

employee handbook your holy book. The sacred drink, coffee, is imbibed five times a day. When you worship Ambition, there is no Sabbath, no day of rest. Every day, you rise early and kneel before the God Ambition, facing in the direction of your PC. You pray alone, always alone, even though others may be present. Ambition is a vengeful God. He will smite those who fail to worship faithfully, but that is nothing compared to what He has in store for the faithful. They suffer the worst fate of all. For it is only when they are old and tired, entombed in the corner office, that the realization hits like a Biblical thunderclap. The God Ambition is a false God and always has been.

I leave Qatar the next evening. It's dark when I arrive at the airport, but I swear I can still feel the sun, a phantom heat that would shadow me for weeks afterward.

I've tucked Abdulaziz's business card into my breast pocket, alongside my Ridiculously Expensive Pen. The intense pleasure I derive from the pen—the way it rests in my palm perfectly, the way it glides across the page as if riding a cushion of air—will, according to Ruut Veenhoven and the other happiness experts, diminish over time. I will crave a better, more expensive pen, as I fall prey to the hedonic treadmill.

The experts were dead wrong. I enjoyed the pen for as long as I owned it. Which was exactly nine days. That's when I lost it, in a taxi in New York. Or maybe transiting at Heathrow Airport. That's not the point. The point is: It's gone. My first and only Ridiculously Expensive Pen, gone forever. And while at times I pine for my lost Lavin, I know in my heart that its joys were illusory, a mirage in the desert.

I'm back to a ninety-nine-cent Bic. It has no heft or style. It doesn't say anything about me. It's just a pen. I don't ask anything more of it, and that, I suspect, is why we get along so well.

Chapter 5

ICELAND

Happiness Is Failure

Of all the substances known to man, the least stable is something called francium. It's never lasted longer than twenty-two minutes. At any given time there is only one ounce of francium in the earth's crust. "Vanishingly rare" is how it's often described. There are places like that, too.

I arrive to blowing snow and an inky black sky as dark and vast as outer space. It is 10:00 a.m.

"When does the sun rise?" I ask the nice man at reception.

He looks at me like I'm daft. When he replies, he speaks slowly and deliberately.

"The sun? Oh, I don't think you'll be seeing the sun today."

He says this like it's an obvious fact, as in, "Oh, it's Sunday, so of course the shops are closed today."

Not see the sun? I don't like the way this sounds. In the past, the sun has always been there for me, the one celestial body I could count on. Unlike Pluto, which for decades led me to believe it was an actual planet when the whole time it was really only a dwarf planet.

I had plenty of time to ponder celestial bodies on the long flight from Miami. Flying from Florida to Iceland in the dead of winter is at best counterintuitive and at worst sheer lunacy. My body sensed this before the rest of me. It knew something was wrong,

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- Bhutan, where the king has made Gross National Happiness a national priority
- Switzerland, where residents believe envy is the great enemy of happiness
- Iceland, which, despite being cold, remote, and full of failure, is among the world's happiest places—and for good reason, the author finds.

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the Happiest Places in the World
ERIC WEINER

One Grump's Search for
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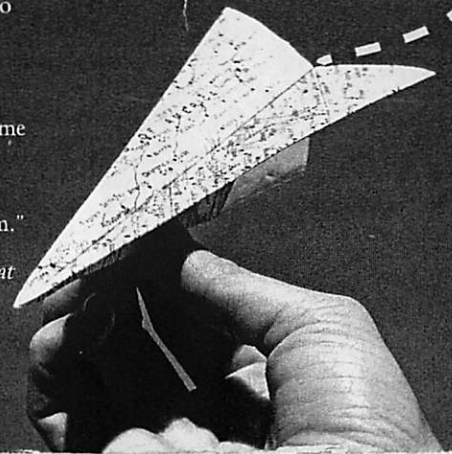
THE GEOGRAPHY OF

Bliss

ERIC WEINER

Correspondent,
National Public Radio

"Laugh. Think. Repeat.
Repeatedly. If someone told me
this book was this good,
I wouldn't have believed them."
—Po Bronson, author of *What
Should I Do with My Life?*



that some violation of nature was taking place, and expressed its displeasure by twitching and flatulating more than usual.

I have my reasons, though. According to Ruut Veenhoven's database of happiness, Iceland consistently ranks as one of the happiest countries in the world. In some surveys, it ranks number one.

When I first saw the data, I had the same reaction you're probably having now. Iceland? As in land of ice? As in cold and dark and teetering on the edge of the map as if it might fall off at any moment? Yes, that Iceland.

