**The Unathletic Department—Meghan**

A blue seventh place athletic ribbon hangs from my mantel. Every day, as I walk into my living room, the award mockingly congratulates me as I smile. Ironically, the blue seventh place ribbon resembles the first place ribbon in color; so, if I just cover up the tip of the seven, I may convince myself that I championed the fourth heat. But, I never dare to wipe away the memory of my seventh place swim; I need that daily reminder of my imperfection. I need that seventh place.

Two years ago, I joined the no-cut swim team. That winter, my coach unexpectedly assigned me to swim the 500 freestyle. After stressing for hours about swimming 20 laps in a competition, I mounted the blocks, took my mark, and swam. Around lap 14, I looked around at the other lanes and did not see anyone. “I must be winning!” I thought to myself. However, as I finally completed my race and lifted my arms up in victory to the eager applause of the fans, I looked up at the score board. I had finished my race in last place. In fact, I left the pool two minutes after the second-to-last competitor, who now stood with her friends, wearing all her clothes.

The blue for the first loser went to me.

However, as I walked back to my team, carrying the seventh place blue, listening to the splash of the new event’s swimmers, I could not help but smile. I could smile because despite my loss, life continued; the next event began. I realized that I could accept this failure, because I should not take everything in life so seriously. Why should I not laugh at the image of myself, raising my arms up in victory only to have finished last? I certainly did not challenge the school record, but that did not mean I could not challenge myself.

So, the blue seventh place ribbon sits there, on my mantel, for the world to see. I feel no shame in that. In fact, my memorable 20 laps mean more to me than an award because over time, the blue of the seventh place ribbon fades, and I become more colorful by embracing my imperfections and gaining resilience-but not athleticism.

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**The Musketeer in Me—Vikas**

One fundamental rule of reincarnation is that you do not know your past life. Well, it seems as though I broke that rule. In fact, I am absolutely certain that my past reincarnation was none other than d’Artagnan, the fourth musketeer.

Knowing that is a gift. It makes the arduous process of describing the entirety of my personality in 500 words or less, possible. I can simply toss Alexandre Dumas’ biographical recount of my past life and say, “That’s me,” and those two words would mean everything. They make me that noble and heroic Gasconian that set out to Paris with nothing more than a yellow, hairless pony and a dream of grandeur.

Alas, times have changed. The Musketeers, dueling, and horses, they have all become relics of the past. A new era and new circumstances bring a different life. Now, I am a first generation, 17-year-old American living in Jersey. My yellow, hairless horse is an old, squeaky Toyota Camry: its modern equivalent. My stunning silver-gilded rapier and armour have been replaced by a BIC pen and legal pad.

However, all those changes are superficial. Inside, I still dream of the same grandeur. I dream, with every fiber of my body, that one day I will become a Newtonian giant holding a Nobel Prize. That one day I will support the innovation and ingenuity that fuels our evolving world. The only challenge is that there are millions of people that share the same dream as me, so what makes me different?

Well, even if the shell of who I am has changed, I am still d’Artagnan at heart. That means being young, foolish, and audacious all at the same time. With pride, I charge first and then think second, knowing that my intuition and passions will forge my path. With conviction, I duel my enemies under the slightest provocation (as long as you consider a pen a weapon). The result is that I’ve been beaten to the ground an ungodly number of times. But, from those moments, I learned the most. And, in those adventures, where I got bruised and battered, I had friends that brought to life “All for one and one for all.”

Yet, the greatest part of being d’Artagnan that I believe in myself to the point that I believe in something larger than myself. I believe in the people around me, my community, my country, and even the world. And I believe every day is going to be better than the one before it.

So, when times like these come, being d’Artagnan makes me strong. The following months are going to change everything. My town. My home. My friends. Everything is going to become college and that proposition is as equally frightening as it is exhilarating. Anyone who says otherwise is lying. Yet, with all those changes, being d’Artagnan is my constant. It is what is going to help me not only overcome the challenges brewing in the future, but also excel. And, if the past is any indication of the future, then the Nobel Prize already has my name written on it.

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**Undecided—Daniel**

I was born in the wrong century.

A combination of an avant-garde homeschooling education and liberal parents produced an inquisitive child who dreamt of versatility. I want to be an Aristotle, a Newton, or, if nothing else, an engineer who can perform titrations and analyze works by Rand or Fitzgerald.

