



# University of Pennsylvania

- Accepted College Essay -

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## BEST READER

The giant brown bear was creeping quietly behind the blissfully pink duck ready to wring his bare paws around her neck and throw her into a pot of boiling stew.

We turned the page.

While I chuckled at the impracticality of a bear boiling water to eat a duck, especially a pink duck, I lifted my head to find Matthew tiptoeing about the room exhibiting the meanest, most ferocious look his cute face could conjure. All the while, little Monica sat huddled next to my arm honestly afraid to turn the page and find her favorite pink creature in a bear's "tummy."

It was one of those moments of my hours spent reading with children at the library when it dawned just how much, as a "grown up," I was missing.

I remembered the Thursday when Victoria bounded into the reading room showcasing in her small hands a golden certificate from school. "Best reader," it glistened. A smile came across my face as I looked into the eyes of the petite 7-year old who just last year had been held back in first grade because her reading was not up to par.

It was the same smile that had filled my face six months prior, when Victoria joined the reading program and I saw the other volunteers instantly point at me. Our supervisor had agreed with them, knowing I would use my patient disposition and friendly way with children to motivate our new student. I had nodded vigorously, smiling, not only because I was proud of the confidence they had in me, but because nothing would make me happier than taking on the challenge of helping Victoria improve her reading.

After spending the first session responding to an unrelenting stream of questions, I recognized that Victoria's talkative nature and impatience for answers overshadowed her desire to sit down and read. I treasured her energy and insatiable curiosity and fueled it with my own enthusiasm. Yet, for every interest she presented, I took her to scan the library shelves in search of a related book. I watched her eyes grow with excitement as I tirelessly helped her press through the stories, a journey in search of her answers. Some of the books I chose were difficult for her, but we read through them together, challenging limits and quenching the thirst for knowledge. In books, I told her time and again, she would find all she wanted to know.

Taking her certificate in my hands, I couldn't help but be proud that part of this glittering piece of paper was likely my doing.

My thoughts were interrupted by Victoria's chant. "I got best reader!" she exclaimed over and over jumping between feet as her arms waved from side to side. Without hesitation, I followed. Holding her certificate up for all to see, I matched my footing with hers as we hopped the length of the room giggling.

Whether it is victory celebrations or talking in different voices, whenever I am with these kids, I find myself being pulled into their childhood world—a world of simplicity, of undying curiosity, and of pure innocence. It is a world in which if everything is not perfect, it definitely can be. And with a simple "prayer to god" or "kiss on the boo-boo" it will be.

Though I go in each week to be these kids' teacher, I come out, having been their student. They have introduced me to a side of me I never realized existed.

As I enter college, it is not only my intelligence or my accumulated knowledge, but also the kid in me who will bring success. This child will jump to try every new activity with an enthusiasm that cannot fade. She will ask questions of everything she sees, of everything she hears and of everything she reads. She will dream big and for

every step she stumbles upon towards that dream, she will get right back up and step again, this time, a little more carefully. And she will do all this, approach every life hurdle or triumph with a smile- a big contagious smile.

## BOX OF CHOCOLATES

Every Sunday morning, the local Starbucks plays host to what my mom likes to call “mother-son bonding time.” This Sunday is no different. My mom and I sit down with our regular Chai Latte and Caramel Frappuccino, and absorb the aroma of the coffee beans and the gentle rays of the winter sun.

“So Alex, what are we going to do for dad’s 50th birthday?” When my mom asks a question about upcoming plans, she doesn’t expect an answer; she already has something in mind. Many years ago, my mom started a family tradition of making gifts personal: poems, songs, skits. At first I didn’t understand why we were wasting so much time when we could just buy a gift card from the local mall. But my outlook changed when I turned twelve. For my birthday, my parents gave me a poster, a product of their many hours on Photoshop. With long hair, sideburns, and a slim suit, I had become the fifth member of the Beatles crossing Abbey road. Every morning when I wake up, this poster opposite my bed is the first thing I see, and I start off the day with a smile. Since then, I have needed little persuasion to start working on the next gift project. Actually, I even look forward to these times, when my parents find their inner children, and the trivial worries of life simply whisk away. My dad, both figuratively and literally, ditches his office suit and proper manners, and dons a red woman’s wig and high heels to practice a scene. My mom stops scolding my sister and me, and joins us in our ruckus, doing the jitterbug and blowing on a harmonica. These are the moments in my family when there are no children or adults, just four people who give in to their creative urges.

“How about throwing Dad a party, and making him a movie?” my mom asks as I use my straw to fish for any remaining coffee at the bottom of the cup. “Just think of a movie you like and we’ll parody it.” A big fan of “the-life-is-like-a-box-of-chocolates” theory, I suggest my favorite movie, Forrest Gump. She smiles. “OK, but only if you play Forrest.”