As for the winter part, I figured anyone could be happy during the Icelandic summers, when the sun shines at midnight and the weather turns "pleasantly not cold," as one Icelander put it. But the winter, yes, the cold, dark winter, that was the real test of Icelandic happiness.

I plop down on my hotel bed and drift off to sleep for a few hours. This is easy to do in the middle of the day since it looks an awful lot like the middle of the night. When I awake, the sky has lightened a bit, achieving a state of pleasantly not dark, but pleasantly not dark isn't the same as light any more than pleasantly not cold is the same as warm.

I find myself pondering darkness, something I admit I haven't pondered much in the past. For me, as I suspect for most people, dark has always been dark. What is there to ponder? In fact, there are as many varieties of darkness as there are types of landscapes or clouds. Some darkness is hard and unforgiving. Other darkness is softened by the glow of the moon or distant city lights. Then there is the expectant darkness of 5:00 a.m., when we sense though can't yet see the coming dawn.

Icelandic darkness is in a category of its own, a stingy darkness that reveals nothing and, if it could talk, would probably do so with a thick New York accent: "Yo, ya gotta problem wit Mista Darkness, bub?" It is a darkness that for several months each year engulfs Iceland, smothers it, encases it, like one of those head-to-toe burkas worn by some Muslim women. Just as black and just as confining.

How, I wonder, staring out my hotel window into black noth-

ingness, can Icelanders possibly be happy living under this veil of darkness? I've always associated happy places with palm trees and beaches and blue drinks and, of course, swim-up bars. That's paradise, right? The global travel industry certainly wants us to think so. Bliss, the ads tell us, lies someplace else, and that someplace else is sunny and eighty degrees. Always. Our language, too, reflects the palm-tree bias. Happy people have a sunny disposition and always look on the bright side of life. Unhappy people possess dark souls and black bile.

But the number crunchers at the World Database of Happiness say that, once again, we've got it wrong. Climate matters, but not the way we think. All things considered, colder is happier. The implications of this are tremendous. Maybe we should all be vacationing in Iceland, not the Caribbean. And global warming takes on added significance. Not only does it threaten to ravage ecosystems, flood coastal cities, and possibly end life on earth, it's also likely to seriously bum us out. This might be the most inconvenient truth of all.

Theories abound as to why cold or temperate climes produce happier people than warm, tropical ones. My favorite theory is one I call the Get-Along-or-Die Theory. In warm places, this theory states, life is too easy; your next meal simply falls from a coconut tree. Cooperation with others is optional. In colder places, though, cooperation is mandatory. Everyone must work together to ensure a good harvest or a hearty haul of cod. Or everyone dies. Together.

Necessity may be the mother of invention, but interdependence is the mother of affection. We humans need one another, so we cooperate—for purely selfish reasons at first. At some point, though, the needing fades and all that remains is the cooperation. We help other people because we can, or because it makes us feel good, not because we're counting on some future payback. There is a word for this: love.

I desperately need a stiff drink. For research purposes, of course. Before my trip, people who know Iceland told me that to really get

at the heart of the Icelandic soul, to understand what makes these quirky sons and daughters of the Vikings tick, I needed to observe them in their natural state: pickled.

Luckily, I've arrived on a Saturday, in the midst of the decadent Icelandic weekend, which is not to be confused with the sober Icelandic week. Icelanders practice bracketed indulgence. Everything in moderation, they believe, including moderation. It's perfectly acceptable to drink yourself comatose on the weekend, but so much as sip a glass of Chardonnay on a Tuesday night and you're branded a lush. Icelanders attribute this oddity, like all of their peccadilloes, to their Viking past. The theory goes like this: During the harsh days of yore, people never knew when the next catch of fish or crop of vegetables might arrive, so when it did, they devoured it greedily. Of course, nowadays there isn't a shortage of anything in Iceland, except sunlight, but the old binge mentality remains, like an appendix or tailbone. Only more fun.

Actually, the best explanation I heard for the weekend binge drinking came from a sunburned penguin. Okay, not a real penguin, but an Icelander named Magnus who lives in Miami Beach. When we met for lunch one day, I was instantly reminded of a sunburned penguin—an image I tried but failed to dislodge from my mind for the two hours that we ate and drank at a bookstore café. Magnus believes that Icelanders drink so much because the population is so small. They see the same familiar faces, day in and day out. By the end of the week, they need a break, but getting off the island isn't easy. So they drink—heavily—and suddenly all those familiar faces look a little less familiar. "It's sort of like putting on a new pair of glasses, with a different prescription," the sunburned penguin told me. "The world looks a bit different, a bit less familiar."

