

Dealing with Goliath

Kelsey left the house a little early that brisk winter morning, so she slowed down her pace walking to the city bus stop. It didn't seem like it had been that long ago that her dad was walking with her. On mornings like this, he would carry her on his back covered by a blanket. He was not a huge fan of her walking alone then because he wanted her to "have the strength to make it through the day." They would load the bus together and share hot chocolate out of his old rusty thermos and talk about how they were going to conquer the day. Kelsey always promised him that she would get all of her work done, finish her lunch (so she could stay big and strong), and be on her best behavior. Things were much simpler then.

Kelsey had nearly an hour commute on the city bus to get to her school on the other side of town. She would normally use the bus's Wi-Fi to complete the homework she couldn't finish on the way home the day before. Ali Middle High was a very prestigious and diverse school that admitted students on the basis of merit and community involvement. She considered it a blessing to be there because it helped her to avoid the temptations of drug abuse and sex that were so prevalent in the high school closer to her home. It also gave her access to opportunities unheard of by those students, like the recruiter that would be joining them later in the day. She had never met a college recruiter before, and she wasn't sure what school this recruiter was representing. But, she hoped that she would catch their attention long enough to receive a full ride to attend.

When Kelsey got to the school, she went directly to the bathroom to freshen up. If her dad had taught her anything, it was that first impressions are important. She fixed her makeup and sectioned off her locks into a half up bun while leaving the rest to caress the top of her back. She tucked her crisp white shirt into her pleated green and navy-blue skirt. "Today will be a great

day,” she uttered to herself before glancing into the mirror one final time. She pulled her shoulders back to correct her posture and strutted towards her counselor’s office. “Good morning Mrs. Lewis.”

“Good Morning Kelsey. You look beautiful as always.” Mrs. Lewis said swiping her blonde hair behind her ear, even though it always fell back out to shape her face perfectly. “You know this is a really great opportunity. Not many students get a chance to speak in a small group setting with a recruiter from Cornell University.”

Kelsey’s neck muscles bulged as she swallowed a yawn. “Yes ma’am, and I am really grateful for this chance.”

“You’ve earned it Kelsey. Watching you grow over the past five years has been amazing. I know very well what you are capable of, but now it is time that you share those gifts with the rest of the nation and maybe someday even the world.”

“I’m not so sure about that Mrs. Lewis, but I will try to keep an open mind. I still need to get accepted into a college first.”



When Mr. Cole arrived at Ali that day, his appearance left Kelsey and her peers with their mouths open. They were not expecting an approximately 6’4” black male with tattoos peeping beneath the sleeves of his snug, white polo to be the recruiter from Cornell. Smiling at Mrs. Lewis, he reached out to shake each student’s hand. “Hello everyone. My name is Mr. Cole but you can call me Dré. Please take one of these packets and pass them around.”

Kelsey shifted her weight in her seat and wrote the date in her journal. As Dré began speaking, she twiddled her pen between her pointer finger and her thumb.

“Cornell University is an ivy league school located in Ithaca, NY.”

Oh cool. They have a great sports team. I wonder how far Ithaca is from here.

“We offer over 80 majors. In fact we awarded the world's first degree in journalism, the nation's first degree in veterinary medicine, and the first doctorates in electrical and industrial engineering. However, you don't have to worry about that when you first get there. We just want you to spend some time getting adjusted.”

Okay so majors and areas of study are the same thing. How am I supposed to pick just one from all of those options? Also who knew there were electrical doctors. They must be the people who fix the broken machines in hospitals.

“I would like to note,” Dre said while scratching at his chin, “that about 40% of our school's population is white and 7% is African American, which is quite different from your school.”

Different is not even the word. I would be like a dot. I already struggle to blend in here. Cornell would be even worse.

“Fear not, because I'm sure you and half of the other students will have the fact that you don't call New York your home in common. Most of our students are charged around \$56,000 for the out of state tuition before scholarships.”

\$56,000! He's joking right. Who can afford to pay that much for school? I mean I knew college was expensive, but I don't think all the bills in my house for a year add up to \$56,000. Did anyone else hear this? They don't seem fazed at all. Okay Kelsey you have to focus. Take a deep breath.

“Most of our first year students scored between 31 and 35 on the ACT and 1390-1550 on the SAT, but of course there are always exceptions to this range if you can prove your case.”

31-35! Prove my case! Where the hell am I? This is outrageous. I will never even be considered to get into this school. So I might as well forget about the full ride. I'm ready to go home now!

