

The Children of the Sun

Laaja synopsis
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Dream sequence: children in a park, on the swings, stealing kisses, the sensation of fingers touching, skipping rope, excited laughter under the embrace of a warm sunlight, which envelopes all and casts long, black shadows all over the tarmac.

Dawn, an twelve-year old girl, wakes up. Looking around, the room seems emptier than usual. She has been dreaming during class at a special school and Nordic research institution in Finland for children with a xeroderma pigmentosum, an especially rare skin condition, where the children's skin is dangerously sensitive to the sun's rays. This is where the children - foreign to this land - spend their days, while also being monitored to unlock the secrets of cancer and ageing.

Bandage Boy, eleven, jokes about Dawn always having the same dreams in class. He goads her to open the school front door already. Getting up from her desk, Dreamy Dawn literally levitates in the air, as she follows Bandage Boy to his room.

Hovering out of the classroom, Dawn hears an argument in the hallway. The parents of another girl, Alice, have brought formal, bureaucratic education officials to meet their teacher, Sophia, who has secretly been substituting more and more hours a week for the children to just share dreams in class. For these children, who know well their fate of dying young, and who live in a very sheltered, but boring indoor world provided by their fearful parents, dreaming is, as Sophia calls it, and escape and 'the purest form of art'. The officials seen distant and pity the children.

Alice's traditional and intimidated parents threaten to have Sophia fired for inspiring futile hope in the children, which they think will hurt the children in the long run. Overprotective, they don't trust the physical and mental safety of their children if they become too enthusiastic about their chances in life.

Near the school's back door, we see other parents discuss how it is now more dangerous to stay outside at night nowadays, not being able to trust your safety anymore. School staff, who are smoking a cigarette by the back door, are half-listening to a broadcast about a sea of refugees pouring into the country, and complain about the world being a more suspicious place. They stomp their smokes in the early snowfall, uninspired by the characteristically Finnish, jet black sky.

Alice, a frail teenager with the degenerative disease progeria, but stuck in the same school with the other children, grabs her fashion collage books and rushes off upon hearing her parents' plan to take her from school.

Alice retreats from the adults to her room and places her collage books on her night desk. She sees the light snowfall through the window. Then, she catches her reflection in

the window. In stark contrast to her book of perfect models, she looks like an old man, with an oversized, bald, wrinkly and venous head.

Across the hallway, she sees Dawn and Bandage Boy revealing their passive hopes of seeing more of the outside world. They'll never do it, or get out. Furious, and facing her own forced departure, she walks over and barks at them, daring them to help her leave and go to see the sunrise. For a moment, Bandage Boy loses his bravado and looks stumped. He adjusts the bandages on his face, which cover recent plastic surgery for face burns. Alice leaves, seething.

Elsewhere in the school, young Alphonse, nine, sits in his usual spot on top of a cupboard, observing the world pass by. He often pretends he lives in a tree, however being stuck inside the building leaves few options to see the world from the high vantage point of a tree. His attention turns to Blink, a nine-year-old boy who is transfixed by the television, now left unattended by the adults, who have retreated to argue in an office at the other end of the school. He stares at the people in the radiating box of light, moving closer to the television. Bandage Boy hides behind the door, before slowly entering, Dawn in tow, to see what Blink has discovered.

The flickering television presents a panoply of serene summery landscapes, masses of poor people escaping something in the snow - and beautiful people applying sun cream in a commercial.

Alice enters the room. She has formulated a plan to escape the school: she shakes a bunch of keys in one hand. They all put their meagre savings in a pot on the table. It's now or never -

We see the school's back door ajar and the hall stand on a painted blue and white wall, liberated of the children's overcoats.

As the parents are occupied with the authorities, the children sneak out of the school and towards the evening city. Slipping down darkened alleys, they peer into houses in the neighbourhood. They see house after house of families living their mundane daily lives. Blink drops his sunglasses at the sight. Looking through the windows, they see children neglected to their video consoles and televisions, pensioners left staring at walls, people sitting passively on their sofas.

They take the first bus they see. Boarding the bus, they attract the examination of passengers. The children look like awkward space men in their winter clothes and

sunglasses, which normally provide cover from the dangerous sun rays. People are staring at Alice.

Slowly, seeing the darkened sky and the passengers' eyes, the children discard their protective hats and sunglasses. In turn, they begin to observe their fellow travellers, now shyly avoiding their eye contact.

Alice has brought a map with her. Folding it over the backrest of a bench, she scans the paper for the best route to their destination. She tells the team about a park at the other end of the city; a park with magnificent trees, swings, rides, on a hill top with the best view of the city and the sunrise. Suddenly, the bus halts - it has reached its terminal stop near the city centre and the children have to get out and make their way by foot.

Meanwhile, back at the school, the parents have noticed the children's absence. Many of the parents are paralysed by this, however Alice's parents, further angered, begin to look for the children.

Regrouping, the children forge ahead like a pack of tourists, trying to navigate the city's streets and alleys with Alice's map.

They pass several bars and clubs with adults in a drunken, chaotic state. A couple break out into an argument, frightening the children.

Running off, they follow the bustle of the chilly night city, with the homeless mixing with the well-to-do walking past them. People in line for some kind of fashionable restaurant. A sunlight bar.

