BOOK REVIEW

More Happy Than Not

By Adam Silvera

The last couple of months because of, well, you-know-what, but I passed everything (even chemistry, which can go in a corner and melt in hydrochloric acid forever). My guidance counselor tried getting me to talk to her about how I should use this summer to get back in a better headspace for senior year. I totally agree, but right now I’m more concerned about tonight than I am about high school.

The apartment feels extra small, my head even smaller, so I go outside to breathe for a second or minute or hour, but no longer than that because I am having sex tonight whether I know how to or not. I spot Brendan heading into a staircase, call his name, and he holds the door open. He got his first blow job at thirteen from this girl Charlene, and he would go on and on about it whenever we played video games. I hated him for achieving something I hadn’t, but he’s actually the kind of person whose ways I should tap into.

“Yo, you got a second?”

“Uh.” We both look down at his hand and he’s carrying weed in a Ziploc bag. Long gone are the days when he was a solitary whiz. “I actually gotta go handle this.”

I make my way past him before he can close the door. The staircase smells like fresh piss and I see the puddle on the floor; it was probably Skinny-Dave who is very territorial. “You blazing or dealing?”

Brendan checks his watch. “Dealing. Customer is coming in a minute.”

“I’ll be fast. I need to know how to have sex.”

“Let’s hope it’s not fast for your sake.”

“Thanks, asshole. Help me not fuck this up.”

He shakes his pungent weed in my face. “I gotta make some bank, A.”

“And I gotta make my girlfriend happy, B.” I pull out the two condoms I bought from work yesterday and shake them in his face. “Look, just give me some tips or tell me girls don’t really care about their first times or something. I’m freaking out right now that I’m not—I swear to God I will pay Mc-Crazy to destroy you if you repeat this—that I’m not going to be good enough.”

Brendan rubs his eyes. “Fuck all that. I honed a bunch of girls just so I could get off and get better.”

“But I would never treat Genevieve like that.” I wouldn’t use any girl like that. Maybe Brendan isn’t the right person to ask after all.

“That’s why you’re a virgin. Go ask Nolan for advice.”

“Nolan, who’s fathered two kids at seventeen? No thanks.”

“Aaron, don’t be some little boy who everyone will think is a punk or fag if you bend over.”

“I’m not trying to bend over!”

Brendan’s phone rings. “It’s my customer. You gotta bounce.”

I don’t move. I expect my sort of best friend to step his game up during this big day for me. “I need you to do better than that.”

“What, did your father not give you a sex talk before he kicked it?”

Really crude way of labeling my dad’s suicide, I know. “No, he would always joke that we had HBO. I overheard him telling Eric some stuff once, though.”

“There you go. Ask your brother.” I’m about to protest when he stops me. “Look, unless you’re about to buy this weed off me, you need to go.” Brendan fake-smiles with a hand out for money. I turn away. “That’s what I thought,” he says. “Man up tonight.”

There’s a list of things I would rather do than have the sex talk with my brother, but dying a virgin isn’t on it.
I knee him in the nose. Then Skinny-Dave comes at me with a sucker punch, but it’s Me-Crazy who actually tackles me down to the ground and I know I’ve lost. I can’t move out from under his grip. Now it’s all pain. Resisting gets harder and everything becomes dimmer and blurrier with each punch to my face and each blow to my chest. Me-Crazy is roaring while he strangles me, and Skinny-Dave and Nolan stomp me out.

I shout and twist and cry and guard my face with the one arm I manage to get free. Me-Crazy gets off of me and I think it’s over. I’m so dizzy. The ground I’m crumbled on is spinning around, first one way and then another. I don’t even bother trying to crawl away. I feel like I’m falling...

No, someone is picking me up. I confused up with down. But the terrifying sensation of Crazy Train Mode is insanely familiar. He runs with me over his shoulder, and I hear Brendan yelling at him to stop, that he’s taking it too far, but Me-Crazy keeps running. I don’t know where we’re going until we crash through the glass door of my building and I’m sprawled across the lobby floor.

There’s an explosion in the back of my head, a delayed reaction. Blood fills my mouth. This is what death feels like, I think. I scream like someone is turning a hundred knives inside of me, spitting up blood as I do. And I’m not crying because of the attack. I’m crying because there’s new noise in my head, and it builds from a couple faded echoes into an uproar of jumbled voices—all the memories I once forgot have been unwound.
through his small talk about “procrastination masturbation,” where you save a porn link for later because you can’t be bothered with the cleanup at that moment. But it’s not long before he stops playing so he can check on his laundry, leaving me alone with a handball I “better not fucking lose” or he’ll castrate me and my future sons. (Sorry, Faust.)

