

THE KIDS ARE ALRIGHT

This is a work of fiction and has absolutely nothing to do with reality. Kind of.

I

Sash

There was me Sasha (Sash), Rick (Stick), and Benjie. Benjie was goofy enough without a nickname, so we just called him Benjie. Plenty of heat waves in the sprawling dog days of summer with nothing to do but kick stones and slap palms.

Besides nothing we had basketball and basketball was everything. It was the hours practicing a crossover shot late into those cool summer nights, until some omnipresent force shut down the court's lights.

Sequestered by a ring of towering ancient Eastern White Pines, Manchester's basketball courts, "the courts", was where we had each other and where we had basketball. It is where the story of me, Stick, and Benjie begins. And April, but we'll get to her later.

It was another day running full-court threes. Full-court threes can make you throw up. Not Benjie. Benjie didn't play basketball. Benjie sat out and chewed dip. He was better at chewing dip than basketball, so he spit into an old Gatorade bottle some sinful shade of purple and cheered us on and called every imagined slight a "damn flagrant!"

Me and Stick were teamed up with White Sonny. There were two Sonnies who frequented the courts, White Sonny, and Black Sonny. One was white and one was black. The three of us were playing our eternal enemies: hockey kids from the rival Middle School in Essex. Jim, Tim, and Eugene played basketball like their native sport of hockey. Lowering their shoulders and huffing and puffing they'd work up a sweat ramming into us. Benjie screamed himself hoarse every time we played the hockey kids, purple spit spraying onto the red and white paint of the court like some Jackson Pollock painting.

"Flagrant!" "This ain't hockey!" "Ejection!" "I'm out of dip!" "Y'all are hockey kids, I know damn well you got dip!" "Nah, I ain't gonna chew your Artic Dip, that's some stuff only hockey kids would pull!" Benjie was funny. Benjie got into fights. People were always talking about me and Benjie. April asked if we were a couple.

I wasn't too fast, I wasn't too slow. Like most things in life, I was in the middle. But the one thing I knew how to do was use my body. My parents for some reason dressed me up in spandex and sent me to gymnastics as a kid. The infamous photo lives on to this day. Me, straight faced with my bowl cut, gripping the beam like some Soviet gymnast. But since then, I've always been able to move, jump, and balance with grace. Even the act of walking was an art form to me, and I was a master. I've thus developed infatuations with anyone who can move: Paul Pierce shrugging his shoulders as he swaggered down the court, John Travolta's pumping walk in *Saturday Night Fever*, Michael Jackson's gyrations. I knew how to use my body, and I used it well in basketball, and basketball was the second thing in life I was good at.

The hockey kids didn't know how to move. Like gorillas on amphetamines, they jumped up and down and ran in circles and exhausted themselves. Desperate to block a shot, desperate to embarrass us slacker basketball kids, it made it only too easy to get them flying past you, clearing the lane for an open layup. They didn't care if we scored, they only cared that we left the courts bruised and scarred.

It was ten to six, one point to win and get those hockey kids to shut up and give the courts back to their rightful owners. White Sonny was death incarnate, hobbling around gasping for breath. He knew he was useless, so he hid doubled over in the corner and prayed for the game to end. I had the ball at the three-point line with big shouldered hockey kid Tim all up on me, his stinky beer breath heaving and huffing into my innocent face. In his eyes I saw determined violence.

Stick came by to set a pick, but his sticklike body stood no chance against the meat block that was Tim. Stick instinctively knew this so he drew away, cutting to the hoop with Eugene on him and double teamed by Jim because White Sonny could be left alone... Or could he? With a four-point cushion and a desire to leave the game without another body check, I threw the ball overhead at White Sonny whose desire was not so much to win, but as to get off the courts and into the refuge of his air conditioned 1996 Chevrolet Lumina that he bought for \$750 in the parking lot of the Essex McDonalds.

