

*From a high school teacher to her student.*

"This is so stressful," you tell me. You say it nearly every day. And I know that it is. You are standing on the edge of so many things. You feel so much pressure to move forward, but it is so easy to slip back.

"All my life, I've fucked up," you tell me. "My whole life. I'm just a fuck up." I tell you that I don't think so. You lament that because of what you shouldn't have done, you are still in high school, struggling to graduate at the age of twenty. I tell you that everyone has fucked up in their past, and remind you that, "we must not define ourselves by our worst actions." Nor can we accept others defining us by such. I tell you what I see in the person before me, "An intelligent, thoughtful, and wonderful young man." You back against the wall, looking the opposite direction down the empty hallway, unable to accept my truth.

You are a young black man, raised by your mother after a vengeful bullet left you fatherless at the age of eight, growing up in the same streets of the South Bronx where fires and hopes have blazed. But that's not all. Sometimes I wish you could hear yourself the way that I hear you. You are not just "another thug basketball player," as you once described yourself. You are a brilliant, creative, thoughtful, talented young man. You are an athlete, a musician, a poet, a thinker, and you are an activist. You are fighting for change, for yourself and for our society. You are my student, and you have taught me so much.

"That's not what she thinks," you say. "My moms thinks I'm a fuck up and I'm gonna fuck up again." At the same time that society expects you to

fail, it simply can't understand why you shouldn't succeed. It can't understand why it is so hard for you to go to school every day and be there on time, to get good grades, to do well on your SATs and to go to college. Obviously you just don't care. Obviously you are just fucking up. Why can't you just get it together?

"Nothing's ever good enough for my moms," you tell me. "I can never do anything that's good enough. I'll never be able to." You turn to look into my eyes. "It's hard to do anything positive when I never hear anything positive." You tell me that she introduces you as her son who should be in college, but keeps messing up and so is still in high school. "She doesn't even have a diploma herself," you say. "And I know that's part of it; that's part of why she wants me to get one so badly. But can't she just be proud of me? Can't she be proud of me that I stay out of trouble, that I'm a good ball player, that colleges already want me, even though I messed up? Can't she be proud of me that I'm trying to graduate?" Instead, she is telling you that you will no longer be welcome in her home if you don't bring home a diploma at the end of the semester. "His bags are already packed," she tells me over the phone when I call to let her know that you are on track to graduate. "He has got to get out of my house."

I wish sometimes that you could hear yourself the way that I hear you. Sometimes, the classroom walls melt away and your lanky teenage body ages to match the years of wisdom that you possess. Sometimes what you say makes everything clear. You, however, can't hear it because you are in the middle of it all and can only see a short life of failure ahead.

"I shouldn't be here," you tell me, slumping in a chair by my desk. "I should be on a campus somewhere. I shoulda been there already, two years ago." But you are on your way. You'll be there soon.

Almost a man. Almost a graduate. Almost gave up. Almost dead. Almost home. Almost lost. Almost locked up. Almost on top... but.

"My whole life," you tell me, "people said, 'he's a bright kid, but...'" "He's a smart boy, but..." There was always a but, you say. "Not anymore," I tell you. You nod your head, "we'll see."

I remind you of all that you have accomplished, in spite of everything. You are right; you shouldn't be here. But in our society, where more black men are in prison than in college, we don't expect to find you on a campus, but in a cell somewhere. "I've never been locked up," you tell me. "I've never been in trouble. I try to stay away from all that. I'm a good kid, remember? But..." But nothing. You are on your way, and you should be proud of what you have done to be where you are.

You see, you are not simply fighting a personal battle. You are not simply fighting for your high school diploma or for a scholarship to play ball in college and the chance to see beyond your neighborhood. You, my friend, are fighting for Nicolas and Neil, for Alicia and Ebony, for Sadeesha and Luis. You are fighting for your cousin, and you are up against a society that is fixed to see you fail.

You are not alone, though. Don't worry. They are fighting too. You may not even recognize that you are in this greater battle as your own personal war rages too loud, but with every paper you write, every hand that

you raise in class, and every college application you send out, you chip away at the expectations of failure holding you down.

“I hate to lose,” you yell out in an intensely focused moment of a close basketball game. As the clock ticks down and you miss a three-point shot, I think about what you told me after the last game. When you are on the court, you said, you can’t think about all of the mistakes you made, the points you gave up, or the shots that you’ve missed. You’d only end up doubting yourself. “The clock doesn’t have time for that,” you said. Instead, you must focus on the moment you are in, and on what you want to accomplish. You can use those mistakes to drive you, but you must not dwell on them. So too in the rest of your life. All of your “mistakes,” all of your past experiences, all of your successes – those are what make you who you are, and they are what drive you to where you want to be. And you have a team that is ready to support and assist.

I used to feel discouraged by your apathetic response to injustices that I expected would make you rage and want to “take on the world.” Your classmates are the same way, offering acknowledgement that “things are messed up,” but confident that “nothing will change.” I started to lose hope myself, and didn’t know how to inspire you. But knowing you and watching you work through this difficult final year of high school has helped me to understand that things will change. You have taught me that activism is not only marches and rallies, fliers and pickets. It is not always a grand act, or mass movement. Sometimes, activism is in the daily grind and it is in our mindset. You have reminded me that, sometimes, the most dramatic and

meaningful changes are caused by the slow, but persistent acts that erode the boulders of injustice.

- L. McBride