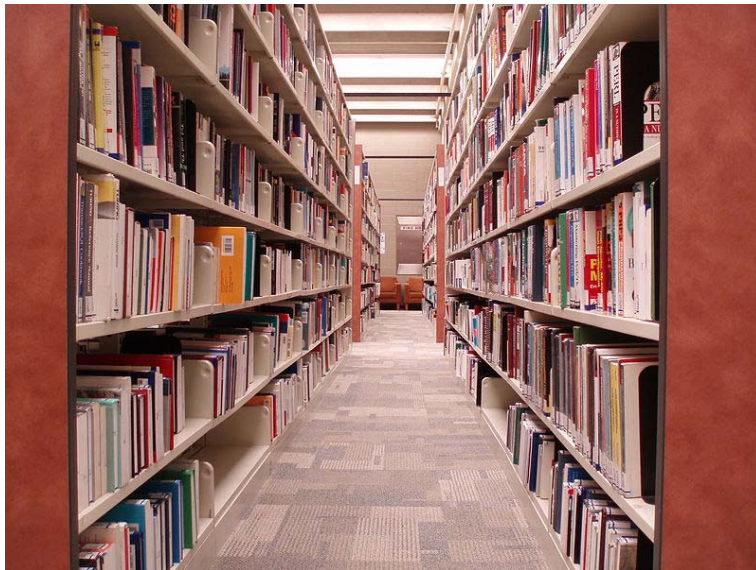


Lonely

By ReadWorks



When the bell rang for lunch, instead of going to the outdoor cafeteria to meet Morgan like she usually did, Jessica took her lunchbox and retreated to the library. The rest of the school was rushing past her, relieved for a 50-minute break after the first day back from winter vacation—like she didn't exist. And today, Jessica really felt like maybe she *didn't* exist.

She pushed open the swinging door to the library and sat at one of the tables in the corner. Nobody—not even Mrs. Garcia, the librarian—was around. The windows to the library looked out onto the cafeteria space. Jessica could hear kids laughing and screaming and chatting, eating lunch at the plastic picnic tables and enjoying each other's company. Jessica hunched down until her chin hit the hard, wood table and groaned. She pulled her lumpy cheese sandwich out of her lunchbox and chewed awkwardly against the table, staring off into space.

Suddenly, Jessica heard a rustling in the corner. She turned around and saw that the pink and orange, four-foot-tall, stuffed dragon that had lived in that exact corner of the library ever since she had started at the school (almost six years ago) was stretching its wings and yawning.

Jessica turned back to the table, eyes wide. “Oh my gosh,” she whispered. “Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh.” She peeked over her shoulder again and saw the dragon was walking toward her. She shook her head and closed her eyes tightly. “This can’t be happening,” she said to herself. “I must be going insane.”

“Hi there!” a voice said from behind Jessica’s left elbow.

Jessica turned around slowly. The dragon was standing in front of her, one claw on the scaly area near what would be its waist, smiling and blinking. The dragon looked confused.

“Do you speak English?” the dragon said.

“Um...yes?” Jessica said. “I think I’m just hallucinating.”

The dragon shrugged and pulled out the chair next to Jessica and sat down heavily, its wings spreading out majestically.

“Probably. Why are you eating in here by yourself?”

“Uh...” Jessica looked around the library. It was still lunchtime; she could still hear her peers playing outside in the courtyard; and the library was still empty.

“Look, I know this is unusual, but why don’t you just try to go with it?” the dragon said. It looked at Jessica’s half-eaten sandwich. “Finish your lunch. I’ll sit with you.”

Jessica picked up her sandwich and took a bite, then looked over. The dragon was still sitting there watching her steadily. It seemed a little concerned about her. It had the same look in its eye as her mother did when Jessica was quiet during the car ride home, or when she was doing her homework on Saturday nights at the kitchen table.

She knew her mother thought she was a loner, but it wasn’t that Jessica didn’t have any friends. They all just happened to live really far away. Jessica knew she had a very rich social life online, and stayed up chatting with her friends in Australia until midnight sometimes. She had met them in chat rooms or on blogs about favorite bands they had in common, or their favorite book characters. She felt comfortable chatting with her friends through the blue light

of her computer screen. Talking face-to-face was the not-so-comfortable part. The first days back at school after vacations were the hardest. Jessica had spent the last two weeks talking to people all day, and today she had barely said two words to her homeroom teacher.

"I know how you feel," the dragon said, as if it could read her mind. "I get lonely here, too, sometimes."

"I'm not lonely," Jessica said. "And don't read my mind."

"You *are* lonely," the dragon said, leaning forward on the table to look at Jessica close in the eye. "I can see it in your face. You haven't smiled all day."

Jessica felt a wave of sadness settle over her limbs. If a stuffed *dragon* could even sense her loneliness, she didn't even want to think about what the other kids in school thought of her.

"Just say hi to someone today," the dragon said softly. "I promise they'll say hi back."

The five-minute bell indicating lunch was almost over rang. Jessica sniffed and felt her eyes well up with tears. The dragon obviously didn't understand how difficult that was going to be. When she looked up to say something, it was gone. Jessica looked around the room. The dragon was back in its corner, wings stiff and at the ready behind it.

Jessica packed up the rest of her uneaten lunch. Clearly the dragon was trying to help just her. It probably didn't come alive for everyone who ate alone in the library (but then again, how many people actually ate lunch alone in the library?). Maybe she should take its advice.

In the hallway outside the library, a girl from Jessica's homeroom class was crouched on the floor, picking up pens, pencils, and highlighters that had clearly just dropped out of her empty pencil case, open beside her. Jessica, fighting the urge to just walk away, leaned down and picked up a few pens.

"Let me help you," she said.

The girl, Molly, looked up at her and smiled gratefully. "Thank you!" she said. Jessica smiled back.