

██████████
 "Theo Cider"
 ██████████

You wake up just before the alarm would have gone off and you know you don't have enough time to fall back asleep. It's six fifty-three. You can hear Mom cooking food downstairs, and in a moment you can smell it, too. Bacon, maybe eggs. ← something more?

You get out of bed and dress quickly, hoping to get to the breakfast table before your little brother and sister can eat all of the bacon. On the way downstairs, you see some kind of bug on the wall and you kill it with an old pair of sneakers that never seems to make it out of the hallway. describe

You tell your mom that you killed the bug and she seems mildly impressed.

"What kind of bug was it, baby?"

You don't know. It was gross...

"Hope it wasn't a cockroach," she mutters. "Cause we can't afford to get rid of 'em and we sure can't afford to feed 'em."

You chuckle and immediately start eating your bacon and eggs when she serves up a plate. ~~Me~~

"Slow down," Mom says with mock concern. "You're gonna go ahead and choke yourself to death."

You ask where Abby and Ty are.

"They've both got the flu that you had last week," Mom ^{says} answers. "They're gonna stay home today and I've got Grandma coming over to watch them while I'm at work."

You mumble an okay and continue eating your eggs. When ^{better transition} seven-thirty rolls around, you grab your backpack and wave goodbye before walking to school.

Jeremy and Lisa catch up to you before you ^{can} ~~even~~ make it to the end of your block.

Jeremy punches you on the arm. "Hey, don't wait for us or nothin'."

I knew you'd catch up, you say.

"What you walking so fast for, anyways," Lisa says. You look at her and notice she's wearing a new pair of pants. "Yeah, my ma gave me a couple bucks cause she won at the casino this week. She won big." *she holds out her arms.*

"Good," Jeremy says, snorting. "Now she can pay her rent on time this month." *Nah*

"Boy shut up," Lisa ^{chest} ~~orders~~. She reaches over your ~~body~~ and pinches Jeremy on the arm.

"Ow, goddammit." You watch two white crests made by Lisa's nails materialize on Jeremy's dark skin. "We waitin' for Latoya today?"

You shake your head and tell them the story your mom told you.

"Ah shit," Jeremy says. "She'll be back by the end of the week, for sure. Her daddy always does that and she always bounces back."

Maybe take Latoya out altogether?

"We should stop by after school and say hi," Lisa offers.

Yeah we'll do that, you say.

The three of you stop at the next corner for traffic. The tall red-bricked Hoover Middle School stands on the other side of the street.

No one stops at stop signs.

"Hey look," Lisa says, pointing at the boy walking across the playground.

"There's Theo Cider, all right. Look at how funny he walks."

You study your classmate's actions, his left foot picking up slower than his right as if it's just a little longer. Or maybe his right foot hurts, you muse. *More detail*

"He's always had that weird walk," Lisa says. "I went to his grade school and he walked like that. Was just as ugly, too."

"Think I can hit him with a rock from here?" Jeremy asks, picking up a small stone from the gutter of the road.

"No way," Lisa ^{says} ~~states~~. "You throw like my mamma." ^{No.}

"Yeah but I ain't as poor as your mamma," Jeremy retorts. You laugh at the comment and hold out your arm before Lisa can reach over and pinch him again.

"You couldn't ^{mess} ~~fuck~~ him up worse than he already is, anyways," Lisa says. "Theo Cider's about as dumb as he looks."
 → does this work?

"Why he look like that, anyway?" Jeremy asks.

A blue sedan speeds by and you announce it's safe to cross the street.

"His mamma probably drank when he was still in her," Lisa says. "That's what my brother thinks, anyways."

"His mamma black?" Jeremy asks.

"Either his mamma or his daddy," Lisa answers. "He looks like he's got a little bit of every race in him."

"Glad I ain't in any of his classes."

"You are," Lisa says, jamming a thumb in your direction.

Jeremy laughs. "Man, that's right. And today's group day, too. You gonna get paired up with him again!"

You tell him to shut up. He doesn't know what he's talking about.

“Yes I do,” Jeremy states. “You always get paired up with him because your last name starts with a ‘C,’ and everyone knows ^{teachers} ~~they~~ just go down the attendance list to pick partners.” *↳ They're smart for kids*

You tell him to shut up again and affirm your decree with a punch to his arm.

“Ow, dammit,” he says, clutching his arm. “That’s right where Lisa pinched me.”

You tell him you know and the three of you walk in through the large double-doors at the front of the school.

