

Allana

Kids Will Be Kids

"Hey Claire...look what I found!" Stephanie mischievously whispered, loud enough for me to hear. My dreary brown eyes followed Stephanie's every move as she inched closer to the small bowl of toothpicks placed in the middle of the brown coffee table in Claire's living room. "Oooh, *toothpicks!*" Claire snickered, shooting a wicked glance in my direction. I knew what was about to happen, what always happens, but I prayed mercilessly in my head that maybe this time things would be different. I watched in slow motion as Stephanie grabbed a handful of toothpicks from the bowl and slowly turned in my direction.

At this point, I wish there was a "pause" button I could press on the remote control of my life. Perhaps even rewind back a couple years and do everything differently. But of course, to my dismay, my life is no movie and does not include "pause, rewind or fast forward" buttons.

The handful of toothpicks came flying at me, some landing near my feet, others scratching at my legs and a few poking my arms and stomach. Throwing my arms in the air, I attempted to shield my face for the fear that these two girls would see my tearful expression in this moment of shame. Claire slowly walked towards me and for a split second I thought to myself, "Okay, maybe she's going to apologize, maybe she's not that mean after all." Wrong.

Claire bent down by my right leg and picked up one of many scrawny toothpicks surrounding me. "Allana, we just want you to know, that this is what your body looks like." As if I somehow couldn't see the toothpick in her hand, Claire decided to pick up more and shove them towards my face. Giggling, Claire paraded around me, toothpicks in hand, waiting to see my reaction. "You *are* stick thin, it's just disgusting," Stephanie chimed in. The two girls burst into hysterical laughter as I sat in the corner of Claire's living room, motionless. I looked up at them laughing at me and then quickly bent my head back down because I knew if I looked at their giggling faces one more time, more tears would start to fall down my face.

The laughter went on for a number of minutes more, until the two girls, who I called my friends, got bored. "Lets go shopping," Stephanie commanded to Claire, completely ignoring "toothpick girl" in the background. As Stephanie and Claire ran off to get their purses and whatever from Claire's bedroom, I quickly gathered my composure and braced myself as much as possible, for the day to come.

Running my fingers through my unmanageably curly hair and re-applying the most popular lip-gloss of the week, I tried to make myself look presentable. I tugged on my short jean shorts, thinking that magically they would expand and I would be able to cover up as much of my bottom half as possible. I smoothed my ratty old red tank top from Old Navy as fast as I could and took one quick downward glance at myself. I tried my best to get the dancing toothpick image

out of my head and took one long deep breath, closing my eyes for that second, praying that today could still be salvaged as a good day. A few moments later, Claire and Stephanie walked confidently out of Claire's room, shot a glance in my direction and next thing I knew, the three of us were out the door.

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I attended Saint Clement School from junior kindergarten until eighth grade. The school itself was rather small, with no more than thirty kids per grade. Although my class had our share of students transfer in and out, I spent ten years with the same thirty kids. It was inevitable that everyone knew everything about each other and each other's families.

From kindergarten up until fifth grade, it was all so effortlessly easy. Your new best friend could be the person sitting next to you in the sandbox, helping build the greatest sandcastle of all time. Since boys had cooties and the girls in my class wanted nothing to do with those "icky boys", boy/girl relationships was never an issue. Everyone was always nice to one another and "cliques" never existed. Everyone was taught at a young age to treat others how you wanted to be treated and that is exactly how we all acted. On the rare occasion that someone would become angry with someone else, that miniscule anger usually lasted one day and by the next morning, it was long forgotten. During this period of my life, I looked forward to school. I woke up each day anxious and excited wondering what the day would hold. Little did I know how quickly everything could and would change.

The transition from fifth grade to "junior high," sixth through eighth grade, was harder for me to make more than the transition from eighth grade to high school. As the school year began, everything was different. It seemed as if everyone in my class spent the summer creating new identities, because I knew on that first day, the "new and improved" kids in my class were not the same people I had spent seven years forming what I thought were, lasting friendships.

