

Better Barbie

By Jesse K., Grand Ledge, MI

I don't have any alumni ties to Brown, though it's possible I could be the long-lost granddaughter of James S. Miller. Never have I sailed the Pacific Ocean on the back of a humpback whale, nor can I wrap sushi with the skill of former Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto. I haven't done much research regarding podiatry, and chances are I will never win the Michigan Mega-Millions lottery. I am, however, the proud owner of a Little Mermaid Edition Barbie.

At some point in almost every little girl's life, she becomes engrossed in the Pepto-Bismol-pink world of Barbies, a place I entered at the age of seven. My sister, Hannah, and I decided to take our collection of 11-inch plastic friends for a dip in the pool one sweltering summer day. Hours of giggling resulted from tossing the Barbies as high as we could into the air and watching them dive gracefully into the waves. Three ... two ... one, I launched my Little Mermaid doll in the same fashion as Apollo 11. We watched her rocket into the sky. I glanced at my sister, who was scrambling through her scorecards to make sure she had the well-deserved "10" ready. My eyes returned upward, anticipating the gymnastic stunts Barbie would undoubtedly deliver to her enraptured audience. Where was she? The crowd was growing restless. Had she landed on the moon?

Utterly bewildered, we combed through the freshly mown grass and woods, but unfortunately, our search bore no fruit. After a moment of sorrow, our tiny attention spans directed us to a different game, and our minds fluttered away.

Over the years, I encountered many of my own quirky adventures. As a field biologist intern, I camped for 15 days on an uninhabited island, purified my own water, surveyed the endangered Piping Plover, tested the water quality of lakes, and found my way out of 70,000 acres of northern Michigan wilderness. My view of the world broadened through travels and encounters with the Costa Rican, German, French, and Australian cultures. I won varsity letters, had my poetry published, and volunteered at a local hospital, and as I grew older, the mystery of the once-beloved Little Mermaid Edition Barbie faded into a misty memory.

One recent fall day, rainbow-colored leaves swirled through the air and the chilly breeze carried its pleasant scent, an amalgamation of bonfire and pumpkin. Upon the rooftop was not good Saint Nick, but rather my dad, cleaning the leaves off our house. Tied to the branch of an ancient oak tree, the tire swing moved my body in a pendulum motion. My dad approached with something dark in his hands. "Eh ... does this belong to you, or Hannah?" he said with a look of perplexity painted on his face. I couldn't believe my eyes: It was the Little Mermaid Edition Barbie! The poor girl – she was an absolute disaster. I affirmed my ownership of the traveler, and took her battered body in my hands.

Nine years had passed since I had seen the almost-world-renowned Olympic diver. I recalled that summer day and smiled as memories flooded my mind. She looked as though she'd been struck by lightning a few times, weathered heavy monsoons, and held onto the gutter for dear life during tornados. Her mangled arm appeared to have been mistaken for a worm by a ferocious momma bird. Leaves, dirt, and other debris were entwined in her once shiny, cherry locks. Her attire was tattered – she seemed to have fashioned herself a Tarzan-esque ensemble. Her ingenuity was impressive; it reminded me of an experience in which I had to craft socks out of a garbage bag and medical tape, then wear them for three days in pouring rain. Nevertheless, one thing stood out as I ogled my long-lost friend: her face.

She wore a radiant smile, a look of contentment, self-confidence, and accomplishment. With head held high and a positive attitude, she had battled life's unexpected challenges. She knows now what it means to strive and succeed. I realized the world of pink doesn't fit someone with so much potential, so much passion for learning, so much heart, independence, and creativity. I looked at her and saw myself reflected in her sapphire eyes.

Like her, my dreams lie far beyond those of a Stepford wife, and with the ability to bend and not break, I am ready to step out of my plastic box society, through the Van Winkle gates, and into a world of endless possibilities. I crave the works of Thoreau and Emerson, not mall directories or grocery lists. I desire adventure and the opportunity to study new cultures. I long to write what I want and voice my opinions with my whole heart behind them. And as the Little Mermaid Edition Barbie sits on my shelf, next to musical and athletic trophies, behind silly pictures of friends, and alongside books by Maya Angelou and Lewis Carroll, she reminds me of myself. For this ambitious girl, pink is not enough; she is ready to dive into Brown.

