I’m Happy

A story from the Milspur Archives

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Horrible morning

My head hurts. Something is stabbing my ears. I feel my hand make contact with what feels like a box. Finally, peace.

It starts again, louder this time. What could be making—

It's my alarm.

I shoot up. My alarm reads 6:12 am. God damn it. Why do I always need to sleep in?

I throw the sheets aside and rush to the bathroom; there's no time to make my bed. I throw some gel in my hair and struggle to wrangle it into position. I part my hair carefully, making sure I match the dress code regulation of a quarter part.

I throw on my school uniform, making sure there are no wrinkles and my shirt is tucked in properly. Oh god. That thing was due today. The uh... The math homework. Not again. Why do I always do this?

I run down the stairs without my book. Not that there's any time to read it. It’s 6:40 now, school starts at 7:30. The walk should take 30, maybe 40, minutes. I hurry past my mom. My dad's not up like usual, and his briefcase is still unpacked on the kitchen table, and bills are clumped in piles around it.

“Bye, have fun at school!” She must have already had a cup of coffee. Even with her energy, she still has bags under her eyes.

“I’ll try.” The door closes behind me. It’s a long walk, and the mornings are always cold. I wish I could drive.

The walk is a blur; it’s the same thing every day. The only difference is more clearance signs and some posters for the upcoming harvest festival. A radio crackles in a nearby shop, “*Unemployment rates continue to rise as the amethyst crisis worsens—”* I stop listening. How could it get worse? The crisis has already stopped us from driving.

The first time I walked to school, it was dark and cold. I got lost all the time at first. I had more than a few close calls with a homeless person or a druggie.

I was scared for the first few months. Not anymore, I've gotten used to it. The roads were barely wide enough for two cars, which makes sense; they were designed for wagons.

At the very least, each building had its own personality; some were tall and red, and some were short and blue, which makes it easier to traverse the maze that is HavLehn. But once it gets dark, everything starts to look the same.

At least it's not Newtown with its glass offices and trendy stores I don’t buy from. It’s not like anyone can afford them. Not anymore.

I take a right at a wide red building with leaf railings. A bland blocky building made of red bricks is at the end of the street. It’s two stories tall with small, stubby windows every few feet. The flag of Supporia waves in front of the entrance. Large, bold, and slightly worn letters spell out LEHN HIGH SCHOOL. Directly below the letters, there are two sets of cloudy glass doors. It looks like a prison, a nice one, but still....

I check my watch. It's 7:20. I don't have enough time to do that math homework; hopefully nobody notices. I twist my frown into a smile and enter.

Bad day

When I sit down, there are only five minutes left to rush my homework. I have roughly 20 questions to do, which means I have to do one question every 15 seconds… That won't happen. I get through five and a half questions before the bell rings.

My teacher, Mr. Wensle, walks in from the back of the class. He is a stern man in his late forties. He wears a grey suit with a blood-red tie. As Mr. Wensle walks by, I adjust my homework and pen so they are parallel to the edge of the desk. He pauses for a moment, looks at me, then nods and moves on. Did he not see my unfinished homework?

One of my friends, Reggie, waves at me from the back of the class, then signs *how are you?* That's not allowed. He knows that. I don't wave back and return to facing straight forward.

Mr. Wensle reaches the front of the class and makes a crisp 180-degree turn, nearly spilling his coffee. He scans the class for a moment, "Good morning, everyone."

I sit up straight, "Good morning, sir!" I'm the only one who gave the proper response. The rest of the class only murmurs a half-hearted "morning."

Mr. Wensle scans the classroom one last time before smiling, "I see some students got ahead on their homework last night. Being proactive is a virtue that not many possess." I smile and straighten my papers again.

I didn't need to do the homework.

That can't be right. There are 20 questions, and only five have been finished. The assignment says 10.6. How am I ahead?

"Today is another workday. I have the video lesson posted on ClassAid for everyone to watch. If anyone has questions, please come and ask. I would like to remind everyone to work silently and diligently in class. That means no talking." His smile disappears as he looks at Reggie; his glasses give him the look of an owl. "Which some of you seem to have issues with."

Reggie gives Mr. Wensle an awkward smile before pulling out his computer.

Mr. Wensle forces a look of satisfaction, "Alright, get to work." The rest of us pull out our computers.