Twenty days.
I only have to survive twenty more days without her.

😊 😊 😊 😊

“HELLO?”

“Hey, it’s Aaron.”

“I know, Stretch. What’s up?”

“Nothing, which is a problem. I should be doing something instead of sitting here and only missing Genevieve. You free to hang out?”

“I’m sort of in the middle of something right now. You doing anything tomorrow morning?”

“Nope. Unless whatever you’re about to suggest is stupid, in which case, yeah, I have plans to save the world or something.”

“Well, if you’re done saving the world before noon we could go see a movie.”

“I guess the city can take care of itself for a couple hours. So what are you up to right now?”

“Nothing,” he says.

He sounds kind of ashamed and dodgy, sort of like the way someone (not Skinny-Dave) gets really uncomfortable when you ask them if they watch porn or not, even if the answer is obvious. But I let it go and instead get him to talk to me about stupid things, like what superpower he would like to have—invincibility, which Skinny-Dave always confuses for invisibility.

It’s better than handball, at least.
Eric is playing the latest Halo game—I’ve lost count to which one this is—and his match is finally coming to a close. I have no idea what to say. We sometimes play racing games together, less so these days. We definitely never talk to each other about monumental life things, not even Dad’s death. His match ends and I stop acting like I’m reading Scorpius Hawthorne and the Crypt of Lies and sit up from my bed.

“Do you remember Dad’s sex talk?”

Eric doesn’t turn, but I’m sure the words are sinking in. He speaks into his headset, telling his “soldiers” he needs two minutes, and then mutes the microphone. “Yeah. Those talks are always really scary.”

We aren’t looking at each other. He’s staring at the postgame stats, probably analyzing how his team could’ve done better, and I’m shifting from the worn yellowed stains in the corners of the room to outside the window where life isn’t awkward. “What did he say to you?”

“Why do you care?”

“I want to know what he would’ve told me.”

Eric taps buttons that have zero effect on the menu screen.

“He said he didn’t think about feelings when he was our age. Grandpa encouraged him to just have fun when he was ready, and to always make sure to wear a condom so he didn’t have to grow up too soon like some of his friends did. And he would’ve said you’re making him proud if you actually feel ready.”

Eric echoing Dad’s words is not the same.

I miss my dad.

Eric switches his microphone back on and turns away like he regrets ever talking to me. I shouldn’t have forced him to remember Dad when he was distracted; the grieving need their peace whenever they can get it. He resumes playing, instructing his team like the alpha he is. Like Dad was whenever he played basketball and baseball and football, and anything else he did.

“I don’t know. At least those cash cows finish their comics. My comic—

“You have a comic?”

“No one for sale.”

“Where is it?”

“Not here.”

“Can I read it?”

“It’s not done.”

“So what?”

“It’s not good.”

“So when Stretch, I let you use my rooftop for your girl’s birthday. You owe me.”

“I thought I was going to help you figure out who you are.”

“Just let me read your comic.”

“Fine. Soon.”

I think about the page where I left off in the comic, with Sun Warden torn between saving his girlfriend or best friend from becoming dragon food. If someone asked me to choose between saving Genevieve or Thomas, I would rather dive headfirst into the mouth of the dragon. I’m about to tell him how I haven’t drawn a whole lot since my dad’s death, but I look up and see Collin from school—and he sees me too.

I feel a little shitty. I wasn’t 100 percent supportive or sympathetic toward him when he told me he got Nicole pregnant. But, well, sex is basic math; condom equals less chance of having a baby, and no condom usually equals baby. And I shouldn’t have to feel like a dick because he didn’t think to properly wrap his up. Even though I’m a firm believer that everyone in the universe will one day cut the bullshit—as in politely nod at one another instead of wasting their short lives with pointless conversations—I feel obligated to say something.

I walk up to Collin. He smells of a cheap drugstore-brand cologne.

I pull a shirt out of my dresser that smells like concentrated dish soap. That’s what happens when you share your clothes with a brother who rubs everything against cologne samples. Before I leave, I tell him, “I’m spending the night at Genevieve’s. Tell Mom I’m at Brendan’s playing some new game or something.”

These words knock him out of his zone. He looks at me for a second before remembering he’s totally disinterested in my life, and goes back to playing.

I’m torn walking to Genevieve’s.