Jim just laughed and shook his head instead of going out to defend White Sonny. After passing the ball, my body continued in motion, prancing to the hoop in anticipation of a missed shot. Despite only needing one-point, White Sonny shot from behind the lined arc for two. To

rebound I began to box out Tim with my body. Putting my weight against his body, he slipped out from behind, leaving me with nothing to rest against but gravity. Falling backwards, I began to spin around and ended up putting all my weight on my right ankle. The next thing I knew I was laughing and laughing until I looked down and saw a golf ball shaped mass protruding out of my right ankle. It was so hot outside and those pine trees were so pretty as they filtered out the sunset's orange beams and they swayed so gently. I began to vomit everywhere.

Tick then *tock* and it takes so long for a second to pass.

Tick. Time moves so slow in an unfurnished basement without windows.

Tock. Without my foot, without basketball, now I really had nothing.

Tick. I tried chewing dip and cheering on the sidelines with Benjie but that was Benjie's thing, I was supposed to be on the court with him watching.

Tock. Slowly, the hockey kids with their Abercrombie girls began to colonize the court, shot-gunning Natty Lights in between games and chewing Arctic Blend which Benjie, a dip purist, hated on account of its added artificial flavors.

Tick. Doctor Fox says I need to rest. Rest... Rest...Resting is so boring- *Tock*.

That August I was staying at my grandparents' house because my parents were dealing with my mom's mother's hospitalization in Polotsk, Belarus. My mom said she had a duty to support the one who supported her and my dad said he needed to support mom. Belarussian people used too much mayonnaise, so I stayed behind.

Usually, I collapsed onto the basement couch after a day of playing basketball, passing out around 10 PM on account of the day's trials and tribulations. Now, after a day of dipping and cheering with Benjie, my mind raced as I alternated between staring at my ankle in resentment and rewatching *The Hangover* on my grandparent's 26 inch box TV from the 90s. I found the TV earlier that week in one of the many dust covered cardboard boxes that populated the grey cemented basement.

I began staying up until at least midnight or later, thinking about how if I just landed differently, if Tim didn't pull that dirty move, I'd be out on the courts, I'd be biking to April's house, I'd be sleeping instead of hearing every damn *Tick* and every damn *Tock*.

I became intimately familiar with the endless sea of content that was cable TV: smiling blondes and brunettes moving with programmed precision as they sold waffle machines in 60 minute long infomercials, cop shows with corrupt cops, cop shows with honest cops, sports, sports commentary.

9:00 to 10:00 PM was always the slowest stretch. My mind would obsess about how there were 60 seconds in a minute, and 60 minutes an hour, and I would have to endure 3600 ticks before an hour was up. I had already run through my DVD copy of *The Hangover* three times this week. I had begun to finish the actors' lines for them.

I started to call April but stopped halfway. She said she really liked me, but I think she liked many boys. At least that's what Benjie said last week. Benjie said April flirted with him once or twice. So, I'm not sure if she *really* liked me.

After putting down the phone, I picked up the remote to continue my aimless channel surfing when an image caught my eye. I saw a well-lit street, in a caricatured Levitt town at night. Lining the street in perfect rows were single story homes with varying pastel shades reminiscent of color patterns from the 1950s. Outside the homes were large animal bush sculptures: towering dinosaurs, friendly bears, and sophisticated flamingos. Amongst this manicured perfection was something that had nothing to do with perfection. A young Johnny Depp dressed up in pitch black leather with a pale white face, a face run through with red scars and adorned with spiky Robert Smith type hair. Protruding out of his hands were long knives. It looked like a horror movie, but Depp looked too innocent and the soundtrack was too whimsical. I burrowed my eyebrows, transfixed by the exotic sights and sounds emitting from the box TV. A curiosity began to gnaw at me.

It was the scene where Depp saves Winona Ryder's little brother from a car crash. Depp courageously dives to push the boy aside. He saves him, but hurts him in the process because he has scissorhands. Scissorhands make it hard to help. The jock gets angry at him. The town starts

a witch hunt against Depp. Winona tries to defend Depp. Depp kisses Winona. Depp runs away and lives out the rest of his life as an artist in hidden seclusion. The end.

