

## Renu's Common App Essay

Instant ramen was my contraband.

Kraft Mac n' Cheese was barely legal, and microwavable lasagnas were occasionally tolerated. But in my house, thanks to my parents' fear of MSG, instant ramen was outlawed. Now, what happens when an unstoppable desire to consume instant noodles meets an immovable objection to them? Smuggling, that's what.

For five years, I strove to secretly consume as much instant ramen as possible. Every month, I trudged two miles to my local 7-Eleven to buy Top Ramen in bulk and stash it in my closet, expertly hiding it under my SpongeBob pajamas. I'd eat it when my parents weren't home, filling the cups with boiling water and waiting an agonizing three minutes before vigorously slurping each individual noodle with love.

I was infatuated with the Styrofoam-packed noodles because they tasted heavenly, of course, and because savoring the excitement of teenage rebellion while I ate somehow made them all the more flavorful. However, the driving force behind my obsession was that instant ramen was *instant*. I exerted little energy to make it, yet always ended up with a delicious meal. It was a zero-risk task that guaranteed near-immediate results.

I applied this philosophy—that endeavors were only worth undertaking if they'd result in instant success—to every facet of my life. The novel I'd been itching to write since sixth grade wasn't worth starting because it would never get published. Tamil, my mother tongue, wasn't worth learning because I couldn't achieve fluency overnight. Learning how to play the Game of Thrones soundtrack on the piano wasn't worth the effort; practicing Sonatas and Fugues for upcoming exams was enough work. This toxic attitude squelched my ambitions, confining me to my comfort zone.

Over time, however, the unthinkable happened: a stale aftertaste lingered in my mouth as I downed my formerly-beloved Nongshim Kimchi Ramyun. It began to taste less like the food of the gods and more like what it actually was: brittle, processed noodles mixed with dehydrated vegetables and powdery chemical dust, devoid of any life. The thrill of defying my parents faded as I realized they were health-conscious guardians, not unreasonable tyrants. And, just as I'd

been hiding instant ramen from their eyes, I'd been hiding the truth from mine: much like my noodles, my life was uninspired and stagnant. My tendency to choose safe, predictable routes had hindered my growth—as a writer, Tamil speaker, pianist, and person as a whole.

After I internalized this fact, I resolved to make *real* ramen. I picked random ingredients off Costco shelves: chicken broth, eggplant, fresh pork, chives, even peanut butter. I then began the alien process of preparing a complex meal. The task—boiling whole-wheat ramen, julienned vegetables, and clumsily cracking eggs—was physically and mentally invigorating. Cooking the dish took thirty minutes, ten times longer than instant noodles took, but I hardly felt time elapse as I immersed myself in the challenge. The ramen sizzled to life, its unique, savory aromas drifting into the air and making me salivate in anticipation.

It was far from perfect—it was too salty, the pork was overcooked, and I definitely tasted an eggshell or two. However, it sparked my passion for experimentation and discovery. The sheer thrill I'd felt venturing into the unknown—wholeheartedly pouring effort into the task, even without the guarantee of success—was like nothing I'd ever felt before. My chest swelled with pride as I slurped down my creation, this time with careful contemplation as I tried to discern how I could improve my next ramen dish.

Today, I am halfway through my novel, nearly fluent in Tamil, and able to play six songs from the Game of Thrones soundtrack. It's not complete success, and it definitely hasn't been instant, but the mere act of challenging myself and progressing incrementally has added spice to my life, an indescribable flavor that instant ramen—and instant “success,” for that matter—will never be able to provide.