

WORK SAMPLE: PERSONAL ESSAY

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Woman Enters Skating Rink, Turns 90

Historically, I've found gyms mind-numbingly boring. I'm much more interested in finding engaging *activities* — like biking and swimming and fencing and tennis — that make fitness feel more like fun than drudgery.

In fact, one physical activity I've loved since childhood is roller skating. As a teenager I frequented roller rinks the way oily mashers flocked to discos. Rinks were underage nightclubs with cardboard pizza and flat soda, where controversial romances took wing during “slow skates” and where New Wave girls like Dina Adams and me begged Flock of Seagulls requests at the DJ booth.

Roller skating had been easy to learn in those days, and although I was certainly never a skating *artist*, I was more than capable of holding my own. I could join a racing pack with the best of them. And when the DJ started playing funk after 10 PM, I wasn't some stiff little white girl, ohhhhh no. This is where I could claim maybe a liiiiiittle artistry. Just a tad. But I'll let the Gap Band take most of the credit.

Roller skating went the way of rug-hooking and making potholders on a lap loom, it seems. I'm not sure why. So for most of my adult life, I didn't get on a pair of skates.

But when my friend Jeffrey told me about a still-existing roller rink about a half-hour from my home, I got newly enthused. We drove to Jackson, NJ for \$2 family skate night.

I couldn't wait to get those ratty, clammy rental skates on my feet. As I laced up, I watched as kids of all ages circled the shadowy rink to Lady Gaga, and couldn't wait to get back out there. I marveled at the number of mullets and stiffly sprayed bangs that showed up one night in 1983 and apparently never went home. I was amazed at the chubby little girls in pink legwarmers, jean jackets and side-ponytails and realized, wow, everything really *does* go 'round in circles.

Skates on, I leapt up from the carpeted bench and wobbled. *Whoa, okay*, I laughed. *Must remember carpet does funny things under four wheels.*

But soon enough, it became apparent: it wasn't the carpet. It was me.

I'd gotten...*older*.

And my roller skating muscles were gone.

I pushed my legs forward on the polished rink floor and my ankles SCREAMED IN AGONY.

...WTF?

They were on FIRE.

I found myself reaching for the wall. I laughed again, but more of a panting-laugh this time. “You’d...you’d think I’d never skated before,” I huffed to Jeffrey. “You...you go on and skate without me. I don’t want to hold you back.”

Jeffrey did some kind of Olympic pirouette twenty feet into the air and as he landed, angels sang and he glided away in a pink mist.

I made it haltingly to the next “off-ramp” and collapsed onto a bench.

My knees were crying like orphaned babes. My butt was tensing up like it expected to be punched.

I looked at all the skating kids, all the skating grown-ups, my 50-something skating friend Jeffrey, and Methusela flying by in some lagenlook get-up and a cute pair of white low-risers with purple glitter wheels.

And I felt painfully frustrated.

I watched their bodies moving and I *knew how to move like that*. The muscle memory remained in my body, but my body just wouldn’t go. It was how I imagined it must be to lose one’s legs yet still remember how it feels to run — wanting to propel one’s self out of that chair and start pumping forward, but there are no legs to stand on. Just the phantom memory of muscles moving, feet springing away from the earth and landing again.

It was the first time in a long time that I felt physically incapable of doing something I wanted to do.

With a little practice on the carpet I was able to eventually get back on the skating floor and push myself pathetically around the rink, half a lap at a time before I had to sit and rest again. Every time I tried to push a foot out away from me, the way one would when skating, my leg parts said “uh-UH!” Instead of a fluid leg movement like tracing butterfly wings on the floor, I jerked forward, putting halting little bursts of power behind each foot.

“Oh *man*, and now they’re playing Rick James!” I cried out wistfully to absolutely no one, determined to be determined, and not lame. I bit my lip, resolved not to shed a tear over my shocking new limitations, but to keep it positive and fight my way back to 1981-ish skating condition instead.

Yes, Jeffrey and I did return to the rink, but our visits aren’t frequent enough for me to improve much. So in between, I’ve started going to the gym.

OH my GOD, it’s TRUE! Kim Brittingham is going to a salty-smelling, musclehead GYM and doing things on machines that need to be wiped down afterwards, a gymmy-gym gym!

And I can scarcely believe I’m saying this myself, but — I’m NOT HATING IT.

I’m not hating it for three very specific reasons.

1. It’s an ’80s theme gym that plays obscure, heavily synthesized music and teen angst movies. Can you say, “Kim’s Gym”?
2. I’m starting very slow and gentle, on snort-worthy amounts of weight and at speeds that induce merely a “calorie-burning” heart rate (not the beefier “cardio”). Kiss my grits if you don’t like it.
3. I have a definite PURPOSE. My goal is to SKATE AGAIN. To be able to carry my body around the rink multiple times without stopping, smoothly, gracefully, and with a modicum of style.

When Jeffrey jumps up excitedly from the bench and shouts like a seventh-grade girl, “I’m sorry, but I just *have* to skate to this!”, then darts out into the rink away from me, I want to be able to dart right out behind him. Because I always knew I’d be eternally fourteen in spirit — but with the foolishness of youth, I never believed it when they told me my body would stop keeping up.