

Describe the world you come from; for example, your family, clubs, school, community, city, or town. How has that world shaped your dreams and aspirations? —MIT

Palo Alto can be beguiling: the palm trees, the exquisite gardens with chromatic waves of tulips, hydrangeas, and roses, the extravagant explosions of bougainvillea, the voluptuous breeze on a sun-bright day, the banks of fog rolling over the Santa Cruz Mountains that separate us from the beach to which we hardly ever go because the traffic is horrible. At the western edge is the Town and Country Shopping Center, landscaped with native shrubs and rugged, earth-colored stonework meant to resemble a hacienda that in this case also boasts a Bar Method studio and an Athleta, plus micro-batch ice cream in flavors like Earl Gray Lavender and TCHO Chocolate. There's also Vietnamese street food, plus designer tacos, plus a beauty spa founded by a Russian immigrant where the Asian women who do the manicures and pedicures and facials wear name tags with names the white clients can pronounce: Tiffany, Jenny, Lisa. It's a town both charmed and haunted, kissed by abundance, built on a bedrock of barely contained dread.

The story of Palo Alto is inextricably intertwined with the story of Stanford University, which begins in 1884 with a dead child. Leland Stanford Jr. was born to Jane Lathrop Stanford and Leland Stanford after eighteen childless years and, in a particularly awful bit of irony, died of typhoid on a grand tour of Europe that was the nineteenth-century equivalent of today's junior-year college tour—a trip that would have inaugurated the next promising chapter of his life. He was just shy of his sixteenth birthday. His shattered parents declared that the children of California would be their children and, less than a year after his death, founded a university to honor his memory.

The Stanford campus, all 8,180 tawny, sprawling acres of it, is surrounded by Palo Alto, a city built, like Stanford, on the twin pillars of education and grief. Palo Alto High School—or

Paly, as everyone calls it—is just east of Stanford and just west of the railroad tracks, which run right behind the school. But the suicides by train—so many they’ve been called an epidemic—have been largely by students who go to Gunn, Paly’s crosstown rival. Which is not to say that Paly students are not perpetually stressed, that they don’t abuse Adderall, that they don’t cut themselves, that they don’t drink to excess, that they don’t have eating disorders, anxiety disorders, OCD, depression, insomnia. They are and they do, and so do the girls in pleated blue skirts who go to Castilleja, a private all-girls’ school located in a handsome shingled Craftsman-style building a stone’s throw from Paly. For the record, we don’t throw stones in Palo Alto; instead, we engage in vitriolic exchanges on Nextdoor and in the online comments section of the *Palo Alto Weekly*, criticizing other people’s parenting, which is to blame for everything from careless bicyclists to teen depression and anxiety, and complaining about everything from rude drivers to the size of the Halloween crowds at Steve Jobs’s house, where full-sized candy bars are routinely distributed to legions of trick-or-treaters and their gawking parents. A group of Palo Alto parents is currently suing the Palo Alto Unified School District for unfair math class placement practices that the plaintiffs claim hinder students’ ability to attend highly selective colleges. In Palo Alto, grief and grievance are two sides of the same stone.

A hundred and thirty-five years after its founding, Stanford is all anyone in Palo Alto can talk about. It fills the dreams of hundreds of thousands of high school students and exercises an invisible gravitational pull, like those tractor beams in *Star Wars*. It was founded to be inclusive, to be embracing, to commemorate a child lost too young, to pay tribute to his love of learning, his curiosity, his joy. It was coeducational at a time when universities were typically single-sex, nondenominational when most universities were religious, practical when most were abstruse. Now it admits roughly 2,000 applicants every year and roughly rejects 45,000, some of

whom—and I don't mean to understate the horror of it—throw themselves under trains. It compels parents to do ridiculous things: make donations in the millions, photoshop their landlocked children to look like Olympic-bound sailors, move to Palo Alto from all over the world to pay several million dollars for crappy fixer-upper houses with plywood walls and single-pane windows that fog up in the winter so they can send their kids to the local public schools (“Award-winning PA schools,” the real estate ads say), or, in some cases, to one of the local private schools—Castilleja, Harker, Nueva, Menlo, Crystal Springs, Sacred Heart, Woodside Priory: schools with a carefully pre-screened, pre-tested, pre-approved student body, schools in mansions built by California robber barons, schools that cost over \$50,000 a year. Then they come see me for college counseling.

Yep: me. Irena Smith, née Irina Averbukh, who arrived in the United States from the Soviet Union with her parents in 1978, speaking approximately seventeen words of English (ten of them numbers); who graduated with a 3.3 GPA from the same suburban Silicon Valley high school as Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak; who only got into UCLA by the grace of some benevolent and distracted god; who wore heavy black eyeliner and smoked Benson & Hedges menthol Ultra Lights and cut class and eschewed capital letters throughout her teens and spent her college years aspiring to but never quite achieving the kind of bohemian nonchalance of a sleek, dark-haired gamine in a Parisian garret (while in actuality living in a 1960s walk-up apartment in Westwood Village and sporting permed hair and slouchy socks and off-the-shoulder oversized sweatshirts in slavish imitation of Jennifer Beals in *Flashdance*). Today those delusions of grandeur include offering trenchant responses via languid contralto to Terry Gross on an imagined appearance on *Fresh Air* and fantasizing about becoming Alexis Rose on *Schitt's Creek*, even though I'm neither the right age nor the right build, nor do I possess Alexis's

sartorial audacity. But yes, that's me: playing Words with Friends on my phone, attending Monday night improv classes, leaving the three books I'm reading simultaneously on the kitchen counter, marching in place while brushing my teeth so I can hit my daily Fitbit step goal, shopping for organic salad mix at Trader Joe's, and taking a fish oil capsule every morning, just in case. I'm also the one wondering at least a few times every week how I suddenly got so old and how the hell I ended up where I am, who I am, doing what I do.

