

What Happiness Is

By Petri Tamminen

Translated by Owen F. Witesman

Extracts from the novel *Mitä onni on*

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I was lying on the sofa watching *Sports Roundup*. The ski jumpers were flying at Zakopane. When I go one day, I want the cantor to play the *Sports Roundup* theme on the pump organ and the pallbearers to gaze into the hole like skiing judges staring down into the outrun.

“I have an idea,” Liisa said, sitting down at the other end of the sofa. I muted the television and adopted a focused expression. I focused on thinking about my expression.

“Finnish happiness,” Liisa pronounced solemnly. “I’ll take the pictures, and you write.”

“Not another book,” I said and turned the sound back on. They were reading off the women’s basketball scores now. Liisa waited patiently. I was disarmed enough by this that I turned the television off.

“A book about Finns being happy,” Liisa continued. “Little stories and pretty pictures that remind you of how much good there is in life. I’m sure we could get a grant for that.”

“That’s a pretty bright idea,” I admitted.

The next night, when Liisa had gotten the girls to sleep, she started filling out her leave of absence request. I was lying on the sofa watching *Sports Roundup*. I encouraged Liisa to think it over a little more.

“Are we really up for such a big project?” I asked. “And who will take care of the kids while we’re running around out there on our happiness

expedition? And besides, is happiness really a photography thing? Isn't it more of a watercolor thing? What if I did the book with Hannu?"

One rash, careless word can lead to a three hour bickering match in a marriage. But you never learn. Even though you mentally swear to never, ever, step on that landmine again, within a couple of weeks you always find yourself saying some screwball thing again. A second ago everything was fine and now it's all over—there will be no mercy shown and there is no getting off the hook. Even a kind, loving wife sometimes looks just like a panty liner.

And then when the argument ends, it's impossible to say which one of you was being unreasonable. It doesn't matter—it's enough that you get to rest. It's enough for both of you—giving a lecture is just as exhausting as listening to one.

Liisa ran out of gas a little before midnight. She didn't even have the energy to get angry about my attempts to comfort her. This emboldened me. I even became so animated as to ask why Liisa was worrying about this disappointment. Why didn't she just let go of it, since she knew full well that she would feel better with time? Why didn't she make use of that knowledge in the here and now?

"You never forget disappointments," Liisa said, staring straight ahead. "All the disappointments of life build up in your heart, and when there are enough of them, you die."

At these words, I fell silent and began wondering how many disappointments had built up in me. Then I examined Liisa and tried to estimate her disappointment level. When I looked at her from this perspective, she looked very old and tired to me.

At the beginning of March, I showed the grant application to Liisa:

Although depression has become a national disease, happiness *can* still be found in Finland to this day. We seek this happiness. So far we have

found berry pickers, backpacking guides and badminton players. The exploration of Finnish happiness will require significant economic resources: we therefore request the sum of 10,000 € from your foundation.

Liisa studied the application for a long time.

“This berry pickers thing is a bit off.”

“What do you mean ‘off’?”

“Well, why does this talk about berry pickers anyway,” Liisa continued unabashedly.

“Solely for the sake of rhythm and alliteration. Of which you understand neither. Besides, berry pickers are happy.”

“So why don’t you go berry picking?” Liisa asked.

“What makes you think I’m happy?”

In sophisticated circles, one might hear the approbatory exclamation *touché* after such a snappy, decisive come-back, but Finland has no such sophisticated circles. Later I removed the berry pickers. Liisa is just a regular office worker, but she has a phenomenal sense for nuance.

I sent the grant application to two foundations and one arts council. Then I lounged around. I’ve never understood what meditation means, so I can’t claim that I was actually meditating, but one day I took a long nap, which, as I understand it, bears some resemblance to meditation.

In mid-March, I noticed a story in a women’s magazine about a researcher studying happiness. Liisa read the story and got excited. She was sure that the researcher would lead us to the source of happiness. I thanked Liisa for her support and asked her to arrange an interview at the university. I’m shy about calling complete strangers.