The video starts with some bland corporate music. It's extremely loud and horrendously forgettable. Some text in Times New Roman reads: "*Section 10.7 - polar coordinates*". I carefully write *10.7 notes* into my notebook in cursive. The music suddenly becomes awkwardly quiet, and a bland robotic voice then begins talking:

"Section 10.7 - polar coordinates

Thus far, we have been representing graphs of equations as a collection of points solely on the rectangular coordinate system, where ***a*** *and* ***b*** *represent the directed distances on the coordinate axes to the point* ***(a, b)****. In this section, we will study a different system called the* ***polar coordinate system****."*

I pause the video and quickly jot down: "*Section goal: <u>understand the polar coordinate system.</u>"* The video goes on forever, and I make sure to take detailed notes. Or at least look like it.

At one point, I started writing a little story. It was about a kid. He went on an adventure, far away from his hometown. He left not because he was bored of them, but because he wanted to save them. He wanted to make an impact on the world and not fade into the background. He

traveled far and wide, but he never seemed to find what he was looking for. Eventually, he decided that...

That droning robotic voice drills into my skull. It keeps echoing, burning itself into my ears. Its tone keeps shifting subtly, and the pauses become increasingly irregular. At one point, it almost sounded like a real person.

The video eventually stops, and my hearing fades to normal. The story sits between my notes, written in childish, unprofessional letters. I can't remember what it was about. The time is 09:25, class is almost over. Some kids are whispering about something. It sounds like a muted argument at first, then like they are agreeing on something. Mr. Wensel stops them with a glare. I return my notebook to its place in my backpack and sit up straight. The sound of the bell pierces through the silence. I stand up. Mr. Wensle stands up as well, "Have a good rest of your day, everyone." I bow slightly. "Thank you, sir."

By the time I leave the classroom, Reggie is already waiting for me outside, "You're such a suck up, at least say hi back." His uniform is slightly wrinkled, and his hair looks rushed.

I start adjusting my backpack straps. "Well... It's against the rules, and—"

He gives me a nudge. "I'm just messing with you. We've known each other for years. Why would I tell you that now?"

My neck hurts; I must have slept on it funny. "Did you do the homework? He said I was ahead."

He looks around for a second. "10.6?"

"Yah, 10.6."

“I did it, it wasn't due today. At least I hope. I can’t afford another missing assignment.”

He checks his watch, then looks up at the clock. “We should probably get going. I’ll see you at lunch!”

The hallways are crowded like usual. Nobody even stops to talk or grab something from their locker. Even turning into class can be difficult, like trying to wade through a river. Occasionally, you see someone you know, but only for a moment.

History class is next, Supporian history. Mr. Reden tries his best to make it fun. There's nothing due today, at least nothing I can remember. We were learning about the fall of Plemant and the economic crisis that preceded it. Ironic.

The classroom door appears to my right, and I step out of the river of people. The clock reads 09:37.

The smell of old books fills the air, and the shades scatter the light and give everything a golden hue. A giant Supporian flag hangs on the wall across from the door. Colorful maps and pictures of old heroes dot the walls. Maybe I could be like them one day. A poster in the back of the room reads: *History does not repeat, but it does rhyme*. The desks are spaced into groups like usual, so there's no test. Setting my backpack down, I slide into my desk.

Mr. Reden walks into the classroom and looks at the clock. He then walks over to his desk and begins reading. The rest of the class trickles in.

Demond is the first to sit down in my group. “Good morning, Trent... at least I hope.” He looks pale and has bags under his eyes.

“Oh, you know... Medium, how about you?”

Demond picks up his pen and begins fidgeting with it. “Not great… My dad got fired from his job at the docks last night, another series of layoffs, I think… I’m sorry, I didn't mean to vent; it's been a rough couple of weeks, you know.”

I look down. My dad works at the docks. He’s an office worker, but if they are laying off the longshoremen… “I’m so sorry. Is there anything I can do to help?”

Demond looks down. “I…I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you, I… We're okay.” Demond starts taking apart his pen and putting it back together.

Lucy rushes in at the last minute and almost falls sitting down. The bell rings as she pulls out her notebook. “Hi, what a morning,” she nods at Demond, but he keeps looking down.

“Well… He’s a ball of sunshine.” She stares at the empty seat next to me. “Where's Ket?”

I stare at the seat for a moment. “He’s probably just late; he’s never on time.”

Demond finally stops messing with his pen. “I don’t know… I didn’t see him in economics this morning.”

Lucy looks around the classroom for a moment. “Did he enlist?”

Demond looks up from his pen. “No way, he couldn't even sit through *Stuck in Time* without leaving.”

Lucy pulls out her notebook. “I remember him saying something about good pay.”

Demond straightens his posture. “I don’t think he could join anyway. Don’t you need a high school diploma?”

