

**I wish my life
was an animation ...
I wish to see dinosaurs ...
I wish that I had a tail
to show my mood ...
I wish that I could
make my dreams
come to life.**

School's optional, Facebook is her friend, port is her favourite drink and the mall is her spiritual home. Meet Chloe Gwynne, 16.



A boring home in Mt Gravatt East on a boring Brisbane suburban street full of boring old people who aren't 16 and don't know anything about pain and isolation and

post-noob, bisexual-scene kids.

An adult woman in pink pyjamas answers the door. "Chloe's still in the shower," she says. "I'm afraid you're on Chloe time now."

Angela Rushton is the partner of Chloe Gwynne's father, Jeff Gwynne. She's moving out in a week. "It hasn't worked out," she says, ►



strolling back into the living room. Lame family photographs on lame plasterboard walls. A soft-focus portrait of Angela and Jeff with Chloe's brothers, Fergus, 7, and Jakob, 11. A newsreader douche reading douche morning news.

"He's a great man," Angela says. "He really is. A loving, loving father." Jeff is a funeral director. When she was a little girl Chloe would jump on top of coffins carrying bodies and ride them like ponies. (Two years ago, a close friend of hers died of cancer and Chloe realised how disrespectful she was being to the people inside those coffins.)

"Jeff starts work at seven in the morning," Angela says. "He drops the boys off to before-school care. He comes home, cooks them dinner. He devotes his life to his children."

today," she says. She grasps a clump of pink hair in her right fist and squeezes. "I have naturally curly hair."

She walks out to the rear deck where Angela sips a cup of coffee. "Angela, can I borrow your hair straightener?" Angela nods.

"I like my hair all different colours," Chloe says, running the straightening iron along her fringe. "Pink, black, blue, blonde, brown." She rubs the purplish bags under her eyes. Chloe was up late last night talking on her phone. "I was talking to my mum, strangely enough. She lives in Adelaide with her new partner. I haven't seen her since August, last year."

Eyes remaining fixed on the mirror, her left hand reaches to the bathroom basin and finds a small strip of metal – an "anti-eyebrow" – which

a pair of jeans that are so torn they are more air than fabric. She ties the bandanna over her scalp and bounces out of the bathroom into her bedroom at the bottom of the hall.

"Yeah, this is my shithole room," she says. A large oil painting of a naked Tahitian princess hangs over Chloe's bed. "Every lesbian that I've brought in here wants that painting."

There are no music posters on the walls, which is no indication of Chloe's deep love of music: "Amity Affliction, Bullet for My Valentine, Never Shout Never, Asking Alexandria, Disturbed, Trivium and As I Lay Dying are my favourite bands."

Her room has a bed and little else. "I sleep here and that's it," she says. "Friday, Saturday, Sunday most of the time I'm just out doing stupid shit. Jumping off buildings and things."

Chloe sifts through some clothes and finds a cream canvas backpack. "I was drinking for a mate's 18th the other day; we were at a Brisbane boat shed and we got a fire extinguisher and we extinguished this car that we thought was old and abandoned and then halfway through the night everyone is, like, drunk as anything and the people who owned the car come back and they were all FOBS!"

"FOBS?" I ask.

"Islanders, Samoans, Tongans ... scary big black dudes ... *Fresh ... Off ... The ... Boat*. And we'd all written our names on the car so they were asking us what our names were and we were, like, 'Later!'!" She shakes her head. "It was imaginary fun."

"Imaginary fun?"

"Yeah, most people could only imagine the kind of fun we have."

A school exercise book rests in the corner of the room, near a tossed pair of jeans. Chloe attends a flexi-school in the southern suburbs of Brisbane. "Where are you at with school?" I ask.

She shrugs her shoulders. Chloe goes when she feels like it. Today, a Friday, she doesn't feel like it. Today, like most days, Chloe will be meeting her friends at a cultural and emotional space and state of mind in Queen Street Mall known only as The Scene.

She makes a phone call. "Good morning, Lara. Are you coming in today? Okay, bring your makeup cuz I need it. I gotta go. I love you. Bye." She tucks the phone in her pocket.

