

Cassius Peterson Says

Blood is in my mouth. Blood is on my hands and in my throat.

“There’s nothing beneath you but the ground motherfucker, and the sooner you learn that, the quicker you become a better person.”

This is Cassius Peterson. He’s not the neighborhood bully.

He leans over me – his hands resting on his knees and his eyes squinting in his tilting head. I look up into his thin face, and the desire to sock one of those piercing, intelligent eyes burns in the baser regions of my brain. It just might work if I could move the mangled fingers on my right hand to form a fist. But they are no longer responding to anything except an oddly familiar crunchy throbbing pain oscillating from the wrist to the tips of my fingernails. And anyway, what’s the point?

This is Cassius Peterson. He’s not a thug.

Cassius sighs loudly and straightens his body out. I tense and curl into a defensive position.

“Look, I’m...done. Just think about what I’ve said. Just...think about it.”

He turns his back and I take the opportunity to lean over and spit blood on the pavement.

“Yeah, I’ll think about it.”

In my head, I sound like Clint Eastwood or Denzel Washington or Clive Owen. I sound like the hero of a thousand video games and action movies. In reality – my voice is thick and wet and utterly dumb. It shakes and cracks and breaks in all the wrong places. Why do I even bother speaking?

This is Cassius Peterson. He’s not a Kung Fu master.

He only turns his head, swiveling the tiniest of muscles to favor my body with a backward glance.

“What’d you say?”

I clear my throat, and feel the sick slip of blood down into my stomach. Push myself up on my elbows, which seem the best vantage point I’m going to get at the moment.

“I said, I’ll think about it. Cassius.”

I have better control of my voice. It sounds reasonably human and impossibly submissive. It’s a little heart breaking.

This is Cassius Peterson. He’s my best friend.

Cassius pivots and stoops again, this time offering his left hand. I reach my own out to him and he helps me up.

We stand in awkward silence for a moment. I lean back down, as far as my bruised ribs will let me bend, and retrieve his glasses from the ground. I present them to him with a shaking hand.

He accepts them wordlessly and slides them back over his bleeding nose with a wince of pain stabbing across his face. He spends a full minute staring down at the asphalt below us and I hardly breathe. Mostly because it hurts to breathe.

“I’ll see you around then.”

I don’t nod. I don’t know what to say or do. Fear and humiliation and pity and anger fly to all my limbs at once – paralyzing me. Cassius moves away from me, back turned, moving off across the playground pavement.

We’re in Sixth grade.

I watch him, and out of the corner of my eye – I see her. Well, not exactly. I see the empty swing where she used to be.

Faggot Cunt-ing-ham. Phaegan Cunningham.

She's a breeder. She's a fucker. And a breeder. Her nails are always chipped and her clothes smell like stale cigarette smoke. Her pants are too tight, as if they can barely keep up with her rapidly developing hips. And breasts. She has breasts which she cannot quite conceal. They spill out from the folds of her Hannah Montana T-Shirts and catch my eyes in the middle of long division.

I love her.

Phaegan's empty swing still sways in the rain stained March air over an enormous puddle of water.

Through a blur of furious tears I see a red shoe swimming in the murky liquid. It bobs and dips on the surface.

I watch it pop off her foot as I shove her from behind, toppling her off the swing into the dirty wood chips, her legs splashing in the water. She hardly makes a sound – nothing like the angry cry or startled shriek I expect. The lack of response is shocking and a cruel laugh cuts off in my throat.

She doesn't scramble up and turn around. She doesn't scream, "you asshole." She doesn't close her hand around the wood chips and toss them back in my face. She just lays there.

"Hey, come on Faggot – get up."

She stays on the ground and I can see her shoulders heaving. Is she crying?

"It was just a joke. Come on Fag."

I come around the swing and am about to prod her pudgy belly with the toe of my shoe when she pops up from the ground – tears sliding all over her freckled cheeks and dimpled chin. She bunches up her lips and nose and forehead into one huge ugly crinkle and her brown eyes narrow into furious slits.

When she opens her mouth I see the perfect gap between her two front teeth and an unconsciously dopey smile slips across my face.

“My name is Phaegan!”

She’s still screaming while she hauls back one of those delicate chubby legs – the one still shoed – and kicks me in the stomach.

I fall to the ground.

She runs off somewhere out my double line of vision, screaming across the playground like a valkyrie out of the sky. I close my eyes.

I climb gingerly into her empty swing and it’s still warm from the press of her skin through her tight dark blue jeans. It sings against my limbs.

I wrap my arms around the chains of the swing and the smell of stale cigarette smoke wafts from the metal. I place my hands where I imagine hers were. Heave a sigh that turns into a cough.

I look out over the playground field in front of me – where Phaegan has swooped off into the distance and smile deliriously. I watch a murder of crows – brushed up into the sky with her passing, resettle onto the brown/grey grass. I see a cloud above burst out from another, like a ship passing through a wave on the sea.

What I don’t see is Cassius Peterson step out from the detention room behind me. It’s in a trailer set aside from the main building. One of the two windows faces the

playground. I don't watch Cassius walking very carefully along the path, careful not to make too much noise. I don't look behind me as Cassius slips his backpack from his shoulders and swings it down into his two clutched hands. I never know what hits me.

It's his backpack.