As I walked into my sixth grade homeroom, I was greeted by our teacher Mr. Shaw, a man about forty years old, with bushy dark brown hair and a matching brown beard. I didn't know much about Mr. Shaw, except that he was a stickler for history. He taught all history classes along with sixth grade homeroom. I had heard only good things about him so I was looking forward to a wonderful year. "Why welcome back, Allana! Welcome to sixth grade! Why don't you go find your seat.", Mr. Shaw remarked, with a giant smile on his face. As I walked around the classroom, trying to find my nametag on a desk, I looked around at all the familiar faces. "Hey Allana! How was your summer?", my friend Christina remarked, giving me a hug. "Allana! It's so good to see you!", Jackie said, waving from across the room. "Hi Allana! How are you??", Dan said as he lightly tapped me on the shoulder. Despite the warm welcome from a few of my classmates, I immediately sensed something was different.

Our desks were set up like a small table, two desks pushed together on each side, so there were four students sitting together. As I continued to walk around the room, with no sign of my desk, I approached the final table located

right near the front of the classroom. There were two empty desks on one side, with the other two occupied. The first seat was taken by Claire Eisenhower, who I was not very friendly with and the other seat was taken by someone who appeared to be a new student. "Um..Allana, your seat's right here." Claire remarked, pointing to the desk right across from her. The new girl and Claire started to laugh and watched as I fumbled for my seat. I suddenly became extremely nervous, my palms started to sweat and I gulped, quite loudly, as I quickly sat down and took my notebooks and pens out from my bright orange and pink backpack.

Back in fifth grade, many of my classmates admired my orange and pink backpack. "It's sooo pretty! It looks like an ice cream cone!", my friend Jane exclaimed, over and over again. I loved my backpack and what I loved more was that my friends admired it as well. Every day when I would walk into class with my bright creamsicle backpack swinging from my shoulders, my classmates' eyes would light up and everyone would want to ask me where I got my awesome backpack. I loved that feeling more than anything-- the feeling of acceptance.

As I placed my beloved backpack on the floor next to my desk, my eyes suddenly locked with the new girl's. I sheepishly smiled, thinking she was making eye contact but as I reached into the front pocket of my backpack to get a piece of gum, I suddenly realized this girl wasn't looking at me, rather she was admiring my backpack. Feelings of acceptance from years past came rushing back into body and I felt on top of the world. "That's a..uh.. Interesting backpack

you got there. It's very....colorful." I quickly looked up to see who had spoke such kind words and when I realized the new girl was talking to me, my entire body got goosebumps. "Thanks! I love the colors, I'm actually thinking about painting my room these colors!", I remarked back. Claire started to laugh and I sensed it wasn't the type of laugh where you laugh *with* someone, more, it sounded like she was laughing *at* me. Pushing Claire's obnoxious laughter aside, I turned to the new girl to try to read her expression. She just smiled, in a very fake fashion; it was unlike anything I had never seen before. She turned to Claire and both girls started to laugh, Claire leaning over numerous times to catch a glimpse at my backpack.

Frankly, I didn't see what was so funny. Last year, everyone had fun, brightly colored and crazy patterned backpacks—what was so hilarious about mine? As I glanced around the room for other people's backpacks, I suddenly noticed what was so different. Almost every girl in my class had either a grey or black backpack and every boy had either a green or grey one as well. "Man, people must have done serious backpack shopping over the summer," I thought to myself, admiring the fact that I was different and continued to relish in the love of my bright backpack.

As the day went on, I realized that backpacks were not the only thing different with my classmates. Everyone was a lot more "mature" than they were a year ago. Suddenly talk of movies, television shows and our favorite magazines became replaced with talk of drinking, smoking and sex. Each class, I heard

many different conversations in which I had to “fake yawn” in order to hide my astonishment at what I was hearing come out of my classmates’ mouths. The two people generating the majority of this scandalous talk were the two new girls in our grade—Stephanie and Gaby.

Neither of these girls introduced themselves to me and honestly, I did not want to introduce myself to them. I was greatly intimidated in many ways. First, Stephanie surely looked as though she belonged in the eighth grade, rather than the sixth. She was the type of girl who I thought looked like she could be your best friend one day and then steal your boyfriend and stab you in the back the next day. It was only the first day of school and everyone wanted to be her friend. I couldn’t believe how fast she became Little Miss Popular. I watched in envy as every boy, including my secret crush since kindergarten, Sam, introduced themselves to Stephanie. One by one they lined up around her desk, waiting for the chance to meet her and let her know what “great guys they are.” I was disgusted yet so intrigued. I wonder if people were jealous of me because I got to sit at the same table as Stephanie in homeroom.