"You know what Scene kids are, right? People that look like me, piercings, coloured hair. Scene kids. The Scene. It's shit. It's a bunch of people that look the same and they're, like, 'No, I'm individual'. But it's the same crap with everyone. Four years back, when I first started coming into The Scene, everyone was getting along. And it was just great and then all the noobs came in and were, like, 'Oh, we're



I'm just out doing stupid shit. Jumping off buildings and things.

"But he's going to be raising three kids on his own," Angela says. "I believe he'll just give his all and he'll lose himself in looking after the children. That's just going to be his life."

Angela yawns, rests on the edge of the living-room lounge, warms her hands between her kneecaps. The shower runs hard in the bathroom down the hall. "I feel a little bit lost," she says. "Like I've put in a lot and got nothing out of it. It's another two years of my life. I'm 36. I really wanted to have things together by about now."

The shower stops down the hall. Angela hops up from the lounge. "Good luck," she says.

"What's she like?" I ask.

She smiles, dwells on the question. "Intelligent," she says, then pads leisurely out to the home's rear deck.

Chloe Gwynne – 16, with the word "Tots" painted on her sneakers – stares into her bathroom mirror. "My hair is being douche

she stabs through two holes at the top of her left cheek. "And I was talking to my best friend who had a baby yesterday."

She stabs another piercing through the skin above her top right cheek. Turns her head left, then right. "I don't ever want to have a child. Ever. Crap. Have you, like, seen those things come out?" She shudders. Adjusts her fringe. "Weird." She opens a tub of foundation. "I'm going to cake my face to the shithouse. I have freckles. I don't like my freckles."

The freckles, in fact, make Chloe look like a young Jodie Foster circa *Freaky Friday*, sweet no matter how hard she tries to be sour. She dabs foundation over two small scars around her dimples. "Dimple piercings," she says.

Her father demanded she take them out. "But I'm taking both my anti-eyebrows out and getting my medusa and cheeks back. Medusa is in the middle of the top lip. It hurts so much."

She pulls a red bandanna from the back of

Scene', and it's like, 'Get the f..k out'. They just cause fights now and it's stupid."

Chloe throws a phone charger, a tattooist's business card and a case of coloured pencils into her backpack, slings the bag over the shoulder of her grey hooded jumper. She feeds the earphones to her iPod up and out of the inside of her jumper.

"The end will never come for The Scene," she says. "But for my part in it, yeah, it will come. It's coming very soon."

On her way out of the room, she picks up an object from her bedside table. It's an enclosed glass tube containing a condom. A label on the glass reads: "Break in case of emergency." "It's funny," she says. "Because I'm a lesbian."

Chloe ducks out to the deck, waves to Angela. "Bye, bye," she says. "I'll be home this afternoon."

Chloe smiles sincerely. Angela smiles back at her. It's a sad, half-smile that seems to say something unspoken about what might have been, had more of Chloe and Angela's exchanges been this easy.

At the bottom of the stairs Chloe lights a cigarette and marches down her street. She surveys the manicured lawns and hokey wooden letterboxes of her neighbourhood.

My part in
The Scene,
yeah, the
end is
coming
very soon.



"It's a shithole," she says. She takes a long drag, blows smoke into the cold morning air.

"Yesterday, I had a cigarette, like, every two minutes," she says. "I just wasn't in a very good mood. There's these two douchebags that hang around, Danthony and Jay. Danthony was my best friend and then Jay came back from Melbourne and then he just ignored me. So now my best friend is Justice. He's, like, the *greatest person to ever exist*."

Chloe sees something and gasps. "Bus!" she

says, stubbing out her cigarette and sprinting down the street. She sits in the far back right corner of the city bus, behind a 50-something woman in a business suit. Chloe toggles through her iPod and plays a song, *Anchors*, by the Amity Affliction, a "post-hardcore-metalcore" band from Gympie. The song has inspired her to get an anchor tattooed on her leg. "I've already got two diamonds tattooed on my cleavage and two scar ones on my hips."