Growing up in Miami, Florida, a mecca for diversity, I’ve seen interests and talents splattered across the entire spectrum. Sports coaches who write computer code after practice, cross country runners who dabble in cancer research and community service management, these were the people who influenced my upbringing. From these inspirations, I’ve crafted an ideal for my future, one where I can play a few varied roles, yet play them well. But I am atypical too. A water skier who spends mornings in the Everglades with my camera, and flies remote airplanes on the weekends.

I know I’ll have to find the right focus, eventually. But first, I’ll figure out what I love. There will be dozens of internal debates over my interests. I’ll deliberate and dispute, unsure of whether I truly love what I’m doing, hesitant about whether this is what I want to be doing five years from now. But it doesn't matter; it’s part of the process. When I find what I want to study, I’ll know. If I were a wonder of the world, I’d be the Great Pyramid. Starting broad, before refining myself to a point, I think Maslow would’ve approved.

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**Spy—Elana**

Ten years ago, I was a spy.

Secret identities, awesome spy gadgets and undercover operations consumed my imagination. This was serious business and l took training seriously.

My brother was Public Enemy No.1. He’d come home and I’d use Mission Impossible stealth moves to follow him everywhere. I’d pick his bedroom door with a nail file and steal his allowance. I’d climb the tree outside his window and take reconnaissance photos.

The proudest moment of my young espionage career was Operation Secret Crate. One Saturday afternoon, Mom drove up with my brother and his friends, who were coming over to play Grand Theft Auto, make stupid jokes and eat junk food. My mission: eavesdrop.

My high-tech tool was a plastic moving crate, two and a half feet square, forgotten behind the living room couch. It had eye-holes big enough for an intrepid spy.

I was small and flexible, but fitting inside that crate was a stretch. Still, the mission was on. Quick jumping jacks and toe touches lo loosen the limbs. Squat, knees to chest, crate over head...

Slam! The boys banged through the front door and swarmed onto the couch. Peering out I saw tennis shoes and hairy ankles. My heart thumped so loud I worried it would overpower their excited voices and the hum of the X-Box. The smell of Pizza Hut cheese sticks was in the air.

The moment of truth. Would they notice the girl crouched in the crate inches away?

One minute. Five minutes. Ten minutes. They didn’t notice! Fifteen minutes. Twenty minutes. Still safe. Thirty minutes. I realized the flaw in my plan. l might learn their secrets, but my body was so contorted and aching that soon I might never walk again.

Something had to be done. Something bold, drastic, unthinkable.

ARGGHHAHGHGHGHGHGHAHDHGHGHHGHGHG!!!!!!!

I shouted at the top of my lungs, flung the crate off me and jumped onto the couch. They all screamed. The cheese sticks went flying. The coke spilled. My brother, for once, had nothing to say.

Elana, girl of mystery, strikes, I said. Be warned.

I strutted out of the living room.

Since those first spy trainings, I’ve never stopped preparing for a future clandestine career. I’ve cracked codes in computer science and cracked jokes with a CIA operative. I’ve slogged through 10k of mud at the Camp Pendleton mud run and four years of Chinese in high school. I’ve flown planes with the Civil Air Patrol in Santa Monica and beat drums with Sudanese refugees in Tel-Aviv. I have launched a rocket, administered CPR, operated ham radios, set a broken arm and helped a rescue team look for a downed plane.

I could end up as a spy, a diplomat, a soldier, an astronaut, or a fighter for a lost cause. I could end up famous or completely unknown. I know two things for sure: I won’t be at a desk job, and I’ll be good to have around when there’s trouble.

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**Its Name was Ozzie—Agni**

*Its name was Ozzie. Ozzie stood two feet tall, glistening, and scraping his feet against the ground with the bullish determination to work. We filled Ozzie up. He swooshed, growled, slurped, and gurgled. Just as Ozzie was about to reach the finish line, he collapsed in a panting mess.*

*I looked down.*

That night I received a call from my research partner, M. “We need these readings,” he sighed.

“I know. But the bulb of the university’s Ostwald viscometer broke during our readings.”

“We have no choice,” M’s voice dropped after a few minutes, “let’s fudge the biodiesel readings.”

I knew this wasn’t M. We had overcome numerous obstacles during our research, yet this one was magnified by the time constraint upon us. The journal’s submission deadline was only a week away.

I paused.

Sensing my silence M said, “You find us a better idea then.” The line went dead.

M had helped us overcome obstacles during our research in the past. It was my turn to step up.