Block by Block, Word by Word

By Daniel Steinman
Short Hills, N.J.

You can make almost anything out of LEGOs. You can build miniature spaceships, colorful forts, or cities of blocky skyscrapers that span the basement floor. My favorite was constructing ancient, booby-trapped temples like the ones from Indiana Jones.

In elementary school, I was fanatical about my LEGOs. I would build the medieval castle, complete with the moat and the drawbridge and guard stations and the throne room for the king and queen and their royal dog, Patches. (Coincidentally, Patches was also the name of my dog.) I would kneel for hours, hunched over the hundreds of blocks spread over the carpet, to select just the right piece for each part of the structure.

Once the castle walls were erected and the knights on horseback were set to approach from the other side of the moat, I was done. I didn't really play with the castle afterward. I moved it to the corner so that my sister's Barbie convertible wouldn't crash into it and ruin my little "Ages 3 and Up" masterpiece.



Looking back on my childhood, I was a bizarrely obsessive little kid. For days after building a fort or a spaceship, I would stop and examine that every plastic block was still in place.

It's strange to think that between the age of riding a tricycle and the age of driving a car, I am, in some ways, exactly the same. I don't play with LEGOs anymore, but I am a construction worker of types. Now I write essays and stories and newspaper articles, and I approach it with the same compulsion.

Every word is painstakingly selected with the same intensity I exerted as a child choosing the right color block. Every phrase is turned around and around in my head like arranging the walls of the castle gate. Every sentence is examined for its structural quality. At my desk — like kneeling over my rug — I craft meticulously.

By writing, I hope to create the grand and intricate images in my mind, to give them some physical incarnation. Inked on a page, a nebulous mass of related thoughts can be forged into something real. A story or essay can be erected as the fulfillment of a single concept. My gratification comes from being able to perfectly embody an idea. This can be frustrating because I've never written anything close to perfect. For as much as I agonize over my words and methodically rework every draft, my ideal eludes me. Still, I return to my desk and keep writing, editing, and rewriting because if I don't return to my desk, I'm sure I'll never write the essays, stories, and newspaper articles that I know I want to write.

You can make almost anything out of words. You can build planet-sized spaceships, long-lost medieval castles, or cities of glass structures that pierce the clouds. If my construction work is solid enough, I believe I will be able to make these worlds — real and imaginary — come alive on paper the way they did on the rug of my basement. So I continue to build — block by block, word by word, sentence by sentence — in the hope that I will end up with something I can put to the side of my desk and examine every once in a while to see that every word fits in place.

Becoming A Dancer?

By Jennifer M., East Providence, RI

Standing in front of the mirror one day, I came to the harsh realization that I fell short of the requirements of my dream. The reflection that stared back was of a skinny brown-haired girl who stood a mere five feet tall. My entire life had been about dedication and striving to be the best dancer in my studio. I'd always had elaborate dreams and high aspirations. I never noticed how hard it might be to achieve something that you really want. Most people spend their whole lives searching for their calling or their nitch, but I've known that I was born to be a dancer since the first time I stepped into Thoroughly Modern Dance Studio at one and a half years of age. I've devoted sixteen years of my life to helping my dream come true, and also taken time out of my personal life to be a dance teacher at my studio.

Last summer I attended what is called an audition class in Boston taught by a highly respected Broadway dancer. At this seminar he explained the procedures for getting into a dance company or production. While I was listening and taking notes, I was thinking that I certainly had the experience, but there was one area in which I didn't quite measure up. He informed us that at most auditions all dancers under 5 feet 6 inches are automatically eliminated or simply overlooked. He said that most casting directors are looking for the stereotyped dancer with long legs, a long neck and a size one waist. Standing half a foot under this height, I felt my heart drop to the floor.

It really is hard to listen to someone basically tell you: "Sorry, but you've been working really hard for sixteen years for nothing, so find a new dream." Unfortunately, it just doesn't work that way. Dancing isn't just some hobby for me; it's more like an addiction. My complete heart and soul are exhibited in every step. Through dance I find a sense of pride and satisfaction that I don't think anyone could understand or appreciate. To have all that I've ever wanted instantly shot down created a sick feeling in my stomach.