Leaning back to stretch, her notebook hit the floor. She did not realize how much went into this thing called college, and from the looks on her peers faces this was all familiar information to them. She stared at the blank pages of her notebook and realized that her mind had been racing so much that she would have to research all these points in her own time at a later date. *Why can't I can't keep up? Why don't I ever fit in? What will my dad say when I go home tonight?*

When the talk was over and the other students began to go to class, Mrs. Lewis pulled Kelsey to the side. “So what'd you think?”

“No.” Kelsey said barely giving Mrs. Lewis a chance to finish.

“I'm sorry?”

“I can't do this Mrs. Lewis. This kind of stuff isn't for people like me. Thank you for the opportunity, but I just...” Kelsey's voice trailed off as tears began to mistle her face for the NASCAR speedway. The girls who lived across the street from her had been telling her that the “white act” that she had been displaying would only get her so far, and this must have been that point. She had always dreamed of going to college and making her father proud. No one else in their family or their neighborhood had even gotten close to this point. When Mrs. Lewis reached in for a hug, Kelsey ran off towards the stairwell.



That evening, the knock at the door startled Kelsey and her dad. Anyone knocking on the door after dark, even though it was only a little after 7:00 PM, was usually up to no good in their neighborhood.

“I’ll get it, baby girl. Go ahead and take care of those dishes,” her dad said tenderly walking towards the door while clutching his pocket. As a former gang member, Mr. Turner’s name carried a lot of weight in the community. So, it didn’t take much for people to leave him alone or disappear before they had the chance. “Who is it?” he said deepening his voice.

“Mrs. Lewis.” Dishes began to clink loudly in the kitchen. Kelsey could not believe that her counselor came to her home after dark.

“We’re not interested.”

“I’m not selling anything, sir. This is about Kelsey.”

Mr. Turner took the chain and other locks off the door as he met eyes with the blonde woman with an hourglass shape in the doorway. From the looks of it, part of him seemed to forget that she was there to talk about his daughter.

“I truly apologize for my unannounced arrival. When I finally found the neighborhood, I struggled to figure out which unit was yours, and I couldn’t pass up this opportunity,” Mrs. Lewis said while peering into the dimly lit home. *You definitely could have passed it up tonight Mrs. Lewis. I will see you in the morning.*

“Come on in. Would you like some water?”

“No, thank you. I don’t want to take up much of your time tonight, but I was hoping we could talk about Kelsey’s future,” Mrs. Lewis said while taking a seat at a wooden, 6- chair

dining room table in the center of a room not far from the front door entrance. Her senses were stunned by the house's stained white walls and the scent of lemon Pine Sol and freshly washed clothes.

Kelsey walked towards the edge of the counter closest to the dining room. *Seriously, there is no reason for her to be here right now. Why can't she just talk about this with me tomorrow?*

"What about it?" Mr. Turner said while clearing his throat.

"Well, as I am sure you know, Kelsey is graduating in the top ten percent of her class and her test scores are outstanding. However, I was a bit unnerved when she told me today that she wasn't thinking about going to college."

Kelsey aggressively wiped crumbs into the trash. *I never said that. I just told her that it wasn't for me. I mean I'm still thinking about it.*

"Yea, she's going to try to get a job somewhere. Is that a problem?"

"It's not a problem, but I just think she should explore other options."

"No disrespect ma'am," Mr. Turner said as he sat upright in his chair causing it to squeak, "but, we can't afford that kind of thing and, to be quite honest, I don't think Kelsey is interested."

Dishes crashed abruptly on the kitchen floor, so Kelsey peeped her head around the corner to assure them both that she had things under control. *How could he not have noticed all the hints I have been dropping about getting out of this disaster of a neighborhood? I have school pamphlets, out of state job applications, and a crap ton of books about joining the branches of the armed forces on my bed should. How much clearer can I be?*

“Well, I appreciate your time sir. I hope this is not the last time we speak,” Mrs. Lewis said while grabbing her purse. “Now Mr. Turner, you know that the statistics show that girls...” She paused for a moment. “I just want to ensure that Kelsey has a great future.”

“I do too ma’am that’s why I sent her to that school in the first place. But at the end of the day, we both know that it’s Kelsey’s decision. There is nothing you or I can do about it besides support whatever that is.”

