I’m a smart kid, I know that.

People have told me – parents obviously, but also teachers, friends, and even strangers on the internet.

And I can see it for myself too, in the quantifiable measures – the SAT scores, the GPAs, the creative writing award that sits on my desk – but also in the less tangible aspects, the day-to-day hints that I just might be capable of a little more than the average kid.

I whiz through calculus problems before elucidating to wide-eyed peers how this step leads to that one, how this value can be re-written using the laws of mathematics and converted from a vague set of possibilities into a definitive answer. I’ve written university essays for friends and edited their papers to the surprise of incredulous English teachers. I’ve produced pieces that invoked grudging admiration even amongst the cutthroat competition of adolescent males. I’ve begun the vast majority of my assignments the day *of* the deadline and astounded time and time again both myself and those aware of my nonsensical procrastination.

Indeed, nearly all of my cherished accomplishments have been characterized by maximal achievement with minimal preparation.

I have led myself to believe that my self-evaluation is far too concrete to be mere arrogance. And I have allowed this to fixate my thoughts, a deep-rooted conviction that has become my last bastion of security. When the world is harsh and unforgiving, when my thoughts sting of bitterness and uncertainty, it is this great tenet of self-worth that propels me forward, the knowledge that I belong to the brilliants allowing me to forget my pain and spurring me on dream and achieve.

But now, this great pillar of reassurance upon which I have found solace for years threatens to crumble away. I am attending the University of Chicago this fall.

And make no mistake, I am overjoyed with my acceptance and would have it no other way.

It’s just that, while the majority of Class of ‘17 online groups have prospective students posting flattering pictures, and at best, brief written introductions, the *UChicago Class of 2017* has, in the span of four months, become an intellectual gold mine teeming with academic prowess of every kind. There are political activists, engineers, writers, entrepreneurs, journalists, and bloggers of a myriad of intriguing subjects. And the more I see, the more certain I become of a daunting realization – I will no longer the best at anything.

In all honesty, I stand in admiration of my future class. I harbor no resentment towards their incredible talents and inspiring feats.

But I am afraid.

I am afraid I will become nothing more than a backdrop in the grey blur of *average*, just another speck on the horizon, fighting endlessly against waves much greater than I can bear, trying desperately to return to the reassuring shore of intellectual prominence.

I am afraid that mediocrity will become its own self-propagating reality, that my newfound irrelevance will stamp out what little remains of my competitive drive until I exist merely as a catalyst for the greatness of others.

It is a demon I must look in the eye each time the shifting sights of the car window or the warm splatter of the showerhead triggers my more introspective side.

But look it in the eye, I do.

And when it bears its devilish smile, I grin back.

Because although I may not be the best, I will be good. And if I’m not good enough, I’ll make myself better until I am.

Because I know that I am great. And although I may not be the best, I will be good. And if I’m not good enough, I’ll make myself better until I am.

Because if eighteen years of life has taught me anything about myself, it’s that pressure and anxiety have only succeeded in compelling me to push myself harder than ever before.

If eighteen years of life has taught me anything, it’s that pressure and anxiety can only succeed in eliciting a desperate motivation that turns impossible feats into simple deeds.

If eighteen years of life has taught me anything, it’s that pressure and anxiety can only succeed in eliciting the motivation of desperation

that turns impossible feats into simple deeds.

The reason my work efficiency triples on the night of a deadline is the same reason the University of Chicago will make me better than I could possibly imagine.

And this fear I feel, this nagging self-doubt that clings to every facet of my consciousness is simply another aspect of the uncertainty of life, that inevitable burden which every human being since the beginning of time has had to bear.

Just think of the day you can jump up and grab the bar with one arm, other hand dangling limply by your side, fasten your grip and pull. And as your bicep bulges and the veins running along your forearm swell with exertion, you feel your body rising in the air, stiff as a plank by the tension produced by your abdominal muscles. You sweat and you grunt and by sheer virtue of physical strength, your grip does not falter and your bicep reaches your forearm and your chin soars high above the bar in a display of power and might.

That is the one-arm chin-up.

Motivation is a lie. It is making yourself believe you can achieve more than you can actually achieve so that you never quite reach your goal, but come close enough that you’re not so disappointed in yourself.