

A Happy Tale

(a short story)

‘The secret to happiness is to be so busy with productive activities that you have no time to be miserable,’ the facilitator says, charisma sparkling from her. ‘Think about the needs of others ... making them feel as happy as possible. You’ll have no energy to be sad ... or to ponder the challenges of the cosmos.’ She is laughing as she grabs our attention.

I don’t usually have much time for therapists, in any form. But I’m here in this room, with others, on doctor’s orders ... as a circuit breaker to the spiral of gloom that’s been gripping me about the craziness in the world ... that apparently should be thought of as ... *normal*.

Lying corruption is not normal. *Blind Freddie* should be able to see through the hypocrisy of blatant gaslighting from media and people in power. But apparently not!

So, I look at her – this confident psychologist, well dressed, bursting with energy and charm ... everything I’m not. Why am I putting myself through this self-torment?

She’s talking again.

‘Think of a time when you felt really happy. It might have been only for a moment – or a longer time, looking back. What was it that gave you that sensation ... that feeling of joy?’

What? I force myself to think ... it’s an effort ... about **joy**. Ideas start to form as my brain shudders into action. *Music? The adrenalin of love? Laughing at comedy or some unexpected situations in life? The warm cocoon of feeling safe and loved? Admiration for the talent of others? The comforting relaxation of achievement after immense effort? The smile of a friend? The startling beauty of a landscape? Sun shining through clouds? A rainbow after a storm? Surprise! Satisfaction!*

‘Don’t tell me what you are thinking,’ the facilitator says. ‘We are all different ... so we will be remembering from a wide range of experiences. But **tell me how you feel at this precise moment of happy thoughts!** What is your body experiencing?’

I’m surprised. I am sensing a warm surge of something ... not quite adrenalin – but a sense of feeling high?

Whatever it is ... I'm suddenly – grinning.

'Now, turn to the others in your smaller groups. Speaking quietly, what can you tell about your feeling of joy?'

I look at my particular small group – two women, two men and me. No names. All shy. Perhaps we've all be sent here ... rather than volunteering. I'm not going to be the first to speak.

One of the women says, 'I'm thinking about my cat purring as he cuddles up to me,'

'For me, it's my dog, Bluey,' the big bloke sitting opposite says, 'when he's looking at me with those big eyes, excited, ready for his walk,'

I admire their confidence in speaking up.

What can I say to this group that I've met for the first time? Whatever I say will be embarrassing.

Bugger it. No! I'll give it a go! No-one knows me here.

'For me,' I say, 'it's often poetry ... conjuring up images in my mind. Like Wordsworth writing about the peace of walking in the hills ... amongst nature.'

They are looking at me, puzzled. O no! Have I blown any chance at credibility?

But, luckily ... 'How does that go?' one said.

I take a deep breath and start, '*I wandered lonely as a cloud ... that floats on high o'er vales and hills. When all at once I saw a crowd ... a host of golden daffodils; beside the lake, beneath the trees, fluttering and dancing in the breeze.* There are four verses. They just transport me to a peaceful gentle place ... and time.'

I wait.

'Wow!' says the second woman. 'I've never heard that before. Wonderful words. I see what you mean.'

The bloke says, 'I get that too. Bluey and me like the peace of being out in the trees.'

The cat lady says, 'And gentle music as well ... lyrics with meaning. That's what does it for me.'

'Me?' the quiet second man says, as he senses our eyes on him, 'I like clever comedians ... twisting words ... surprising me. It's a reflex action. I can't help myself laughing.'

We all look at him, encouraging him to say more.

He smiles back at our expressions. 'Like witty one-liners,' he says, 'or silly road signs that create daft images. You know, like a road sign that says, *Koalas cross here*. No punctuation, so I picture a koala reading the sign and crossing the road at that very place ... or a koala being angry. You know! ... or *What is this thing called love?* Putting a comma in after *called*, changes the meaning quite a lot.'

We are grinning at the mental image ... and the quiet man chortles, ready to tell more.

'And one-liners. They are the double-takes – another twist of language like, *Do you see those Exit signs? They're on their way out!* or *I decided to sell my Hoover – well, it was just collecting dust!*'

He's not quiet anymore and we're all feeling our spirits lift.

'I like the story of a tourist beside his car, lost in the laneways of Ireland,' he continues. 'He asks a local shepherd for directions to Dublin.

"Well," said the shepherd. "Dublin, you say? Well, if I was going to Dublin, I wouldn't start from here." 'It makes no sense as a useful answer and just makes me laugh. Seeing the world through unexpected eyes.'

I look around our group We are all smiling ... and relaxing a bit.

Our facilitator eventually calls all the groups back to order.

'How are you feeling now? Have you learned anything helpful? If you have, freeze that moment in time when you laughed and felt good or happy. Can any groups share what techniques lifted you to happiness?'

I say nothing ... but I nod gently as I agree with some of the ideas being thrown up from the different discussions:

I hear:

- *The sensation of being allowed to let fly with ideas or song ... to soar... without worrying about what others might think. It is **freedom** from social expectation.*
- *The warmth of animals, understanding how we feel. **Shared care.***
- *The transcendental experience of music or poetry or dance ... lifting our spirits to unanticipated **imagining!***
- *The **peace** of nature and the beauty of the wild world around us.*
- *Comedians, whose unexpected tales force us into **spontaneous raucous laughter.***

- *Slapstick humour from things that **unexpectedly** go wrong ... and we laugh.*
- *Love, **being needed**, valued ... makes us happy in a deeper way than just laughter.*
- *Belonging to discussions where we can express ourselves **in confidence** ... and **trust** that it won't appear on social media.*
- *Time to myself to **unwind** from the busyness of the day.*
- ***Touch**. A massage or just a cuddle or a hug!*

‘Well done,’ our therapist says as she re-focuses our attention. ‘Together, you actually know much more than you realise. Don’t you?’

Around the room, smiles are being exchanged. We are more at ease.

‘So, how do we pull all your collected wisdom together, now?’ she says. ‘I can share a print-out of these ideas with you. Then, there are the examples you heard in your small groups. Will that start a process for each of you ... when the world might be getting you down? **The process is important.**’

She has an infectious laugh. Her open palms and querying eyes ask the question.

‘**Happiness is a choice**,’ she continues. ‘It is in your control to decide what will influence your frame of mind. You don’t need drugs, pills or a miracle cure. You have shared what makes you feel happy and listened to other people’s ideas. So, keep busy doing those things. It doesn’t take long to get back on track, if you have a system that works for you.’

She glances around the room

‘We started this session by suggesting that we find ways to make other people happy ... no time for misery. Today, in just a few minutes, you have provided each of us with a recipe of ideas. Go off and have fun!’

I look around the whole group now. It **has** taken minimal time – smiles, grins, positive attitudes. And spontaneous thanks for the experience.

I am in control of me. When I ignore TV ‘news’, the influencing social media and the irrational acceptance of dodgy opinion polls – those industries that seek sensations or to create self-fulfilling illusions – **then** I see blues skies, sun shining, birds singing. It’s the sort of world that inspires poets and song writers.

Woo hoo!