The happiness researcher’s cubicle was located on the fourth floor at the back of a hallway, under a flickering fluorescent light. The researcher was sitting

behind his desk and looked ill. His coughing-stressed voice and feverish eyes made him seem harmless enough, but then when I asked him what happiness is, he immediately lost his temper. He began rummaging through his papers until he found what he was looking for—a calendar—and began reading off everyone who had interviewed him over the course of the spring. The list included numerous people from women’s magazines and television talk shows.

“Am I supposed to be some sort of oracle? Do they really imagine that happiness is something that floats around outside a person, that they can grab hold of it if I point it out? What is happiness, what is happiness,” the researcher chanted in a whining voice, the intent of which was apparently to mimic the people who had been hounding him.

He stared straight ahead and said that this pathetic question had started with the publication of one certain book. This bit of mischief came about in America in the year 1962 when Charles Schulz published his *Peanuts* book *Happiness is a Warm Puppy*. The book achieved unparalleled popularity—the whole western world was swept with an avalanche of *Happiness is* books, stickers and posters. The world’s relationship to happiness had changed at a single stroke, and the worst part about it was that this sort of relationship had been created at all. Happiness has become a personal duty, a blank in a sentence that every person has to fill in and then search for.

The researcher related that the insanity had taken on such strange forms that an American gun company even advertised its rifles with the slogan “Happiness is a warm gun,” a phrase John Lennon then borrowed for a song in which “warm gun” referred to a man’s genitals.

I now remembered the “Happiness is” stickers from my childhood: the fancy bathroom at my friend’s house where there was a sticker like that, and a girl named Heidi who sat next to me in second grade with a folder that said on it “Happiness is a shared lunch.”

I didn't start disputing what the researcher had said, even though I had never found that the stickers had changed my relationship to happiness or forced me to fill in any blanks.

Hannu said that he didn't remember those stickers, but that he thought the phrase "happiness is a warm gun" sounded wise and beautiful. Hannu claimed that anyone who has ever been rabbit hunting would understand the beauty of that phrase. For him, it brought to mind the heady scent of gunpowder, those early morning moments when the rising sun slices through the mist and illuminates each stalk of wheat and drop of water individually and when steam rises from the men and the hounds and the forest tracks disappear into the distance in the Brueghelian velvet of the conifers.

I considered this. It seemed as if the researcher didn't understand rabbit hunting or Brueghelian velvet any more than I did.

"But in any case," said the researcher and stared at me.

"So happiness was invented in America in 1962," I prompted. The researcher nodded and caught hold of his train of thought again: people no longer had the slightest idea what a twisted idea they had of happiness. Happiness was something external for people, like a missing object from a collection or like some distant fantasyland. Even though happiness is fundamentally a gift, a gift of grace that a person finds within themselves. If he finds it.

All of our grant applications were approved; altogether we received 30,000 €. Hannu wanted to celebrate the occasion, fly to Lapland and eat chocolate cake at Pohjanhovi restaurant with Lappish vixens dancing around us. I suggested that we should return part of the money.

An excessive sense of responsibility may be a hidden sign of depression.

The creation of the world's best school system was based on a sense of responsibility. Conferences and great sporting competitions are organized based on a sense of responsibility. The Ice Hockey World Championship's first round is played, and the other basic foundations of life are established, on the basis of a sense of responsibility. But the final match is an estrade and on an estrade the ones who succeed are the carnivalistic celebrants. A person who understands this can, with a calm mind, vouchsafe victory to peoples that thrive under that sort of limelight, who are children of the moment.

In Hannu's opinion, the foundations owed us a debt of gratitude. He claimed that it was because of us that the foundations were able to get rid of a lump sum and weren't forced to scrape together their required number of handouts from aspiring flautists' Mickey Mouse applications.

