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College Personal Statement

The sun sleeps as the desolate city streets await the morning rush hour. Driven by an inexplicable compulsion, I enter the building along with ten other swimmers, inching my way toward the cold, dark locker room of the Esplanada Park Pool. One by one, we slip into our still-damp drag suits and make a mad dash through the chill of the morning air, stopping only to grab pull-buoys and kickboards on our way to the pool. Nighttime temperatures in coastal California dip into the high forties, but our pool is artificially warmed to seventy-nine degrees; the temperature differential propels an eerie column of steam up from the water's surface, producing the spooky ambience of a werewolf movie. Next comes the shock. Headfirst immersion into the tepid water sends our hearts racing, and we respond with a quick set of warm-up laps. As we finish, our coach emerges from the fog. He offers no friendly accolades, just a rigid regimen of sets, intervals, and exhortations.

Thus starts another workout. 4,500 yards to go, then a quick shower and a five-minute drive to school. Then it's back to the pool; the afternoon training schedule features an additional 5,500 yards. Tomorrow, we start over again. The objective is to cut our times by another tenth of a second. The end goal is to achieve that tiny, unexplainable difference at the end of a race that separates success from failure, greatness from mediocrity. Somehow we accept the pitch—otherwise, we'd still be deep in our mattresses, slumbering beneath our blankets. In this sport, the antagonist is time. Coaches spend hours in specialized clinics, analyze the latest research on training technique, and experiment with workout schedules in an attempt to defeat time. Yet there are no shortcuts to winning, and workouts are agonizing.

I took part in my first swimming race when I was ten years old. My parents, fearing injury, directed my athletic interests away from ice hockey and into the pool. Three weeks into my new swimming endeavor, I somehow persuaded my coach to let me enter the annual age group meet. To his surprise (and mine), I pulled out an "A" time. I furthered my achievements by winning "Top 16" awards for various age groups, setting club records, and being named National First Team All-American in the 100-Butterfly and Second Team All-American in the 200-Medley. I have since been elevated to the Senior Championship level, which means the competition now includes world-class swimmers. I am aware that making finals will not be easy from here—at this level, success is measured by mere tenths of a second. In addition, each new level brings extra requirements such as elevated weight training, longer weekend training sessions, and more travel from home. Time with friends is increasingly spent in the pursuit of the next swimming objective.

Sometimes, in the solitude of the laps, my thoughts transition to events in my personal life. This year, my grandmother suffered a reoccurrence of cancer, which has spread to her lungs. She had always been driven by good spirits and independence, but suddenly my family had to accept the fact that she now faces a limited timeline. A few weeks later, on the other side of the Pacific Ocean, my grandfather—who lives in Japan—learned he had stomach cancer. He has since undergone successful surgery, but we are aware that a full recovery is not guaranteed. When I first learned that they were both struck with cancer, I felt as if my own objective, to cut my times by fractions of a second, seemed irrelevant, even ironic, given the urgency of their mutual goals: to prolong life itself. Yet we have learned to draw on each other's strengths for support—their fortitude helps me overcome my struggles while my swimming achievements provide them with a vicarious sense of victory. When I share my latest award or triumph story, they smile with pride, as if they themselves had stood on the award stand. I have the impression that I would have to be a grandparent to understand what my medals mean to them.

My grandparents' strength has also shored up my determination to succeed. I have learned that, as in swimming, life's successes often come in small increments. Sometimes even the act of showing up at a workout when your body and psyche are worn out separates a great result from a failure. The difference between success and failure is defined by the ability to overcome strong internal resistance. I know that, by consistently working towards my goals—however small they may seem—I can accomplish what I set for myself, both in and beyond the swimming pool.

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