I looked up at the clock and it read 10:30 PM. I had not heard a *Tick* nor *Tock* for an hour. The next day I didn't go to the courts.

Benjie texted me “WYA Bro” “I got some Gold Virginia for you” “Ya know Hockey Kids love to shower together.” “Ya know what they do in the shower together.” Sometimes he would double, triple, quadruple text if I hadn't responded. Usually, I texted Benjie back. But that day I forgot about Benjie, and I even forgot about April with her cherry lip balm kisses. With the concluding snow-swept scene from the film still on my mind (which I had since learned was called *Edward Scissorhands*), I assembled my crutches and started trekking to the library with an empty sling bag over my shoulder.

Hitherto, my town's library served the sole purpose of providing a refuge for me and my friends on days of pouring rain. Today, it served a different purpose. The melodramatic soaring theme, the suburban housewives, and sullen Depp in the middle of it all. I wanted to see it all over again, I wanted to *feel* it all over again.

It had rained the night before and the street had alternating patterns of dark moist cement contrasted with stretches of light green pollen-covered grey road. I tried to walk along the dark stretches, conscious that my allergies could act up at the slightest whiff of pollen and that if I sneezed on crutches I might fall and injure my other ankle and never make it to the library. It was a breezy 70-degree summer day, when anybody who was anybody was out and about frolicking and playing and sunbathing. Walking past these idyllic images I smiled as I listened to a playlist of songs by *Moby*, imagining a movie of Manchester and the beautiful people who lived here... A movie about basketball and cherry flavored kisses and a crazy boy whose name was Benjie.

I made it safe and sound to the library in a sticky sweat. Entering the building, I was enveloped by scents of years past... The musty scent of VHS tapes and dusty Dr. Seuss books and lightly-perfumed, smiling, middle-aged library employees. I took the elevator to the 1st floor and rested a bit on a guest bench, with my crutches on the floor and my hands wafting my shirt. I sat in ecstasy as the nearby vent lulled me to peace with its air conditioning. Eventually I cooled down and mustered up the strength to pick up my crutches and head to the help desk.

A middle-aged woman with a resting smile smiled at me and asked me about the crutches. Sometimes as a youth I would talk a lot, like with April. Sometimes I wouldn't talk a lot, like with any cute girl who wasn't April. Something about the quiet playfulness in the library lady's hazel brown eyes prompted me on and before I knew it words began spilling out of my mouth. The basketball game and hockey kids and the particular differences between white and black Sonny and she kept nodding and smiling and then asked with a measured pace:

“Hmmm. Very pleased to meet you Sash. What can I do for you today?”

“Oh right, I'm in the library... Nice to meet you as well. I know the library has uh books, but can I take out movies as well?”

“Yes, yes you most certainly can.” To match her calming cadence, her head ever so slowly bobbed. She reminded me of every art teacher I've ever had.

“Ok, here's the thing though. Um, how do I say this... So, I was young, like really young once. And I took out a copy of that book, about the kid and the Greek Gods. What's that called?”

“Percy Jackson?” she said with an amused glint in her eye as she slightly tilted her head.

“Yes! Ow!” In my excitement I forgot about my right ankle and had put too much weight on it. “Well, I never returned the book... and I know there are fees and maybe over the years the fees have compounded in interest. And maybe I can't take out anything from the library?”

Pursing her lips, her expression playfully mused over my dilemma “Hmm, I see. Well Sash, if you pay for the book which costs twenty dollars, we can give you a fresh start.”

“And then I can take out movies for free?”

“The library is very forgiving.” There was something so knowing in her eyes, like she had known me forever and was amused to see that I hadn't changed.

I bowed for some reason as I let out “of course Miss...?”