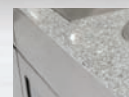
Chloe doesn't bother using earphones on ►

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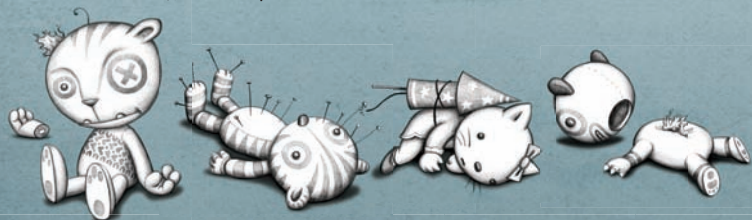


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the bus. The sound simply floats out from the iPod in her lap for all the passengers to hear: *"Will you hear nothing I say as the tide just sweeps and sways / As the anchors that bind me just rust and decay / As I tear my flesh from bone, as I scream out to the sky / When will I find my way home?"*

The woman in the suit throws a sharp, frustrated look behind her which Chloe misses because she is searching through her Facebook photographs on her phone.

"Tell me about your relationship with Angela," I ask.

"Mmmmmmm," she says. She shrugs her shoulders. "I don't ... like her. I try to get on with her for my dad's sake. But ..." She shakes her head. "Nut, I'm pretty sure he could do a lot better."

I mention Angela's comments about how wonderful Jeff is for the way he's raising three kids on his own. Chloe looks up momentarily from her Facebook page. She nods her head twice, silently and thoughtfully, then shows me a picture of a male Canadian backpacker who she met fleetingly but has a powerful crush on.

"I'm an asexual so I don't really choose," she says. "When I was in the stage of men, I was just choosing all the drug-f..ked stupid idiots that loved me. And then I kind of grew up and then I was, like, 'You're a dickhead, get out of my life'. I have a lot of high standards. Like, I was talking about it with my mum ..." She sits up, rests her left thigh on the bus seat. "Okay, I'll tell you my standards: must be tall; brown eyes, or dark eyes; brown or black hair, has to be long; have to be in a band; have to play guitar or drums, and have to have an accent."

"I'm pretty sure I have met that person." She stares dreamily into her phone. "He exists."

Chloe taps a text message to a friend, Brian: "Drinks?"

Chloe has four coloured ribbons tied to her wrist, each inscribed with a message: "I wish my life was an animation"; "I wish to see dinosaurs"; "I wish that I had a tail to show my mood"; "I wish that I could make my dreams come to life".

Her dream is to be a photographer. She shows me her work, a series of images in her Facebook collection. They're all photos of people, friends and strangers, passing by her; beautifully composed; tenderly captured, alive with colour and movement. She's a gifted photographer. She hates taking photographs of still things. Plants that aren't blowing in the breeze. Insects not spreading their wings and taking flight. Not moving.

Chloe was born in Queanbeyan, 15km east of Canberra, but she tells people she was born in Christchurch simply because she likes the name. "Christ ... church," she says. "Cool."

A text from Brian lands in her phone: "You got money?" She texts back: "Yeah."

Her father's job took her to funeral homes around the country. They moved to Brisbane in 2006. "I got bullied a lot when I came to Brisbane," she says. "I had short hair so people called me a dyke. But I had, like, my mother ... I love her to death. I changed primary schools a lot ... but she was always there, kind of supporting me. I was really quiet and shy. Now I'm one of the most open people you could ever meet."

She looks at her iPod. "Wednesday 13!" she screams. Wednesday 13 is a frontman for several American horror-punk bands with names such as Murderdolls, Bourbon Crow and Frankenstein Drag Queens from Planet 13. "When I met Wednesday 13, that was the happiest moment of my life," she says. She sways her head to the music on the iPod.

my port. It's got class. It gets you really shitfaced too."

She constructed that joke deliberately, tagging the "shitfaced" line to her grand aspirations of class. She's sharp like that. Wry. Yesterday a police officer sniffed a Coke bottle she was holding for traces of alcohol. "Man!" she said. "If I was drinking I would have started at 10am!"

A small crowd of teens gathers on The Scene. Newo has a blond fringe falling over his face. Tight black jeans. Skateboard under his arm. "It's Owen spelled backwards," he says. "I used to do everything backwards, around the wrong way."

There's Token. "He's our token black guy," Chloe says. "Every group's got to have a token black guy."

There's Jason. He wears a shirt saying, "Drop



"And what was the saddest moment of your life?" I ask. She still sways her head as she responds. "When my mum left Brisbane."

