

# Please Be Happy.

1<sup>st</sup> Anniversary Booklet





# Thank you!

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**Warning: Spoilers ahead!**



studio élan



# Adirosa Postmortem

In just a couple days, it'll be the one year anniversary of releasing Please Be Happy. This time last year I was frantically putting the game together, at a grueling pace of... what was it... implementing 3-5 scenes every day? I remember feeling both despair and determination at knowing that there were 150 scenes in Please Be Happy and only a few months left to put all the elements together. I mustered up every bit of goodwill I've accrued over the last 10 years of my VN career to call in favors for support and we somehow, miraculously, got it over the finish line. I stayed up until 5 am the day of the release - and then continued to not sleep until maybe 2 am the next day. I was feeling proud for sure, but also maybe a little bit... hollow. I'm used to falling into depression after releases, but this wasn't that - it was like a wave of exhaustion crashing on me. I don't fully have the words for that post-release brainset. Maybe one day I can properly articulate it.

It's surreal to look back on. People have asked me to do a post-mortem before now, and I wanted to; for the one month anniversary, for the half-year anniversary. It somehow didn't feel quite urgent or pressing, and I kept myself busy. But it's something I really wanted to do, and so here I am now. I wanted to look back across the entire lifespan of the project.

Early 2018. There's still a year before Heart of the Woods comes out. Early years Élan was so ambitious, to the point that we were planning three large-scale concurrent games with staff overlap while we were working on Heart of the Woods. It's my final year of university. Josh decides to write a pitch document about a magical fantasy story with the aesthetic of the 1910's, about a potion shop owner and a fox girl, who comes to rob her in the dead of night but ends up protecting her instead. Honestly? Banger idea, maybe we should bring it back. There's a vegan vampire as a side character in there somehow. Those three become Aspen, Miho and Juliet. Josh comes to me asking if I'd be interested in helping flesh out the world and cultural aspects as he wanted to set it in a place inspired by New Zealand. Perfect! I know New Zealand! We also had another writer from New Zealand at the time, and we had a great time bouncing ideas off each other. I thought the fox girl could be a Gumiho. Memory magic, the fox bead, all these details are born - somewhere along the line, we changed the setting so it was a coffee shop AU. It was still just Miho and Aspen as the leads at the time, and that continued for a while. I also wanted Juliet to have an ouji lolita aesthetic. We find an artist, we get concepts, it's exciting, but mostly we're focused on Heart of the Woods.

Sometime in August of 2018, our dev server has a discussion about how a lot of writers become the directors for games to the point that it almost seems like the assumed default, and Josh mentions that all three of us were the directors for PBH. I said that was silly and we couldn't have three directors, and then Josh offered me the hat. I took it, and I think one of the first things I did was fire the old artist for being extremely overdue with concepts and poor communication, and find a new one. Josh was still busy directing and writing HOTW, and I was mostly just a GUI designer for it, so I had a lot of time to take charge and get things going for a shiny new project. Theo suggested an artist they liked on Twitter who did fanart for Flowers, a yuri visual novel, and we ended up with kobuta! (There was a minor scare where Kobuta thought we wanted 18+ content when I was just asking if they did it, and they almost rejected us but we worked through that!)

I was very, very secretive about PBH because I wanted to release it within three months of announcing. That, uh, didn't happen, but I'm still glad we announced later rather than earlier! We worked hard on HOTW and released it, and then our next priority was Starkeeper (the renamed version of The Waters Above.) Please Be Happy was fully a backburner project, but then due to some circumstances, Starkeeper got cancelled. It was a weird period where we didn't have a clear project to focus all of our efforts on. And then we got an opportunity - one where it seemed like someone was going to fund us fully to make a collaborative visual novel featuring their characters. It sort of... ended up... not being the grand opportunity we thought it would be, but we spent months conceptualizing and trying to make a game concept that would work for our investor. In the end, it fell through and we had a new WIP on our hands - one that would become Summer at the Edge of the Universe, and again a sense of aimlessness. The scope of Summer was too big, and we wanted to release something in 2020. So I, foolishly, thinking PBH was going to be a short 60k word game, suggested that perhaps we could fully focus on PBH. We were getting constant CGs, the sprites for the main girls were done, and I had a rough idea of the story. So that's what we did - I spent a month writing a 10k word outline trying to figure out all of the story beats, planning on hunkering down and releasing in 2020. I was writing, I was designing the UI and doing backgrounds. We had an opportunity to get a press release, so I made a trailer, and in it we stated...

