



High School Graduation

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Speech by Adriane Quinlan, Class of 2003

Just to answer your question, Nick, The Matrix was based on french postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard's masterwork, Simulacra et Simulacrum, but this is about my speech, so...

So, the other day I was at the hairdresser's. We made small talk, discussed gardening, puppies, how we hated going to the dentist.

And then she asked me where I was going to college. At first I was going to say UDC, but then I decided just to say that I had made the tough decision not to go to college at all.

She thought this was interesting. She asked me what I was planning to do instead. I thought I would say I was going to be a hairdresser, just like her, but I didn't know the names of any beauty schools, and I didn't wear enough makeup for this to be plausible. So instead I told her that I was fixing up a 1969 Saab Sonnet and driving across the country. I told her I would rename myself after the town where my car first ran out of gas.

Then I realized I had stolen this plot from a Barbara Kingsolver novel.

But no matter, I could tell she liked my story.

What color is the car? She asked.

Yellow, I said. Yellow. It looks like a banana.

It turns out the hairdresser's boyfriend fixes up cars, she gives me his business card, and later, she discusses her love of bananas, her addiction to Chunky Monkey ice cream, and the road trip she took when she was twenty-one to see the Grand Canyon.

She views me as a troubled teen, in need of her guidance. She leaves me with a story she sees as intense wisdom. And though I didn't really know where I was going with this before, this is

exactly what I wanted. She tells me, don't leave too quickly. She tells me that high school was the best four years of her life. She tells me that each year of her life has been worse than the last. She tells me about gas prices, phone bills, her backlog of boyfriends and her struggling sister. She tells me that I should be cautious, that I shouldn't forget my parents and I can never forget my friends.

I tell her I don't have any friends.

This is also a lie. But she frowns and tells me if I cheer up they'll come running. She tells me to drive by the salon in my banana car when it's all fixed up.

Somewhere she knows I'll never do this.

Yet throughout high school, I've just keep thinking of this thing I read a few years ago, that when Joyce Johnson was in school, she took a creative writing course. On the first day, the professor asked his students to raise their hands if they wanted to become professional, published writers. Everyone in the room raised their hand.

Then he asked why anyone raising their hand was in this classroom at all, instead of hopping trains to Mexico, instead of really living.

Sometimes I flirt with the idea of leaving, but people like me don't want things to happen to them anyway.

It's easier to go along with the flow, to go through high school without ever really knowing why.

But there will be no Saab Sonnets, no road trips, and no train hopping, unless it's some sort of new, posh outdoor excursion program we'll embark on this summer. Most of us are just graduating to bigger, different versions of high school. GDS hasn't really taught us to be that creative or that original.

So what have we learned?

What have we been doing for the past half a year with the ten thousand dollars our parents shelled out?

I'll tell you what we've been doing: Nothing. We've been stuck in a sort of "nothing purgatory" - a shifty period of months where we used only the past or future tense. And through this period, we've been waiting for letters from colleges, waiting for classes to end, waiting for this slip of a diploma, this day, this minute. We've been blocking out the days in the little calendars at the backs of our hoppers every first period with that black sharpie. But this is that last day. This is now.

But I have to admit I never expected the year to end this way.

Some of you may remember an emergency meeting held earlier in the year concerning the school's response to a terrorist attack.

Others of you may not remember it. You may have been in the alley or asleep on the couches in the Tenley Starbucks. The rest of you will recall Paul's bone-chilling sermon.

In the event of biological warfare or a nuclear holocaust, Paul proclaimed that our lives would be entrusted to the construction club - whose duty it was to seal us from our fate by duct taping windows and blocking doors with pillow polo sticks. While our destiny would be in the hands of the men's baseball team, who would retrieve supplies from the stairwell while the track team watched.

Then we were to fall back to the gym, where we would wait out the years. After a few months spent eating protein bars, the survivors would tunnel under Davenport Street and loot the dusty aisles of our beloved Safeway. I imagined a sort of post-apocalyptic scenario - pale, thin seniors, dressed in ragged P.E. uniforms, munching on freshmen and inevitably breeding a race in which they could instill a "lifelong love of learning."

GDS would finally meet its goal of having constant town meetings, while simultaneously taking over the world.

And yet what interested me most about this speech, was that not only could those separated from this loving community never return to the building, but those trapped inside could never leave. We could never escape GDS.

Today marks our escape, and for those of you - those lifers - who have been here for something

absurd like thirteen years, today is a bittersweet finale.

But I get the general feeling from my classmates that we all are dying to leave. We avoid the campus like seniors avoiding English teachers the week before papers are due, we don't even want to come back to play a prank - it's just simply not worth the pain and effort.

And if we cannot possibly imagine the idea of never escaping, if we can't possibly imagine ever going back to school, ever trying to do anything intellectual or even meaningful, then when will we change?

When will I have one of those midlife crisis makeovers, so I can come back and impress all my high school friends? When will I audition for a WB show centered around my dream high school reunion? And when will I start caring about these years, when will I begin reforming them into a perfect, nostalgic childhood?

Will we come back to the reunions older, richer, and fatter? Will we arrive fashionably late, our helicopter landing on the helipad that was recently constructed over the fourth floor pool, emerging from the cockpit with a trophy wife on one arm? Will we return as world-weary misanthropes? Or will we live in Potomac and have obnoxious pseudo-bohemian children like ourselves who we'll pimp through the college process? And if we look at the odds, in five years, one of us will inevitably be dead. Who will it be? I'm curious.

And maybe that's what I have in common with my hairdresser - that we're both looking forward to our high school reunions, though for different reasons.

And now that we're graduating, should we be hopping trains to Mexico, should we be embarking on road trips, getting our white dresses dirty, changing our lives and really living?

Or should we have left a long time ago?

What did we do for four years?

When we were told our graduation year back in 1998, 2003 was still being used in sci-fi movies. Was this really a waste of time?

And despite all the nights I've wasted reading the canon of American literature when I could have been watching Fox, it definitely was not. Although I can't say these were the happiest four years of my life—because that doesn't give me much to look forward to—I can say that I wouldn't mind coming back. I can say that I look forward to that reunion, that although I don't remember a thing I've learned, that's not what we'll be discussing there. Because it's not what we learned, but the fact we learned it together.

And because we could also have suffered out eternity in the GDS gym, this graduation, this escape—if you will—feels more like a gift than an expectation. So don't waste it. Leave here and hop trains to Mexico, fix up old cars and see the world, take chances, make mistakes, and most of all remember that your parents are living vicariously through you, so whatever you do have fun.