I’m overthinking everything. Why am I not running? If I really want this, I should be running, or at least jogging, in the interest of saving some energy. But if I don’t want to do this, I should be dragging my feet and flipping around to go home. Before I reach her door. Maybe I’m playing it cool by just walking there, not too eager; not thinking too highly of this completely monumental rite of passage to manhood. Here I am, a lanky kid with a chipped tooth and first chest hairs, and somebody wants to do this with me. And not just anyone. It’s Genevieve: my artist girlfriend who laughs at all my unfunny jokes and doesn’t abandon me during anything-but-fun times.

I step into this corner store, Sherman’s Deli, and pick up a little something for her since it feels like a dick move to take a girl’s virginity without some kind of present. Skinny-Dave says flowers are the perfect deflowering gift, so if that’s what he thinks, it’s gotta be the wrong move.

As I approach Genevieve’s door and knock, I look down at my crotch and say, “You better do what you were made to do. So help me God, I will ruin you if you don’t. I will absolutely massacre you. Okay, Aaron, stop talking to your dick. And yourself.”

“Hey. How’s your summer been? We miss you around the courtyard, dude.” It’s a bit of a lie since he always thought manhunt was child’s play. He’s not wrong, but he never fully beasted at it like we do. He preferred sports, mainly basketball, before I reach her door. Maybe I’m playing it cool by just walking there, not too eager; not thinking too highly of this completely monumental rite of passage to manhood. Here I am, a lanky kid with a chipped tooth and first chest hairs, and somebody wants to do this with me. And not just anyone. It’s Genevieve: my artist girlfriend who laughs at all my unfunny jokes and doesn’t abandon me during anything-but-fun times.

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I’m about to sit in the alleyway between the meat market and flower shop and maybe flip through one of the comics I brought for Collin—Issue #7 of The Dark Alternates, the big finale—but community service do-gooders are painting over the spray-painted black-and-blue world Collin and I made.

And then he’s here.

“’Sup,” Collin says, nodding at me. He looks around, probably for spies with cameras, and finds the community service team in our spot. “Hey, what the hell are they doing?”

“Community service,” I say.

“Where can we go instead? You need to go buy a condom too because Nicole was finally in the mood last night and I used mine.” Of course he uses a condom after she’s pregnant.

“Don’t need them.”

“You want to do it without . . . ?”

“Look, our graffiti is gone.”

“Yeah. That sucks. Oh shit, you got the last issue! Let’s go read it.” I hand the comic over to him. In another life, this could’ve been cool. He speculates on what might happen: “Who do you
BOOK REVIEW MORE HAPPY THAN NOT By Adam Silvera

KENNETH WAS FUCKING GUILTY down yesterday and it’s all Kyle’s fault. Kyle couldn’t fucking help himself and just had to fucking fuck Jordan’s fucking sister, even though we all fucking knew Jordan is the kind of fucking guy who would fucking kill someone if you fucking crossed him. Those bullets were fucking meant for fucking Kyle but no, they fucking found their way into fucking Kenneth when he was fucking innocently coming home from his fucking clarinet lessons at school. We will never get the fucking chance to see Kenneth on a fucking stage, playing us a song we would fucking call him a little bit for, even if we are so fucking proud of him for fucking making something of himself.

Thankfully I have Collin here. He is being a real fucking champ and letting me cry into his chest. He promises distractions, like movies and comics, but the best fucking distraction of all is having someone who will hold me whenever I’m fucking lost and defeated.

COLLIN AND I went pummeled to see the new Avengers movie together—until our girlfriends invited themselves to join us. But like good boyfriends, we let them tag along. Genevieve fought to sit next to Nicole so they could swoon and stuff over Robert Downey Jr. but Collin argued this was a dude’s movie and the dudes should get to sit next to each other. Collin even faked jealousy over them wanting to talk about other guys. Crazy.

An hour into the movie, I reach for a handful of popcorn from the bucket on Collin’s lap, slily brushing his arm. I think pretty little of myself for being such a dick with Genevieve directly to my left, and even when she’s far away, but Collin makes me happy and that’s that.

But best. Fucking. Movie. Ever.” Collin whispers to me, pressing his lips against my ear for a second. This double date is kind of a turn-on, but there’s a big hole here: we won’t go home with each other.

“Hey, I’ve seen better,” I whisper back.

“The hell you have.”

I punch his arm and elbow him. (Tip your girlfriends won’t suspect you’re sleeping with your guy friend if you’re hitting them.)

“Get a room,” Nicole hisses after some popcorn flies on her. (Or maybe they will.)