Coming 2020.

I'm so sorry. Whoops?

That was fully the plan, but ultimately I'm glad it had the time to become the game it is today. What actually threw the real wrench into this was Highway Blossoms: Next Exit. It was supposed to be super easy - already had the sprites, just get a couple backgrounds and CGs, just get the script done during NaNoWriMo. The planning started in summer of 2019. I remember being sort of anxious and not wanting to have a lot to do with it, and I was mostly left out of the discussions. The expected release date was May 2020, the wonderfully skilled Caps was doing the UI, the then-stranger-now-

friend Moekki and Kamifish were working on the CGs, and it was slowly trodding along, script being completed and edited, and then... Well. 2020. Covid happened. Everyone's life circumstances changed rapidly; I got stuck in New Zealand because of travel bans and others had varying levels of busyness that really messed up the HBNE timeline. I was in a position where I had a lot more free time, so I ended up helping a lot more. Because of our overlapping team, PBH development got shelved to get HBNE out. Also, in the background, we were constantly ping-ponging back and forth on if we should use Ren'Py or Naninovel to make PBH. We wanted to make it available for console, but we had been ghosted by multiple Ren'Py porters for Heart of the Woods by that point and we were getting discouraged, but Naninovel was brand new to us and we didn't have anyone familiar with Unity on the team. Without the brainpower and manpower, PBH was in a state of stasis that honestly, made me sort of sad! It was a difficult time for me. With a lot of difficulty, we finally got HBNE out, and that meant it was time to focus on PBH again. By this point, we found porters who delivered for Heart of the Woods, and we decided ultimately for our own sanity, to go with Ren'Py.

With things going ahead again, I wanted to make PBH as soon as possible. We started work on the demo post-haste, getting the final music tracks done, and then we realized that we weren't really happy with the way the story was going. It was a difficult choice, but we effectively scrapped 3 chapters of writing to start afresh and use that draft for the demo. We fully thought with all the other assets we had coming along, we were going to release it in the first half of 2021. I started doing monthly wallpapers to try and drum up some hype, and all the while Summer was in development. Working on PBH and Summer art concurrently was a time, and somehow I completely forgot all about it until I went back through the logs! I was making a lot of CGs for both the new voice acting trailer and the demo. We were very fortunate to get a spot in Wholesome Direct, and we wanted to have the demo available for that Direct - and behind the scenes, we were casting and recording for PBH. And in June of 2021, we finally released the demo and chapter 1 of Please Be Happy.

After that, I went on my background spree, trying to knock out as many as I could. They don't really bring me a ton of joy, but doing backgrounds myself would help with the PBH budgeting... Somehow I did seven of them in August alone? Wild. This was the grinding period of Please Be Happy, which a lot of projects have to go through. After a certain point, the "fun ideas" period ends and it's just... nose to the grindstone and work. Script was being written, backgrounds and sprites were being made... In September of 2021, we admitted that it wasn't coming out in 2021 and committed to a 2022 release.

And boy was I committed to that release. No more delays!!!! We also decided to switch to Naninovel because we wanted to handle the porting instead of relying on a third party, and we hired an old friend of mine - a VN dev and someone who knows their way around Unity. Things finally felt like they were coming together! I had some pretty bad wrist pains by the end of the year and I did some non-art work while I recovered.

2022 though, we were SO back! It was time for extra CGs! I was back into drawing and Josh was working on the script. I was a bit conspicuously quiet about PBH during ÉlanFest22 because I didn't want to have a release date that we couldn't follow through with again. I just worked blindly really hard, trying to get it to the finish line. Art assets were done in May and scenes were being finalized; the game was being put together and it was honestly so exciting to see. I visited the States in June-July and I remember working on remaking the demo scenes in Naninovel on Syon's computer! As soon as I got home, I immediately started working on scripting Please Be Happy. By this point, we had over a hundred scenes and the game was far, far longer than anticipated. And then we loop full circle back to the start of this story, and we announce a release date and scramble to get it done.

I think I always had late November as a target; generally we want to avoid the holiday season for game releases because that's when a lot of AAA games come out, but I didn't want to say it until I was sure. Thanks to the incredible hard work of everyone involved, we finally released the game on November 22, 2022.

