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Mr. Zachary’s Opus

“Uncertainty could be my guiding light.” – U2

“Do or do not. There is no try.” – Yoda

“Life’s what you make it, so let’s make it rock.” – Hannah Montana

An eclectic group of unrelated aphorisms? Not at all. I like to think of them as drops of inspirational “Zachary-isms” splashing the drab cinderblock walls with colorful insights. To call room 134 a “classroom” is an understatement. I prefer to think of it as a sanctuary where students are free to disagree, take risks, and derive their own sense of meaning.

Room 134? Hardly. It’s an extension of Mr. Zachary himself.

Each English class with “Zac Attack” is a unique experience. He sits on the windowsill digging his elbows into his knees, a panorama of hazy trees stretched behind him in the early morning sunlight. The rays beating onto his back seem to infuse him with an enthusiastic energy which he passes on to his drowsy students. The well-worn spine of Great Expectations is plopped in one open hand, complete with the ubiquitous highlighted passages and illegible margin notes. The other madly gesticulates through the air as he conveys the literary beauty of the passage he’s reading aloud to his awakening audience. He reads faster and faster, gradually increasing the intensity in his voice until suddenly he stops—catching us all by surprise with his silence. A smile spreads across his face as he watches the words he’s just spoken permeate our thawing brains. That is Mr. Zachary in his pure, unadulterated genius.

He finds subtle ways to sneak in references to his proud Irish-Catholic roots. One day, he recited all of Yeats’ “Second Coming” from memory. I could almost see the “widening gyre” behind his dancing eyes. Remarkably, he never intimidates with his boundless knowledge. To be honest, most of the time I forget he’s my teacher. I’m genuinely convinced Mr. Zachary is a kid stuck in an adult’s body. He’s the only teacher I know who will walk you to the cafeteria if a conversation spills over into the lunch period. He’s the only teacher I know who conducts class from a beach chair on Fridays. He the only teacher I know who has snappier wisecracks than the class clown. Mr. Zachary is half-Yeats, half-Bono—the perfect Irish combination of intellect with that classic “cool dude” persona.

His passion is contagious. Never before have I felt so liberated sitting in front of a blank computer screen. One of Mr. Zachary’s “inviolate rules” is to write for yourself, not for a grade. He’s taught me to catch the thoughts in my head and crystallize them on paper. He’s taught me to harness the therapeutic power of words flying across the page. He’s taught me to be unafraid of words—to love words. He’s helped me find the writer in myself. He’s a sage, a muse, a bard, a mentor, and a savant. More importantly, he’s my friend.

**The Surgeon** [**https://www.crimsoneducation.org/us/blog/essay-and-interviews/College-Admissions-essay-accepted-into-5-Ivy-League-Schools/**](https://www.crimsoneducation.org/us/blog/essay-and-interviews/College-Admissions-essay-accepted-into-5-Ivy-League-Schools/)

The apron drooped to my knees. I was emblazoned with the ʻHi, My Name is Jamieʼ sticker, coupled with a scarlet employee-in-training hat.

The ʻFresh not Frozen, Grilled not Friedʼ motto resonated in my mind. It was July 2011. I had taken the plunge and secured my very first part time job. I was flipping burgers, and I was excited.

I was accustomed to academia, to the sports field, to the stage, but this was an entirely fresh paradigm. Anuj, the staff trainer and joyously friendly employee tasked with the rather unfortunate challenge of having to teach me hamburgerological cuisine greeted me with a firm handshake. This guy meant business.

The familiar fast-food funk wafted through the tiny store like cologne in an airport duty-free store – overpowering, faintly nauseous and all-encompassing.

The filing cabinets in my mind usually reserved for physics formulas, economics jargon and debating cases were tipped out and crammed with permutations and combinations of burgers – Otropo, Chicken Wrappa, Bondi.

Exceptions to French conjugations were momentarily replaced with extra topping combos. The till became my new graphical calculator.

With surgeon-like precision Anuj modelled how to wrap a burger in four swift motions – place burger in the dead centre, pull wrap from left to right, then right to left, then roll the corners.

He gestured towards his demonstration model and motioned for me to take to the stage. It was show time! Unfortunately, my burger ended up looking like the after-effects of Hurricane Katrina. Anuj patted me on the back, said ʻyouʼll learn fastʼ – and smirked.

Suddenly the barricades were overrun and an influx of jandal-wearing, sun-glass toting beach-goers charged into the store. The orders came flying faster than budget cuts at a Tea Party convention.

I heard the petrifying three words ʻchicken tenderloin comboʼ. This was it, the Everest of my culinary career.

It involved delving into the bossʼs prized stock of ʻsucculent tenderloinsʼ as he had described, ʻthe highest quality meat we sell, expensive to buy and delicate to cook, we canʼt afford any mistakesʼ. I was handling meaty gold.

As the first tenderloin slapped onto the grill with a satisfying sizzle, I could imagine the bossʼs scorching eyes scrutinizing my every action from behind the prying lens of the staff security camera.

Sun-glass toter number two, the tenderloin culprit, then muttered ʻExcuse me! Sorry mate, my fault, I meant the chicken nuggets."

Silently, I screamed. I grimaced, pirouetted and pleaded with the security camera.

Anuj saw my face, contorted in anguish, and took to the rescue with business-like efficiency. He rolled his eyeballs.

In one graceful movement he scooped the tenderloins and flicked them into the cooler with one hand, and in perfect synchrony, removed the emergency chicken nuggets with the other.

His eyes glistened with intensity. With consummate mastery his arms flicked from grill to cooker to table to bread to wrap. In less than ninety seconds, the order was complete. The bossʼs eyeballs returned to their sockets. The day was saved.

I worship the Anujs of this world. Certain jobs may look simple but that simplicity masks years of expertise. My skills in the rococo art of burger flipping paled into insignificance beside the master. I learnt more than burger flipping that day. I learnt humility, respect and the value of a good chicken tenderloin.