↳ did they cross the street?

“Let’s meet at these doors after school,” Lisa says. “Then we can visit Latoya on the walk home.”

“Word,” Jeremy says jokingly.

You give them a goodbye wave when you reach the stairs and head up to the second floor for your first class. *↳ More detail about the school.*

At two o’clock, your history teacher splits the class up into two-person teams to work on a project. *↳ what project?* Theo Cider is chosen as your partner just like he always is.

Theo Cider sits in the chair next to you. As always, your eyes are drawn to the features of his face. His left eye sits just a little lower than his left, and his forehead protrudes out like a large bubble. His heavy lips never seem to close and the left side of his head is flatter than the right. When he stares at you, you want to both look away and continue staring. When you stare into his face and examine his dirty olive skin, you wonder if the rumors about him never bathing are true and you can’t help but wonder what it’s like to live in his house.

You say hello and move your eyes to the piece of paper at your desk outlining the project instructions.

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“How are you?” Theo Cider says, his voice lisping at the space between “how” and “are.”

Sick of projects, you say.

“I wish it was summer,” Theo Cider says. “I hate coming to school when it’s so nice outside.”

You want to tell him to stop talking because you hate his lisp and his weird accenting of syllables. Instead you tell him that you agree completely and read aloud the instructions.

“Sounds hard,” he says. “I don’t remember reading about Malcolm X at all.”

You tell him that it was in chapter nine.

“What did he do?” Theo Cider asked. “He sounds familiar.”

You have no idea how to answer the question, because you’re not entirely sure yourself. You tell him you think he was kind of like Martin Luther King, but more aggressive.

“Kind of like Magneto and Professor X,” Theo Cider says in a questioning tone.

“You know, from the X-Men and ~~stuff~~?”

You tell him you’ve never picked up the comic. ← which is a lie ...

“Well,” he says, “Magneto is kind of like the bad guy who doesn’t think people can get along, so he always hurts them. Professor X thinks people can get along, so he tries to help them.”

You nod and tell him you understand.

“I love reading comics,” he says. “I read a lot of them.”

Where do you get the money for that, you ask.

"You can rent them from the library," Theo Cider says. "As many as you want. ^{So long} as you bring them back, ^{who?}

You noticed a few of the other students staring at you, and you try to wear your most annoyed face when you tell Theo Cider that the two of you should get the project over with already.

"Okay," he says. The two of you run through the textbook and answer the appropriate questions. When you finish, you notice that you still have four minutes of class left.

"You read any comics?" Theo Cider asks.

You tell him no. You definitely don't have two boxes in your room.

"You should come over sometime and we could go to the comic store together,"

he offers. You immediately imagine walking to his house, all of the kids in school learning about it by the next school day and ridiculing you even more than they ridicule Theo Cider.

You tell him you already spent your month's allowance.

"Well, I could give you a couple of mine that I don't read."

Thanks, you say, but it's not a big deal.

The bell rings and you pack your things quickly so Theo Cider can't follow. You meet Jeremy and Lisa at the doors and the three of you visit Latoya. When you finally get home, Mom is already back from work and Grandma is gone.

"How's Latoya doing?" she asks.

You tell her about the welt around Latoya's left eye.

"Poor girl. Her dad already gone?"

Yes, you say.

He has one hand, the other is fucked-up, and you can't stop staring. 6

I thought he couldn't afford it!

he has trouble w/ just one hand

what questions?

“Probably won’t be back this week, then. Abby and Ty are eating soup, so I’ll make you some macaroni for dinner.”

Sounds good, you say.

“How was school?”

You tell her about your group project with Theo Cider.

“Were you nice to him?” she asks.

Yeah, ~~you answer.~~ You shrug...

“Poor boy, getting picked on so much.”

You ask Mom what’s wrong with him.

“Don’t know,” she answered, “He was just born different, that’s all. It certainly wasn’t his fault in any way, and it’s a shame that none of the kids at school can see that.”

} F.A.S.

You ask her what she means.

“Oh, I know how much he gets picked on, because there were kids like that when I was growing up, too. He’s an outsider. ~~Nobody can see past his appearance and recognize him as someone just like them.~~ The other kids pick on him and humiliate him because he’s different than them, and they think that’s wrong.” ← Awk.

You tell her he offered to give you some comics.

“You two should get together sometime.”

I don’t know, you say.

She nods and cooks up a hot bowl of macaroni. She doesn’t judge you...

