

**Maia Siegel**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, MI

Educators: Brittany Cavallaro, Maia Siegel

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

---

## **Chloe**

Four years later, we still bullied Chloe. We still talked about Chloe, showed her pictures to our new friends, states away, schools apart. Four years later, none of us from junior high talked to each other except to inquire about the states of our virginities and, of course, Chloe. We tried to seem above it, sometimes, but we never were. Our new friends, people she had never met, started mimicking her facial expressions, too. We spread Chloe over states, over years, even over countries. No, not countries, except for one girl's church mission trips. We all stayed close to home. I went the farthest away, and it wasn't by choice, really. It just happened.

The text, four years later, that set us off, was from Helen. It just happened. She asked us to share stories about Chloe, and no one wanted to share the big ones. We said little things. A weird look. A strange thing she said. We didn't say what we were really thinking.

What we were really thinking: the ellipses that popped up and went back down.

Chloe looked different from us, and we never said the obvious of it. We called her hair greasy. We said she had pimples. But that wasn't a real difference; some of us didn't wash our hair for weeks, but that was, to us, a matter of small importance. That was natural hair care. Chloe's face drooped, her teeth jutted out. Chloe's back hunched, and she had a brace. The brace stretched out her torso, but her legs didn't grow, so she had tiny feet. She had some sort of sickness, something unknown. She had seizures, sometimes. After the seizures, we would be nice to her. We would remember her life was hard and we would feel a pang of something and then the next day we would forget.

It was cruel of the parents to do that, to refuse to tell us what was wrong with her. The parents once made her walk with her sister all the way back home from the pool, shivering in a swimsuit. Her sister linked hands with her and they walked the highway. I passed them in my mother's green Toyota Camry. Neither of us waved.

Her dad had oily hair and a thick Jersey accent. He worked for her grandfather, doing some bullshit job, and still, he complained about his employer-father all the time. The grandfather was a Holocaust survivor, and I was embarrassed when I would sometimes see Chloe at a Passover seder with him.

Chloe had clearly chosen her mother's Catholicism, since she wore a bejeweled cross necklace, but my place as one of the few Jews at the school was already tenuous. The only other one, Nathan, was also supremely uncool, and extremely short. His only redeeming factor was that his dad had a sports car. If Chloe was thought of as Jewish, I would be lumped in with her. I would be connected. Chloe started going only to church, and Nathan and I never mentioned her attendance at the rare seder. Nathan and I—our dislike of her was protective, maybe. We had to keep our domain clean of her.

That was an excuse; I am not going to be making any more excuses. I will just tell you how it was.

Once, the entire class was on a field trip, and we all were sleeping in bags on the floor. Chloe slept in an area all her own—no one wanted to get too close. I rolled in my sleep, across the room, across the carpeted floor. When I woke up, I was inches from Chloe's face. There was an intimacy, a secrecy in this. She was sleeping, and now I was awake, and I was so close I could see all the markings on her face, her tooth that jutted out, her wet blonde eyelashes. I felt an acute sense of danger. If I was seen this close to her, what would happen? It looked like we

might kiss. What if someone thought we were about to kiss? What if I wanted to?

That same trip, Chloe walked out of the bathroom in front of the entire class in nothing but her underwear and her back brace. She walked up to the math teacher, our trip's chaperone, and asked him to un-velcro her brace. We were all shocked by the brazenness of Chloe, how she wasn't disgusted by her body in the same way we thought she should be, how we were of our own.

Most girls in our class had an eating disorder, myself included. We nibbled on red peppers and apple slices at lunch. Chloe slid next to us, a hot pocket in front of her. Or Lunchables. Or McDonalds. It seemed like her eating of junk food fed something gross inside of her. Chloe was gnawing on junk food, and we were eating singular vegetable spring rolls for lunch. We were, fundamentally, cleaner, we thought. From the inside out.

Several years after this, I was diagnosed with scoliosis. Like Chloe. Our insides matched, our insides were wrong in the same way. I was scared I would have to get a brace, in some sort of divine retribution. The doctors talked about it, but I was insistent. I would rather let the improper growth continue, would rather let my spine contort itself, than become like Chloe. I never got a brace. The long-term effects on my spine, on my growth—I won't know them for years, probably. But I was not going to need the math teacher to unstrap me. I was not going to let the class see my pale legs in cotton underwear, a plastic tube pulling my torso up.