I wanted to make some sweeping statement about the lessons I learned, and what I would do differently... Maybe there are some of those - stop announcing release dates too early!!!! - but overall... What happened happened, and I don't know if I would've had it any other way. The initial delays led us to the final script. Being stuck in New Zealand gave me the time to work on PBH. And all the struggles but also the camaraderie of making the game has given it so much more meaning. I'm a different person to who I was in 2018, and the meaning of happiness to me has adapted and changed. I like the story that we told and released in 2022, and I'm so excited to keep evolving as a person and make more stories for you all.

Thank you everyone so much!



# Josh Postmortem

"With just a word or two, the year will end so soon."

When we first wrote that line for the ending theme, "Someone Someday," I don't think either adi or I had any idea that we'd be quoting it to each other so frequently from that point on. And yet, sitting down to write this almost a year after we finally released Please Be Happy, it feels more true than ever. In the past couple months, or maybe even the past couple years, I often find myself wishing time would slow down, while simultaneously being impatient for what's coming next. I suppose this is just a part of getting older.

As the director, there was a certain concept that adi wanted the game to convey: that there are many different paths to finding happiness in life, and that all of them are equally valid. Filtering that concept through my own writing forced me to consider and examine happiness in ways that I hadn't exactly done before. While I'm far from an expert on the subject, I feel like Miho, Aspen, and Juliet have taught me several valuable lessons on it.

Something that may come as a surprise is what exactly it feels like to release a game, or any kind of major creative work. I tend to think of my life in terms of eras which are based upon whatever project has been my primary focus for that time. The Highway Blossoms era. The Heart of the Woods era. And of course, the Please Be Happy era. Sending these games out into the world tends to be the end of each era. There are the expected feelings – elation, nervousness, hope and doubt – but a lot of these climax just prior to the actual release. Once we hit that button and officially put the game into people's hands, I think the primary thing that I, or adi, or several of the other people we work with tend to feel is... emptiness. A sense of "now what?" The void that comes with a change in routine; a change in thinking; a change in focus. It sounds melodramatic, but after pouring so much of oneself into a project, it feels a little like there's nothing left to give.

And yet, we must. There are always new projects on the horizon. New challenges; new eras. Like reaching the top of a mountain, only to look out and realize there are more to climb.

For a while, I thought it meant that there was something wrong with me. That if I wasn't feeling euphoric, then maybe I didn't really care as much as I thought I did, or maybe I wasn't actually proud of what we'd made. Although I had faith in the work, I doubted myself and my motivations. I've said before that compared to our earlier games, Please Be Happy was a lot more personal for me, with a lot more of my own experiences and feelings going into the characters. After releasing PBH, the void was still there, but I felt more comfortable in it.

At the start of the game, Miho feels like she's fundamentally different from everyone else. Like there's something missing from inside her that everyone else has. Things that come naturally to others are things that she has to try to feel, and try to understand. This is perhaps where I most deeply relate to Miho as a character. In the early days of development (and even some of the later days too) I worried that it would make her unlikable. That there wouldn't be enough to her for a reader to connect with, or care about. In the time since the game came out, I have been very glad to have been very ironically wrong about that.

As the writer, there was a concept of my own that I wanted to convey with the text; one that I believe complements adi's pretty well. It wasn't my goal at the start, but as I began to understand the characters better, it became important to me to say. It's the notion that both love and happiness are journeys, and not destinations. That they are continuous, active choices that we make in our everyday lives, and not just a threshold to be crossed or a target to be hit. Like I said, I'm not an expert in either subject, but I've found this to be true.

It's through this understanding – or perhaps a better word would be "acceptance" – that I've made a bit of peace with the void. Within that terminus of intention is the limitless potential for something new. At the peak, the thought of climbing another mountain seems daunting and difficult, and looking forward, we only see the task ahead. But it's only when nearing the next summit that we understand what a privilege it was, and how fortunate we are to be able to look back at the last one. It's the decision to keep going that gives meaning to the journey so far.

These eras, as I call them, are not defined solely by the work that's done within them. Rather, they're defined by what I've lived through and felt, and how they shape me as a person. The work is the synthesis of experience and change. I myself am the result, and the creation is more like the byproduct. To me, this is art; this is life; this is happiness – or at least the pursuit thereof. In the end, I think that's the most important lesson that Aspen learned. I'm glad that she could help teach it to me, too.