The next day, you meet up with Jeremy and Lisa at the end of your block.

“How was the group project?” Lisa asks in a snide voice.

Fine, you say.

"You two didn't kiss or anything, did you?" Lisa asks.

You feign a laugh and say no. *... ?*

He
"Theo Cider didn't try to eat you or no shit like that?" Jeremy asks.

Nope, you say.

"Did he touch you?" Lisa asks. "I hear if he touches you, your face starts getting all disfigured like his."

That's stupid, you say. Even as you say it, you can see Theo Cider standing at the corner of the next block, just outside the school's front doors. He's holding something in his hands. When he sees the three of you down the block, he begins *limping* walking towards you. You feel your heart begins to speed up.

"Hey, there he is," Lisa says, pointing. She laughs. "Look at him walk."

"Why he coming this way?" Jeremy asks. "I don't want him near me."

~~Neither do I, you say.~~ You can feel your heart quickly beating in your chest when you notice the comic books in Theo Cider's hands. You silently curse yourself for saying anything to him at all during the group project. *... ? Elaborate.*

When Theo Cider reaches you, he gives you a hearty hello. "I brought some comics I don't read anymore," he says. "I thought you'd like them."

"Don't nobody want your shit," Jeremy says. "Get the hell out of here."

Theo Cider continues to stare at you, and you want to look away from his face but you can't. You want his face to look normal. You're mad at him for looking the way he does, not even caring that he's embarrassing you. "You can just keep them," he says *to you.* *ignoring Jeremy.*

You look at Jeremy and Lisa. They're both staring at you, confused. You tell him you don't want his comics.

"You hear that?" Lisa says, pushing Theo Cider's shoulder. "We don't want your shit, so get the hell outta here already."

Theo Cider pushes her back. "I wasn't talking to you," he says shakily. Already you can see tears welling in his slanted eyes.

"Don't nobody push a girl," Jeremy says ~~angrily~~. He grabs Theo Cider's comics and throws them into the street.

"You didn't have to do that!" Theo Cider yells, pushing Jeremy with both hands. *His deformed hand ...*
Jeremy trips on the sidewalk and falls backward onto the rusty-looking lawn. *More detail.*

"~~Oh~~ Hell no," Jeremy says, getting up and grabbing Theo Cider. "I don't care how messed up you are. Don't nobody push us, especially not some piece of shit like you!" *by his dirty brown shirt.*

You watch the two struggle for a few moments until Jeremy secures Theo Cider's arms. "Punch him!" he says to you, struggling to keep control. "Punch him while I got him!"

You waver a moment, staring into Theo Cider's slanted, teary eyes. You realize just how mad you are at him for being different and step forward and even though you really don't think you want to do it, you punch Theo Cider in the ~~stomach~~ *chest* and Jeremy drops him. *Keep*

Theo Cider falls to the ground and when he looks up at you questioningly, you see the bruise swelling on his cheek and his thick lips and slanted eyes and bulging forehead and misshapen head and you suddenly hate him even more. You get down and you punch

him again and you watch his face get even uglier and you punch him again because now you're even madder at him for being different as though he could control it and you punch him again and you hope that somehow you can beat the ugliness out of him and make him like you but each punch swells up his face and you can't stop now because he keeps getting uglier and uglier with every punch and you're crying now because you feel so much pity for him and you hate yourself for ever having punched him in the first place but you still can't stop even though your conscience is screaming for you to stop and your heart is heavy and you can barely see Theo Cider anymore because there are hot tears in your eyes and you can hearing him crying and pleading and screaming but you still refuse stop until Jeremy and Lisa pull you away.

change.
Let
others
punch
him
while
you
watch.

They hurry you towards school and you can hear Theo Cider screaming and crying interchangeably on the sidewalk. You cover your ears and refuse to look back until you're safely in the school building. You spend the day guilty and anxious, expecting to be pulled out of class at any minute. It never happens. When you get home, your mother acts as though everything is normal. You feel guilty, and the feeling refuses to leave.

Theo Cider doesn't show up for school the rest of the week. When he returns next Monday, you can see the outlines of his bruises but no one ever mentions ^{the incident} ~~the beating~~ again. When you try to approach him, he immediately turns away and you wonder what he sees on your face that scares him. ^{You wonder if...} ~~Then you realize that~~ he sees the same ugliness you see when you look at him, and you remember that feeling for the rest of your life.

Needs something
better!!

THE END