Furthermore, I knew that at that moment I could do one of two things. I could settle for a second choice, or I could commit myself to the tedious uphill battle to come. Well, I've never been known as a person who gives up easily, so I've been working even harder to make up for in skill what I lack in inches!

Nevertheless, it really doesn't matter how high the odds are against me, for I will rise above them. It's time for me to "put my nose to the grindstone" because, despite what anyone sees, the only direction my life is going is up. Whether I end up becoming a professional Broadway dancer or open a local dance studio is irrelevant, because I will do one or the other by choice, not because I wasn't qualified. I'm comforted in knowing I'm not alone in this battle. My mentor, Lorie Bernier, who stands at 5 feet 1 inch and has taught me everything I know, always inspiring me by saying: "You have to believe you can reach the stars before you can actually touch one of them."

Cooking Up a Cataclysm

Goggles? Check.

Lab coat? Yep.

Common sense? Maybe not.

I was determined to start the mission anyway, a mission of proving independence, a mission of showing I did not need to be babied and demonstrating just some modicum of autonomy. My mission: to cook salmon.

I turned around, checked that my grandmother was asleep, and gave myself the go-ahead.

I turned on the stove, tossing pink chunks into the pan; the hot oil first sizzled, shook, then violently splattered with incredible vehemence.

I turned into a statue, frozen in shock.

I had neglected to wipe the wet fish before chucking it into the pan. Now I stood in pain, in panic, in my outlandish garb, wincing as each speck of oil found its home on my exposed skin. Then out of nowhere my grandmother appeared, my gray-haired savior with a lid, throwing her frail body before the pan to shield mine. The oil indignantly pattered against the lid as she set it down; I bowed my head in guilty silence, waiting to be scolded.

But Po-Po just took my hands.

"Are you hurt?" she asked in her rural Chinese dialect, gently.

I looked up from the dirtied kitchen floor, my mother's sacred domain desecrated. There was no anger on Po-Po's tired face, only love, and splotches of reddened skin where the oil had scalded her. She wore no protective goggles, no fancy coat. I had been afraid she might be angry at first, but I was more shaken now, shamed by the realization that I had hurt her.

Yet, she never showed it. She never does. She did, however, accept my apologies and even worked beside me to help clean. Only when I appeared not to notice did she briefly disappear to check her burns.

I had acted rashly that day, but so had she, in confronting the volcano of hot grease. Only, her act of irrationality had been for my sake. I believe it to be the same irrationality that compelled her to leave her rustic home among rice paddies to immigrate to America, where she would work two menial jobs, where the people spoke a strange language ever beyond her grasp. She stood alone, enduring those hardships for the sake of her children and grandchildren. I stood alone for my own sake, to further some illusion of independence.

In reality, though I was reluctant to admit it before, I have always depended on people like her. I depend on them for the sweet, life-giving encouragement and the warm, unconditional love that makes everything else possible. They love me. They inspire me. They free me from fear of failure.

Indeed, despite all she has done for me, Po-Po never asks for anything more in return than just for us to spend time together. She is simple. But so is love. Here is someone without so much as a high school education. Yet, it is through her that I have learned things no amount of schooling could possibly teach—a giving heart, strength of character, a humble spirit, and most importantly, an understanding that I am connected to those who have made my opportunities possible.

As I see my grandmother's quiet resolution, I feel invigorated, inspired. This titan of quiet strength makes me feel invincible. Her selflessness humbles me. Her love and loving sacrifices are pillars of my success. I just needed a little prodding from a malicious piece of fish to remind me that even as I stand triumphantly over my neat little heap of achievements, people like my grandmother stand with me, and it is on their sacrifices that I build my success.

Admissions Reader Comments

All too often, I see essays that start with a first sentence of "My _____ inspires me." While I appreciate the statement, there are definitely more creative ways to convey the message. Alan does just this. He has written, in my opinion, a successful essay. Through his story telling, he informs us of why he is who he is and how the people in his life have influenced where he wants to be in the future. By the end of the essay, I was thinking

to myself, "This student would be a great roommate...witty, warm, caring, and thankful to those who have sacrificed for him!"
—*Shannon Miller, Senior Assistant Director of Admissions Johns Hopkins University*