

It was snowing. For the first time since 1976, it was snowing in San Francisco. Audrey stayed indoors, afraid to approach this foreign scene. The window's reflection allowed glimpses of herself; uncombed dark brown hair, pale skin, green eyes, and silk pajamas. Audrey examined her room: furniture her dad had picked out years ago encased in a gray wallpapered box with slits sufficient to see the tiny yard that was partially hers. Audrey sat on the bearskin rug, a gift from one of her dad's friends, and began to reread *How Beautiful the Ordinary*. If nothing else, the snow brightened David Levithan's inked pages.

Over Thanksgiving break, Audrey was going to visit colleges. She had already applied to UC Berkeley, Stanford, Caltech, and Williams. The first three were insisted on by her father, who also happened to be unaware that Audrey had dared apply to an east coast school. He was spending the week on business trips or something else keeping him away, so she'd be driving alone for days.

Audrey was lying down on the rug, and ran her toes through the dead animal's pelt. It felt good to be on top. When her mom died, her flesh at the funeral felt sort of like that fur coat and the bearskin rug. Audrey's mom had long brown hair and strange convictions about life incomprehensible to her child. One wall of Audrey's room was covered with horizontal dashes depicting her growth, and the segments below 5' were all Audrey could recognize from her mother's touch.

The next morning, Audrey loaded her suitcase into the old Ford explorer. It was only a fifteen minute drive to the campus tour at UC Berkeley. Audrey arrived to a visitor center on Sproul Hall full of kids in the ripe stage of the college admissions process. They walked down Gayley Road and University Drive, with San Francisco's fog and admissions statistics filling the atmosphere. As Gayley turned into Pielmont, Audrey saw the familiar Berkeley stadium.

When she turned four, Audrey received a Cal football jersey from her father. She didn't remember the instance, but there was a photograph of this moment of the unfiltered happiness on his dresser. Audrey did remember, however, watching Cal play Stanford, their rivals, that evening. After hours of passionate gestures at a low-definition screen, Cal lost. Audrey's dad relaxed with people she didn't know, covering up a little bit more of himself with another bottle of beer. Audrey went to use the bathroom, but heard her mom crying inside.

"Mommy? Is that you? What's wrong?" Audrey inquired.

"Audrey? Yes, honey. I'm... I'm good, baby. Everything's good, I'm just... so sad that

Cal lost. I love you.”

“Okay. I love you, too! Bye!” But Audrey found a baby doll next to the door, sat down, and played with it.

“Oh honey... Mommy doesn’t mean to be sad. She has a beaming baby girl. Maybe a network of alumni, but maybe every one of them are losers. She is trapped with people from past actions...”

When her mom walked outside, Audrey smiled up at her with her baby doll, and said, “I’m going to be a mommy, just like you. And, I’ll get married. We’ll be just like you and daddy! I think I’ll marry a boy in my preschool class. His name is Thomas, and I love him, just like you love daddy.” Audrey’s mom kept crying, a result of pride in her daughter’s happiness and fear in a nursery rhyme’s ability to shape futures.

Audrey drove down to Stanford in the afternoon. It was a forty minute drive through crowded freeways before entering one of the most expensive neighborhoods in the United States. She went to get pizza at Patxi’s in downtown Palo Alto. The streets were shining, it was seventy-two degrees, and there were seven frozen yogurt shops in the area. When the trees lit up, Audrey drove to the Sheraton, checked in, and fell asleep to the top forty countdown.

Audrey awoke the next morning in time to enjoy a continental breakfast and join a walking tour of the Stanford campus. She was welcomed to the main quad and white plaza by a student exasperated by visitors’ desires for assistance getting accepted. Afterwards, Audrey enjoyed a store-bought turkey sandwich in the sun.

She licked the crumbs from her hands and felt her cheek flush. She thought it was a blooming sunburn, so she laid down, and hid her head in the shadows. A boy sat down near her, falsifying her previous assumption. He had eyes that mixed hazel and rainbow, layered brown hair, a tan from California’s exposure, and green glasses. Audrey had instantly decided that she was in love with this boy.