We were hard on the heels of happiness all that summer, interviewing obstetricians, grave diggers and a few dozen other people who we imagined would have something to say about it. By autumn I didn't remember anything about the people or the interviews. Instead, I found Liselotte on the net. She was working in ad sales at a radio station in Copenhagen. Her name was printed in big blue letters on the station's website. A contact form opened up behind her name, and there was a photograph too.

Once, while I was looking at Internet porn pictures, I did a double-take when a woman reminiscent of Liselotte came up—I studied the woman's face and other bits carefully.

But when I was looking at Liselotte in the stamp-sized picture on the radio station's website, I felt as if I had come home. Liselotte looked like herself. She wasn't anyone else, not some made-up porn star horror or a passer-by in a Danish documentary. She was the same Liselotte as before, even though she was twenty years older. When I stared into her eyes long enough, I began to believe that what had been true could be true again.

My email to Liselotte was so short that it was almost hostile. I spent two lines giving an update about myself and at the end asked how she was doing. I didn't say anything about my family. I didn't consider it a lie; I considered it a courtesy.

Liselotte's answer arrived in the middle of November, after a wait of two weeks. During this period of waiting, I cycled through all of the emotions that a modern emotional person is able to have. I also swore to myself many times over that I would never feel anything ever again—that I wouldn't care about the world because the world didn't care about me.

The success of the engineering sciences has made our age appear rational. This is a serious misconception. In the whole history of the new age you will not find any people who vacillate more than we.

Our emotions are fed and stimulated non-stop; we are made to feel so much that we are no longer able to discern where our emotions end and the world begins. Around us we see our own emotions; our own emotions bring to mind new emotions. It is very difficult for us to say how we feel.

Liselotte's reply was good-humored. The first sentence finished with a line of exclamation marks. I personally avoid exclamation marks—I'm afraid they'll come across as childish—but when Liselotte used them, I just thought they looked fun. It appeared that Liselotte found it pleasant that I had written her.

Clandestine romantic relationships caused our fathers' generation enormous inconvenience: letters dressed up as official correspondence, calls to work on the family phone, evening walks near the beloved's home, perhaps the wave of a hand from the balcony. It all must have been quite burdensome from the standpoint of guilt. With email and text messages, an affair can be mastered easily. It overlaps with family life. During a lull in the impassioned messaging, you can go warm up the macaroni and cheese or empty the washing machine. The whole relationship experience resembles a

harmless hobby that is a delight for everyone: dad gets something to do and the family gets an energetic dad.

The Finnish man ran out of things to do with the advent of urbanization. Neither lathes nor circular saws fit in the living room. Now the computer has saved men—the computer is the new lathe. If there is another woman waiting at this lathe, then all is actually better than before.

My messages to Liselotte were very good. I was funny and wise. I felt like I knew how to write again.

The male is at his best during the mating dance.

Liselotte was already talking about the summer and vacation and all the pleasant things we could do. As I read these messages, I didn't think that I would find my muse in Denmark—I thought I would move to Denmark permanently and escape the whole imperative to be creative and this horrible profession where I constantly have to have something to say and all the while suffer not having anything to say. I was already planning out how I would become a bicycle mechanic in Copenhagen—I wouldn't have anything to say about anything, and I would be happy.

I wasn't exactly expecting that Liisa would wink and wish me a pleasant journey, but I did expect that she would respect my decision and that we could discuss the plan like two adults who have already seen something of life.

But Liisa didn't say anything. She lay on the bed with the blanket clutched tightly under her jaw and stared at the ceiling. It's creepy when a woman stares at the ceiling. A man may happen to cast his eyes upwards in a moment of shock, but he will then proceed to examine the lines or knots in the ceiling, while the mood created by a woman's staring is wholly threatening.

Liisa threw off her blanket and rose up on her elbows. This time she was looking somewhere above my head. She appeared to be thinking hard.

“We aren’t young anymore,” she said. “We can’t rush forward anymore thinking that we’re going to conquer the world.”

“What are you talking about?” I tried to avoid Liisa’s gaze.