Here in Reykjavík, Iceland's capital, there's a bar right next to my hotel. It's called Sirkus. The fronting is painted bright reds and greens. It looks like it belongs on a Caribbean island, not in cold, dark Reykjavík. I ask the nice man at reception whether he can

recommend it. He quickly looks me up and down before declaring, "I don't think it's for you."

"Are you suggesting," I say, doing my best to sound hurt, "that I'm not hip enough for that bar?"

"Not exactly. I'm suggesting you don't listen to punk music and buy your clothes at secondhand stores."

He has a point. I back down and head instead to the more grown-up establishment he recommends.

The bar is indeed grown-up, if you were a grown-up living in, oh, 1982. There's a worrisome abundance of wood paneling and track lighting. The piped-in music sounds suspiciously disco. I notice a group of young Icelandic men sitting at a table, eyes trained on the centerpiece: two large bottles of Tanqueray nestled in buckets of ice. Clearly, they are settling in for a serious evening of bracketed indulgence.

I order a beer, which costs as much as a college education in some countries. The high cost of alcohol (and pretty much everything else) in Iceland is another explanation for their take-no-prisoners style of drinking. Since booze is so expensive, Icelanders figure if you're not getting drunk you're wasting your money. It is difficult to argue with such sturdy, Nordic logic.

Iceland has a long and twisted history with alcohol. The country briefly experimented with prohibition, at roughly the same time as the United States did and with roughly the same success. Prohibition was lifted in the 1930s, and Icelanders have been drinking heartily ever since. Oddly, the government continued to ban beer for many more decades—apparently concerned that people would remain lightly buzzed all week rather than bookending their drunkenness with a few days of sobriety. Finally, in 1989, the ban on beer was lifted, and Icelanders put down their shot glasses and picked up their beer steins. One Icelandic psychologist told me, "Icelanders used to get drunk on hard liquor, like vodka; now they get drunk on wine and beer." He said this like it represented progress.

I'm sipping my extravagant beer, amusing myself by calculating

how much each sip costs—gulp, there goes \$1.25; gulp, that one was small, only seventy-five cents—when I hear a female voice. She is speaking English, and she is speaking to me.

“Can you tie me up?” I spin around to find a heavyset woman with a tattoo of something—it’s hard to say what—on her left forearm. I just sit there, staring blankly for a beat too long.

“Can you tie me?” she repeats, this time dropping the preposition that has lent a lascivious air to her request. She points to the bow on the back of her dress that has come undone. I tie it and introduce myself.

Her name is Eva, and she is drunk. Within a few minutes, I learn that it’s her birthday today, that she’s a single mother, that her ex-husband beat her, that she’s lived outside of Iceland for the past seven years, and that she’s now holding down three jobs. She is clearly not shy, nor is she particularly happy. A six on a scale of one to ten, she says. She introduces me to her friend Harpa, who is both drunker and happier—a solid nine, she says, putting an arm around me like we are old friends. I quickly do the math. Harpa and Eva, when averaged, are a 7.5, making them only slightly less happy than your typical Icelander. No wonder they’re friends.

Harpa and Eva didn’t get drunk at this bar. They arrived drunk. Typically, they tell me, Icelanders start drinking at home, where the booze is cheaper and then, once sufficiently prelubricated, head to the bars. Some people, those on an especially tight budget, will park a bottle of booze on the sidewalk near the bar and then step outside for a nip every few minutes. It is this kind of resourcefulness, I think, that explains how this hardy band of Vikings managed to survive more than one thousand years on an island that is about as hospitable to human habitation as the planet Pluto—if Pluto were a planet, that is, which it’s not.

The music is loud. Eva and Harpa are sloshed. I am jet-lagged. These three facts conspire against coherent conversation. “I’m a writer,” I tell Eva, trying to break through the fog.

She looks confused. “A rider? What do you ride, horses?”

“No, a WRITER,” I shout.

This scores me points. In Iceland, being a writer is pretty much the best thing you can be. Successful, struggling, published in books or only in your mind, it matters not. Icelanders adore their writers. Partly, this represents a kind of narcissism, since just about everyone in Iceland is a writer or poet. Taxi drivers, college professors, hotel clerks, fishermen. Everyone. Icelanders joke that one day they will erect a statue in the center of Reykjavik to honor the one Icelander who never wrote a poem. They’re still waiting for that person to be born.

