

Slow Down, Breathe In, Hit Hard.

There is a moment of peace while driving during a storm, where the traffic is so backed up that you end up stopped underneath an overpass. I try to be that for people if I can. A brief recess from the storm and the rising flood. I cannot stop it. I cannot hold you here until it is over, and I cannot prevent the fact that you must keep driving. But for a moment, I like to remind people that there is something deeper than the noise, if you know how to hear it. I learned it from my mom. My mom shows me overpasses.

I'll tell a sports story, which strikes fear into the heart of anyone who reads a substantial amount of college entry essays. I feel you. Stay with me. When I played volleyball in elementary school I had real potential to be good at serving but I just wasn't getting it. I would toss too early and let it drop, or I wouldn't hit it hard enough. I would watch in frustration as the ball soared into the net and bounced back onto the floor, and my eyes would look over to my mom. She would lower her chin and eyes to the floor with intention, telling me:

Next time. For now, eyes up. It is the other team's turn.

One day I was already in a tizzy because my serves were worse than usual. They weren't even making it to the free throw line, my fingertips barely making contact. At the break I was so flustered that I hyperventilated and cried to my mother. *Listen.* She said, grabbing my hands to keep me from raking my fingernails down my soft cheeks. *Stop. Look—*She grabbed my wrists and held my hands in front of me.

You have power stored here. Use it. When you go up there, you'll slow down. You're so worked up you'll never be able to think straight. She wiped a tear off of my face and shushed me again. *Then you'll take a breath in.* She waited for me to breathe. *You bounce the ball three times. You toss. When it is just above your head—look at me—when it is just above your head, you hit. Hard. Do you hear me? You hit it hard.*

I heard her. I nodded. She shook my hands in front of my eyes again. *All of this anger and frustration, you send it to your hand and you hit it HARD.*

I went back out there and looked at her. She pushed her hands down and took a deep breath for me to copy. She mouthed, *Slow down, Breathe in, Hit hard.*

I got it over the net. We still lost the point because as soon as I got it over I turned to my mom, hands splayed in extra-worldly elation, but I got it over the net. As my eyes met hers, she showed her approval with a deep nod and a slight smile. We lost the point but my floodgates were opened. I had reached an overpass.

Through senior year of playing volleyball it was the same thing. I was by now excellent at serving and even the preferred choice by my teammates, but on the first serve of every match, I glanced at my mom and waited for the look. She didn't always mouth it, by now I knew the mantra. If I would miss one, I would hear her voice raise above the cheering parents. *Hit HARD, LJ.* On the last serve of my last game, I must have looked scared. Meeting my mother's eyes in the stands, she pushed her hands down and took a deep breath so I would copy her. She gives me the look. Though my mother was never this harsh, it is a look that says, *Do not mess this up. You are better than that.* I turned to the side standing on the line. *Slow down.* Heaved a breath. *Breathe in.* Tossed and swung. *Hit hard one more time.* An overpass, a win.

Now I'll share a story about school. This admittedly happened less often, I was more of a scholar than an athlete. My first year of college was bad enough that I went home every weekend. I went home so often that I knew exactly how many overpasses there were on I-26. Learned to wait for the rumble and small blip of muffled quiet when I drove under them. My mom was at home.

You should stay at school during some weekends.

You don't like having me home?

I do. But I want you to be able to go to things or hang out with people on the weekends.

I hate it there. I can't be there any longer.

Slow down. You haven't even been there a semester.

Everyone there hates me.

Breathe.

They say awful things about me. The classes move too fast. How am I supposed to—?

—Work for it. Make a schedule. You love schedules. She grabs the top of my head with her hand. *You have power stored here.* Then presses her hand to my chest. *And here. Use it, LJ. They will love you, too. Hit hard.*

Now a hypothetical. My mother is such a realist it pains me. When I ask a hypothetical, *What would you do if you were stuck in a shark cage and the door breaks?* My dad and sister come up with strategies. My mom says *Don't ever go in a shark cage.* Even when I ask her if she loves me she answers with a question of her own, *Have I ever done anything to make you think I don't?* I talked to her about a paper I was writing and she noted that the world would be much simpler if everyone just wrote a bullet point list about everything they wanted to say. *Why tell me the story of Jonah and the fish? Just tell me to obey God.* I tell her it's good for her to have to decode things. To know that there at least *can be* a deeper meaning. *That shouldn't be true. Everyone should just say what they mean.* I wonder if it is possible to be hopelessly optimistic and frustratingly realist at the same time. This conversation didn't yield much in the way of finding common ground, I'm afraid, but it did give me a reassuring insight into my mother: nothing she says is fabricated. There is no deeper layer because she renounces the need for one.

So when she tells me there is power stored in my hands, my head, my heart...

Now a few true stories. Rapid fire, so pay attention. My best friend from preschool until tenth grade ghosted me and I wallowed in my bed for weeks. My dad and my other friends told me to take it easy and do what I needed to to heal. My mom sent me to a Christian work camp, where I was forced to air it out. It helped. When my homecoming date told me he would rather be friends, I swore off dating. My mom told me I didn't even go on one date with the boy and to stop being dramatic. I did. Another student was upset when I got chosen for debate captain over him, I was about to give it to him. My mom said I *better not* hand over my title to

someone who whines like that. Just a few weeks ago my tires had low air and I called my dad crying, not knowing what to do. I called him because I wanted to be comforted, not set straight. When I hung up with him, five minutes later my mom called.

Dad said you were crying.

Yeah.

Why? It's tires.

I don't know how to fix this.

You go to the Autozone and ask for a tire gauge.

My wrist hurts, too. And I don't want to go to the doctor.

Dad and I will pay for it.

And it's the midterms, too. The midterms and the tires and the wrist and money and-

Slow down.

Sorry. Sorry.

Breathe.

Okay.

Are you at Autozone?

Yeah.

Buy a tire gauge.

Then?

You know what to do. All this frustration and overwhelmedness you're feeling, you channel it into your brain, and your hands, and you do the midterms and you fill the stupid tires. You hit it. Hard.

The Autozone that night was under a highway overpass. That is true. That writes itself. I didn't feel fulfilled that night. I didn't feel strong. I was ready for the highway above to crash down on me and leave me crushed like roadkill. But the cars rumbled above and it still rained hard and I couldn't stop it. My mom couldn't stop it. She couldn't hold me there, in the embrace of her voice, until the storm passed. She couldn't prevent the fact that I had to keep driving. But, for a moment. Just a moment. There was something underneath the noise. When it all crashes down at once and I cannot get the ball over the net, I think I know what to do. Slow down, Go under the overpass. Breathe in, listen to the silence. Hit hard. Then drive on.