Very soon it will have been a full year since PBH's release. My life has changed significantly in that time. I've been so fortunate to have met several friends since then because of the game, and because of the ways that they connected with it. The fear I held that no one would relate has been supplanted

by joy at just how many people do. And yet, looking ahead, I do feel some of the same familiar worries again. Will people like the next game just as much? Can I surpass or even match the quality of the last one? I know that to some extent, the doubts will always be there, and that is an important realization unto itself. They're just a part of the journey; the steepest part of the mountain. But I know that they make the view from the top all the more rewarding.

"So I put a bookmark in this chapter of my life."

I first wrote the chorus for "Someone Someday" years ago, nearly a decade by now. Long before there was a PBH or Studio Elan, and back when I was a very different person from who I am today. Those words resonated with me back then, even though they didn't have a home. Being able to use them for the ending song so many years later felt a little bit like closing a loop, and bringing resolution to those days. At the time that I wrote them, I never could've imagined where I'd end up today. But looking back, I can still see the peaks of that mountain, and appreciate the trail that I followed to get to where I am. Although we can never go back and retrace the paths we've taken, we can always alter the course ahead of us, and steer ourselves towards something better and brighter. I think that Miho would agree.

Writing this feels like the end of an era, too. Technically, it's a postmortem; an "after death" for the game. But that feels incorrect, because PBH and its characters are far from dead. They live on, not just in the hearts and minds of the audience but for us the creators as well. A bookmark indicates a place that you intend to return to, after all, if only to look back and reminisce for a while. I'm excited for what comes next, just as I know that I'll someday look back on these times with warm fondness. No matter what happens, I'm glad that I got to walk this part of my life alongside such wonderful people.

"On and on and on, the clock on the wall keeps ticking along"

To adi and to everyone else who was a part of Please Be Happy's development...

To you, the reader, for playing and caring about our game...

To Miho, Aspen, and Juliet...

To myself, past and future...

Thank you, for everything.



11/6/23

# A Farewell to Flowers - Extra Story

Written by Josh

It's autumn and the leaves are yellow, not worried about winter quite yet. Apartment buildings and convenience stores have replaced many of the wild places I once knew, and what were once just towns have become entire cities. It doesn't feel like that long ago, but I haven't been counting the years for too long either.

A couple centuries that I've been alive. A couple decades that I've been with Aspen. The minutes have more meaning than ever for me, yet I find myself taking things slower. I'm in no hurry to get to where I'm going. I'll be there just on time.

She's sitting on a park bench when I reach her. Her hair is cut shorter than before, and eyeliner accentuates her cold steel gaze. We lock eyes as I arrive, and I see her challenging me to recognize her.

Of course I do. Even without the bracelet on her wrist, adorned by a shining white bead, and made of sterling silver.

"It's been a while, Eunbi," I say with a smile. She regards me with a cold expression, choosing not to say a word. Some things really do never change. I didn't expect to find her here, nor am I surprised. If she's been tailing me since I arrived in Korea, that would hardly be a shock.

I take a seat beside her, knowing she'd leave if she objects. Instead she just ignores me, pretending she's still on her own. I consider poking her, or tapping her on the shoulder. Just because I know I could, and know that it would bug her. But instead I sit patiently, something I've gotten better at with age. Whatever she's chosen to find me for, I'm sure she'll reveal soon.

With a sigh, she turns to face me, feigning disappointment. In truth, the makeup doesn't hide the warmth that really lights her eyes.

"Shame on you. You've gotten older." But she doesn't seem too shocked.

"Yeah, I guess I have. But it looks like you have too."

Every morning in the mirror, I look to see who I've become. Every line, every wrinkle, every difference from before. They don't make me feel bad - quite the opposite in fact. They're the proof of my existence. That I'm moving forward in life.

For Eunbi, every change she makes is

deliberate. She's gotten much better at dressing, and I can even smell perfume. I wonder if she's like this every day, or did this just for me.

"I'm proud of you for that," I say.

Raising a hand to her bangs, she nods in concession. "I should've known you'd find a way."

For us, silence is just as comfortable as conversation, so there's no awkwardness when neither of us speak for a while. Just sit, and watch the world pass on by. Not far away, a child hops in some of the fallen leaves, and tosses a handful overhead. A couple holding hands soon go past us, with one of them holding onto a leash. The carefree way the dog trots along reminds me of another old friend of mine.

