

Theo Cider

By Ken Brosky

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, and something else cooking inside the microwave. She's using the skillet for the bacon so the grease doesn't escape, and the smell of sizzling smoked pork strips is enough to hollow out your stomach.

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 white-and-blue sneaker that never seems to make it out of the hallway.

You tell your mom that you killed the bug.

“What kind of bug was it, baby?”

You don't know. But it made a crunchy sound, when you squished it, like teeth on toast.

“Hope it wasn't a cockroach. We can't afford to get rid of 'em and we sure can't afford to feed 'em.”

You grab a portion of the eggs that are sitting on a place in the middle of the table, on top of a stack Sunday newspaper coupons. You shove into your mouth as much as one fork will allow, anxious to have seconds before your brother Ty can get downstairs. Like a starving pride, it's every lion for itself.

“Slow down,” Mom says from the sink. “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. They’re staying home today and I’ve got Grandma coming over to watch them while I’m at work, so be quiet upstairs.”

You finish off your eggs before returning to your room, shuffling through the clothes on the floor to find something half-decent to wear in the hot weather: a pair of old black jeans and a faded Brewers shirt you wore last Friday that missed the wash cycle, nothing nice enough to trigger the memories of any classmates. It’s a constant threat in a part of town where quality doesn’t count so much as *quantity*. Everyone in school knows about Jimmy and James, the fourth graders who switched shirts every other day because they couldn’t afford a full wardrobe. For everyone else, it’s a matter of deception, re-wearing shirts over the weekend, turning shirt inside out, anything to maintain the appearance that they have at least seven pairs of clothes.

When seven-thirty rolls around, you grab your backpack and let your mom kiss you goodbye before stepping outside. Jeremy and Lisa catch up to you before you can make it to the end of your block. Jeremy punches you on the arm. “You gonna wait up for us at all, or what?”

I knew you’d catch up, you say.

“What’re you walking so fast for, anyways,” Lisa says. You look at her and notice she’s wearing a new pair of jeans, the kind they wear on soda pop commercials. She notices, too. “My ma gave me a couple bucks cause she won at the casino on Friday. She won big.” She holds out her arms wide, as if she’s diagramming how much she loves someone. A lot of the parents in the neighborhood, your Mom included, always go to the Pottawatomie casino twice a month. Although Lisa disagrees, you and Jeremy have

decided it must have something to do with “cycles” you hear women talking about so much.

“Good,” Jeremy says. “Now she can stop asking my ma for rent money.”

“Shut up.” Lisa reaches over your chest and pinches Jeremy on the arm.

“Ow, goddammit.” When Jeremy begins rubbing his dark skin, two white crescents begin to materialize. “We waiting for Latoya today?”

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

“Don’t worry,” Jeremy says. “She’ll be back by the end of the week, for sure. She’s tough.”

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 like a run-down castle, complete with its own surrounding population of loyal serfs. Beyond the moat of twelve-foot-high chain link fencing, a long, rusted-brown Oldsmobile speeds through the intersection without slowing. No one stops at stop signs in this neighborhood—the only cars police stop are the pink Cadillac’s. The pink Cadillac’s look out of place no matter what house they’re parked in front of in this neighborhood.

“Hey look,” Lisa says, pointing at the boy walking across the playground from the opposite end of the block. “There’s Theo Cider, all right. Look at how funny he walks.”

You study your classmate’s actions: His smaller left foot clamps down on the concrete harder than his right foot, which is just a little longer. He’s clutching his left hand, which consists of a thumb and a finger attached to a soft, round palm of flesh. You can’t see his face from so far away, but you remember how it looks funny, too, with the wide eyes and flattened nose.

“He’s always had that weird walk,” Lisa says. “I went to his grade school and he walked like that. 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. “You couldn’t even tag out James with a kickball last week.”

“Yeah but I can hit you with my goddamn fist,” Jeremy says, tossing the rock in the gutter. You laugh at the comment and hold out your arm before Lisa can reach over and pinch him again.

A blue sedan speeds through the stop sign and you announce it’s finally safe to cross the street.

“You couldn’t mess him up worse than he already is, anyways,” Lisa says. “Theo Cider’s about as dumb as he looks.”

Jeremy hops onto the sidewalk in front of Hoover, waiting for you and Lisa to catch up. “Why’s he look like that, anyway?”

“His mom probably did drugs when he was a baby,” Lisa says. “That’s what my brother thinks.”

“She black?” Jeremy asks.

Lisa shrugs. “One of his parents, maybe. He looks like he’s got a little bit of everything in him.”

“Glad I ain’t in any of his classes.”

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

Jeremy laughs. “That’s right. And today’s group day, too. You’re gonna get paired up with him again!”

You tell him to shut up—he doesn’t know for sure.

