

Of Grapes and Audrey

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IT'S FUNNY HOW OUR MIND CHOOSES TO RETAIN certain threads of memory over other, perhaps more consequential ones. It would be like taking a vine of grapes and, instead of taking the large and firm one, I chose the tiny runt on the end predestined for raisin-hood.

June 28th, 2003. I roamed the hallways, trying to enjoy the fifteen minutes allotted us for break. But my efforts proved futile against the stifling humidity. The air hung heavy, coming to me in short, shallow breaths. Beads of sweat dripped down the freshly-painted lockers. All this I remember. In retrospect, the climate was quite foreboding. I even remember what Patrick wore as he came around the corner the very next moment. Baby blue chinos cut at the knee and a green St. Athanasius gym shirt, the thick reversible kind used to differentiate teams in P.E. class. The other side was yellow, and it peeked out at the wrinkled bottom and at the torn collar. This too was quite foreboding, as his wardrobe rarely strayed from the fine linens of J. Crew's regal collection. And yet I cannot remember the words he used to tell me that you were gone.

I can see the pale mint-colored tiles of the Academy that came rushing out to meet me. My eyes fixed on the halogen lights as I envisioned you in heaven where it was just as bright. And I remember

that very next moment, when I tried to think of you but couldn't, for the life of me, recall your face.

I will always know that you only ate Oreos frozen, and that you had underwear for each day of the week. But when it came down to it, I couldn't even remember the color of your eyes. You see someone every day for what seems like a lifetime, and all of a sudden they're gone. And the minute they go, your mind immediately starts to erase their image from your memory. One minute we're dragging the zigs and zags of our friendship across the grey canvas of my Etch-a-Sketch. And with one casual tremor, the simple shake of its surface, half of you is gone, and what's left "us" is a faint contour of what used to be. I try desperately to salvage little tidbits here and there, but I find myself holding on to something that was never really there in the first place, something I thought was etched away in cement, like our initials we drew in the fresh cement with sticks. But it wasn't.

I'll never forget that rubbery-sweet smell of those dolls we used to play with, the plastic girls that morphed into cupcakes when you flipped their skirts up and turned them inside-out. That was back in the days when our parents could surround us with the world of Fisher Price; the safe, sterile, plastic world, with all the "grown-up" amenities our parents used only miniaturized. We made invisible eggs in a frying pan the size of a chocolate-chip cookie.

I remember you taught me how to braid hair using the tail of Princess Sparkle, the most regal of all the My Little Ponies. We couldn't practice on each other, not after the gum incident. I remember you decided to get your hair cut the same as mine so that I wouldn't feel so bad, a grown-up decision for a 7-year-old. But then you cried the whole time the lady cut it, looking at me from under your newly acquired bangs as though it were my fault your hair lay in auburn clumps on an undeserving dirty salon floor.

Mrs. Maguire herded us into the guidance office, Marti, Patrick, Kendall, Allison, Natalie, Patrick, and me. All I could think about was how it suddenly smelled like Bubblegum Lip Smackers. We each bought one at the dollar store in sixth-grade and held a race to see who

could use their's up first. I remember listening to Ms. Scott talk about Mesopotamia and pomegranates, and then seeing you across the aisle, swiping the lip balm around and around your heart-shaped mouth. I remember popping mine off the necklace it came with and vigorously applying the bubblegum flavored balm to catch up to you. To compensate for lost time, I would lick my lips a couple times and then reapply. If I remember correctly, we both got tummy-aches that night and decided to postpone our competition...indefinitely.

I remember Mrs. Maguire was flanked by a couple support soldiers eager to test out the "trauma" protocol. A myriad of terms poured past her lips, lips once adorned with obnoxious red lipstick but, due to the plethora of aluminum TAB cans and Virginia Slims that came in contact with them, they boasted a tasteful hint of rouge. The way she over-emphasized her gesticulation and looked at every person in the room, waiting for an answer, reminded me of Lucy Ricardo. Such a tragic tale of falling victim to the times, her fiery mane perversely muted in the grayscale mediocrity of television. I remember my heavy eyes watching an "I Love Lucy" marathon, snuggled up in your flannels that were lucky to graze the tops of my ankles. We shivered, remiss in our recent decision to dip in the Lake, fully-clothed and cognizant of the late November date. Determined to defy exhaustion, you appealed to my reliable humor with countless impersonations. You would mock the cherry bomb, your face stretched in a frozen whine as you looked from Marti to me and back to the screen, waiting for a reaction of any conscious kind.

But you were never a Lucy. You were most definitely an Audrey; your classic fashion and porcelain beauty were anything but tragic. Even in the professional shots your parents had, you looked like an Audrey frozen in time. Your small, delicate, and manicured hands clutched an antique handbag at your waist. Your warm brown locks parted to the side and pulled back in a low ponytail. A string of pearls lay on your neck, your flawless skin laid bare by the conservative scoop neck of your green and cream sear-suckered sun dress. You'd flash that shy, yet elegant demeanor conveyed through the half-smile

of your heart-shaped lips. That classic eternal beauty was kindred to Audrey and Audrey alone.

I remember rising from our chairs and walking out of the office, ignoring the inundation of buzzing discontent; it was an imploration we knew was made with ulterior motives in mind. We were leaving. We were moving in slow motion, but the lockers flew past us at alarming speed. I don't remember how we got to the Schuba's; I just remember tripping over a root in the front yard, cursing that I was going to "kill myself in these shoes" and regretting the words as quickly as they came. I remember the porch steps were lined with lit candles. A small trace of yellow CAUTION tape clung to the boxwoods. I can see Mrs. Schuba's face when I walked through the door, the screendoor slamming behind me. I can't recall what I said to her; I don't even know what I would say to her if I had to do it all over again. But I will never forget that heaviness that showed on her face when our eyes met, as though she saw her little girl in my very gaze.

I ascended the staircase, again in slow motion, as people buzzed around below. The moment I could see your room, even from the stairs, I felt my breath begin to weaken. Everything was where you left it, jewelry strewn about your dresser, geometry homework on your bed. It was just Tuesday that we stood on that bed singing along to Mr. Big, not knowing how lucky I was just to be with you.

I remember all these things. The way you pushed your shoes around the ground with your toes until they slid on just right; the way you wore your pearls in the pool at the club; the way you could only chew gum for thirty seconds, and that your favorite gum was Fruit Stripes, even though you cursed the manufacturer as their press-on tattoos never worked; the way you would start a new sheet of paper every time you weren't satisfied with your handwriting.

All this I remember. And yet only a vague silhouette of your angelic face remains. All that I have are a few photographs I must refer to for those times you are reduced to a blurry Audrey.