Genevieve calls my name right as Collin leans in to whisper something else to me and I turn to him. I laugh at his dumb joke about a monkey and a dragon in a bar, pissing off others in the theater. Genevieve included, probably. I want to ask her what’s up but I can’t expose myself for ignoring her in favor of my undercover boyfriend—or whatever we are—so instead I lean in on her and whisper, “I cannot wait for later tonight, Gen.”

GENEVIEVE PULLS MY BELT and drags me to the edge of her bed. Her father is out of town until tomorrow, for a reason I can’t remember, and it’s obvious what her intentions were after the double date. If I want to keep what I have with Collin, I have to play along so she doesn’t get suspicious. She climbs onto her bed and relaxes on her knees, pausing in front of my face.

“You want this, right?”

I should tell her something like “Not really” and just walk away and call up Collin. Instead, I grab her shoulders and pull her to me, kissing her neck, face, and lips. “You’re beautiful,” I whisper right into her ear.

marching to my death, and I know I sort of am, at least the part of me everyone is better off without. The panic melts away.

“I’m ready,” I tell Dr. Castle with zero doubts. I turn back to Genevieve and while I’m kissing the girl who has been keeping my secret without knowing it. I wonder again if maybe she’s known all along. We’ve never gone as far as saying we love each other in the year we’ve been together. It’s simple, I know, but she’s smart enough to never admit loving someone who can’t love her back.

I never thought I would say anything like this to her, that I would rather hold this secret in my tight fist until the day I die, but I go ahead.

“I know you know about me, Gen. I won’t be like that tomorrow, okay? We’re going to be happy together, for real.”

She’s speechless, so I kiss her one last time and she weakly waves to me, probably saying bye to the person she found a way to love despite that wall I’m about to knock down. I quickly turn around and head through the door, sick that all my lies and chaos have brought me to this breaking point. I know it’s what has to happen. I can’t be like Collin who can pretend like nothing ever happened between us and who can fucking forget everything that did. I no longer have to be ruined by another guy. I no longer have to hurt the girl who thinks I love her.

At the threshold, Dr. Castle places a comforting hand on my shoulder.

“Remember that this is for your own good,” she reminds in her light English accent.

“I think we both know that remembering doesn’t really do anyone good around here,” I half joke, and she smiles.

I won’t remember that this is for my own good, because I won’t remember why I came here in the first place. Leto will make me forget my relationship with Collin. My insides can stop burning me alive with how much I miss him. I won’t ever get jumped on the train again for liking another guy. My friends will stop being suspicious of what I’m doing when I’m not hanging with them. We’re going to kill that part of me that’s ruined everything. I’m going to be straight, just like how my father would’ve wanted.

THIS PROCEDURE ISN’T A PROMISE I’ll stop being you-know-what, but using science against nature is my best shot.

I’m stretched across a narrow bed with wires sealed to my forehead and heart. I’ve lost count of how many needles they’ve stabbed into my veins and how many times someone has asked me if I’m comfortable, and if I’m positive I want to do this. I’ve said yes and yes and yes a lot.

Some doctors and technicians are running around and setting up monitors; others are typing away on computers and doing analytical stuff with blueprints of my brain. Dr. Castle has stayed by my side the entire time. She fills up a glass of water from a small basin, drops two blue pills in, and hands it to me.

I stare at the pills, but don’t drink yet. “Do you think I’ll be okay, Doc?”

“Absolutely painless, kiddo,” she says.

“And my dreams will be altered too, right?” Some dreams are unwanted flashbacks; others are nightmares, like the one last night where Collin put me on a bike, even though I wasn’t ready, and pushed me down the steepest hill, laughing at me as he walked away.

“To avoid our work being unwound, yes,” Dr. Castle says. “This wouldn’t be an issue if we could simply erase memories without consequence, but memory manipulation is far less of a risk. When we put you under, you won’t even have to relive the memories—that would be cruel. It’ll feel like a long, long sleep.”
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PROFANITY COUNT AND OTHER SENSITIVE WORDS

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RED FLAGS

Sexual Content
Language
Drinking
Violence
”Memory-relief procedure”
”Experimental brain work”
Teen Pregnancy

Normalization –

Normalizing a person refers to social processes through which ideas and actions come to be seen as “normal” and become taken-for-granted or “natural” in everyday life. It is a process whereby behaviors and ideas are made to seem “normal” through repetition or through ideology and propaganda. To alter, modify, convert, change, adapt.

CONCLUSION

Not appropriate literary content for K-12 schools