“Yes I do,” Jeremy states. “You always get paired up with him because your last name starts with a ‘C,’ and everyone knows teachers just go down the attendance list to pick partners. Just like they use those special textbooks because they don’t know shit.”

You tell him to shut up again and punch his arm, aiming for the two fading white crests of damaged skin.

“Ow, goddammit,” he says, clutching his soft shoulder flesh. “That’s right where Lisa pinched me.”

You walk in through the large double-doors at the front of the school, under a banner that reads “Drug-Free School Zone.” You successfully pass the metal detector without setting it off, keeping your eyes off the large security guard and slowing down only slowly enough for Lisa and Jeremy to catch up if they don’t get busted with anything in their backpacks. The south staircase smells like cafeteria food and dried vomit, probably something from one of the younger kids in the Free Breakfast program.

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

You give them a goodbye wave and head upstairs to the second floor, hurrying past the two bathrooms right outside room 200 because you know the older kids will be in there, stopping at your locker next to room 221 with the intention of putting your bag lunch inside but opting against it when you see the cockroach scurry back into the small hole in the corner. For the rest of the day you carefully avoid bumping into anyone with

the delicate contents of your backpack, hoping no teacher smells the cookies or cold grilled cheese. Food isn't allowed in the classrooms because it attracts more bugs. The alternative is Hot Lunch, which costs more than a dollar a day unless a student's family is poor enough to qualify for a free lunch, which yours is not. Barely.

At two o'clock, your history teacher splits the class up into two-person teams to work on a project. Theo Cider is chosen as your partner, just like he always is. He moves to sit 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 right, 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 his eyes are somewhere, you can't help but safely stare even though part of you wants to look away. 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.

"Hi," he says after tucking his backpack safely under his seat with one good hand.

You say hello and move your eyes to the piece of paper at your desk outlining the project instructions, letting your eyes safely rest on the smooth white space between words. Anything to keep from looking up and finding something new about Theo Cider to be disgusted by.

"How are you?" Theo Cider says, his voice lazily drifting between each word into a monotonous, low-pitched slur, the way you imagine a cow might talk while chewing cud.

You mumble something about how sick you are of projects.

“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 voice and his weird droning of syllables. Instead you tell him that you agree completely and read aloud the instructions. It’s supposed to be a year-end summary of the entire textbook, but your teacher has decided to eliminate a handful of the objectives on the sheet so everyone can finish it on time. She makes a joke about not leaving any child behind, but you don’t get it.

“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 the opposite of Martin Luther King. He promoted a less peaceful approach to the Civil Rights Movement.

“Kind of like Magneto and Professor X,” Theo Cider says. “You know, from the X-Men?”

You tell him you’ve never picked up the comic, which of course is a lie. No one in the neighborhood is unfamiliar with the movies or the comics. When the first movie came out, you and Latoya and Jeremy all stole a pair of Wolverine claws from the Wal-Mart on 27th Street. VHS copies of both movies float from house to house like an unwanted family member who somehow seems related in some way to everyone on the block.

“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 absently.

“I love reading comics,” he says. “I try and read at least a few a week.” He opens his mouth to say more, then quickly reconsiders when he sees you looking at him. Staring.

You force your eyes away from his mangled left eyebrow long enough to ask him where he gets his money.

“You can rent them from the library. As many as you want, so long as you bring them back. Or you can go to the comic store and just read a few, if the nice guy is working.”

You notice 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, mostly by skimming through the last few chapters. When you finish, you notice you still have four minutes of time left and so quickly bury yourself in an old chapter to draw out the answer to the first question.

“You read any comics?” Theo Cider asks.

No. You definitely don’t have two boxes under your bed in your room, filled mostly with beaten-up paperbacks collected from the local comic store’s ten-for-a-dollar

bin. You definitely don't own the entire X-Cutioner's Song series that spanned X-Factor, Uncanny X-Men, X-Men, X-Force and Cable.

"You should come over sometime and we could go to the comic store together." You immediately imagine walking to Theo Cider's house, all of the kids in school learning about it by the next school day and ridiculing you even more than they ridicule him.

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

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

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

The teacher settles down the class and has everyone turn to the last page of the Civil Rights chapter. While she does this, her eyes scan the room for an unlucky student. You spot Salvadore talking before she does, and try to reach the closest leg of his chair with your toes to get his attention. He doesn't feel the gentle nudge and continues talking until the teacher calls on him to read the conclusion section that conveniently wraps up ten years of struggle into five digestible paragraphs.

Salvadore can't read. You know this, and so does everyone else in class. No one makes fun of him because no one really knows how to read all that well. And no one corrects him because no one is confident enough in their reading abilities to do it.

Except Theo Cider. When Salvadore struggles with "Birmingham," pronouncing it "B ... B-ire-min ... sha ..." Theo Cider corrects him.