The bus pulls into Adelaide Street in the heart of the city. Chloe disembarks outside City Hall. She wrestles her hooded jumper off. Throws it in her bag. Breathes in the city.

"I'm home," she says.

"F..K YOUR ARSE THEN, C..T!" SCREAMS LUKE to his drug dealer. "Some friend you are, bro'." Luke – 18, hooded jumper, hat backwards – slams his mobile phone shut and stomps on a bench seat outside the Rocking Horse Records music store on Albert St in the Queen Street Mall. Chloe gives Luke some space: "He's trying to get on."

Chloe hangs more with drinkers than drugtakers. "I'm a port girl," she says. "I love

dead". He's using his music headphones to tie his pants up.

Chloe spots a thin, pale figure with jet-black Japanime hair in a red and black flannelette shirt and spray-on-tight blue jeans moving toward the group. He's got a heroin-chic rock star swagger about him; a walk that screams "f..k all you know-nothing conservative dinosaur motherf..kers" with every stride of his worn skate shoes.

"Destry!" Chloe screams. She sprints toward him, throwing her body – her entire weight – into his arms. Destry falls back on the mall pavement and the two roll on the ground, kissing and hugging as men in business suits shuffle widely past them, sidestepping them like they were 17th century London peasants with plague sores.

A passing man in a suit, mid-fifties, shakes his head at them. Destry makes a goofy smile ▶

and points his finger directly at the man. “My team!” he shouts. Chloe rolls in hysterics.

“My Team” is a game the Scene kids play where they point at attractive passersby, claiming the person in their “team” of people they’d like to sleep with.

Chloe adores the bright and outgoing Destry almost as much as she adores the dark and mysterious Justice, who is yet to arrive. “I’ve been coming here six years now,” Destry says. “The Scene is like a drug addiction that we all need to get over. We really do.”

“Too many noobs,” Chloe says, handing Destry a cigarette. “The Scene is like one big, drug-f..ked, alcoholic, incestuous family mess. But it’s fun.”

“Yeah, it’s fun,” Destry says. “But remember when those noobies who were pointing at me like, ‘Who is this guy?’ I felt like going over there and saying, ‘I’m Destry. I’m like Gandhi of this place.’”

Chloe adjusts her bandanna which has fallen out of place. “Leave it off, you don’t need it,” Destry says.

“I want to look like a dyke,” Chloe says.

“Well, it’s workin’ for ya dude,” Destry retorts, sharply.

“F..khead,” Chloe says.

“You love me though,” Destry shoots back.

“I do,” she says, nodding seriously. She kisses Destry on the cheek. He bats his eyelids.

“How long you here?” Chloe says.

“Gotta go at 11,” he says. “Uni.” Destry is in his first year of a law degree. “I’m gonna be a lawyer, yeah!” he says, pumping his fist sarcastically, dragging hard on his cigarette.

“Well, I’m gonna be a photographer so suck on my left tit,” Chloe says. Destry motions to do so. Chloe adopts the voice of a breathless Jane Austen heroine: “Oh, please don’t! Let’s go get some KFC!”

Then they waltz. They spin briefly through the mall like two lovers on a starry night. Then they rub their bodies against each other as though they are having sex. Then they’re distracted by a large fundraising group of babyboomer mums in bike pants and sun visors carrying a rowing boat through the mall.

“Oh yeah!” Destry calls across the mall.

“Splish splash!” Some mums look over. Destry waves, smiling warmly. The mums wave back. “F..kin’ nerdcare,” he says, waving politely.

Chloe grabs the arm of a friend, Erin.

“C’mon, I feel like Breadtop,” she says. “It’s like sex in your mouth.” Chloe winks at me, shakes her head. “We have no shame,” she says. “I lost my dignity at 14. I traded it for a muffin.”

Chloe, Erin and Destry walk to Breadtop bakery at the bottom of the Myer Centre. They sing songs loudly as they push through the

weekday mall crowd. “*The sun goes down and so does she,*” Chloe sings. An elderly lady in a green woollen pullover shuffles past Chloe wheeling a vinyl shopping trolley. “*The sun goes down ...*” Chloe sings. She points at the elderly woman. “*... And so does she.*”

They are royalty. Queens and kings. Princes and princesses of The Scene. Chloe is Marie Antoinette. Destry is Louis XVI. Chloe buys a custard tart from Breadtop just to throw it in Destry’s face. Let them eat cake. F..k you all. The only time you are truly free is when you’re 16 and penniless.