“Better to go barefoot than without a book,” the Icelandic saying goes. The government supports writers with generous grants—salaries, really—that might last for three years. Iceland’s most famous writer, the Nobel Prize winner Halldór Laxness, once remarked, “I don’t understand this myth of the starving artist. I never missed a meal.”

I figure now is a good time to dive in with the question that has brought me to this overpriced, wood-paneled bar.

“So, why do Icelanders drink so much?”

“It’s because of the darkness,” declares Harpa confidently. “We drink because it is so dark.”

“So you don’t drink in the summer?”

“Oh, no, we drink in the summer, too. Because of the light. We drink because we’re so happy that it’s light.”

Harpa just stands there for a moment, swaying back and forth, mug in hand, her beer-soaked brain contemplating the unavoidable conclusion: Icelanders drink all year long.

I can’t afford another beer, and Harpa and Eva have grown virtually incomprehensible. It is time to leave.

“Wait,” says Harpa, mustering a final burst of lucidity, “you need to know something. About the darkness.”

“Yes, what about it?”

“Don’t fight it. Embrace it.”

And with that, she and Eva disappear into a cloud of cigarette smoke and the pleasant hum of Icelandic chatter. Funny, I think, as I bundle up, it sounds exactly like seals barking.

* * *

The next morning, I try, as Harpa suggested, to embrace the darkness. It's not working. If anything, the darkness is embracing me, suffocating me. My alarm clock says 8:00 a.m., but outside says midnight. I slam the snooze button again and again and again until, finally, at 9:30 a.m., I muster the resolve to get out of bed. I peer out of my hotel window. Still dark. Not even a hint of dawn. The sun is like most things in life. You don't miss it until it's gone.

Wait, I do see some sort of light. Not sunlight but a bluish glow. Is it the aurora borealis, the northern lights? It's coming from the building across the street. Perhaps some exotic Viking ritual? I put on my glasses. The light, I now realize, is that of computer terminals. The Icelandic workday has begun. How do they do it? How do they begin and end the day in darkness?

My alarm clock says 9:55. Oh, no. The free breakfast buffet ends in five minutes, and in Iceland free food is precious indeed. I scramble downstairs, pile my plate high with herring and gouda, until it's nearly overflowing, and fill my coffee mug to the brim. In Iceland, coffee is a staple, as necessary as oxygen.

You'd think all of this darkness would lead to an epidemic of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). Caused by a lack of sunlight, SAD leads to symptoms such as despair, listlessness, and a craving for carbohydrates. It strikes me as a particularly cruel affliction. Not only are you depressed, but you're likely to gain weight from all of those carbs, thus making you more depressed and therefore turning once again to carbs, which make you more depressed.

Yet the ailment is virtually nonexistent in Iceland. There is a higher prevalence of the disorder in the northeastern United States than in Iceland. Perplexed by the results, psychologists theorize that over the centuries Icelanders developed a genetic immunity to the disease. Those who got SAD died out, taking their gene pool with them. Survival of the felicitous.

I've finished my third cup of coffee and am eager to get going. There's no point in waiting for the sun—that would take months—

so I bundle up and head outside. Icelanders, for obvious reasons, have several words for ice. The particular kind underneath my feet at the moment is called "*bálka*": flying ice. The ice doesn't fly, you do. I slip and slide, almost falling on several occasions, before getting a handle on the flying ice.

I immediately like Reykjavík. Iceland's capital is not so much a small city as a cosmopolitan village. The best of both worlds. Small-town neighborliness but with sushi, too. Anywhere you can't reach in Reykjavík within a ten-minute walk probably isn't worth reaching. I like this—not only because it limits the amount of time I am exposed to flying ice but also because it feels right. Most cities are bigger than necessary. Beyond a certain point, the liabilities of urban life start to outweigh the benefits.

Reykjavík is in no danger of crossing that Rubicon. The entire population of Iceland is only three hundred thousand, roughly the same as that of Louisville, Kentucky, or your average bus stop in China. Iceland is about as small as a country can be and still be a country.

Thirty years ago, the maverick economist E. F. Schumacher argued that when it comes to economics, smaller is better. But is smaller also happier? Are microstates like Iceland more likely to achieve national bliss than bigger countries like the United States or China?

On a practical level, Iceland's smallness means that parents needn't bother with that old bromide about not talking to strangers. There are no strangers in Iceland. People are constantly running into friends and acquaintances. It's not unusual for people to show up thirty minutes late for work because en route they encountered a parade of friends. This is a perfectly valid excuse, by the way, for being late. The Icelandic equivalent of traffic was hell. On the downside, Iceland is the worst place in the world to have an affair, though that doesn't stop people from trying.