“I’m talking about us,” she said. Her voice was frighteningly calm. “We aren’t young anymore. We’re middle-aged. Do you understand? Now we have to have perseverance. Now we’re supposed to build, not tear down; now we’re supposed to put things in order, raise children, work. Otherwise life will just go to waste.”

“But I’m going to Denmark precisely so that my life won’t go to waste,” I pointed out. “It will if I stay here. I could be here for the rest of my life.”

“The rest of us certainly will be here for the rest of our lives.”

“Liisa, this isn’t a criticism of you.”

“Who is it a criticism of?”

“No one. This isn’t a criticism at all. I could have just not mentioned the whole thing. This isn’t a big deal. This isn’t any big life change. I’m just popping over to Copenhagen. I just have to turn over a card that I left unturned when I was young, and when I’ve turned it over, I’ll come home and everything will be like before.”

“It isn’t a life change,” Liisa repeated.

“Yeah, I said this isn’t any big life change.”

“And you’re doing what? Turning over what? Why the sudden change?”

I thought silently in my mind that there wasn’t anything sudden in the change. It had happened slowly and naturally; this new, exciting boyish feeling had pulsed into me like a saltwater inflow entering the Baltic from the depths of the Atlantic through the Sound.

Out loud I said that we needed to stay calm now and concentrate on the children, to keep them out of this.

“We can’t pile our worries on the children. We have to ensure a familiar, safe environment for the children.”

“And you’re going to ensure that by going to Copenhagen to make it with some slut,” Liisa said.

I stood in Liselotte’s dim entryway behind Hannu and pondered whether I should take off my shoes. Liselotte didn’t take off her sneakers, but just went around the apartment picking pieces of clothing off the floor and throwing them into her bedroom.

We went in and looked around the two-room apartment. I looked at the bedroom the longest. Right there was the bed where I had imagined myself and Liselotte. The room looked strangely real.

Liselotte put water on to boil for tea. She was energetic and good-humored, a little too energetic, as if we were her male cousins. On the other hand, I understood that I was also different from my emails. I figured that the tones that Liselotte had used in her emails might still come out. I wasn’t a pup anymore—I was a man who knew how to draw out tones like that.

We drank tea and ate liver pâté sandwiches. After the tea we sat in the living room and looked at Liselotte’s old pictures. In these pictures, Liselotte looked the same as in my memories. I even found myself in Liselotte’s album, although only in one picture, and gazed at this picture for a long time, leaning up against Liselotte remembering the time it was taken. I wanted to whisper something nostalgic about lost youth, but I didn’t remember what youth was in English, so I contented myself with saying:

“It’s been a long time.”

“Yes it has,” Liselotte said.

“And still somehow it feels like nothing has happened at all since then and that life could just as easily continue from where it left off back then.”

“Which one of you chaps is going to take the sofa and who’s going to sleep on the floor mattress?” Liselotte asked.

I stared at Liselotte and started thinking rapidly about sleeping arrangements. I secretly hoped that there wouldn’t be any floor mattress and that Liselotte was plotting to subtly direct Hannu to the sofa and then take me into her own bed. I talked with Hannu for a moment in Finnish and then told Liselotte that the matter had been settled. Hannu would sleep on the sofa. Liselotte nodded and went to the entryway closet to get a camping pad.

Three days passed. Liselotte went to work; Hannu and I bummed around art supply stores and candy shops. In the evenings we sat in cafes. I remembered these cafes from the happy days of my youth. Liselotte didn’t remember those evenings from our youth, but I found it cheering that the cafes still existed. The evening was turning blue outside the window, and for a moment, I felt that all was as it had been. Liselotte drank white wine, I had coffee and Hannu took cocoa. We talked a lot about movies, especially Hannu and Liselotte. Liselotte thought that Dogma was an entirely new form of expression, while Hannu insisted that the seeds of Dogma had been sown in the great Danish classics of the 1960s.