Families pass them, smiling at Chloe as if she were a dextrous baboon at a zoo: “Look, mummy, Scene kids.”

Two men from Queensland Rail walk past and Chloe silently falls in behind them, mirroring their determined walks like an emo Charlie Chaplin. She pretends to slap their backsides with her palm, laughing devilishly.

Destry passes a professional woman, late-thirties, folders under her arm, moving quickly through the mall. He gives her an intense gaze. “You’re pretty,” he says. The woman blushes, scurries on. Destry laughs heartily.

The trio passes a shop poster of a man fishing. “I hate f..king fishing,” Destry says. A tall, attractive brunette, early twenties, passes: “Team!” says Destry. A short, unattractive homeless man passes: “Team!” says Chloe.

They enter a youth fashion store. The store stereo plays *The Logical Song* by English band Supertramp, from 1979. Chloe bounces her head to the beat. “Who is this?” Destry says. “This is cool.”

The trio wrap their arms around each other. They scribble their names on a whiteboard in the store. They try on outrageous sunglasses and big hats. “*When I was young, it seemed that life was so wonderful, a miracle / Oh, it was beautiful, magical / And all the birds in the trees, well they’d be singing so happily / Joyfully, playfully, watching me.*”

Outside the store, Destry sees a sharp-suited businessman walk past in sleek, expensive sunglasses. “Look at that guy’s glasses!” he says, loud enough for the businessman to hear him. “I’m Cyclops. I’m leader of the X-Men. I’m such an asshole.” Destry falls in behind the businessman, mirroring his unstoppable march. He falls away laughing, grabbing his giggle-sore ribs. “Aaaah, I love my life,” he says.

The City Hall clock tower bells chime 11am.

“Later,” Destry says, rushing off to uni.

“Luff you.” “Luff you,” Chloe says.

“*But then they send me away, to teach me how to be sensible / Logical, responsible, practical / And then they showed me a world where I could be so dependable / Clinical, intellectual, cynical.*”

Erin punches Chloe in the shoulder:



“Bottle-o?” she says. Chloe nods. They walk casually into a bottle shop in the Myer Centre. “I get into pubs and shit,” says Chloe. “Fat Louie’s, Step Inn, Rosie’s is very good.”

The girls scan the red wine and port shelves. Chloe pulls a \$10 note from her jeans’ pocket. The note is as crumpled and tattered as her jeans. They need \$3 more to buy the port. Chloe shoves the crumpled note back in her pocket, haphazardly. They walk back towards Rocking Horse to bum \$3 from their friends. But by the time they reach Rocking Horse, Chloe’s \$10 has dropped from her pocket.

“It’s alright,” she says. “I’ll get Dad to drop some money in my bank account.”



There are those who stand out ... Chloe is one of them. She's been through stuff. She's very special. She's what I call a gem.

Jeff, asking him to put \$10 in her bank account.

"That \$10 split in half!" she pleads. The line drops out on her. "Oh, that's delightful," she says. "He said, 'No, piss off'."

The girls trudge, heads down, back to the bench in front of Rocking Horse where some 15 Scene kids are now gathered – including an ex-boyfriend of Chloe's, Blade. "I wasn't attracted to him," she says in a low voice, looking over at Blade who's pointing a large and futuristic plastic dart gun at a friend's temple.

"I dated him for four-and-a-half days. I was thinking of ways to break up with him and my mate's like, 'Go get a pen and then just drop it and tell him he's dropped'. So I got a pen and I went up to him, dropped the pen and said, 'You're dropped', and walked away."

Chloe puts her arm around a girl. "This is my fourth best friend, Amy," she says. Amy smiles.

A young man raises a half-smoked cigarette. "Auction?" he says. "Sold!" a friend says, claiming the cigarette.

At 2pm, a lull falls over the group. There's no clear idea of how the day will unfold. Some want to go to the inner west's Paddington skateboard bowl. Others want to go to Musgrave Park, across the river, to drink. Someone burns a detention notice. Someone else complains because Facebook has shut down temporarily. They just sit and watch people pass by.