Former French president Jacques Chirac, in his farewell speech, declared: "A nation is a family." Chirac was speaking figuratively, but Iceland really is a family. Geneticists have found that everyone in the country is related to everyone else, going back seven or

eight generations. Icelanders can go to a website and find out how closely they are related to a colleague, a friend—or that cutie they slept with last night.

One woman told me how unnerving this can be. “You’ve slept with this guy you’ve just met and then the next day you’re at a family reunion, and there he is in the corner eating smoked fish. You’re like—‘Oh, my God, I just slept with my second cousin.’”

All of this closeness, this familiarity, has a direct effect on how government works. Take unemployment. Politicians are more likely to care if Hans is unemployed if Hans is their brother’s best friend. In the United States, there is an unspoken understanding that an unemployment rate of 5 or 6 percent is acceptable, yet inflation must stay very low—no more than 1 or 2 percent.

In Iceland, the reverse is true. If the unemployment rate reaches 5 percent, it’s considered a national scandal. Presidents are booted from office. Yet Icelanders will tolerate a relatively high inflation rate. Why the different approaches?

The answer lies in how countries feel about pain, economic pain. High inflation is shared pain; everyone feels the pinch of higher prices when they go to the grocery store or the gas station. Everyone suffers a little; no one suffers a lot. Unemployment is selective pain. A relatively few people suffer greatly, yet most of us don’t suffer at all.

Or do we? High unemployment, research has found, reduces overall happiness much more than high inflation. The specter of losing one’s job spreads through a nation like a ripple across a pond.

An older man shuffles by. He is disheveled, has a scruffy beard, and is wearing a leather bomber jacket. I wonder if it’s Bobby Fischer. I’d heard that the former chess champion was living here. Icelanders love Bobby Fischer. He took part in one of the most famous chess matches ever, right here in Reykjavík. Fischer was brilliant, beating his Russian counterpart, Boris Spassky, in a match watched around the world. For Americans, Fischer became

an instant hero, a Cold Warrior who had defeated the Evil Empire, albeit only on the chessboard. For Icelanders, Fischer was also a hero but for a different reason. He had put Iceland on the map, and that is the best thing anyone can do for this tiny nation.

Fischer has not aged well. He’s grown ornery and, at times, incoherent. He spewed anti-Semitic comments and, after the attacks of September 11, anti-American ones as well. When, in 2004, Fischer was detained in Tokyo and faced deportation to the United States on charges he violated a travel ban to the former Yugoslavia, the Icelandic parliament came to his rescue. They granted him citizenship, and he’s been living here ever since, shuffling around Reykjavík, muttering to himself. A Cold War ghost.

The strange and sad case of Bobby Fischer says more about Iceland than it does about Bobby Fischer. Icelanders possess a deep love for the game of chess, an abiding loyalty to their friends, an obsession with getting on the map, and a high tolerance for idiosyncrasy—not only when it comes to people but, as I discovered, in food as well.

The connection between food and happiness is well documented. The good people at McDonald’s know this. That’s why they call their burger-and-fries combo the Happy Meal, not the Worthwhile Meal or the Existential Meal. People may like to chew on misery, but they want to swallow happiness.

“He who tastes, knows,” goes the old Sufi saying. France’s most famous epicure, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, believed that food is the mirror to our souls: “Tell me what you eat, and I’ll tell you what you are.”

So what does this say about the Icelanders? Quite a lot, it turns out, for these people have some funny ideas about food. Traditionally, Icelanders won’t eat anything ugly. Until the 1950s, Icelandic fishermen threw lobsters back into the sea. Too ugly. And to this day most Icelanders avoid eating cod for the same reason, even though the fish is so plentiful in the North Atlantic waters it practically swims up to your dinner plate, fillets itself, and jumps into a nice lemon meunière sauce. Instead, Icelanders export cod

to America, where people apparently have no compunction about eating ugly things.

The Icelanders' fussiness about how food looks does not extend to how it tastes. How else to explain such favorites as *súr-saðir brútsþungar*, ram's testicles, or *harkarl*, rotten shark? The latter supposedly promotes virility and intestinal health.

The poet W. H. Auden sampled *harkarl* when he visited Iceland in the 1930s. He was blunt in his appraisal. "It tastes more like boot polish than anything else I can think of," Auden wrote, adding that, "owing to the smell, it had to be eaten out of doors."