I lay awake on the camping pad for a long time thinking about Liselotte’s body and how she had aged. At some point I thought of Liisa and her body and decided that I would call her first thing in the morning and ask if she understood how well her body had held up even though she already had some years on her too. I decided to make a call like that, even though I knew deep down that I couldn’t call. It isn’t enough for women to praise them—they want to be praised when it suits them and for precisely the reasons they wish.

I got up and stretched by numb limbs. Behind the curtain a street lamp swayed on its cable over the street.

I went and knocked on the bedroom door. When Liselotte didn't answer, I cracked the door and peered in. I had to stare into the darkness for a long time before my eyes could make out the details: the curtains covering the window, the white rectangle of the bed, Hannu and Liselotte's faces and their open eyes staring back at me.

I decided to call Liisa.

Liisa answered from the tram. She was on her way to work.

"I'm seriously ill," I began. "I may have been sick even back in Finland. It mixed up my head. It caused this whole trip. It may have been hiding in me even then."

"What, a stallion like you?" Liisa said.

I wanted to laugh. And then I wanted to cry. I took Liisa's joke as a sign of forgiveness.

"You're a sweetheart," I said. "Can you forgive me? What if I come back home? I'll come on the very next flight."

"Come on whatever flight you want, but I'm not letting you through the door," Liisa said in a quiet voice, nearly whispering. "Go to the hospital if you're so sick."

"I'm not that sick."

"Well I'm not taking you back."

"So that's how it is."

Liisa was silent—all I could hear was the thundering noise of the tram and the hum of the cell phone connection. I didn't say anything. I didn't want to start begging, and I didn't have anything else to say.

"You have a good chance now to think about who you want to live your life with," Liisa said finally. "And oh yeah, some mail came for you. Some bills and then some letters from those grant foundations. I opened them

because they looked important. They all had some form in them. You're supposed to give an accounting of how the grant money was used."

"Oh, right," I said.

Ten days went by. I called Hannu and asked if he would meet me at the airport. Hannu said that things had changed a little. He had decided to stay in Copenhagen. He had arranged for an exhibition at the Hellerup library. Everything was settled—the opening day was set and the exhibition was named: *Den danske kvindes seksualitet*.

I congratulated Hannu. Hannu did not take offence at the tone of my congratulations. He told me how he had been painting night and day, eight portraits of Liselotte all together, and in these paintings he had captured all of the impressions of happiness that we had been searching for over the last year. Hannu spoke of the brushstrokes as "a journey from happiness to happiness" and of the colors as "the warmth of divine love." He said he had hit the mark; he had recorded on the canvas everything that we wanted to say about happiness.

"And what about me then?" I asked, as if I was posing the question to life itself.

Hannu assured me that I would find my happiness too, that in any event I had my work and my family. I was quiet, thinking about my work and my family and Liisa, who might forgive me but who wouldn't ever be the same Liisa ever again even if she did.

After Hannu I called Liisa. She chatted with me amiably, mostly about the weather and how the children were doing. When I asked how she was doing, she said that she had landed a contract with a postcard company in Porvoo for a series of six cards: she had taken photographs of puppies and combined them with happiness aphorisms, and the people in Porvoo had

promised her that the “Happiness puppy” series would go on sale in the fall at every post office and newsstand.

I listened to this news and, sitting up on the edge of the bed, said, “They say that no one has ever lost any money by underestimating their audience.”

“Sour grapes,” Liisa said, still good-natured.

“Some grapes really are sour,” I pointed out. Liisa said that she didn’t have time to chat about grapes—she had to hurry to eat with the people from Porvoo.

I spent the rest of the evening composing in my head the reports I had to turn in about the use of the grant money. I sat down at the table and wrote a draft on hotel stationary:

REPORT ON USE OF GRANT

More than one year ago we undertook the writing of a book entitled *Happiness of the Finnish Man*. As often happens with large projects, the topic took on a life of its own and became more focused as the work progressed. The final result of our work is a multicultural art exhibition entitled *Sexuality of the Danish Woman*. Without the support of your foundation, we would never have been able to complete this ambitious enterprise.