They sit like this for two hours in the sun. Talking intermittently. Smoking listlessly. Runny-nosed cold sufferers sipping group-shared Boost Juices.

Beside Chloe on the council bench, a hardcore punk skinhead covered in anarchy symbols fidgets restlessly. "This is f..ked!" he roars. "I want to judge people."

"Judge them in your head," yawns the girl on his other side.

"I have been," he says. He roars again: "I WANT TO JUDGE PEOPLE OUT LOUD!"

A schoolgirl in uniform approaches Chloe pulling a bottle from her schoolbag. "Do you want this Lambrusco?" the schoolgirl says. Chloe accepts the bottle, then hands it back. "It's no good to me," she says. "Doesn't have a lid." Without a lid, the bottle can't be concealed in the mall. Chloe shakes her head. Amateurs.

Destry returns from uni. A new Scener recognises him from primary school. The new Scener has a thing for Destry's cousin. "Man, she's hot," the Scener says. Destry says: "Now, she's working at Pizza Hut."

"Man, I'm going to Pizza Hut!" the new Scener says. "Tell me she's hot."

"I can't, she's my cousin," Destry says.

"It's alright man, you can tell me she's hot."

"Okay, she's hot," says Destry.

"You're f..kin' sick, man! She's your cousin!"

Then a bitter argument erupts between two male Sceners. One says a friend of the other wrongfully slapped a girl in the face. The other takes offence: "I'll f..kin' smash you myself."

The boys stare off. One looks away intensely toward King George Square, suggesting the other very narrowly escaped a catastrophic flurry of unprecedented fist-pounding.

Two police officers enter The Scene with notebooks open. On cue, the Scene kids line up against a raised garden bed, reach for their identification cards. Blade doesn't have identification. The police officer doesn't believe his name is, indeed, Blade.

The officers take full names and addresses. "We get this all the time," Blade says, as the officer scribbles his details.

"Just so you know," says an officer, "we do it because when their parents call us saying their child is missing we can give them an idea of where they were in the afternoon."

Justice arrives on The Scene a little after 5pm to a minor flurry of excited whispers: "Justice is here"; "Justice over there"; "Justice". People flock around him. Chloe is talking to a small group on the other side of the mall. Justice – black coat, square jaw, philosophical – looks over at Chloe. "Most of these kids are selfish, like all teenagers are," says Justice. "But occasionally you get what I call gems. They stand out. They're the opposite to the archetype of what a normal teenager is. Chloe is one of them. She's been through stuff. She's very special. She's a gem."

Chloe and Erin scurry off up the mall.

"Right now she's just on the repetitive cycle of fun, like all of us," says Justice. "I don't know what life path she'll take. She'll eventually leave this place. We'll all leave and get jobs and raise a family." He smiles. "But not right now."

Night begins to fall on the mall. At an ATM on Queen St, Chloe and Erin bounce on the spot joyfully as the machine processes Erin's request for the \$20 her mum just placed in her bank account. The machine spits out the note and Erin raises it triumphantly in the air. "*Bless her hole!*" she sings.

Chloe claps her hands, giggles, and dances like a background dancer in a rap video. She has a beautiful laugh. She has a beautiful smile, too. She has smarts. She has friends who care deeply about her. She has a dad who loves her. She has a worrying fondness for port. She has a complex sex life. She has an extra "e" in her name. She swears often. She uses Facebook often. She hugs people often. She cares deeply for animals. She wishes her life was an animation. She has no immediate plans. And she won't be home this afternoon. ■

"Do you *have* a bank account?" Erin asks. Chloe thinks for a moment. "Yeah," she says. "But I don't have a card."

The girls go to a Commonwealth Bank. "Yes, can I help you?" says the teller, an impeccably dressed, warm-smiling woman.

"I'd like a new card please," Chloe says.

"Certainly," the teller says. "I just need some identification."

"I have nothing," Chloe says.

"Nothing?" the teller says.

Chloe shakes her head: "All I need is my account number." The teller writes Chloe's number on a piece of paper, slides it across the counter. In the mall, Chloe calls her father,