It is difficult to move an object from a dead stop: especially if that object is your brain. Finally, I got it. I called up our professor to tell him my idea. My suggestion was to assemble a team of four undergraduate students at the university, who would work on repairing the Ostwald viscometer (Ozzie) in between classes. In the meanwhile, we would work on synthesizing fuel samples for the tests.

The ensuing week could be classified as ‘Hell Week’, characterized by a search for disposed chicken and pork skins, 14 hour lab days, and holding beakers for hours with only energy drinks to fuel us.

We also had the mission of motivating the undergraduate students to work on repairing Ozzie. They could easily have lost their interest with their other priorities. We encouraged them by getting to know them on a personal level, taking them to late night dinners at KFC, and playing 2-on-2 basketball with them during tea break.

I was constantly aware of the risk I had put in the faith that they would stay focused, as repairing an Ostwald viscometer for two high school students was not getting them any university credits, but they connected to our mission in finding a sustainable fuel, and to us. Colonel Sanders’ recipe could’ve helped us too.

Slap! We high-fived once we finished synthesizing the samples. We hugged the undergraduates when they had finished repairing Ozzie’s bulb.

Placing this small event in a large spectrum, I learned the basic values that research is founded upon: building bridges, team work and valuing academic integrity above the pressure to submit papers. This experience showed me that there are always resources available to solve a problem as long as you are creative. Even against a deadline that makes you question your academic ethics, one must consider the impact correct results may have on the academic community.

In our case, fabricating the fuel’s readings would not only affect our search to find a viable solution to the production of a sustainable fuel in the future, but also it would be against the spirit of experimentation and failure in science. The end result of a choice we made now awaited us. Tension tingled my fingertips. It was time…

*Its name was Ozzie. He slurped, burped, bubbled and crossed the finish line. There were our readings.*

*I looked up.*

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Reviews of the example essays

The UnAthletic Department

*“The first thing that stands out about this essay is the catchy title, which effectively sets up an essay that is charmingly self-deprecating. The author goes on to use subtle humor throughout the essay to highlight one of her weaknesses but at the same time reveals how she turned what some might have considered a negative event into a positive learning experience. Not only is this essay well-written and enjoyable to read, but it reveals some important personal qualities about the author that we might not have learned about her through other components of her application. We get a glimpse of how she constructively deals with challenge and failure, which is sure to be a useful life skill she will need in the real world, starting with her four years in college.”
—Senior Assistant Director Janice Heitsenrether*

*The Musketeer in Me*

*“This essay was clever, humorous, and gave insight into the writer’s personality. He effectively used a fictional character as a way to talk about himself; this overcomes a common mistake I see in essays where applicants don’t make a strong connection between themselves and the character they are writing about. From the essay, I was able to get a sense about how he handles challenges, his ambition, and how he is as a friend. These are all important aspects that we look for in an application. His voice was clear in his writing, gave me the sense that I knew him, and made the essay memorable.”
—Assistant Director Patrick Salmon*

*Undecided*

*“What stood out to me about Daniel’s major essay was that, while he applied undecided, he still crafted a really well written essay about his interests. Daniel writes about how his upbringing and where he’s from has led him to be inquisitive and explore a range of interests. He does a great job of tying it all into using his academic experience at Hopkins to pinpoint what exactly it is that he wants to study in the future.”
—Admissions Counselor Monique Hyppolite*

*Spy*

*“I like this essay because you really get to see the adventurous side of Elana, an intangible quality that cannot be seen in her transcript, test scores, or list of activities. By telling a story from her youth and connecting it to current activities and personal qualities, her sense of humor shines through and lets the reader know she is not afraid to take risks. After reading this essay, I saw her as someone who would make a difference on our campus, someone who wouldn’t hesitate to get involved and try something new. She seemed like a great fit for Hopkins.”
—Associate Director Shannon Miller*

The Name was Ozzie

*“The author does a good job of pulling the reader in from the very beginning by recounting a scenario that at first seems like it might have had a catastrophic outcome. As we read on, we learn that the author, along with his research partners, was able to tap into his resourcefulness and determination to overcome an obstacle. Along the way, the author reveals not only the logistical challenges his team encountered, but also the ethical dilemma they had to consider. A big part of the work we do as admissions counselors is to find a student who will excel academically at JHU and who will also be a good community member. This essay gives us real insight into how this student will confront academic challenges in college, as well as his potential to be an effective team member and leader.”
—Senior Assistant Director Janice Heitsenrether*