She let out a stifled laugh before she said “Miss Kaminsky”

Struggling with my crutches, I leaned my hand over to her for a handshake.

Returning to the guest bench, I spilled out the contents of my lint ridden pockets and began assembling cash. I scraped together a ten and five and three one dollar bills with eleven quarters and three dimes. I threw out an empty dip can. Dip didn't belong in the library.

After hungrily filling out a sheet with my address, phone number, and email, I handed over the jumbled mess of money with great anticipation. Pondering my application, she simply returned an understanding smile and slowly walked over to a large white machine. After pressing some buttons, out came a very special card with my name *Sasha Dominsov* printed on it under the heading of *Manchester Ridge Library*.

I rummaged through the internet, finding lists with titles like *100 Movies You Need to Watch Before You Die*, *American Film Institute's Top 100 Films*, *An introduction to Movies*, and *IMDB's Top 100 Movies*. But I eventually was persuaded by a Youtube compilation to guide me through this new world. The video, humbly titled *Some of the best movies ever made - Compilation [HD]*, compelled me with its hypnotic edit of the following movies: *28 Days Later*, *300*, *Braveheart*, *Der Untergang*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Donnie Darko*, *Forrest Gump*, *Gladiator*, *The Hurt Locker*, *Inglorious Basterds*, *It's a Wonderful life*, *Leon*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Magnolia*, *The Matrix*, *Memento*, *Trainspotting*, *Platoon*, *Psycho*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *The Green Mile*, and *The Dark Knight*.

My notes app became a sanctuary, where each virgin film title was written down. Scrolling up and down through the list, I entitled the list *August 2012*. This was the month; these were the movies. Days were no longer dedicated to clock watching. These were days of that feeling, that *Edward Scissorhands* feeling. Not everyone felt that way.

Benjie's texts crashed in waves of aggression "Bro, at least text something back, this is a big douche move", "You're being an absolute douche", and ended in remorseful undertows of apologies "I'm sorry for calling you a douche twice", "It's just I thought we had something special going on. I just appreciate you is all". Each text pushed me away until I finally reached the precipice of blocking him. But the remembrances of school lunches eaten alone struck fear in my heart and brought me back from that edge. Like a non-committal politician I sent him

vagaries about how I just needed to rest and thanks for apologizing about calling me a douche and the courts were too far to get to on crutches.

My mile long journeys to the library became a daily excursion for that second week of August. Scanning the rainbow colored rows of DVD's, running my hands along the spines, I flirted with this new frontier. From A-Z, I procured the following titles that matched names from my list: *Trainspotting*, *Lord of the Rings*, *28 Days Later*, and *Donnie Darko*. Bringing my daily catch to the front desk, I took out the sacred card, received Miss Kaminsky's approving smile ("Oh you've never seen *Lord of the Rings*, you are in for a treat.") and with reverence carefully placed the DVDs into my sling *Nike* bag.

I cried during *Green Mile*'s tragic ending, pumped my fists during *Trainspotting*'s triumphant ending, and cried again, more like sobbed, during *Lord of the Rings*, *Return of the King*'s ending. After all Frodo and Sam have been through, for Frodo to leave his brother, for him to look at the man he loved and to tearfully say "You don't mean that. You can't leave." *Edward Scissorhands* was just the beginning. Something was happening to me. This happening didn't go unnoticed.

Benjie texted me in the middle of *Donnie Darko*'s *Tears for Fears* sequence. He texted a text that made me search out the remote's stop button for the first time since I had started my obsessive descent into the dreamworld of cinema.

"YO - this my last attempt. Maybe something happened with your family in Russia or Kurgenstani or whatever and you are bummed out or something IDK. But Stick is out of town for a week and he said we can use his house, his dad's house. Just letting you know. I could get you and April there alone."

