

# SKATER BOY

ANTHONY NERADA

SOHO  
TEEN

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*To every queer person who has ever changed the pronouns of  
their favorite song so they could live out a happily ever after—  
I see you. I hear you. So, sing your damn heart out. 🤘*

*And to Tim, for being the better half of the greatest  
love story I'll ever tell.*

# 1.

## GOD SAVE THE AMERICAN IDIOT

I hate people.

They're fake and pretentious, they make assumptions about everything, and no matter how hard they try, eventually, they always let you down. And let's be real, I couldn't care less if they like me back. But when I grab the kid by the collar of his Captain America T-shirt and pin him to the lockers, the pang in my chest is almost enough to make me question how I ended up here.

Almost.

"Hand it over," I growl into his ear, patting his pockets with my free hand.

What can I say? The kid had it coming. He'd been peering out from behind a dumpster when I first spotted him. I was bent at the knee, keying the side of Principal Cohen's car during third period, when the shutter on his phone went off. I'd been caught red-handed. Kids like that, we don't run in the same circles. They have a habit of turning me in. Lucky for me, though, I knew to wait for him outside the principal's office.

The kid never asked why I did it. If he had, I would have told him that I overheard Principal Cohen calling me a lowlife this morning. But I doubt he'd care. Telling the truth won't change anything. It never has.

"Please, I-I don't have the picture anymore, I swear. Tony got to me first and made me delete it." His eyes dart around the hall, searching for help.

It's not that I don't believe him—that does sound like something Big Cheese would do—but I can't just let him go. Stonebridge High's social hierarchy typecast me as a punk the second I moved to town. Whether I like it or not, I have an image to uphold.

I'm not going to lie. Aside from the occasional suspension, being Stonebridge's resident bad guy does have its perks. Not only can I not remember the last time I paid for my own lunch, but no one has ever tried to stop me from skateboarding down the halls between classes. Unless you count last semester, when I traded a joint with the hall monitor in exchange for her silence. You'd think punks would be hot commodities in this age of My Chemical Romance revivals, but we're not. No one wants to mess with the angry redhead in the black leather jacket and faded skate shoes. Except for this kid, apparently.

I shove him harder into the wall, bundling his shirt between my knuckles.

At first, the kid tries to fight back with a weak punch to my arm and a kick above my right knee. But he gives up fast, knowing he doesn't stand a chance. He has no idea that if he'd only kicked a little harder, I would've buckled over in pain. My kneecap is my Achilles' heel, made of more trauma than bone.

I make him empty out his pockets. I would never actually hurt the kid, but the fear in his eyes tells me he doesn't know that.

"You're kidding, right?"

I glance over my shoulder. Mr. Hamilton, the guidance counselor, is in the doorway to his office, his white Nikes glowing under the hallway's fluorescent lights. If he hadn't spoken, I would've missed him entirely—his beige collared shirt and brown corduroy pants blend in seamlessly with the school's walls.

He crosses his arms. "Are you really going to beat someone up on your way to our appointment?"

Confused, I say, "Our what?"

What does Mr. Hamilton think? That I'd actually remembered—let alone planned on attending—the counseling session Principal Cohen sentenced me with for tagging the gymnasium last week? If it weren't for my best friends, Tony and Brad, I wouldn't even be in this position. Sure, I was technically the one who bought the spray cans, but if Tony didn't talk his way out of every situation and Brad wasn't so damn fast, I wouldn't have been the only one to get caught. Besides, why bother going through the motions when Mr. Hamilton knows as well as I do that my future was decided for me a long time ago?

Mr. Hamilton moves his hands to his hips, and I throw my arms up in mock surrender, letting the kid slide to the floor.

I'm not like Tony and Brad. I know when to stand my ground and when to give up. I've been around for seventeen years, long enough to interpret the whole hands-on-hips charade as a telltale sign that if I don't smarten up, I'll be forced to spend lunch as the official garbage picker-upper for the rest of the semester. Just like junior year.

I reach for my skateboard as the kid collects his textbooks on his hands and knees and hurries out of sight.

Mr. Hamilton looks at me through horn-rimmed glasses, smiling like we're the best of friends, which is ironic considering he doesn't give a damn about me. I'm just another name on

the list of delinquents he needs to cross off by the end of the school year.

Sighing, I push past him and take a seat, dropping my board in front of me. Mr. Hamilton's office is the size of a porta-potty with outdated wooden lacquered walls and barely enough room for the filing cabinet in the corner. Next to his desktop computer is a small, barred window that—while there to keep us safe—reminds me I'm serving time.

To make matters worse, Mr. Hamilton always smells like a cloud of body spray. He's probably convinced it makes him relatable.

"I won't sugarcoat this, Mr. Mackenzie," he says, swiveling in his chair. "Your grades are horrendous . . ." His voice trails off as he looks down the bridge of his nose at me, acting as if I should be surprised. Appalled, even.

I'm not, though. Not really. I've skipped more classes than I've attended this semester.

I don't know.

School's stupid.