Rather than “peaking” at around seventeen or eighteen, like many people, Stephanie hit her peak at exactly thirteen years old. And boy did I envy her for that. With her perfectly tan and clear complexion, Stephanie’s face was a teenage dermatologist’s dream. Her teeth were white and straight and unlike all of our classmates, Stephanie never had to deal with the pains of having braces. Or acne. Or any other physical deformity that many kids face come their teenage

years. The one thing Stephanie and I do have in common is our hair color, although talking about hair in general, Stephanie definitely got the better, longer end of the stick. With her ideal straight brown locks, putting together the effortlessly “messy bun” was never, ever a problem. I on the other hand, was definitely on the opposite end of the spectrum, with my curly, frizzy hair looking like a big mess most of the time. When discussing my hair, “effortlessly” was a word that was certainly not in my vocabulary. While I was always trying to look older, by experimenting with the newest makeup trends or buying all my clothes at Wet Seal, the “only store where we buy our clothes”, according to Claire, Stephanie naturally looked about three years older than her actual age. The amount of self-confidence Stephanie exuded at such an awkward age is perhaps what drew me to her in the first place.

Gaby was unlike anyone in our grade. She moved to Chicago from New York and just like Stephanie, looked as though she belonged in eighth grade. She had short, light brown hair with red highlights that I liked to admire from afar-- As did many of my classmates. Gaby was very well developed for a sixth grader. She had an extremely voluptuous chest, which the boys constantly drooled over every day. Gaby also knew how to rock our white uniform polo's. She always managed to add her own sense of flair to our gross uniforms, which I always found so fascinating. Every day she walked into class wearing this amazing red fuzzy jacket that became her trademark. I admired her sense of style and the fact that Gaby really didn't care what anyone thought of her. Her outspoken and

loud personality scared me half to death. I am a very friendly person but I am most certainly not one to walk into a classroom full of students and teachers and scream "HAAAY EVERYBODY!!!!!"

With the addition of our two new students, who seemed to contribute to the change in dynamics of our class, I also found that my friends became very conscious of other people. All of a sudden, ones physical appearance and material possessions became indicators of class status. Cliques began to form and everything began to change. People started to notice the little things; the things I thought I could hide all of a sudden became visible. My differences were no longer "acceptable" and I found myself wanting to blend in, for I couldn't bear to be different. My past was finally starting to catch up with me. What I was about to encounter was something completely unexpected and I never thought that in a million years being different could inflict the number of emotions I was about to experience.

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My differences emerged the moment I was born. I was born two and a half months premature. Weighing in at two pounds and ten a-half ounces, I fit perfectly in the palm of my dad's hands.

When I was a little girl, I would grab my dad's hands and stare deeply into them, looking for some answer as to how I, a newborn preemie, fit into those hands. Looking up at all 6'4 of my father with a blank stare on my face, then glancing back down to those hands, I would repeat this gesture over and

over again. With a smile on his face, scrunching his thick, bushy, grey eyebrows, he always said the same thing, every time. "Yep, you fit right there," and then he would put his hands next to each other, palms facing the ceiling, and start to gently rock his hands back and forth, back and forth, like he was rocking a newborn baby. In turn, I would then mimic the baby-rocking gesture to the best of my ability, with my smaller, more delicate hands, and we would sit or stand, wherever we were, rocking our hands, together.

I was placed in intensive care in Prentice Hospital at Northwestern University Hospital for two months. As a preemie, there were numerous health risks such as slower lung development and the possibility of developing cerebral palsy. Pushing the obvious risks aside, my parents constantly faced each day with their new baby as a life or death situation. Every night my mom would call the nurse to see how I was, and every night for two months the answer was, "Well, she's not out of the woods quite yet." As I fought to stay alive, my parents lived in a constant, 24/7 state of panic. I was born so unexpectedly early that my parents were hardly prepared for their new baby's arrival.