Several years after this, I realized that I was also attracted to girls. Again, this was like Chloe, who came out in high school, w

ho started posting heavily filtered images of her girlfriend on Instagram. I loathed this extra similarity between us. When Chloe came out, my eighth grade group chat exploded. I stayed quiet. I only told one person from middle school that I was like that too, and he wasn't even deemed cool enough to be in the group chat, not even after he became a D-list Netflix star. "I'm glad you thought you could tell me," he said. "I'll be filing away the image of you with a girl for the next time I need it."

Chloe was boy-crazy in middle school. Her biggest crush was on Nathan, but would willingly run through a list of the other boys, if asked. None of us did anything about our crushes. We sat with them, we waited beside them, we stared down at their socks. Chloe was the only one who did anything about them. She moved on from Nathan to Braeden, a boy with processing problems and a large, skeletal head, topped with small eyeglasses. Chloe slept in the same bed as Braeden at a sleepover. It was just them, in a bed.

When the class learned about this, we found it obscene. We didn't want to imagine them together, and we were infuriated how she could've gotten so close to another person before we did. Was her back brace laying in a corner, his small eyeglasses on the table? Did they kiss? Did they reach out their thin arms and touch one another?

The D-list Netflix celebrity I went to middle school with is named Carson. He was the one who saw Chloe's seizures start. Chloe started seizing, and Carson yelled, and my teacher reluctantly turned away from her ChromeBook. We all stood up, watching Chloe's muscles convulse, her head jerk back. A girl named Libby called 911 on the classroom phone, and the science teacher ran into the room. He set Chloe down from her blue plastic chair, and she flailed on the carpet. In the corner, Libby stood and laughed. Compulsively, she said. We all were quiet, except for the laughing. Libby started tearing up, her shoulders heaved, her laughs burned into croaks. Chloe was still, her small body stretched out on the floor. Libby turned away, her laughs pointed towards the corner of the retractable wall.

Later, the science teacher told us never to call 911 if Chloe started having a seizure. *The ambulance is too expensive*, he said. *Just grab me, I can handle it.*

Libby, the last day of eighth grade, wanted to make amends with Chloe. Wanted to help her, going into high school. *Let's take her shopping*, she said. We saw ourselves as saints, as charity workers, as some *Clueless* makeover gurus. We all wanted to be the Cher, the all-knowing creator of a correct appearance. An H&M had just opened up in our town. It was a huge event; girls went with beach bags and filled them to the brim with clothes. We invited Chloe to go to H&M with us, we who had been in class with her since first grade and never invited her anywhere. She accepted.

My mom drove us because no one else wanted Chloe to touch their seats. One girl said she had OCD, and so

Chloe's nose picking was detrimental to her mental health, her Mercedes-Benz seats. We nodded, we understood. We pulled up to Chloe's house in my Toyota Camry. The seats were already stained; I said I didn't mind. Chloe came out of her house wearing a crop top, her whole red-spotted back exposed. She was wearing caked-on makeup, smelled like Victoria's Secret. She must've sat in front of her older sister's closet that morning, thumbing through skimpy hot pink shirts. Her sister must've sat her down and sternly applied a smokey eye.

In H&M, we steered her towards the sections we thought were appropriate. She would hold up a hoodie with a slogan about video games, and we would shake our heads. She started compiling a pile of clothes we hated. We started whispering to each other through the racks. We silently removed items from her cart, stuffed them in drawers in the men's section. Was her back cold, exposed to the overzealous H&M air conditioning, to us? She brought three hoodies to the counter, and we bought them for her. We felt saintly for this, I know.

The three hoodies came out to about 70 bucks, which felt mountainous. It was as if, just because of the price, these three hoodies would be the difference between so much, would wipe our guilt, would remake her. We handed her the H&M bag. We said we hoped she would have fun at her new high school. She was the only one going to New Hanover, a public high school. I was districted for New Hanover, too. But, again, I had made sure that wasn't going to happen for me. I was leaving everyone here, everyone sitting primly in my stained seats, every small child returning from the pool that we passed on the road. I pretended to be very sad about it.

We drove Chloe back to her house, and I watched her bare back rise as she climbed her steps. We might have said goodbye. We might have just let the car run, its engine panting as she closed the door.