Why would I intentionally sit through a teacher rambling on for hours when I can find any answer on Google in less than ten minutes, all while never leaving the comfort of my own bed? Even if you so much as glance at your phone in class or get distracted and sneak a picture of the season's first snowfall, it's taken away for the rest of the day. Total BS. And when said teacher announces to the whole class that you'll never amount to anything, it doesn't matter how much effort you put in when all you'll ever get are Cs and a "needs improvement" evaluation.

It's not like school prepares you for real life either. It didn't teach me how to change a tire on the side of the interstate in the middle of the night. Or how to sock away a few extra dollars each month for a rainy day. Ma taught me all that and

more. Seriously, when would I ever need to know what the length of a triangle is? That's what rulers are for.

Mr. Hamilton leers at me.

Right about now, it'd be smart to say something like, "I hear your concern, sir, but I'm failing to understand the importance of the underlying issue."

Grown-ups love that. That flowery language shit.

But I don't.

"What's your point?" I shrug, fixating on the stray chin hair he missed shaving this morning.

"My point, Mr. Mackenzie, is that if you don't get your act together, you're not going to graduate."

He keeps using my last name like it's a threat, as if addressing me by my dad's name will scare me into submission. Joke's on him, though, because I barely knew the guy.

Still, my stomach twists in a knot.

I know I should show concern regarding my impending doom. I should be polite and address my elder with respect. That's what we're taught to do, anyway.

Instead, I say, "Are you shitting me?"

*"Language, Mr. Mackenzie."*

If you haven't already guessed, words and I don't get along. At least, not when it comes to talking to people. When I want to be funny, I get the tone all wrong, and people think I'm mocking them. When I want to sound sophisticated, I come across temperamental with a complete lack of self-awareness.

It's even worse with Authority Figures™.

Growing up, teachers used to think I had something called oppositional defiant disorder, but that wasn't it. I just can't find the right words to get my point across, which makes me angry, which makes me lash out, which makes me angry because I've lashed out. On top of everything, while adults were always so quick with a diagnosis—thinking they could medicate me into



obedience—no one ever asked why I was so angry in the first place. Because what does a child know, right?

I'm not a victim or anything like that, but it's a vicious cycle.

To stay calm, I pull my black beanie further down my forehead and count in multiples of three in my head. It's something I've done since I was a kid.

*Three times one is three.*

*Three times two is six.*

*Three times three is nine.*

"If I were you, I'd take winter break to seriously consider what your next steps are going to be. The deadline for college applications is sooner than you think."

I twist the hairs on my left eyebrow, much like a villain would do to his mustache in a campy B-rated action movie. Except I'm not plotting Mr. Hamilton's demise. At least, not yet.

I've been told a million times I won't graduate at the rate I'm going. It's not exactly Breaking News at this point. But the thought of repeating senior year without Big Cheese and Bud—of watching them walk across the stage without me—makes me want to skateboard out of here and never look back. Or, at the very least, smoke a joint.

"What can I do?" I ask, deflating in my seat.

I regret it immediately.

Even a "lowlife" like me can see Mr. Hamilton's eyes gleam, like he's waited his entire career for this exact moment. I'm pissed I'm the one that gave it to him.

"Well, for starters, I'd pick up a textbook now and then."

It's meant to be funny—he actually pauses for my reaction—but I'm not willing to give him the satisfaction of a fake laugh. Not on the merits of a weak dad joke.

I tap my foot against the underside of my skateboard. Though all I want to do is make some quick retort, I know this man can prevent me from graduating. And since graduating

is the only way I can put this hellhole behind me, I have to choose my battles.

When I don't respond, Mr. Hamilton opens a drawer to his right and slams a pile of college brochures—wrapped in red ribbon—onto the desk. Like he's Santa Claus and Christmas has come early.

"I wouldn't worry about any of these ones," he scoffs, taking most of the pile away with unnecessary flourish. "Given your track record, you don't stand a chance."

I crack a smile and feel the corner of my mouth lifting with pride. My rap sheet of detentions is longer than any of my academic achievements. The guys and I beat Austin McNally's '06 record last year.

After Mr. Hamilton's finished sorting through the pile, only three brochures remain: one for a community college in the next county over and two with such terrible stock images I don't even bother committing their names to memory.

"I don't want to go to college," I huff, flipping my skateboard up between my knees. "I just want to graduate."

I'm familiar with the look Mr. Hamilton gives me next. I've seen it from adults my whole life. Though the order can be, and usually is, interchangeable, it's always the same thing: lips pursed, arms crossed, followed by some snarky remark about "not wanting to believe that."

"I hope you don't mean that," Mr. Hamilton says, folding his arms.

It's like fucking clockwork.

His eyebrows are about to spark, that's how close they are. "Do you have any *passions*, Mr. Mackenzie?"

I pause, biting the inside of my lip.

This question always gets me. When we're kids, adults love to ask us what we want to be when we grow up, which is basically what Mr. Hamilton is asking now.