Turning off to a quieter street, they close in on a makeshift urban refugee centre at a hostel. An angry mob has gathered around the building, throwing bottles and yelling at the occupants. A frightened group of children peer from behind the curtains of a window, catching our characters' sight, before being whisked away to safety. Alice and her friends gaze in amazement of the activity. Blink remains put, staring at the lit fires.

A couple of streets down, they see a governmental retirement home hit by recent budgetary cuts. Through the windows, they see the same they saw in the suburbs: people sitting sedated, now with medication, with attendants absent. Alice catches a glimpse of her aged features in the window, and in a burst of fury, she dashes off to the front door of the retirement home. The surprised children look at themselves and scurry after her.

Alice and her team burst into the main pensioners' room, but their entrance receives a delayed response. The children walk around the pensioners, who gaze back with muted

smiles. The children wave their hands in front of the pensioners' faces to gauge response - nothing. A meeting of young and old, both within touching distance of death.

Alice darts for the radio, broadcasting a bland news story about more government cuts and revived markets, and turns the knob furiously: disco music! As the life in the pensioners' eyes lights up, Dawn takes the hand of a woman who has fallen asleep. From the street, we see that the children have resuscitated the whole room.

Alphonse, entertaining two pensioners, notices Blink through the window. Blink is standing on the street, having clocked a cinema a block away. Alphonse calls the children to the window and they try to catch up with Blink. Alice returns to grab her map and, passing a night nurse preoccupied with television, she leaves the pensioners to dance the night away.

As the children arrive at the cinema, Blink has already disappeared into one of the rooms. We follow the children as they jump between screens, with each film displaying a different, alternative version of the modern world: comedy, romance, horror, action. The children observe the audience as much as the vast screens, fascinated by the way different emotions in the films affect people. They imagine the audience members floating up and into the screen worlds.

Clutching her map, Alice has got stranded from the others. She walks up a dimly lit alley and towards a light outside an unusual looking shop. The sign says is all: 'End of Life'. Opening the door, she finds the shop sells everything from chocolate to spare parts for machines. Ray, the shop keeper, ascends from behind the counter to greet her. There is a little of everything for any person, he says. Food is thrown away while still edible and machines are designed to break early, he says. All those things end up here. Alice listens intently. Despite her young age, the irony is not lost on her that she belongs here.

Meanwhile, we see the parents' search party move along the street near the school neighbourhood. They find Blink's glasses on the ground.

A worried Sophia sits alone in the school. She notices that her coat has been taken off the coat rack. Her keys are gone.

The children are kicked out of the cinema by the staff. As they realise Alice and Blink are missing, their confidence is shaken. Tired, they begin quarrelling with each other, resigned to their fates of being locked indoors. Trying to avoid the quarrel, Alphonse begins climbing up a dead street light, but it begins flickering, so he slides back down.

They back track into the security of a darkened alleyway and, saddened, confront their

own fears. They were lost - perhaps their hopes of reaching the park and enjoying the sunrise were just dangerous dreams, like their parents told them? Suddenly, Blink re-emerges from the shadows of the cinema's corridors. Dawn rushes to hug him. He tells them that, in order to survive this journey, they need to survive it together.

Back at 'the End of Life', the shop keeper tells Alice she doesn't truly belong there. She, like everyone, belongs wherever they are at that very moment. She should 'be whoever she is' to feel at home anywhere, disregarding others' opinions of her, her friends and their lifespans.

Back with the search party, the parents begin doubting their parenting skills, revealing for the first time their softer side and that their fears regarding the children overpower them. Even though the children are sick, the parents should let them roam more.

A bright shard of light slowly lights up the alley. Alice approaches the children, accompanied by the shop keeper, who has been able to monitor the area with his CCTV system made from spare parts. Alice, map in tow, takes over and the children gather around. Leaving her new friend behind, the children can now resume their journey to the park.

Opening the map reveals — that they are almost there.

The children manage to get back on track and can now see the park hill ahead of them. Alice is very tired and cold and is being supported by the others. She usually only goes out for a few hours at a time - this is pushing her limits. Dawn the dreamer takes Alice on her back, as Dawn rises up the incline.

As the children reach the hilltop, Dawn descends and lets Alice down on the ground. As Dawn moves on, Alice stands proud. She's been here before. Although it is very late, they muster the energy to marvel at the sight of the city before them. The sun is rising, as Alice promised. As it does, Alphonse sees the most magnificent of trees to climb. Witnessing the rays of sun, Blink is content without his television.

But, it is now freezing - how will they ever make it back to their parents? They're exhausted, in the middle of no-where and no-one knows where they are - they are doomed.

Alice walks up to the children - and produces a bunch of keys from her pocket. Following Alice down a path, they walk up to the entrance of an empty watchtower. She hands the keys to Alphonse, who lets them in. He is in awe of the warm and mighty building, which lights up upon entrance.

Dawn walks up to Bandage Boy and tries to tighten his dressing, but he stops her. In defiance of the burns he has received, for this one moment, he will watch the sun together with her. He undresses his bandages and she takes his hand. Sitting in the swings, they watch the city wake up. Finally, they are the ones watching, not the ones being watched over. Hello, sun.

We see a relieved Sophia, their teacher, enter the doorway of the watchtower to pick them up. However, for one precious moment, the watchtower and its sunrise serves as a warm home for this family of outsiders.