It's my thinking that my parents favorite part of the "Allana's premature birth" story is when they tell me, and consequently anyone willing to listen, that when I was born I looked like a cross between E.T and a little baby frog. I understand that premature babies are not pretty babies because they've hardly had time to develop, *but* describing your newborn child as looking like an alien? I don't think so. The only baby pictures displayed in our house are those of my

younger brother Matt. My parents recently told me that they don't show anyone my baby pictures because honestly, they're not that attractive. If you want to see pictures of me around age 4, there are plenty, but the newborn baby pictures are locked tightly away in a drawer in my parent's bedroom for no one to see.

As a result of my premature birth, I was faced with many challenges growing up as a "normal" child. I was much slower in my development than most children and by the time I reached junior high, I was finally beginning to recognize how different I really was.

Physically, I was a skinner, smaller version of my classmates. Even though my birthday suggested I was the third oldest in the class, my looks unfortunately did not live up to this proud fact. I had straight brown hair up until sixth grade until it decided to turn into giant curls taking over my head. My arms were rail thin and I would spend hours after hours staring at them, wondering what the hell was wrong with my arms. My thumb and middle finger together could easily fit around my wrist, which horrified me. It seemed to me that my arms could easily be snapped in half. My legs were long and skinny, just like my dad's. My thighs were almost the size of my calves, filled with only muscle. I had no hips whatsoever and a perfectly flat stomach. I could eat and eat and eat and somehow never gain any weight. I would grab the sides of my stomach, praying for something other than my hipbone to stick out. I so often wished that one day I would gain enough weight so I wouldn't have to look so disgustingly thin.

It all became a reality one summer when I was out shopping with my older cousin Hilary in Ohio and we ran into some of her friends at the mall. Her two girlfriends ran up to Hilary gushing about how excited they were for the new school year to start. One of her friends looked me up and down--her eyes filled with curiosity and somehow repulsion. "Are you anorexic?" the girl blurted out. I had no idea if she was addressing me, Hilary or the other friend. I stared at her in disbelief, shocked that those words would come out of someone's mouth. It was silent for about five seconds until Hilary's other friend immediately changed the subject and both girls said goodbye and walked away. My cousin and I never discussed that incident again and somehow the image of the girl's eyes scanning my body, looking for some kind of deformity, forever remains in my brain.

My slower development as a child had many consequences beyond the physicality of my body. There were many concerns facing my parents and I questioning how well I would perform in school. In order to find out the burning answer to this seemingly important question, I met with a number of different doctors and was tested every three years on my developmental skills.

I was in between fifth and sixth grade when I first met Carol Sonnenshine, a psychologist who would perform the psycho-educational testing on me. She lived in downtown Chicago, in an apartment building similar to my family's apartment. "You're going to be fine Lan, just do your best and it'll be over before you know it." my mom yelled to me as she dropped me off outside the lobby of Carol's building. The doorman escorted me to the set of twin black elevators and

told me to press the button for floor number fourteen and Carol's door was the furthest to the left. "Fourteen. Fourteen. Fourteen. Fourteen", I counted in my head, waiting for the elevator. The elevator ride felt like the slowest one of my life. As much as I feared getting stuck in an elevator by myself, I hoped that the elevator *would* get stuck and I would be trapped until my mom would come back for me and the testing would be long forgotten. And then the elevator doors opened to the fourteenth floor.

I dragged my feet as slow as a tortoise towards her apartment door. Getting tested meant that I was different. It wouldn't be a big deal if everyone in my class also got tested, but that wasn't the case. It was just me. So now I looked different than everyone *and* had to get tested for my developmental ability. Up until the point of testing, I always had an inkling I was different than the kids in my class. For so many of them, everything came so easily. I had to work extra hard and was often far behind and could not keep up with the fast pace of my classmates. I tried to reassure myself that getting tested would finally provide some answers to my differences and perhaps make me normal, like the other kids.

I knocked on the door like I was knocking on the door of death. My heart started to race and when the doorknob started to turn, I closed my eyes and hoped for the best. I opened my eyes to a tall, thin lady, probably in her mid-sixties, with short gray hair and sparkling brown eyes. "Hi Allana! My names Carol, it's so nice to meet you." Whew, a sigh of relief left my body as I entered

her apartment and she led me to a small room in the back of her house, where she would conduct the tests.