On the periphery of Manchester's border with Exeter were gravel country roads that slithered through maple tree lined granite hills. Populating these country roads were well spaced seventies style ranch homes. Stick's house was a prototypical ranch home, one with amber colored wood and large panes of glass. The house seemed to be as ancient and native to the land as the mossy rocks, wild grass, rabbits, deer and powerful pine trees that surrounded it. Entering the house, your feet were comfortably greeted by the type of beige carpets that were synonymous with 70s living. To the right of the entrance was a lived-in, slightly creased, lightish burgundy

leather couch. Sinking into the couch one faced a sixty inch flat screen TV that was connected to surround sound speakers that were carefully placed throughout the room. Imagine watching movies on that set up.

II

Sash

April was the first girl in our grade to develop breasts. On the streets of Manchester, hushed voices spoke of this epochal development. Snatches of “have you seen that photo,” and charged whisperings of “I saw her this past summer, at the pond. She was wearing a two piece. I could see *everything*. Ok, well not *everything*.” But most importantly, people rumored about how “I’ve heard April’s into Sash, the way they danced at Sarah’s Bat Mitzvah. She was all over him, like that song “the boy is mineee.””

At Sarah’s Bat Mitzvah, a familiar suburban scene appeared. In the air was a hormonally turbulent concoction of AXE chocolate body spray mixed with Victoria’s Secret Chrome Peony body mist. This pungent cloud wafted over a divided house. Partitioned to the right of the tan wood paneled dance floor were the sullen boys, confused by what the girls wanted. To the left of the partition were the girls, confused by the boys who weren't doing what they wanted. Occasionally a brave ambassador would bridge this ancient rift of the sexes.

Usually, it was Benjie. Benjie was just a sacrificial lamb. He made his rounds around the girls who wanted nothing to do with him. The boys chuckling at his endeavors and the girls sighing, all could agree that he was a fool. With this shared consensus, the sexes shared a new common understanding and the mysterious distance between man and woman was dissolved. Boys began to trickle past the dance floor’s demarcation point. But not me. Mystified by these girls who were becoming women and wanted us to become men, I looked on apathetically with Stick by the punch bowl.

Stick in his approachable way shrugged at the whole affair, which lessened the guilt over my inaction.

“Oh man, April has been looking at you.” As he said this, he leaned his hand on the drinks table, looking like the leaning tower of Pisa, his lanky body threatening to collapse at any second.

Surveying the scene until I caught her eyes, I sincerely asked “But yah, what should I do?”

Bending his arm as he leaned even further into the table, he sagely concluded “Ah, let’s hang back here. If it was meant to be, then it’ll be or something...”

Looking out, he then un-sagely added “good God her boobs.”

Panicked by the B word, I asked, “I know, I know... When I dance with her, *if* I dance with her, do I like press against them? Is that ok?”

“Press against what?” He began inspecting his finger nails.

“Her boobs!”

Mulling it over, he scratched the chin on his cherubic Andrew Garfield like face, “Her boobs... I think so... maybe not.”

“I don’t know man. OK. Listen, I won’t leave if you won’t leave. Deal?”

“Wait... Look out.” His eyes widened.

“What?”

Ominously, he whispered “it’s happening.”

A feminine voice broke through the male adolescent dialogue.

“April wants to dance with you.” It was an envoy, Sarah. Sarah was five feet tall and all woman. At least as woman as a 13-year-old could be. Jet black hair with dark eyes. Half Indian and half white, resulting in a racially ambiguous profile. A boy, Anthony, once asked her in third grade “What are you?” and Sarah replied “What am I? I’m Sarah!”

I looked from my feet, up to Stick in desperation, who just blurted “bathroom” before tripping away. With her hand on her hips in a matter of fact pose, she proceeded to shake her head at me and at boys in general, before continuing the interrogation “so?”

“April’s nice... Um, yah she’s nice.” Exasperated, she growled in a low mutter “April’s nice. Uh!” Before taking me by the hand and commanding me to “come here.” With her cold and dry hands, she began to lead me through the crowd. I looked back for Stick who was nowhere to

be seen. The densely crowded dance floor, replete with eyes darting from girl to boy and boy to girl, parted for Sarah who was mildly shouting “April? April?”