Not exactly a stellar Zagat recommendation. But I was curious. Can it really be that bad? Besides, I felt a certain reportorial responsibility. If food is indeed the mirror of a nation's soul, then I had an obligation to stare into that mirror, no matter how foul.

The best place for *harkarl*, I'm told, is the weekend flea market. Held in a cavernous warehouse near the harbor, it's where Icelanders go for bargains, such as they are in this land of ten-dollar cups of coffee. It's crammed with used books and clothing and all manner of bric-a-brac. I find it refreshingly unsophisticated, an island of squareness in a vast sea of hipness.

After some meandering, I stumble on the *harkarl*. It looks harmless enough. Cubes of gray meat, the size of dice. The woman behind the counter is grim and muscular, and I wonder if she killed the shark with her bare hands. I approach meekly and ask for a piece, please. In one smooth motion, she spears a gray cube with a toothpick and hands it to me, unsmiling.

I take a deep breath, then swallow. Instantly, my mind is flooded with one thought: Auden was right. I've never actually eaten boot polish, but this, I imagine, is what it tastes like. The *harkarl* has an acidic, unnatural flavor. Worst of all is the persistent aftertaste. It lodges on the roof of my mouth and resists eviction, despite my attempts to flush it out with many glasses of water, a bag of honey-roasted cashews, an entire wheel of gouda cheese, and two bottles of beer. By the time I return to my hotel,

an hour later, the taste has, ominously, migrated to my throat, and shows no signs of leaving soon. I feel sick.

"Tried the *harkarl*, did you?" says the nice man at reception, sensing my discomfort.

"Yes, how did you know?"

He doesn't answer, just makes a quiet tsk-tsking sound and then suggests I try a drink called *svarti dauoi*, or black death. It is the Icelandic national drink, and it is, I can report, the only substance known to man that is strong enough to dislodge the taste of rotten shark from your throat. True, it inflicts an especially nasty hangover, but that is a small price to pay for liberation.

I'm sliding around Reykjavík, and something seems...off. Not right. The city, I realize, doesn't feel solid. Not exactly gaseous, like Qatar, but temporary, fleeting, as if it were erected yesterday and could just as easily disappear tomorrow. I half expect to hear someone shout, "Cut, that's a wrap" and see stagehands cart away the city en masse. The architecture, such as it is, partly explains this feeling. Many of the buildings are made from corrugated steel and look flimsy. Then there are the cliffs, mountains, and sea, which loom around every corner, threatening to erase the city. One minute I'm immersed in urbanity—cafés, designer shops—then I turn down a street and suddenly the view has transfigured to a wild, natural one.

Unlike New York or Shanghai, Reykjavík has no delusions of grandeur. It's a city that knows its place in the cosmos, knows it's an insignificant place, and is comfortable with that. Icelanders thrive on this provisional nature of life. It keeps them on their toes, fires their imaginations. Most of all, it reminds them of the fragility of life. Big cities feign immortality, deluded that somehow their sheer size, their conquest over nature, will forestall death. In Iceland, a land where nature always gets the last word, immortality is so obviously a joke that no one takes it seriously.

In fact, Icelanders seem to thrive on nature's sense of impending doom. Kristin, a television producer, told me about a recent walk she took, just ten minutes from her house in a suburb of Reykjavik, which abuts a lava field: "Not another human being in sight. If I fell and broke an ankle, I'd die of exposure in a matter of hours." It sounded frightening to me, but she found it exhilarating. Is this the same thrill that motivates the skydiver or the motorcycle stuntman? I don't think so. She's not talking about an adrenaline rush but rather a deep, timeless connection to nature—a connection that includes the prospect of death but is not defined by it.

Sliding around Reykjavík, it doesn't take long to realize that this is an exceptionally creative place. Every other building, it seems, is an art gallery or a music store or a café filled with writers penning the Great Icelandic Novel. Maybe, I speculate, this is the secret to Icelandic happiness.

Clearly, happiness is not a function of cold, hard logic—or all accountants would be ecstatic. The great thinkers have long pointed to a connection between creativity and happiness. "Happiness," Kant once said, "is an ideal not of reason but of imagination." In other words, we create our happiness, and the first step in creating anything is to imagine it.

The British academic Richard Schoch, in his book *The Secrets of Happiness*, put it this way: "Your imagination must, to some extent, be found in a realm beyond reason because it begins with imagining a future reality: the self that you might become."

We tend to think of culture as something old and fragile. Culture is what we inherit from our ancestors and either preserve or, more likely, squander. True, but that tells only part of the story. Culture is also invented. Of course it is. Someone had to invent it so we could fuck it up.