In fourth grade, Audrey had already been married seven times, and was wondering why her relationships weren’t lasting. She decided to ask her slightly intoxicated mother, because her marriage had been lasting much longer than Audrey’s average of two weeks.

“Well, I don’t know all of the boys you’ve married. If you’re lucky, try to find someone who cares about your thoughts and feelings--but with most men, honey, you’ll have to settle instead for a deathbed, where you will sleep every night.”

Audrey eventually realized that none of her boyfriends had been nice to her. Audrey also figured out that people who got good grades were better and richer than people who got bad grades, so she needed to marry someone who was very smart. Very smart people are nerds, so Audrey knew that they would love her forever. Smart people wore glasses, so Audrey chose a boy named Amitbikram, because he had silver glasses, was very good at chess, and won lots of trophies from science olympiad. Audrey planned on being Amitbikram's most important trophy.

Audrey sat up and smiled at the space where the boy in green glasses had been. She began the walk back to her car, and was shocked to see the green glasses guy smoking a joint outside the parking lot.

She got into the Explorer, and drove away from these people who should mean nothing to her. Audrey spent the five hour drive down the I-5 half-listening to whatever rock stations each section of California offered. She also took note all of the cattle farms along the way. California cows were supposed to be the happiest, but they looked so trapped, like they were slowly baking in their burning manure.

There was an In-N-Out Burger near Pasadena, so Audrey enjoyed a chocolate milkshake and a double cheeseburger. She proceeded to and checked into the Vagabond Inn. Audrey swam off the drive before falling asleep in a bed less comfortable than the refreshing restriction of water.

A continental breakfast buffet was laid out in the lobby, so Audrey picked up a muffin before checking out and walking to Caltech. Pasadena was studded with clay-tiled roofs and palm trees, breathtaking abnormalities for visitors. Audrey arrived at the admissions office for her 10am tour, and was again blown away by how beautiful college campuses are--or at least those she had the pleasure of hoping to attend.

The most shocking thing about this group of lonely teenagers and their parents was the gender ratio. At every other college Audrey had heard of, there were a few more girls than boys attending college--but sixty-three percent of Caltech's students were male. Test scores here were also the highest she had ever seen. Audrey did not have the thirty-four-and-a-half ACT score that Caltech wanted. She followed the mass of similarly hopeless tourists to ponds and libraries Audrey thought she'd only see this once.

Audrey then remembered how palm trees and Rose Bowl stadium were familiar. When she was eleven, Audrey had flown down to the Los Angeles area with her mother. Her dad had

requested a picture of the Rose Bowl stadium that Cal had nearly played at in 2004 and 2006. Audrey's mom had called her dad very frequently throughout the trip, often sounding sad and angry, but Audrey's inquiries were ignored. A silent child and her mother continued to Disneyland. They spent two nights in the Paradise Pier Hotel, and Audrey felt like the happiest princess in the world, just like Ariel or Snow White or Aurora.

As a middle schooler, Audrey knew Disney Channel's child stars were famous. Hannah Montana was her idol; Audrey knew she wanted to be famous, and a pop star/movie star/TV star/attractive teenager gathered much more attention than falling in love in a country still governed by a monarchy. In her pursuit of popularity, Audrey found Hannah Montana in Disneyland and had her mom take a picture of the instance. Hannah liked boys and kissed them sometimes and got mad at her father and sang and shopped and had a cell phone, and Audrey knew that she would repeat these steps in order to become a celebrity.

When Audrey returned to sixth grade after the trip, she was prepared. She learned to get invited to co-ed parties, and she flirted (sort of). After dating and kissing about eight boys in sixth grade, Audrey got a tad bored. Kissing wasn't enjoyable; she just liked to watch the expressions of other people. To improve the action, Audrey tried new lip glosses and opened her mouth a little bit and practiced with tongue on her hand.