I suddenly became aware of the musical ambience of the room as a song change brought a sea change to the social dynamics. The silly raucousness gave way to wistful romance as the song changed from *LMFAO*’s “Party Rock Anthem” to *Queen of the South*’s “Need You Now.” Except for the few boys who already dreamed of romance, the rest of the male race disappeared from the dance floor. The girls lingered, bodies searching in vain for another body to hold tight and sway with, as sweet southern voices pined:

Looking at my phone,

Wondering when you’ll call,

I need you now.

Along with the auditory shift to a melancholic spiked longing, the lights dimmed from pulsing yellows and oranges to a muted amber melting into a quiet dark purple.

Told my friends,

I was over you,

Wouldn’t call,

Wouldn’t text, but

I need you now.

Benjie lumbered around the dance floor, walking in circles with his head down. He gave me a sad smile and asked “have you found April?”

A gentle voice came from behind and Benjie vanished.

“Sash...” It was April. She was wearing a speckled glinting silver dress and an anticipatory smile.

“Oh, hi.”

Sarah's aggressive demeanor melted and she whispered in my ear "dance with her tiger," before leaving me with April.

"Oh, ok."

April's milky cheeks were always flushed red. Looking at her cheeks I thought the phrase *strawberry milkshake* and she took my right hand and following expectations I pulled her in. Feeling her chest I could feel myself darken a few shades.

"I've been waiting for you to come say hi..."

"I've just been waiting, for like the right song. And this is the right song. Sooo."

She laughed and I forgot about all the eyes staring at us. "All a part of the plan, Sash." She pulled in closer, putting her arms around my back as her head nuzzled underneath mine. Her hair smelled of strawberries and of the foreign land of femininity.

Do you ever think of me,

As you count down the hours?

The lights yawningly turned from a deep purple into a shade of blood red orange.

"There's not too many people on the dance floor," she said.

"They're scared. I mean, I think the boys are scared."

"The boys, scared? Of us, of girls?"

"Yeah, I'm joking. Kind of. Some of them might think you guys are scary." She pushed her head back so she could look at me with her widened eyes.

"Hmph, boys are scary, and stinky."

"Um, are you calling me stinky?"

She burrowed her head into my chest.

"Are you sniffing me?"

"Not stinky today." She concluded. I no longer felt like I was talking with a girl. I was talking with April. And I liked April.

“Was it yesterday?”

“I didn’t see you yesterday, but I did see you in art class last week.”

I rebutted back “O.K. yes, but I just had gym.”

“Everyone has gym. Not everyone stinks like that.” She said before letting out a “tsk tsk tsk.”

“It was basketball, I go hard in basketball. I go hard in the paint.”

“It also smells like you don’t wear deodorant in basketball.”

I laughed as my mind patiently waited for a jibe to her jab, “I read somewhere that the French don’t wear deodorant. *Bonjour*.”

“Hmm, I didn’t know you were French.”

“Ah, I’m not.”

“Well, you smelt like one.”

“Not today. Today I got some AXE. I got this spray. Chocolate spray.”

“Chocolate, yum.”

She re-nuzzled her head into my chest, and I took another deep inhale of her frizzy fragrant hair.

We swayed, my hand making circles around her bare upper back. Feeling her hairs stand on end, I began to feel the deep pangs of a satisfied melancholy. Strawberry milkshake. Strawberry milkshake. I deliberated over whether to call April *strawberry milkshake*.

“Strawberry milkshake” I whispered into her ear.

She didn’t say anything and panic set in. I felt vibrating giggles in my chest, and she pulled her head away.

“Sash D. You are just about the silliest boy I ever met.”

She stood on her tiptoes for a kiss and time stopped and her lips were hugging mine and I opened my eyes to see hers closed.

She then ran off to Sarah who was gawking at the whole affair along with everyone else I knew.

I simply need you now.