Iceland—and this is the part that is truly mind-blowing—is inventing its culture now. As you read these words, some Icelandic

musician is composing the quintessential Icelandic song. So far, no such thing exists. There is no tradition of instrumental music in Iceland. It was too cold and dark back then to bother, or maybe the ancient Icelanders were too drunk at the time. So young Icelanders are deciding for themselves what is quintessentially Icelandic. It is a wonderful thing to watch. To be present at the moment of creation.

If it is possible for language, mere words, to nurture happiness, to tickle the creative soul of an entire people, then surely that language is Icelandic. Icelanders love their language. Love it even more than they love their country, which is saying something. For Icelanders, language is the tabernacle of the culture. That's what one person here told me. In any other country, I'd dismiss such a statement as nationalistic hyperbole. I might even laugh. Not in Iceland.

As any Icelander will tell you (and tell you and tell you), they speak the pure language of the Vikings, while other Scandinavian countries speak a bastardized, diluted version. Like the French, Icelanders are fiercely protective of their native tongue. Unlike the French, Icelanders aren't sanctimonious about it. Everyone here speaks English as well as Icelandic. "Bilingualism" is not a dirty word.

With every new invention—the computer or, say, low-fat blueberry muffins—countries around the world need to invent new words, in their own languages, for these things. Most take the easy way out and simply borrow the English word, bending it to fit their language. Thus, in Japan a personal computer becomes a *persu-con*. But Icelanders insist on inventing purely Icelandic words for these modern devices.

Icelandic linguists do this by drawing upon the language of the Vikings. Of course, the Vikings didn't have a word for lightbulb, let alone broadband, so the linguists have to get creative. The Icelandic word for television—*sjónvarp*—for instance, means, literally, "sight caster." The intercontinental ballistic missile presented

a real challenge. Ultimately, the linguists came up with a word that means “long distance fiery flying thing.” Not bad. My favorite, though, is the word for computer: *tolva*, or “prophet of numbers.” I like the way it makes my PC sound like something magical and vaguely ominous. Which, actually, it is.

The highest compliment any foreigner ever paid Iceland came when, in the nineteenth century, a Dane named Rasmus Christian Rask claimed he had learned Icelandic “in order to be able to think.” When I heard that, it made *me* think—about the connection between language and happiness. Can language make us happy? Do words alone have the power not only to describe our moods but to create them?

Clearly, some words can elicit instant joy. Words like “I love you” and “you may already be a winner.” Yet other words—“audit” and “prostate exam” come to mind—have the opposite effect.

All languages share one trait, and it is not a happy one. As I discovered in Switzerland, every culture has many more words to describe negative emotional states than positive ones. This partly explains why I’ve found it so difficult to get people to talk to me about happiness. They literally don’t have the words to express it. It also makes me wonder: Are we hardwired for misery? Are we a species of whiners? Perhaps. Or maybe happiness is so sublime, so self-evident, that it doesn’t require many words to describe it.

An optimist might point to some hopeful evidence from the field of neuroscience. Researchers at the University of Wisconsin have discovered that the part of the brain that controls language is, like the part that controls happiness, relatively new, in evolutionary terms. So is there a connection between these two recent upgrades to our brains? If so, is language merely along for the ride—or is it in the driver’s seat, in ways we don’t yet understand?

That’s hard to say, but there is no denying that, for Icelanders at least, language is an immense source of joy. Everything wise and wonderful about this quirky little nation flows from its language. The formal Icelandic greeting is “*komdu sæll*,” which translates literally as “come happy.” When Icelanders part, they say “*vertu*

sæll,” “go happy.” I like that one a lot. It’s so much better than “take care” or “catch you later.”

The Icelandic language, like the people who speak it, is egalitarian and utterly free of pretense. Bill Holm captured the casual elegance of the Icelandic language in—what else?—a poem.

In an air-conditioned room you cannot understand the
Grammar of this language,
The whirring machine drowns out the soft vowels,
But you can hear these vowels in the mountain wind
And in heavy seas breaking over the hull of a small boat.
Old ladies can wind their long hair in this language
And can hum, and knit, and make pancakes.
But you cannot have a cocktail party in this language
And say witty things standing up with a drink in your
hand.
You must sit down to speak this language,
It is so heavy you can’t be polite or chatter in it.
For once you have begun a sentence, the whole course of
your life is laid out before you

I love that last line in particular. It speaks to how words can possess a momentum of their own, beyond the literal meaning they convey.