When we come home, my mom takes down a box, heavy with the dust of age, scribbled with messy Russian lettering. I peer over her shoulder as she empties onto the living room floor the contents: my dad’s life story in black and white. Within minutes, I am completely immersed in the photographs I have never seen before. As I gape at a picture of a bearded teenager laughing with his friends, I do a double take. Is this the same clean-shaven man who helped me to prove the theorem that all right angles are congruent and always tells me to tuck in my shirt? I shake my head in disbelief as I thumb through some pictures of my dad and his friends with guitars in the forest singing songs around a camp fire. My mom explains that the Soviet government didn’t approve of these songs, so the woods became their only refuge. I am now starting to understand why my dad, limited in what he could sing or say as a youth, pushes my sister and me to ask probing questions, survey news from all sides of the political spectrum, and watch controversial movies. Looking down at one of the pictures of my dad in the forest, it just hits me: the movie should be called “Forest guy.”

With each picture comes its own story, and collectively, they create a collage of my dad’s past that I had never known. But even more surprises await me as I watch documentaries about Russian leaders in the 20th century. To truly parody Forrest Gump, some “great” Communist leaders must be part of Forest guy’s life, just as Kennedy and Nixon were part of Forrest Gump’s. Coming up with bizarre ideas of how my dad met the Communist leaders is the most entertaining part of our moviemaking. My stomach throbs with laughter as I conceive the impossible notion of my dad bullying Gorbachev into destroying the Berlin Wall.

Along with Russian history, I also discover part of my family’s: while discussing the horrors of Stalin’s reign with my mom, I am shocked to hear that my father was born in exile, and one of his uncles died in Stalin’s concentration camp for joking about Communists. It’s hard to believe that someone can be killed for cracking a joke, when cracking a safe will only get you a few years in jail. Luckily, when I am joking about Lenin and Stalin in my film, my only worry is crowd response.

It is the day of the party, and as I look around at the apprehensive crowd, my instincts yell, “run, Alex! run!” Soon, the lights dim, and my anxiety grows. I am watching the viewers as intensely as they are watching the screen. As each joke is met with uproarious laughter and table slapping, my breaths become calmer and my fingers stop shaking. Twenty-five minutes later, I hear the long awaited ovation. I gaze from table to table at the sea of smiles, but one face catches my attention. It is my dad’s, showing complete disbelief that something so grandiose could be done about him and for him. All these weeks I had been so focused on the guests’ reactions that I never thought about my dad’s. Although he is trying hard to contain himself, I see a tear sneak from the side of his eye. It is the first time I have seen my dad cry.

Yes, life is a box of chocolates. Some are delicious, some too bitter for your taste. But the best are like the one I picked that day; they seem like any other chocolate, but when you bite into them, they surprise you with an unexpected flavor.

## **THEN AND NOW: HOW THE PERSEVERANCE OF A WORKING, SINGLE MOTHER MOLDED THE PERSONA OF HER CHINESE- AMERICAN DAUGHTER**

I grew up in a four-room apartment in the middle of Beijing at the turn of the twentieth century. Common household features such as the existence of stairs within a house were thought of as decadent luxuries representative of the incredibly wealthy. My life was simple. At five years old, it was differentiated by two things, the times I was with my mother and the times I was not.

My single mother was a chemist and professor at the University of Beijing. Even at a young age, she distinguished herself from her peers with her remarkable ambition and intense passion for learning. From growing up in the frigid winds of northern Mongolia, to becoming one of three students to earn a full scholarship to China's most competitive university, to working as a government-sponsored chemist in Goslar, Germany, my mother accomplished more before I was born than most people achieved in a lifetime.

Unfortunately, I would not learn of the fabulous successes and arduous trials of my mother until much, much later. All I could understand or not understand at five years old was why my mother was rarely home, why I did not see her for three months during the summer when I lived with my grandparents, and why I was forced to go to a daycare owned by a tyrannical monster who would tell ghost stories to make me cry. Even now, much of my knowledge about my mother's early life is something I am still piecing together. As was the case then, my full understanding of her brilliant yet ill-tempered persona is continually hindered by the simple troubles of life. Although now, they are the issues of an eighteen-year old teenager rather than those of a five-year old child.

I remember nights we would spend together when she was busy with her research and classes; I would sit in a desk next to her, drawing pictures and imagine that I was her personal assistant. I also remember times when I had to stay home alone because she had a lecture to give or errands to run; I would lean against the window sill staring down into the bleak, concrete streets waiting and watching for the return of a petite form in a bright red jacket. Yet despite the forlorn days and the lonely nights, I feel neither regret nor resentment towards those early years or my mother. On the contrary, I am incredibly proud and grateful for all the difficulties she endured in order to raise me properly. Had it not been for my childhood experiences, I would not have matured at such an early age or developed such a strong sense of independence.