I was seven the first time I had to answer that. It was Career Day at school, and Malcolm Weaver's dad came to talk to the class about being a police officer. But I didn't want to listen. I already knew what that entailed. Ma and I had just moved to Valentine, Ohio to escape the officer that, up until recently, I called my dad. And this one was no different; he walked deliberately between the desks, his boots thudding over the linoleum like they carried the life sentences of his arrests. I felt his breath on the back of my neck as he spoke, felt my knees trembling against my seat.

When it was my turn to speak, I'd said I wanted to be Percy Jackson because Percy Jackson was *the man* growing up.

Sure, I got a few laughs from the room, but Officer Weaver wasn't amused. He rapped his knuckles along my desk and asked again, slower this time, like I hadn't comprehended the question.

That shut me up real quick.

I learned right then and there that I wasn't allowed to be the Riptide-wielding, badass demigod I wanted to be most in life. Because the truth is, when adults ask that question, they don't really want to know what you have to say.

I cross my legs, pretending to ponder my answer. "Ma says I'd make a good lawyer with all the arguing I do."

Mr. Hamilton's hollow laugh fills the air with the scent of stale coffee breath. "Sorry, kiddo, but you'll never be a lawyer. Not with these grades."

Did I mention I hate this man?

He pulls out a copy of my most recent report card, holding it between two fingers like it's covered in the Black Plague. Even from across the desk, I can see it's riddled with Ds. "Math seems to be your best bet. How about accounting?"

The first thought that comes to mind is Ma's mind-numbing fiancé, Tad, who popped the question last week at Red Lobster

after one too many margaritas and a heated discussion about amortizations.

“I’d rather watch paint dry for the rest of my life,” I deadpan, thinking of all the tax conversations I’ve suffered through in the last three years.

My phone buzzes inside my pocket, so I dig it out and find a text from Tony.

Where the hell are you?

When I look up, Mr. Hamilton is glaring at me.

“Sorry,” I say, though I’m not sure if I’m apologizing for having my phone out or for insinuating his career suggestion was quite possibly the worst outcome known to mankind. I guess it works for both.

“Wesley.” Mr. Hamilton gets up and sits on the edge of his desk as if to reason with me. “Can I call you Wes?” Without waiting for my reply, he continues, “I used to be you, Wes. The slacker, the”—Oh, *God*, not air quotes—“punk.’ The one whose only concern for the future was what beer he’d buy on the weekend with his fake ID.”

Okay, that’s not even a question. It’s Budweiser. It’s always Budweiser. Brad would kill me otherwise.

“But then I straightened out. I ditched my deadbeat friends, found the perfect girl, and got it together.” He shakes my forearm at the end of his sentence, like doing so will cure me of my so-called punkness.

I side-eye him, wondering at what point touching my arm becomes unwelcome bodily contact. The answer is immediately.

“It’s your turn now, son. I’m passing the torch.” He grabs the college brochures and hands them to me like he’s Emperor Palpatine tempting Luke Skywalker to join the Dark Side.

Just then, the bell rings, and I jump out of my seat because a)

I want to get as far away from this torch ceremony as humanly possible and b) it isn't something I hear on a regular basis since I'm always skipping class, so it legit startles me.

"Saved by the bell, it seems. Get to class, Wes, and if I catch you skipping again, so help me, I will drop-kick your ass."

"You can't talk to me like that," I say, throwing my skateboard to the ground. I relish the sound of its wheels screeching against the floor.

"I think I just did." Mr. Hamilton snaps his fingers, motioning for me to pick up my board. "Oh, and Mr. Mackenzie?"

I turn on my heels.

"Detention first thing Monday morning when you get back from winter break."

"What the hell? Why?"

"You don't honestly think I'd let you slam a kid into the lockers without consequence, do you?" He doesn't wait for my answer before closing the door behind him.

Speak of the Devil. I catch the kid from earlier snickering down the hall, having watched our entire exchange from afar.

"What are you looking at?" I bark, charging at him with my skateboard.

The kid jumps, dropping a black-and-white notebook, and races around the corner.

I watch him flee down the hall as Mr. Hamilton's words echo between my ears. *If you don't get your act together, you're not going to graduate.*

Groaning, I pick up the kid's notebook.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" I call after him.

The notebook's bursting at the seams, held together by an elastic band. It looks too important to throw away, so I shove it in my backpack and chuck the college brochures into the nearest trashcan.

There's something symbolic in the way the brochures fall

among the garbage—like I’m tossing away a future I could never live up to anyway—that makes me pause. The words “Community College” stick out from behind a crumpled piece of paper, as though begging me to reconsider. I glance around the hall to make sure no one’s around before pulling out my phone and snapping a photo.

When the bell rings again, I contemplate heading to world history but decide against it. There’s really no point since I didn’t complete last night’s homework and I’m not in the mood to explain why picking up a last-minute shift to help Ma pay rent was more important than some stupid assignment about the Great Depression.

Mr. Hamilton can go to hell anyway.

This whole situation is completely out of reach.

Graduation.

College.

Getting my shit together.

But above all else, the one thing next to impossible in his grand illusion of life is the girlfriend part.

The wooing of a woman.

The straightening up and straightening out.

Because despite the leather jacket and skateboard and disheveled bedhead, I’m as gay as they come.

Not that anyone would know.