One afternoon, Audrey was lying on the sidelines of their school's soccer field with her friend, Toby. Toby had glasses and blonde hair, and they were talking about Toby's parents' divorce. Audrey didn't know what a divorce was like, but it was enough to bring a twelve-year-old boy to tears, so she rolled over and hugged him. He pulled his face away to kiss Audrey's bright red lips. The motion was aggressive, stripped of the innocence Audrey so casually thrived on. His hand groped her butt, and she freaked out. This wasn't what she wanted, and her beautiful soul isn't what Toby wanted. Audrey stumbled to her feet, and ran home. Disney hadn't prepared her for this.

Once she got inside, Audrey found her mother, sitting at the dining table with a glass of wine, and explained herself between sobs.

"Hi mommy. Um, I don't know what happened... Toby... touched... me."

"Is Toby your boyfriend?" Her mother responded, sounding surprisingly unemotional.

"No."

“Is he someone else’s boyfriend? Why did you let him do that?” Audrey’s mom almost sounded angry, for a reason that made no sense to her daughter.

“I didn’t let him! I tried to stop it! No... Wait, yes, he has a girlfriend. She doesn’t love Toby though. She doesn’t spend enough time with him or let him do what he wants or trust him. She’s also ugly. He loves me, but he’s so gross!” Audrey’s mom saw herself in the window across from the table and began to cry with her daughter.

Caltech’s campus faded, and was replaced by Los Angeles’ lights and shadows. Audrey edged through baggage check and security lines before boarding a plane to Connecticut’s Bradley International Airport. The five hour plane ride was spent sipping ginger ale and rereading local poetry. She felt special to know the establishments and generic feelings of teenage angst, strung together with assonance she hoped to replicate sometime.

It was almost midnight when Audrey landed in Connecticut, so she picked up her suitcase from the carousel and a car from the rental lot, and spent the night at a nearby America’s Best Value Inn. The hotel was dingy, but not as bad as the review claiming that a crackwhore was lurking in a stairwell and that people were smoking pot in the lobby. Audrey hadn’t been harassed before falling asleep, so she slept well.

She got up at noon to drive two hours to Williams’ campus in Williamstown, Massachusetts. It began to snow once Audrey crossed the border into Massachusetts. It was the first time she had seen rural landscapes glistening with snow; San Francisco’s flurries had melted or turned into slush that imitated the gray of the concrete.

Williams hosted a campus just as beautiful as the Californian schools, but with a uniquely welcoming and wonderful character. It wasn’t just the highest ranked liberal arts college in the country, but it was filled with such open and fascinating people. Audrey wanted to be one of them, and had therefore applied early decision. Audrey’s father, however, wanted her to go to UC Berkeley because she’d receive in-state tuition, and didn’t mind Stanford or Caltech because she’d be forced to stay close to him for another four years.

Audrey’s mom had been very supportive of her daughter’s desire to get away. The last time Audrey had seen her mother was the day her mom died, which demonstrated her passion for leaving.

Audrey had gotten home from middle school, taken off her backpack, and been caught off guard by her mother’s appearance. Her hair was cut off in uneven, choppy chunks that coated

the carpet. The scissors were still in her hands, with scrapes all over her arms and legs. The blood and spilled red wine mixed so Audrey couldn't tell them apart. Audrey stood in the doorway, unmoving, but her mother wasn't so silent.

“Oh hi, honey. Mommy is so sorry that she had to go. Mommy's just not enough for daddy anymore. You... look at your youth. You are all curves unblemished by gravity, and maybe you are all you'll ever have power over, but just look at your dear old mother. She is falling apart, scars and scabs blending into her rotting skin. She is nothing more than this flesh, either. Just a piece of metal on a man who's nothing better and a little bit of what makes up your bones.” She slurred.

When her mother stopped to take another sip of wine, Audrey ran to her room. She cried into her pillow until she fell asleep.

In mid-December, Audrey's father handed her an envelope, and placed his hands on her shoulders.

*The Williams Admissions Committee has completed its evaluation of this year's candidates, and I write with sincere regret to say that we are not able to offer you a place in the Class of 2017.*