to hold back tears.

Then I realize I am crying. We are crying. The woman from next door is sending out strong currents of sadness and I can't control my reaction. She is crying so I am crying and I am so sick and tired of living other people's emotions.

My arm starts hurting. I don't know why. I'm too tense. I relax my body. I stretch. My arm still hurts.

I get up and walk to the kitchen. About half way there I hear a thump against my wall from my neighbor's side and my head begins hurting too.

no. Please no.

I don't want to tap into this. I don't want anything to do with this. Now my thigh hurts. It feels like a Charlie horse. I hobble the rest of the way to my refrigerator. I open the door and wish I drank alcohol. Now would be the perfect time to get blasted out of my mind.

Oh my back! I drop the orange juice container I just pulled out of the fridge. I fall to my knees in agony. Then I drop to my side as my ribs feel as through a sledgehammer is wailing on them. I pull up my shirt and look, expecting to see some sort of mark. At least a bruise. Something to prove this agony is real.

I crawl to the phone. I can see in my mind's eye her arms reaching out and dragging her short body away from him. She is also trying to get to her phone. I finally reach the phone and pick up the receiver. I scream out in agony as my fingers feel crushing pressure. I struggle to hold onto the phone and dial the number.

Ring damn it! Ring!

“911 what is your emergency?”

“My neighbors are hurting each other.” I groan into the phone.

“Ma’am are you OK?”

“Forget me! Someone stop him! He’s going to kill her!” I shout into the phone. *Stupid people! Just get over here!*

“What is your address?”

I give her my address through clenched teeth. There are no new blows for the moment but fear is coursing through my veins. Part of the fear is in me for her but I know most of it is not mine. I know she is somewhere in her apartment watching him. Unable to protect herself. Watching his every move. Waiting for the next blow.

“Ma’am” says the 911 operator. “I need you to stay on the phone with me. We have police on the way. They will be there soon. Are you safe in your apartment?”

She really doesn’t understand what is happening. How can I explain to her that I am not really safe? My fate is linked to this stranger neighbor and this woman can never fathom. I’m sure 911 training doesn’t include how to talk to a neighbor who isn’t hurt but is feeling the agony of a beaten neighbor.

I can’t help but cry out as I feel my neighbor’s head jerk back from an impact to her face.

“Ma’am, are you OK?” the 911 operator asks.

“NO!” I yell. “Get someone here now! She’s going to die!”

“It sounds like you are in pain. Have you been hurt in any way?”

I try to think of what to tell her. *Yes I’m being hurt but not physically. No one is hurting me but whenever my neighbor is struck, I feel it. I’m emotionally linked to her pain right now. No, I don’t need mental services. . .*

“Ma’am, are you still there? Are you alright?” she asks extremely concerned by my silence.

“I’m not being struck. Just . . . just get someone here right away. I can’t endure this much longer!”

“Endure what much longer? Are you sure you don’t need assistance as well?”

“No! Just help her and I’ll be fine!”

She annoys me. Her concern is smothering me. The pain is choking me. Wait, her concern really is smothering me. I don’t take the time to consider this new level of sensitivity I somehow attained. I slam the telephone down and shrink away from it. The phone had always been my ally. It was my lifeline to the

human race without the burden of sharing everyone's emotional roller coasters.

I crawl to the corner and roll up in a ball. All I feel now is acceptance. Acceptance and pain. She knows she is going to die. She just doesn't know how soon. For her sake, I hope it is sooner rather than later.

I endure with her more blows to the body. He must be using something because the blows aren't as localized. Instead of one or two ribs hurting, four or five feel smashed at a time. Breathe in, breathe out. Now I feel a blow to the head. Now I feel nothing. Before the nothing, was that a flicker of pity?

Finally, I hear sirens. They are getting closer. Even though the pain in my body is gone, the pain of my own despair is debilitating. It was too late. I was too late.

I hear the front door to the apartment next door slam open. I hear someone run by my door. There is a struggle by the stairwell. There are several voices. I feel the emotions flooding from my neighbor's apartment again. There is anger, disgust, revulsion and sadness.

There is a knock at my door. I don't get up. I am too weary and empty for something like standing.

More knocking.

Now banging.

I can feel a vague sense of concern but I am empty. I have no more to give. I will have to flee civilization. I am tempted to call out to the exasperated person at my door *I feel your pain*.

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