

My house was a gingerbread house, like that from “Hansel and Gretel”, covered in a delicious illusion to distract from reality. No one outside knew the secrets held within. I tried to avoid it. I failed.

On Mondays, my neighbor David would always take me to school, along with his preposterously dim-witted girlfriend. We, his girlfriend and I, were in the same grade, but the difference was vaster even the largest ocean. I don’t understand how she manages to function.

One Monday, I was in my room when the bell rang. Martha, that was David’s girlfriend, always insisted on coming to door so that she could say goodbye to my mother, for whatever reason. It didn’t make much sense, because my mother basically hated Martha, and all, but I never saw a reason to end it.

I trampled down the stairs and opened the door. When I stepped outside, I slammed it behind me. “My mother is indisposed,” I said, which was true. She was currently sobbing into an old sweatshirt of my dad.

“Oh, okay.” Martha had this horrendous perm that cut off at her chin. Whenever I saw it, I had this insane urge to vomit- that was how ugly it was. Her fashion taste was even worse. Today, she wore a multicolored, pillowcase-of-a-dress that hung down to just above her ankle, short enough to see the bottom of the blue jeans she wore underneath.

“Nice dress,” I said, words fluid, as if I’d actually meant them, and to Martha, I did. That was all that mattered, anyway. At the compliment, her small face erupted into this childish oversized grin.

I don’t know what David saw in her.

David hung out of the van’s window, yelling at us to hurry. “We’re going to be late,” he said, which he always said and which was never true. David was funny like that.

We hurried into the Sedan- David’s mother’s- and took our respective places. I used to sit in the passenger seat, before Martha arrived, but now I was restricted to the back seat, like a second-class citizen, or worse, a child.

We didn’t talk the entire ride to the school, mostly because we had nothing to say, but also because David wouldn’t let us. He was a new driver and overtly cautious. He said that any

distraction that we could pose on him would result in our imminent death. He was neurotic, that way. It was kind of cute.

He let us out at the drop off, without a word, before driving back to get a parking spot. Martha turned to me.

“So what did you think about that English essay?” That was what got me. Martha was in all of my advanced classes. I thought they looked through applicants, judging them by their merits, before allowing them into AP classes, but I guess not.

“Good, you?” I smiled, easing in to the grey wall behind me. We chatted amicably for a few seconds, before my attention was drawn elsewhere.

“Chloe!” My sort of best friend, Kimberly, called. She was closely followed by our semi-mutual friends: Halie, Tessa, and Rachel.

I wave goodbye to Martha and went to them. Halie and Tessa were siblings, a year apart, who, in my professional opinion, had some sort of co-dependency. They were constantly together, always Halie and Tessa, Tessa and Halie, a pair.

Tessa came up to me, smiling brightly, “We were assigning fractions, and we think you should be in Amity.” Tessa obsessed over this book, *Divergent* by Veronica Roth, and although I’ve never read it, I got the general guise. Each fraction valued a single attribute, and Amity was the kind fraction, or something. I’m pretty they were the super perfect, classic “good” characters.

I shook my head. In Tessa’s deluded mind, the world was like that of a book’s- simple where people were just *one* thing. I felt sorry for her. She didn’t understand that the world was infinitely more complex.

“Really?” I smiled, ducking my head enough to let my hair create a veil over my face. It was a shy move, but I wasn’t actually that shy or even shy at all. However, it resembled an equation: shy + friendly = likeable and I was good at equations. That was how I had so many friends.

“You’re like the nicest person ever.” I really wasn’t, but it was Rachel who spoke, and arguing with her was like stepping on a puppy. She was probably the nicest person ever, herself.

I smiled, friendly and shy and everything I was supposed to be.

I looked to Kim, “So, how’s Johnson.” That was her boyfriend- Gabriel Johnson, although everyone just called him Johnson. He taught computer courses at the community college once a week for actual money. That was probably the only reason I approved of him.

“He’s good,” and the conversation lagged, as it always did. For whatever reason, I believed that it was my sole responsibility to keep everyone constantly entertained. Even in the briefest of silences, I felt the beginnings of panic. *What should I say, what do I say, what can I say.*

“So...” a pause, infinity in a second, “How’s school?”

Rachel answered first, eager, and she had every right to be. She was a genius and her grades were perfection. “Good, I think I killed that chemistry test. How about you?”

I was almost completely sure that I flunked it, but I said, “Oh, really well. This material is *so* easy.” Kim shot me a look, suspicions evident, but I smiled anyway. “It’s the Pre-Calc test that will kill me.” Which was one of the most absurd lies I had ever told, but I needed something negative to even out the extreme positive of my other lie. There was a science to it.

“No way, Chloe. You’re awesome at math,” Rachel said, pure friendly with an ease in her tone, something I wish I had.

The bell rang before anyone else had the chance to talk. We hurried off to our classes.

In math class, I doodled as I did every day. Each time the same girl, only ever her face, with only one of two expressions: an inexplicably sad one or an inexplicably happy one. Neither seemed right, her happy face was too sunshine smiles and twinkling eyes and her sad face was too depressive.

Perhaps I was a perfectionist and the exactness in which I portray a fictional girl didn’t matter. The only thing that bothered me, really bothered me, was that she was too nondescript, a poster of a girl, rather than an actual one.

I tore out another piece of paper, preparing to draw another incantation of her, when a green slip appeared in front of me. I looked up to see Maggie Bowler, who thought I was the spawn of the devil himself. I wasn't even sure why.

"Congratulations," she said, her tone like acid. She used to be my best friend, the only person who knew the real me, but that was years ago.

"Thank you," I whispered, reading the slip. I won student of the month, again.

I tucked the paper away in some folder, where I would eventually forget it. At the end of the year, maybe I'd find it; give it to my mother, eyes teary when she uttered the same line she did every year. Not that it mattered, anyway.

I sighed, going back to my paper, drawing the girl, sad, in the same way I always drew her sad.

My mother picked me up right after sixth period, like I figured she would. My seventh, and last, period class was gym and whenever she was feeling guilty she'd pull me out early.

When I arrived to the office, my mother was chatting with the secretary. They had gotten to know each well over the past three years.

"That's great! And how is Bill?" The secretary asked. Bill was my dad.

"Oh, he's wonderful. We think he may be getting a raise." He lost his job last May.

"How marvelous! And how is Chloe?" I know she saw me, but seemed to just disregard my presence.

"Oh, great. She just won first in an essay writing contest." This was almost true. My mother did tell me to enter an essay contest, and I did write a whole 100 words before giving up.

"It wasn't that hard." I mumbled underneath my breath, but if anyone heard me, they didn't mention it.

"And how does she like tennis?"

“Oh,” my mother said. “She loves it,” and my mother actually believed this to be true, despite the evidence of the contrary.

“That’s wonderful,” the secretary said, and since they had exhausted all of their topics, they parted with a friendly smile and wave.

“That woman is exhausting,” my mother said once the door closed behind us.

We arrived home just as my dad was pulling out. My mother cursed beneath her breath, but made no move to go after him. Instead, she hurried inside, presumably to see what was missing.

I stalled for a second, dreary and cold, and looked at that much-hated gingerbread house. It was lot like me.