

Leslie Grigsby

Hoodville

As a student at King Drew Magnet Medical Program of Math and Science in Compton, California, I had a pretty routine schedule when it came to my journey to school each day. I would awake at six to my alarm clock, be dressed by seven, and meet my cousin, Lexi, at the bus stop at Alameda Boulevard and Myrrh at 7:15. Then from there, we would make our way to the Blue Line train station. The train came every fifteen minutes, so if either one of us were a little late, there was no need to stress. For some reason on this particular day, nothing felt as it should. I woke up half an hour late and my cousin was at least forty minutes late to the bus stop. I knew we would be in trouble, but I did not foresee the trouble that day had in store for us.

My cousin, Lexi, was three months older than me. She was the closest thing I had to a sister at the time. We walked to school together, went to church together, were in girl scouts together, basically were inseparable. Lexi was just like me. When people met us they automatically assumed that we were somehow related. Lexi was 5'10, caramel skin, hazel eyes, and carried herself well. Everybody would tell her how she was gorgeous and she never disputed it. She was thin with long hair and dimples deep enough to bury gold in. When she walked into a room, her personality alone would claim the center of attention; she was bubbly, charismatic, funny, and very, very, very stubborn. She was always one for cracking jokes and I was always one to laugh. My cousin always looked out for me, always. I looked up to her and waited for the day I could show her how much she meant to me.

It was the year 2002; we were in our second month of high school, ninth grade. On this fateful day, it was fifteen minutes into our first period class before Lexi and I finally met up. We were rushing to the Blue Line. It came in the next fifteen minutes and in the next twelve minutes

we would be at school. When we got off the Blue Line, we looked at the clock and saw that it was 8:40. We knew that our tardiness was to the point that we would most definitely have detention and be sent to the dean. So, coming to that realization, we slowed our pace. It's a good one and a half mile hike to school. The journey was simple, get out of the Blue Line station parking lot, which we cleverly named "Hoodville," and make it to the Starbucks on the corner of 120th and Wilmington, and we were home free. The golden eagle shines so bright for two fifteen year old girls that hold their breath every time they walk through "Hoodville." "Hoodville" is a very dark section of the parking lot that kids who take the Blue Line have no choice but to pass through on the way to school. My cousin and I were no exception.

We dreaded walking through "Hoodville," there were shadows, drugs, drunken men at eight in the morning. Most frightening of all, were the young men who didn't go to school and lived what they perceived as the gangster life. They robbed, raped, and murdered people, and they didn't care who knew about it. The police wouldn't dare go into "Hoodville." This was the criminals' territory, and they made sure you knew it just about every time you walked through there. When we walked through "Hoodville," we would hold our breaths, just hoping and praying we wouldn't get noticed, until we reached the bright sunshine again. Usually we would arrive at our stop around the same time as other students, so we would all walk in a big group. However, on this day we arrived so late there were no big groups. It felt as though the only people in the world were my cousin, "Hoodville," and me.

So, as we stepped off the Blue Line, Lexi was on her brand new Sidekick 2 cell phone texting. We approached the shadows of "Hoodville." I turned to Lexi and said "Lex put your

phone away.” It was just like Lexi to be stubborn and hardheaded. She mumbled, “Hmmm yeah, yeah, okay.” The weather changed to a cold draft, I held my breath, and we entered “Hoodville.” An immediate nervousness came over me, my hands started sweating and my stomach started to cramp up. I could feel the stares as we passed a group of thugs. I turned my head to peer at them and caught the eye of one. It was as if he sensed my fear and enjoyed it for breakfast. I glanced back over my shoulder and then turned to Lexi again with a tone of voice that resembled my mother and said, “Put your damn phone away,” and she flashed a look of obedience back. She pulled out her carrying case and proceeded to put her phone up. As I was focused on her, my progress was stopped as a man crept up on me with a nine millimeter in my face. All breath in me stopped. He said with a raspy low-pitched voice, “Hey shawty, how you doing today?” I didn’t respond. He then turned to glance at Lexi, who still had her Sidekick 2 and carrying ease in hand, and said “What about you, how are you doing today?” Lexi didn’t respond. He then turned back to me, gun still in hand and said “Kind of late for school aint ya?” He still got no response. As the breath in me left, so did my speech. I was overcome with a crippling fear. I had never seen a gun that close before nor did I ever want to. I felt as though at any moment my body was going to give out and the fear I felt alone would kill me. His eyes completely focused on me, he said, “Who is she to you?” I didn’t respond. He asked Lexi the same question and she responded by saying, “She’s my cousin.” He then told me to tell my cousin to give him her Sidekick 2. I held my left hand out, though I could barely keep it steady and reached for her phone. She resisted giving me the phone. As I felt a tear stream down my face, I said in the lowest whisper imaginable, “Lex, can I have your phone please?” She released her grip on the phone and gave it to me. I then gave him the phone; he brought the gun down from my face and asked me if I had any money. I emptied out my pockets and gave him my seven dollars

lunch money.

I don't know why I expected him to say thank you, but he didn't, and, just as he appeared, he vanished back into the shadows. We immediately ran to Starbucks and as the warmth of the sun came over my face, I started to cry. In that moment, as I turned to look at Lexi, all I could see in her face were the tears I was also crying. In Lexi, I always saw the strength I thought I never had, but that day I saw what made us most alike. It was the vulnerability and weakness that neither one of us wanted to succumb to.