“I’m going to get a glass of lemonade, would you like one?” Carol warmly asked. “Yes, please,” I replied. All my constant worrying from that elevator ride has made my mouth quite dry. I sat down in a small black computer chair, which was pulled up to a table with one chair on the other side. Behind the empty chair, which I assumed was for Carol, stacks of books filled numerous shelves, as well as a computer, printer and what looked like giant fax machines which I assumed were in part to help aid the testing. A few moments later, Carol returned with two giant glasses of lemonade. My mouth started to water. I wondered if I could distract Carol by continuing to sip on the glass of lemonade instead of answering questions. Probably not. Carol immediately sat down and took out a notepad, a handful of pens and some flashcards, which she placed in the middle of the table. I thought to myself, “these flashcards can’t be that bad; I use math flashcards at home all the time and any flashcards are probably better than math flashcards.”

The first day of testing was over in about three hours. I was asked a number of different questions, many dealing with shapes and object placement. Some had math questions and other had history. As I thanked Carol and left the building, I felt mixed emotions. Of course I was relieved it was over yet I wondered what she could possibly tell about my development from just asking a number of different questions.

I also met with Karen Pierce, a psychiatrist, who specializes in brain function. Karen's office was located in the basement of her house, which I found kind of odd. "Mom, I really don't understand why I have to see another doctor. She's just going to ask the same questions Carol asked." "Allana, it's very important you meet with Doctor Pierce. She's going to help us out a lot." As we knocked on her back door, I started to tense up just like before I entered Carol's office. A million thoughts were running through my head. What was Karen going to look like? Was she going to be as nice as Carol? Why do I have to see a psychiatrist? My head was spinning with endless thoughts and I knew I had about a minute to calm down.

My mom and I were greeted by an incredibly cheerful, short, very petite looking woman with short red hair. "Allana! Robyn! Come in, come in," said Karen, motioning to the inside of her office. As we entered her office, I immediately took a liking to a black spinning chair I saw in the corner of the room. As my mom got comfortable on the leather couch, I got comfortable spinning around and around in the black bouncy chair. For a second, I thought to myself that the spinning chair may annoy Karen and my mom, but as I spun around and around, that thought quickly left my mind.

My meetings with Karen were very different than my appointments with Carol. Karen talked, rather than questioning me, which I liked. From my meetings with Carol and Karen I discovered I had attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder. I could never sit still and in order to focus on schoolwork, I needed

complete silence. I was put on the medication Ritalin, to help aid my ADHD. Through Karen and Carol, I learned that my success in school could be extremely challenging due my learning disability along with the ADHD. It was recommended that I not take a foreign language, for the difficulty level would prove too challenging.

After hearing all the disappointing news about myself, I was unsure of what to do. I hated being different and I despised the fact that I even had to be classified as ADHD. There was no way I wanted to return to school knowing this about myself. I already felt enormously self-conscious about my body and having to worry about my ADHD seems like too much to handle. I constantly wondered if my classmates would find out I was ADHD. Would they treat me differently? Are any of my other classmates different like me? What I did not anticipate was how much of an impact my differences would have on my ability to view myself as a normal human being.

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With the first few months of sixth grade behind me, I have finally achieved what I so longed and hoped for. At last, all the time and energy I invested has finally paid off. I was part of the "popular" crowd. Or rather, I was spending most of my free time with the "popular" crowd. Within a matter of weeks, Stephanie and her newly decided best friend Claire became the rulers of

our sixth grade class. Everyone looked up to them, went to them for advice, all the boys asked them out and all the girls were dying to be their friend. And for some odd reason, they decided to include me in their inner circle.

It made the most sense for me to try and blend in as much as possible and try to conceal my differences. Hanging out with Stephanie and Claire allowed me to do just that. The three of us did everything together- go shopping on Michigan Avenue downtown, have sleepovers at each other's houses, read the latest gossip magazines in the back corner of Barnes and Nobles. We talked on the phone almost every night and spent hours chatting on Instant Messenger. Since our class size is so small, the three of us had every single class together, always sat next to each other and had three lockers in a row with our names on them. We would pass each other notes to pass the time in class and every time Stephanie would throw the notes away, my heart would drop. Secretly, all I wanted to do was collect all the recycled notes and read them over and over again every night to reassure myself that my inclusion with them was real.