"Would you go somewhere with me?" Silver asks while standing up. I nod, half-expecting her to leave me behind now that I can't move as fast as I used to. But she waits for me, and leads us out of the park at a pace that's almost insultingly slow.

"I'm not dead yet, you know. We can walk faster than this!" I bop her on the arm to emphasize my point. With a smirk, she speeds up.

"Where are we going?"

"I'm not sure yet. Is that a problem?"

"Nah. I like it better that way."

I'm not surprised when we leave the trail, heading for the trees. Burrs and pine needles scratch at my ankles, piercing my clothes that weren't meant for anything rougher than a sidewalk. But the familiar sting isn't unpleasant. Although Aspen and I take plenty of strolls in nature, it's been a long time since we've gone off the beaten path.

"What has it been like?"

"Which part?"

"All of it."

"Hm... It's been... everything. Sometimes everything is so perfect that I could cry. Sometimes, things are so bad that I can't help but laugh. But no matter what, I have to keep on living. Good or bad, it all changes.

So I just try to appreciate every day for what it is. As cheery as that all sounds.

"I know that someday it'll end, and that it could be any time. So I try not to waste any. Even if I'm just taking a nap or reading a book. Or going for a walk with a friend."

Her silence makes me smile.

Eventually we reach a spot where a little more of the afternoon sunlight reaches us. We're barely an hour's walk from the park, not nearly far enough to be considered "the wild." And yet here amongst the trees, it's easy enough to pretend. The tall grass and a fallen log remind me of another forest, several lifetimes ago.

Noticing me slow down, Eunbi comes to a stop. She looks around, at the treetops and clouds, and at everything except for me.

"Yes. This should do."

"Do for what?" I ask as I take a seat on the log, kicking off my shoes and wiggling my toes. My feet and legs ache in a way that they haven't in a long time, although even the pain is nostalgic in its own way. Maybe I'm getting a little older than I thought!

Eunbi fidgets, looking at the sky and rubbing her wrist. She mouths something imperceptible.

"What was that? You've gotta speak up, dearie." I put on my best imitation of an old human woman. Closing her eyes, Eunbi's face remains stoic.

"I asked, was it worth it?"

I don't even have to think about it.

"Definitely."

"I'm glad."

The sunlight gives Eunbi an otherworldly shine as she raises her arm, her sleeve falling away. Even in the luminous glow, Eunbi's bead is brighter. From behind, I can see her raise her wrist to her face, and her head shakes as she makes a tearing motion. Slowly, her hand returns to her side, the empty leather straps dangling uselessly.

The light around her fills her, seeming to burst from her every pore. Slowly, like a dancer, she turns around to face me, chest

heaving as a river of magic flows through her. Our eyes meet, hers glowing a ferocious, wild blue. I watch as her skin takes on a vibrant shine, and the sharp angles of her face seem more pronounced. Her hair glimmers like purest silver, and all nine of her tails unfurl behind her with graceful precision.

The glow fades away; the light that surrounded her disappearing. But she keeps that shine. That glimmer. That grace.

And yet, the first thing I see in her eyes is doubt. I can tell that she's waiting to hear what I think.

I wipe tears from my eyes. I know that she wouldn't believe me if I said it was beautiful, like a flower blooming before my eyes. She wouldn't want to hear that it's something I'll never forget.

"Thank you, Eunbi."

Because like always, everything that she hasn't said says so much. The fact that she sought me out. The fact that she waited for me. The fact that I'm the only one here. For someone like us, I know how much every one of those unspoken things means. And that it's even harder for them to express them this way than with carefully guarded words.

Slipping back into my shoes, I walk over and give Eunbi a hug, wrapping my arms around hers so that she can't get away. Although she stiffens, and every single tail stands on end, she doesn't even try.

"I would've liked to show the wild to you, along with the rest of our sisters."

"I would've liked that too."

I mean it. A life as a gumiho with all the rest of our kind will forever be a fascinating "what if" to me. But Eunbi and I both know that I don't have a single regret. As nice as it would've been, I wouldn't have done anything differently.

When I look at her, I don't see the time that has kept us apart, leaving its mark on me more than on her. I'm just happy that our paths converged yet again. Wherever the two of us go from here, it shows that we can always find our way back together again. There's plenty of time for that.



