



O b e r l i n   C o l l e g e

- A c c e p t e d   C o l l e g e   E s s a y   -



On May 30, 2004, I woke up to bloodcurdling screaming that I'd only heard in horror movies. The haziness of the deep sleep from which I emerged was still fading when I realized that the piercing cries were coming from my mother. I rubbed my eyes as she stood over me, frantically sputtering that I needed to get up, that there was a fire. We ran down the stairs in the dark, because the lights were no longer working. I opened the front door, grabbed my old, senile dog by the collar, and ran across the street to my neighbor's house. As I stood, facing my home, I saw for the first time the fire in its full blazing glory. The black night lit up with hot, menacing flames that were eating away my room, my journals, my sketchbooks, my stories, my watercolor paintings, my music, my piano, and my home.

As I stood watching in a daze, my parents went to wake up our neighbors because the fire was raging and their lives were in danger. Meanwhile, I was motionless, unaware of my surroundings, utterly numb and disbelieving. Twenty minutes later, the fire department came. By then, most of the house was in ruins. After a couple of hours, the last of the flames and billowing smoke was out. The verdict was that nothing was salvageable.

Neighbors across the street, who had woken to the sound of the fire trucks, gave us chairs to sit in, sweaters and blankets. They comforted us immeasurably. Strangers showed us their compassion and goodwill by going around the neighborhood and collecting clothes for us to wear, since we no longer had any. One family let us stay in their house for three weeks. Another couple went to buy sour medications, while others gave us toiletries and other supplies. These were mostly individuals whom we had never seen or spoken to before in our lives.

This experience was a turning point in my life. I have always been a bit of a critic and skeptical of human nature, but this experience gave me a new perspective on the capacity for human generosity. When I felt most vulnerable and scared, the friendly smile of a passing neighbor, the strong hug of a family friend, the warmth of nourishing food brought endlessly to sustain us by parents of my mother's school was a lifeline to recovery.

I don't know if a person ever completely recovers from an experience like this. But, ironically, I do feel that the fire has given me several remarkable gifts. I feel a deep connection to my community and a great need to give to others the help and caring that I experienced. Interacting with many new people has helped me grow from a more timid, self-involved person, to a more mature individual who cares deeply about the needs of others. Most of all, I have gained a vivid appreciation of life, flames and all.

# Envision High

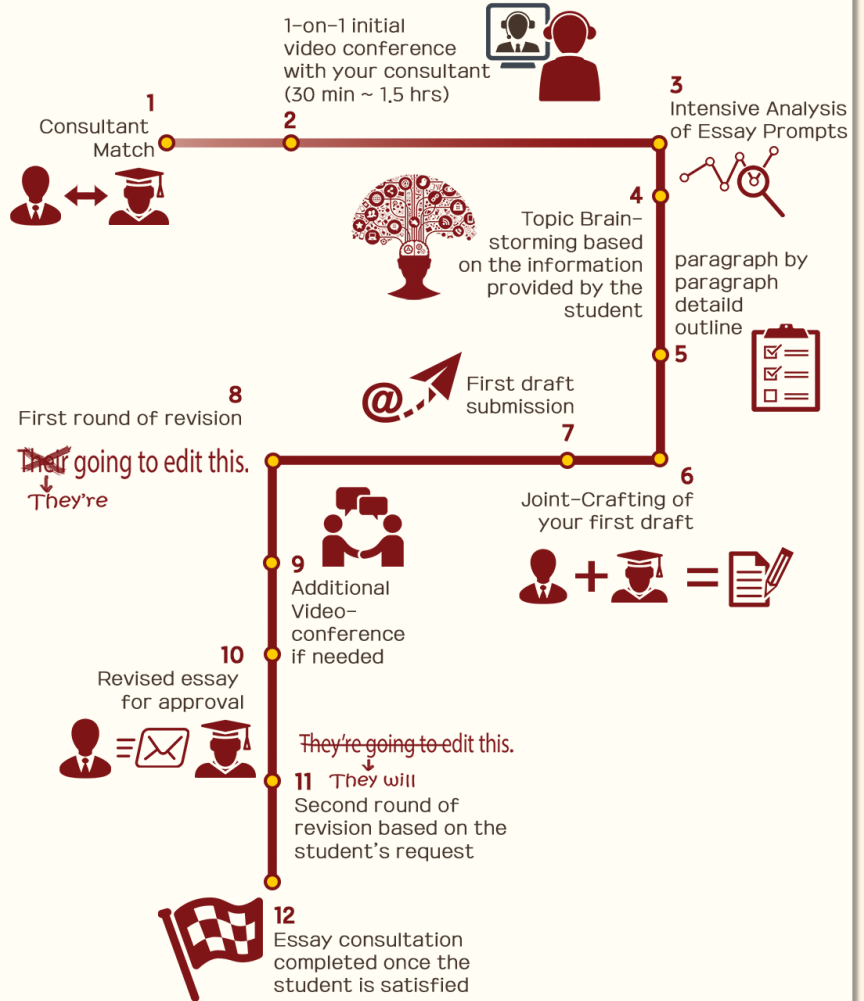
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