"Allana, pick up the phone. It's Stephanie," my dad yelled from the kitchen. I jumped off the couch in our living room, muted whatever show I was watching on t.v., took a deep breath and picked up the phone. My palms were sweaty and the phone was slipping out of my hands as I answered. "Hey Steph, what's up?" I said, trying to sound cool. Even though I was finally "friends" with Stephanie and Claire, my nervousness around them was an everyday struggle. Despite the fun we have together, I constantly question to myself why they're

friends with someone like me in the first place? I don't look like them, act like them and certainly haven't experienced the same types of things they have. I know I'm different than them and so in order to keep them interested I always try to be the best friend I can be. Although they poke fun at me sometimes, I always let it go. Besides, they're my friends so I always tell myself anything they say is usually pretty harmless.

"So, Allana, I think it'd be a good idea if I came over to your house later. I was thinking we can try on outfits for the spring dance on Friday." Having Stephanie come over and hang out in my room is nothing new. She always knows the latest fashion trends and always admires the clothes I have. "Yeah that'd be great! Come over anytime!" And with that, I smiled to myself, said goodbye and hung up the phone.

As the school year progressed and the dynamics of our class continued to shift, my "friendship" with Stephanie and Claire was taken to a whole new level. The three of us were still hanging out on the weekends but the innocent and playful mocking that they disposed on me continued in increasing amounts.

Sitting on my bed, flipping through the latest Seventeen magazine, I found a quiz, "Are You a Good Flirt?" A recent conversation I had with Stephanie and Claire immediately popped into my head. "Allana, guys are *never* going to ask you out if you continue to wear your hair like that." Claire told me, running her fingers through my tangled curly hair. "Exactly. You need to straighten your hair and then twist pieces around your finger, when you flirt with boys.

Otherwise you're just a lost cause." Stephanie said, turning to Claire as they burst out laughing. I thought of a quick comeback but instead I decided to smile, nod my head and forget whatever was said.

A knock on my bedroom door jolted me back into the present moment. My mom walked in with a very serious look on her face. "Allana, I need to talk to you about something." Uh oh. I closed the magazine and pushed it under a pillow. "What's up?" I replied. "You know how I feel about you hanging out with Steph and Claire". Oh, I know. My parents are not that fond of 'those girls' and make that clear to me at any available chance. I looked at my mom with a blank expression on my face; what exactly does she expect me to say? "Well, I've been hearing unpleasant things about them for weeks now, but I just got off the phone with Mary James who heard something from Abby about something Stephanie did. Something she did to you." I continued to just stare at my mom. "And, I want you to know that Stephanie has been stealing from us. Rather, stealing your clothes and parading them around at school." She *what?* I couldn't and wouldn't believe it. "Wha..well how do you know for sure?" I suspiciously shot back at my mom. "Abby told her mom that Stephanie walked into homeroom wearing a Juicy black velour zip-up jacket..." In my mind, I envision my own Juicy black velour zip-up, but I'm pretty sure it's in my closet. "And I guess when someone commented on the jacket, Stephanie told the entire class 'Oh it's Allana's...she'll never know it's missing. Her room is a mess and she has enough clothes as it is.'" I jumped off my bed, looked into my closet, shot a

glance back at my mom and told my mom to leave. As my door slammed and my mom left, I started to flip through my clothes in a very savage like manner. The jacket was missing.

The next day at school, fearful of rejection, I decide to say nothing about the missing jacket. Besides, I have no idea if Stephanie really did steal the jacket and if she did, it may have been months ago. No point in bringing up the past. As I walk into homeroom, I sit down to an empty table. Five minutes later, right before the bell rings, Claire and Stephanie walk in, laughing and whispering to each other. I have a feeling they're probably talking about me but I say nothing and just smile at them as they sit down.