He thrusts it like a javelin at the back of my head, knocking me off the swing and down on to my knees. I hit the wood chips with my hands splayed out and roll quickly onto my back. Ready to spring up and attack.

I freeze. Cassius has already moved from behind the swing set and is literally on top of me. His eyes are wide behind his glasses and his thick lips are set in a single line of fury.

I only have time to shake my head before he kicks my left rib so hard I feel like it might crack. It never does. But it shrieks with pain and so do I.

“What are you doing!?”

My voice is high and nearly lost in a gasp as I struggle to bring air into my lungs. Cassius doesn't answer. A kind of horrible instinct propels me up onto my feet, my hands forming into unwilling fists.

“What's your fucking problem!?”

I get the first swipe in, and it lands in the sweet spot between his eyes, making them water and swell and his nose drips red. It's amazing, but I feel a burst of pride. I drop my fists and grin.

He uses my prideful pause to slam his own fist into my mouth. I feel teeth give way and my tongue slice in half.

Not really...but it does feel that way. I hit the wood chips and scramble backwards – crab style until I hit the pavement. I don't stop until we are halfway to the tether ball court. I don't stop until my stupid bleeding hand gives way in a spasm of pain and drop onto my side, curling into a half-hearted fetal position.

Cassius stands off to the side, surveying. He doesn't look angry anymore. He looks shaken and pale. He swipes an arm over his face and smears blood over his cheek and chin.

“What's wrong with you?” I ask.

My voice is soft like a whisper. It's confused and indignant and ashamed.

“I saw what you did.”

His voice wavers, though I can't tell from fear or anger. It's distorted because of the broken nose, and it doesn't hardly sound like Cassius anymore. Or look like him.

“To Faggot?” Stronger now, my voice is getting stronger.

He nods once, and I can tell it causes him pain because he swallows hard.

Anger floods through me.

“So, who cares? It's just Fago Cuntingham. You don't even like her.”

Cassius swallows again.

A sudden ringing sucks all the sounds out of my ears. Every noise is tinny and muffled. I barely hear myself repeat, “You don't even like her.”

Cassius Peterson says in his strange new voice, “I love her.”

The sound rushes back in from the empty space where it fled to and I hear myself now. Loud. Too loud.

“Are you fucking retarded? She’s a breeder! She’s a breeder and a fucker! She sucked Leo Tooley’s dick for a pack of cigarettes. She got her period when she was 10. She’s dirty Cassius. She’s...”

I can’t think of anything else to say, because my words melt away as my mind calls up an image of the perfect gap between her front teeth. I see her tongue sliding over her two front teeth in the middle of English as she raises her hand to get a bathroom pass.

“She’s a slut.”

I stare up in defiance at Cassius Peterson and his purple and red face melts away. A different face appears in it’s place.

Cassius at my house watching cartoons. He’s grinning – an impossible to ignore grin with his wide lips and wide eyes – everything seeming to stretch to meet his ears. His huge freaking ears.

Cassius in third grade with his hand pressed in modeling clay. We’re making clay ashtrays for our parents. Probably. Cassius holds his hand up – it’s filled with grey. We high five and the clay smooshes between our fingers, dripping to the table below us. We giggle hysterically and Mr. Reynolds calls our names across the room.

Cassius on the bus. Regina Flick walks by and I nimbly spill her books on the floor. I chuckle deliriously. Cassius looks out the window at the scenery rolling by. He doesn’t say a word until we reach school.

Cassius says, “Race you to class.”

He shoves me down on and I stare after him, momentarily puzzled. Then I climb to my feet and give chase, hollering after him. He makes no sound as he runs, but he

beats me to class and is seated at his desk by the time I puff up to the door. He grins lopsided, some look of satisfaction on his face. I don't recognize him. Until now.

...

I watch him move off into the distance. And see her.

Phaegan Cunningham reappears near the swing set. She has made a complete loop around the school and we are back to square one.

Cassius stops. He turns.

Phaegan is staring down into the water below the swing set – her red shoe spinning wildly on the surface. She glances up – a wisp of her curly reddish orange hair lifting and beckoning me forward like a finger.

She seems frozen for a moment, as she realizes that we're both watching her. My legs are tensed and I wait for any sign with which to break into a run. Phaegan opens her mouth, and nervously runs her tongue over her front teeth.

I break into a run. Never mind my head is swimming. Never mind I'm bloody. Never mind the fire roaring up my side.

I glance frantically off to the left, expecting to see Cassius sprinting with his long skinny legs – closer. Nearer to her. Better.

He doesn't move. His head is tilted at an angle, surveying.

Cassius in the summer time. He has a stick in his hand, standing at the edge of the pond – prodding a massive and immovable bullfrog. Cassius with his head tilted.

Phaegan watches me barreling down on her. She glances down at her shoe. I follow her eyes.

The red shoe spins and spins.

I look back up.

And she's gone.

Phaegan is running again – long curly hair flying out behind her in a maelstrom.

Cassius stands in the middle of the field, crows pecking at vacant worm holes, and

Phaegan runs to him. Like a valkyrie streaming down from the sky.

I scoop the small red shoe from the puddle. It smells like cigarettes and feet.

I toss it after her. It hits the ground and bounces away – lost in the grey grass and the grey day.

I walk home alone.