I feel around for my phone, “I’ll call him during lunch, I’m sure he’s fine, he’s probably just sick.”

Lucy flips through her notebook, which is almost entirely filled with doodles. “Didn't they lower the enlistment standards?”

The news was arguing about this last night. It was a very controversial decision by the POE. “I remember hearing something about that; it's not a good decision, but there's worse.”

Demond gives me a horrified look.

I don’t get what's so wrong with the idea; there's no war right now.

“Don’t leave us, Trent, at least not without a warning.”

I laugh, “I won't, there's better things to do than—”

Mr. Reden puts down his book and stands up, “Good... Kind of morning class.”

Chairs creak as people turn to watch Mr. Reden. “Today we are going to keep learning about Plemant, but this time we will focus on Plemre. As you know, or at least should know, Plemre is the capital of Estoria, and has been for centuries. Before the events chronicled in *the return*, which you should have already read, and before its fateful collapse, it was the capital of Plemant.”

He clicks a remote, the lights dim, and a picture appears on the screen. It shows a crowded street with a fountain in the background; there are vendors everywhere, and an aqueduct runs overhead. Behind the vendors, who look bored, there are homeless people. Nobody in the painting looks particularly happy, despite how beautiful the architecture seems.

Mr. Reden turns his back on the class to face the painting, “This was painted by an Estorian artist, years after Belisar and Iani reclaimed Plemre, but it still shows us something.”

He then turns around, “Plemre was a beautiful city, it had tons of aqueducts and a massive population. It was the center of the republic and later the empire. They called it the eternal light.”

How could they not see that they were collapsing? It seems obvious.

I look at Demond, he is messing with his pen again.

“But Plemant is still a society, and societies seem to follow the Ameicof cycle. After imperial Plemant reached its golden age around... 410bf I think, a series of crises caused things to slowly worsen.”

I look around. Lucy has already lost interest and is drawing again, and Demond looks like someone is forcing him to listen.

“One of the most important crises was a major recession caused by a major delay in copper imports.”

Mr. Reden pauses for a second and looks around; his gaze lingers on the poster in the back. “Imagine this, a resource that the military, industry, and transportation require suddenly becomes scarce and—”

Murmurs fill the classroom, I look at Lucy, “Like we need to imagine.”

How didn’t they notice? Lucy gives a faint laugh. Demond is now spinning a pencil he found on the floor.

Mr. Reden stands awkwardly in the front of the classroom, looking at the poster again. “I...I think that's enough for today, you all get the point. I have an activity for us to do anyway.”

We'd better not have to take notes, I don't think my folder can handle any more papers.

Mr. Reden pulls up a colored wheel and writes table numbers down. After spinning the wheel a few times, our table is given the color blue. After every table has an assigned color, Mr. Reden pulls up a map of the world, and each continent is subdivided into smaller states. “Each of you will play as a country, and each member will have to choose one of the following roles: general, emperor, treasurer, and diplomat.”

Mr. Reden looks at us, we all look at Ket’s seat. He would have been the perfect diplomat; he was always talking. “Blue nation, or whatever you want to call yourselves, the emperor will also be the diplomat. We’ll start in 10 minutes.”

He looks at his watch, then at the classroom clock. “That clocks off.” He sighs and looks at his watch again, “We’ll start when the classroom clock says 10:02.”

The classroom fills with noise. Demond is the first to say something at our table, “I’ll be the treasurer, I just had econ anyway.”

Lucy is still drawing something; it looks like a bunch of flowers, and each has a petal missing. I hope I can be an emperor. “What do you want to be?”

Lucy stops drawing and gives me an annoyed look, “I don’t care... I’ll be the general, I guess.”

I struggle to stifle my excitement, “I’ll be the emperor and diplomat then.”

Mr. Reden starts passing out a list of rules. He also gives each of us ten dice, seven red and three white. I take a look at the list:

1. *The red dice are used for battles. Add a dice for each attacking or defending troop.*

2. *Only seven troops can attack or defend at a time, unless resources are spent on defenses or infrastructure (See list on back).*
3. *The three white dice determine the national economy (See list on back).*
4. *You can only access resources if you control that province.*
5. *The Emperor can decide the tax rate; how that affects revenue depends on the economy (see list on the back).*
6. *You win once you have economic dominance or control of three continents.*
7. *Trade is allowed and recommended.*

I give the paper to Lucy, she quickly reads it and hands it to Demond. Demond takes a look, sighs, and flips the paper over.

To be continued... Lunch, and two more classes, still stand between Trent and the end of the day.