"Birmingham."

When Salvadore can't get through "circumstances" on his third try, Theo Cider corrects him.

"Circumstances."

You see the look on Salvadore's face when the teacher quietly asks Theo Cider to let Salvadore do it himself.

The bell rings and you pack your things quickly so Theo Cider can't follow. He struggles with getting his left hand around his backpack strap, giving you enough time to disappear into the hallway crowd. You meet Jeremy and Lisa at the front doors and the three of you decide not to visit Latoya when you see the pink Cadillac parked on her block. 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 pink Cadillac.

"You stay away from them," she says. Her voice is a little shaky. "Don't you ever go near any of them. And you run if you see them."

I will, you say.

"Abby and Ty are eating soup, so I'll make you some macaroni for dinner. How was school?"

You tell her about your group project with Theo Cider and the gun drill during recess. In your neighborhood, there are fire drills and gun drills. Fire drills teach you how to run, and gun drills teach you how to make yourself small.

"Were you nice to him?" she asks.

You shrug.

“Poor boy probably gets picked on a lot.”

You ask Mom what’s wrong with him.

“Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, probably.” She frowns when you give her a confused look. “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.”

You ask her what she means.

“Oh, there were kids like that when I was growing up, too. He’s an outsider. The other kids pick on him and humiliate him because he’s different than them, and they think that’s wrong.”

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 push the issue further, and you quietly thank her for the reprieve. Maybe she does understand what hanging out with him would mean.

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

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

Fine, you say.

Lisa pokes you in your ribs. “You’re not going out with him now, are you?”

You feign a laugh and say no.

“He didn’t try to eat you or any 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 spot 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 toward you, handling his disfigured leg with a master’s ease. You feel your heart begin to speed up.

“Hey, there he is,” Lisa says, pointing. She laughs. “Look at him walk.” She laughs harder.

“Why’s he coming this way?” Jeremy asks. “I don’t want him near me.”

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. You should have been meaner, to keep him at bay. Now, your status within the circle of friends you’ve built since the beginning of elementary school is in suddenly in danger.

When Theo Cider reaches you, he gives you a hearty hello. “I brought some comics I don’t read anymore,” he says. “You can borrow 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, for not being able to see how embarrassing he is. You’re mad at him for not being accepted.

“You can just keep them,” he says, ignoring Jeremy.

You look at Jeremy and Lisa. They're both staring at you, expecting only one answer. 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."

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 push a girl," Jeremy says. He grabs Theo Cider's comics and throws them toward the street. Their covers unfold like wings, scattering along the gutter and dirt-encrusted boulevard like a company of pigeons.

"You didn't have to do that!" Theo Cider yells, pushing Jeremy with both hands. Jeremy trips on the cracked sidewalk and falls backward onto Hank McGruder's rusty-looking lawn.

"Hey!" someone calls out from across the street. You turn and see Salvadore look twice in both directions before walking to your side of the block. Two of his older seventh-grade friends follow obediently behind him. He grabs Theo Cider by the collar of his dirty brown Adidas shirt and shakes him hard. "What makes you think you can make me look goddamn stupid?"

Theo Cider is crying, struggling weakly against Salvadore's grip. His left hand can do little more than slap vainly against Salvadore's thick arm. Salvadore throws Theo Cider to the ground. Jeremy rolls out of the way, kicking Theo Cider when he tries to get up.

Theo Cider looks up at you, and you can't help but notice the bruise swelling on his cheek, and his thick lips and slanted eyes and bulging forehead and misshapen head

and you suddenly hate him. You watch Salvadore lean down and punch him in the jaw and then Jeremy punches him and you hope that somehow they can beat the ugliness out of him and make him look like everyone else but each punch swells up his face more and more. You can't stop watching now because he keeps getting uglier and uglier with every punch and you're crying now because you feel so much pity for him. You hate yourself for not trying to stop them but you still can't stop watching even though your conscience is screaming for you to impede. You can barely see Theo Cider anymore because there are hot tears in your eyes but you can still hear him crying and screaming out in pain. And still, you think: just a few moments more, just to teach him a lesson for being what he is.

Salvadore stops first because he's out of breath. He wipes the accumulation of sweat from his thin forehead and huffs out something like "You deserve more" before crossing the street without looking. His friends follow, more careful to let any traffic pass.

Jeremy throws one more punch at Theo Cider's chest before Lisa pulls him back. "We gotta get to the playground before someone sees," she says.

The three of you run toward school and you can hear Theo Cider wailing heavy sobs 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.

Theo Cider doesn't return to school until the beginning of the next week, and you can still see the outlines of his bruises. No one ever mentions the incident. When you try

to approach him, he immediately turns away. You recognize the look on his face because it's the same look you used to give him.