We moved to America in the spring of 1997. The transition of cultures was daunting yet it failed to dishearten my mother. Like every other experience in her life, she treated the move as an opportunity. However, even my mother was not immune to the overwhelming cultural shock, and despite her perseverance and accomplishments, she continually struggled with the language barrier and the difference in societal values.

While my mother was forced to labor against such changes, my young age enabled me to adapt quickly to the new environment. Unfortunately, my "Americanization" has caused a great deal of mystification and incomprehension in my mother. not only do our manners of speaking differ, but we no longer view traditional beliefs the same way. Her lack of encouragement for my participation in athletics and her excessive emphasis on my grades have been both frustrating and upsetting. From my gregarious nature and social outings to my obdurate refusals to comply with her every long-established demand, she has been forced to accept the evolution of her daughter from that of Chinese doll to American teenager.

Nevertheless, despite our various differences and my acute assimilation into another culture, I have never lost sight of what mattered most to me, nor forgotten the roots of my heritage and rigorous upbringing. My mother's persistence and endurance are qualities which I have proudly assumed and carried with me in every activity of my life. From facing the ignorant racisms of elementary classmates to the malicious jealousies of middle school peers, I have never doubted or second guessed the work ethic and moral code that she instilled in me. Her resourcefulness has also been highly influential and taught me of the importance of seeking opportunities. Whether it was working alongside Philadelphia Inquirer journalists or researching marketing strategies for a

startup company, I have learned and developed with each success and letdown encountered throughout my middle and high school years.

The difficulties of my mother and the difficulties that I faced in two countries on two continents continue to define and shape my personality and character. As mother and daughter continue along the journey of life, I hope that she can come to accept and embrace the daughter whom she has so diligently raised while I hope to slowly unravel the full mystery that is my mother and, one day, finally comprehend and appreciate the entirety of her effect on my life.

## KEEPING UP WITH THE BEAT OF THE DRUM

The Hindu God, Brahma, seeing the plight of a society tainted by envy and greed, presents a boy with a drum that he can only hear, not see. This instrument, which is supposed to bring patience and discipline to humanity, is the foundation of Indian classical music. The boy has yet to discover that musicians use this tool to speak, allowing their minds to transmit messages through the vibrant pulsations of their notes.

My guru told me this story when I began learning the tabla, a north Indian classical drum. Though he never revealed the ending, he offered one clue. "It doesn't matter how fast your hands can beat the drum if your mind cannot keep up with them."

A typical American teenager, I had always yearned for raw strength and speed on the tabla. I thought those were the qualities that made the perfect percussionist. During concerts, I saw musicians' fingers gliding across the head of the drum producing the extraordinary impression of force, immediacy of genius and intensity of passion that left audiences spellbound. I knew that to become the best at tabla, I needed to display my talent in a similar way. I wanted to play equally as fast and forcefully, even if it meant sacrificing precision for power.

I asked my guru to train me to play like the maestros, but he said I lacked mental focus; I didn't listen to or enjoy my music. He believed the mind and body must be in sync in order to master the instrument. I never fully understood this concept until the imagination of one visually handicapped child attuned my mind to the beat of the drum.

As a summer volunteer at the Braille Institute in Anaheim, I developed the musical talents of blind elementary school children through teaching the tabla. My friends and I bought instruments and music with the money that we made during a summer recycling program in our neighborhood. During our first class, the children jumped into action, thumping erratically on their instruments. I chuckled at the sight of nine jubilant youngsters producing musical mayhem.

Chaandni was different. Shy and reserved, she felt the drum's smooth texture and stroked the soft middle portion of the drum head. I stood astonished as she performed her ritual. Tap. Listen. Smile. Tap. Listen. Smile. I could see her contemplating the emerging rhythm and resonance of each successive pulse. Watching a budding musician feel the delicate timbre of each drumbeat is a thrilling sensation.

I learned more from observing than I did through years of erratic practice. Chaandni would eagerly listen to a musical piece, then strike incessantly until she produced a matching pitch. When she stumbled, she would sit patiently pinpointing her mistake. She didn't speak; her insight and emotion glowed through her music. For the first time in my life I felt the depth of the drums. For the first time, I truly comprehended and loved the instrument.

She was indeed a special soul. Her curiosity was insatiable; her regard for the drum was incomparable; her smile was inspiring. Her joyful progress inspired me to perform in London this summer with my guru. Driven by the spirit of a young girl who never let her disability impede her innate talent, I played gracefully in front of hundreds of spectators and cherished the inner triumph.

I am a living example of Brahma's story. The combination of grace and force on the tabla is my channel for communicating emotions. My tale ends with the appreciation that the mind is a beautiful vehicle for the drum.

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