When I returned home from school that day, things were definitely awkward. The abrupt end to the conversation between my mom and I was clearly bothering her but I felt no need to tie up any loose ends. I was relieved when I found out my parents would be attending a charity event and would be out of the house for dinner, leaving my brother and I home alone. "Bye guys, have fun!" I yelled to my parents, as the elevator door closed. I ran into the den where the family computer was. I finished my homework earlier in the day, so I had the entire night to chat online with friends! As I got comfortable in our black computer chair, my heart began to race as I signed in to AOL Instant Messenger. I wonder if anyone good will be online, I thought to myself, waiting for my buddy list to load. I took a deep breath and started to scroll over the list of

people currently online. About halfway down the list, I suddenly receive a message and my pulse starts racing as I realize who it's from.

In size 36 font in pink caps lettering, "*Hey stupid bitch*" appears on the screen. With my hands shaking, I start to type, "Come on Steph, stop" but I'm not fast enough. The messages appear within seconds of each other. "*You're the ugliest piece of shit I've ever seen.*" My eyes start to well up with tears and I'm shaking my head. My fingers are shaking so badly I can't type. "*You skinny whore. You're so fucking disgusting*" Please make it stop. "*Nobody likes you, don't you get it?*". "*If you killed yourself, nobody would give a shit!*" I'm typing words back and then deleting them with every new message she sends. "*God I hate you! And so does Claire!*" "*You better watch your back bitch!*" My whole body starts spinning and I'm crying uncontrollably. My head is pounding with millions of questions. Why is she saying this? What did I do wrong? Did she find out that I know about her stealing? Stephanie and Claire had poked fun at me before but it was never anything like this. I manage to type "STOP" over and over but my efforts are thwarted. As I bang my head against the computer desk, messages keep popping up but I can't bear to look up. I can't imagine what other horrible things she has to say to me. I don't want to know because I've had enough.

"Allana...what...are you...?" Suddenly, my younger brother Matt appears and is rubbing my shoulder. I jump out of the chair, tears running down my face and tell him to get mom. I dash into my parent's bedroom and lock myself in my

mom's bathroom. Slouching down against the mirrored walls of the bathroom, I am suddenly faced with looking at myself from every possible angle. I'm a mess. As I glance around the different mirrors, I suddenly see what Stephanie, Claire, and all my other classmates see everyday. A broken, disgusting, ugly, horrible human being. "She's right. I'm so god damn skinny!", I think to myself, pinching my arms, legs and stomach. I start to scream out of anger. *Why* is this happening?!? In this moment, I feel as though everything Stephanie said, was 100% right. I close my eyes and curl up into a ball on my mom's cold bathroom blue and white tiled floor.

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When the topic of school bullying is brought up in conversation, many of the responses I hear are "Kids will be kids." It is a common fact that in middle school and high school, kids and teenagers will be mean. There's no avoiding it. "It's just part of growing up," someone once told me. When I question who is at fault, the bully or the victim, many people have told me it is the victim's fault. "Maybe they brought it upon themselves," is a common response to my question. It seems as though there *must* be something wrong with the victim if they are being bullied.

Looking back on my middle school years, I've struggled with the question of whether or not I was at fault for my rollercoaster relationship with Claire and more importantly, Stephanie. When I was growing up, all I wanted to do was fit in. Being "in" with Stephanie and Claire was better than being "out." It seemed

to me that if they included me in their lives, I wouldn't fall victim to the cruel mocking they caused upon so many of my former classmates. I did everything in my power to have these girls like me and when I found out about the misdoings they were causing me, by stealing my clothes, spreading rumors or harassing me, I pushed it all aside. I let these girls walk all over me which only fueled the ongoing harassment. I realize now, maybe I am at fault. By not saying or doing anything, I never gave them any reason to stop.

Lord knows if these girls felt any remorse for their actions. They were never properly punished for treating others in the wrong and I think that is what bothers me the most. As I've gotten older, I've gotten past what they did to me-- I'm a stronger person because of it. Yet everyday I can't help but wonder what type of lives Stephanie and Claire are living today. Well, I've got two more years of waiting left until that blue and white banner reading "St. Clement Class of 2002 Ten Year Reunion!" that I've spent hours picturing in my head, will finally become a reality.