After ensuring that Mrs. Lewis made it safely to her car, Mr. Turner inhaled deeply and went into the kitchen. Police sirens wailed a few blocks over, a common background noise for their neighborhood that normally wouldn’t interrupt their night time routines. However, tonight was different. Mr. Turner’s eyes darted about the house as if it was unfamiliar to him. His baby girl was starting to turn into a young woman. Even his former gang member status couldn’t protect her from life itself. As he walked into the kitchen, his muscles tensed up causing his chest to bulge. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words seemed to be caught in the depths of his throat. So instead, he focused his attention on the sink and its emptiness.

Kelsey moved towards her father and placed her forehead against his firm chest. Sniffing, she looked up at him. *I want him to understand, but where do I even begin. We used to talk about everything before I got to high school, but now the conversations barely touch the surface of what I’m thinking. We’ve come so far, and he’s doing his best.*

The sirens ceased and the water dripped from the faucet in the sink. Mr. Turner gently kissed Kelsey’s forehead and tousled her hair. He knew that there was more to be said, but he also understood that now was not the time.



An hour or so had passed before Mr. Turner had collected his thoughts enough to go up to Kelsey's room to check on her. "Baby girl, are you still up?" Mr. Turner said while knocking on her door.

"Yes sir." Kelsey closed her book and adjusted the pillows behind her back. *This can't be good. I have to try to keep it together.*

"Well baby girl," Mr. Turner said while plopping down onto the edge of Kelsey's bed, "I think we should talk about what happened earlier." The room, with books overflowing from every direction, was quieter than her school's library during the ACT.

"Well dad, I'm not sure what to say."

"Just talk to me Kels. You used to talk to me about everything, but now I feel like I barely even know you. Wassup?"

Kelsey began to explain to her dad what happened earlier with Mr. Cole. When she finished, she buried her head in her hands and sniffled as if trying not to cry again. "I failed dad, and I can't fix it."

"Watch that 'f-word' now." Mr. Turner said sarcastically while gently lifting Kelsey's head. "Turners don't fail...we overcome. And, whatever happened today is just another small obstacle that you will overcome. Don't get me wrong, I don't understand all of this college stuff because I never got that chance, but you baby girl, you got it."

Was he listening when I said \$56,000? "But daddy, we don't have the money. No offense, but the fridge is looking a little empty and the lights just got turned back on." Kelsey's voice cracked.

“I know. I know. But that’s for me to worry about.” Mr. Turner rotated his body and extended his torso, so that he could be closer to his daughter while he looked her directly in the eyes. “You just keep your head in those books, so that you can put food in the fridge and keep the lights on for me someday.” A smile extended across his face.

“Daddy, can I ask you something?” Kelsey said moving towards the edge of her bed as if noticing her father’s strain.

“Go ahead and shoot.”

“Will you be okay if I leave?”

Mr. Turner’s eyes glistened and his stomach rose slowly beneath his shirt. Seeing the pain in his daughter’s eyes, he answered, “Baby girl, as long as you are safe and happy. I will be okay. Alright, now get back to work. We have to gotta make sure you stay at the top.”

“Love you daddy,” Kelsey said while picking up her books again.

“Mhm, sure.” Mr. Turner grinned while walking out of her room leaving the door slightly cracked behind him.

I’m not sure if he was telling the truth, but he’s a tough guy. Even if I leave, he has his boys and the other people in the community. He will be fine, right? We will both fine, right? Like he said Turner’s don’t fail. And, I’m definitely a Turner because I look just like him.



Kelsey woke up feeling refreshed the next morning. The conversation with her dad the night before had put everything into perspective. She still didn’t comprehend the root of her fears about going to college, but she was okay with that. She was just glad to have her number one fan supporting her every step of the way. “Dad,” Kelsey said while sweeping her locks behind her

ears.

“Yes, baby girl.”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For always being there for me even when I don’t let you.”

Mr. Turner snickered and patted the cushion next to him on the couch. “Baby girl,” he inhaled, “I will be here for you as long as there is breath in my body. Don’t ever forget that.” He leaned in to kiss her cheek. “Now hurry before you’re late for school and don’t forget your hot chocolate.”

Kelsey grabbed a mug off of the counter and walked out the door into the cool air. She looked at her neighborhood on the way to the bus stop. The vandalism in the alleys and the boarded-up windows on the shops that she passed brought her a subtle joy. She even waved to the cop in the car parked across the street from the bus stop. For the first time in her life, she recognized the issues surrounding her and realized that some day she could be a part of the change. The bus hissed down the road towards her. Gripping her mug, Kelsey stepped boldly aboard. She pulled out her laptop, connected to the Wi-Fi, and went to the Cornell University webpage.