This is not, of course, why high school students and their parents come to see me. They come to see me because I have a PhD, because I taught at UCLA and Stanford, because I spent four years in Stanford's Office of Undergraduate Admission.¹ The parents who come to see me want their children to be happy and successful, and the only way to make their children happy and successful is to make sure they get into one of the HYPS schools. (Yes, there is, indeed, an acronym for Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Stanford. Perhaps because uttering those full names aloud would violate superstition or take up too much valuable time. Or perhaps because it would force an acknowledgement of the subtext, "Nothing but the best will do for my extraordinarily special child—or, by extension, for me.") They come to see me because I'm meant to be the Virgil in Dante's *Inferno*, guiding them through the ten circles of application hell, or else a friendly animal sidekick in a Disney movie—Jiminy Cricket, say—or a combination of Sam Gamgee and Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*. Steady, reliable, wise.

They come to me with complaints, demands, questions, and conjectures. Here's a very partial list, in no particular order:

- My child has no spark.
- My child has an 88.7 in math/chemistry/English that the teacher wouldn't round up to an A-.

¹ "Admission" is singular, because yes, it *is* that hard to get in.

- My child spends too much time doing one activity (often, this is an unconventional, genuinely compelling pursuit like board game design or performing magic tricks or sewing or songwriting that the kid would do even if no one were looking and will likely help their application far more than a summer internship or a pay-to-play summer enrichment program).
- It's so hard to get into college ("college" is usually a signifier for HYPS and not Case Western or UC Merced).
- The schools are brutally competitive. "I don't want Blake's description of his school to sound like a fight to the death in District 12," a mom said to me once, "because it's not really like that. Well, it sort of is, but he shouldn't put that in his essay, right?"
- My child is Indian.
- My child is Asian.
- My child won't work on his essay (which is abysmal) but he also wants to visit his girlfriend in Maryland and he has sports practice so how can he write a compelling essay without doing any of the work? Also, the deadline is in four days.
- My child studies too much and is horribly stressed.
- My child doesn't study enough and spends too much time playing video games.
- My friend's child's college essay is funny. Should my (deadly serious) child's be too?
- I read on the internet that [insert a particularly outlandish or unsubstantiated morsel about college applications here]. Please parse it for me.

My work is a combination of cheerleader, strategic planner, family therapist, and writing coach. My current hourly rate is \$500/hour, which people pay without blinking and which makes me feel alternately like a big deal and a total fraud. Yes, I really am that good at finding a

student's spark, at helping them find their voice, at facilitating the translation of messy lived experience into a five-page application, but a lot of my work also involves common sense. A lot of it is suffused by my experience as a former child and a current parent and an ability to see that while this process is shockingly new to the families I work with, it is at the same time terribly old. It is a rite of passage, albeit one that's been corrupted by colleges' marketing departments, the internet, the *US News & World Report* rankings, and yes, people like me.

I never set out to be a college counselor. What I really am qualified to do, if you must know, is talk a lot (it's a point of pride to this day that I was voted Most Likely to Talk to Anyone or Anything about Anyone or Anything as a senior at Homestead High School in Cupertino) and tell long-winded stories and drink coffee and gesticulate expansively. That was the whole point of graduate school, which was a place where you could hold forth about books to other graduate students or to a captive audience of undergrads and cradle Styrofoam cups of coffee while smoking on the terrace on the third floor of Royce Hall, back in the halcyon days when you could still smoke without people looking at you like you were a serial killer. I expected to spend my life happily ensconced in my ivory tower, gossiping about fellow graduate students and trafficking in stories, celebrating the pliability of language, the infinite variety of human experience, from the sublime to the ridiculous to the tragic. To be clear, trafficking in *other* people's stories from a safe distance. That was the plan, anyway. But here's the funny thing about stories and about expectations for that matter: they never quite turn out the way you think they will.

When people ask me what it's like to live in Palo Alto—what it's like to be a *college admissions counselor* in Palo Alto, where 13 percent of the population holds advanced degrees, where the median income is well over six figures a year and the median home value is over \$3

million, where everyone has to be, and to have, top-ranked everything—I am sometimes tempted to quote Quentin Compson in *Absalom, Absalom!* “I don’t hate it,” I want to say, “I don’t hate it. I don’t. I don’t.” The truth is, I don’t hate it—really, I don’t—but the echoes between the Greek tragedies referenced in Faulkner’s novel and my own life are uncanny. Misguided parents, outsized expectations, scarred children, relentless striving, a house doomed to devour itself, people blind to the seeds of destruction they themselves have sown, and terrible consequences to actions taken with the best of intentions. And that’s just at my own house.