The greatest Icelandic poet of all was a Viking named Egill Skallagrímsson, who lived about one thousand years ago and is widely known, as one Icelandic artist told me, “as that mean motherfucker who wrote beautiful poetry.” Egill was not a poet to be trifled with. “He wrote some of our most beautiful poems but would also throw up on his host and take out their eyes if he felt in any way offended.” I imagine that the literary critics of the time reviewed Egill’s works very...carefully. So embedded is the link between verse and violence in Iceland that the ancient Norse god Odin is the god of both poetry and war.

Does this fierce literary streak explain Icelandic happiness?

I'm not sure. A love of language may not guarantee happiness, but it allows you to express your despair eloquently, and that is worth something. As any poet (or blogger) knows, misery expressed is misery reduced.

But it still didn't make sense. Why is Reykjavik, this cosmopolitan village at the end of the world, such a bastion of creativity? Other Nordic countries, Sweden and Denmark, have much larger populations but don't produce the same caliber of art. What is so special about Iceland?

The answer, I suspect, lies in the name. Ice Land. First, the ice part. Imagine what life was like a few hundred years ago during those long, cold winters. People lived in a sort of sensory deprivation. The mind abhors a vacuum, as the popularity of cable TV attests, so the ancient Icelanders invented dwarves, elves, and other creatures that supposedly populated the rough countryside. Fantastical? Insane?

Alda, a popular blogger, told me about an experience she had recently. She and a friend were visiting a remote part of the country, a breeding ground for Arctic terns. They were walking along the shore, when all of a sudden they heard the sounds of a party, laughter and clinking glasses. Who would be having a party out here, in the middle of nowhere? they wondered. Alda and her friend spent the next ten minutes trying to find this party, but with no success.

It was then that they realized: There was no party. It was an acoustic illusion caused by the echoes of the waves crashing against the cliffs and the birds chirping. Alda, a child of the Enlightenment, not to mention the Information Age, was tricked by the dark magic of Iceland. Her ancestors of one thousand years ago didn't stand a chance.

Then there is the land part of the Iceland equation. Most land just sits there. It may be beautiful land, stunning even, but ultimately that's all it does: sit there. Not Icelandic land. It hisses. It spits. It belches and, on occasion, farts. There are, I'm told, sound geologic reasons for this. None of which interests me. What inter-

ests me is how all of this hissing and spitting and belching (and occasional farting) affects Icelandic happiness.

For one thing, Icelanders tell me, the land itself is a source of creative inspiration and, indirectly, happiness. The ground is, quite literally, shifting beneath their feet. There are, on average, twenty earthquakes a day in Iceland. Not cataclysmic ones, of course, but all of that seismic activity must shake things up.

In Iceland, geologic time is speeded up. Volcanoes are born not over the course of centuries but in a single lifetime. And if you are inclined to believe in energy vortexes and other such things, then Iceland is the country for you. People talk about energy here more than anywhere else I've been. One Icelandic, a graphic designer, told me he squirrels away energy, in the form of sunlight, during the bright summers so that he can make it through the dark winters. Another person, a music producer, told me the "weird energy" explains why most albums are released during the autumn, when everything is dying.

Over the centuries, the world has witnessed a handful of Golden Ages. Places and times of immense creativity and human flourishing. Fifth-century Athens. Elizabethan London. Renaissance Florence. Late-twentieth-century Seattle. Golden Ages never last long. They are fleeting, francium places.

"History shows that golden urban ages are rare and special windows of light, that briefly illuminate the world, both within them and outside them, and then again are shuttered," writes British historian Peter Hall in his marvelous book *Cities in Civilization*.

Is tiny, quirky Reykjavik one of these rare and special windows of light? I wouldn't say it's another Renaissance-era Florence—that would be a stretch—but the two cities have a few things in common. The same population, roughly 95,000. And in Reykjavik, as in fourteenth-century Florence, there is no creative elite. Art is produced and enjoyed by everyone.

Do history and seismic energy alone explain the creative buzz in Reykjavik? Or is there something else, something I'm missing?

One thing is certain. Icelanders possess a natural sense of style,

which, as far as I'm concerned, is the most annoying kind. Fake style can be faked; natural style cannot. I know. I've tried. I own an inordinate amount of black clothing, two pairs of funky glasses I wear all the time, several Kangol hats, some of which I've been known to wear backward. My facial hair is sculpted. My collars are peasant. To the casual observer, I look like a middle-aged man with a decent sense of style. But people with real style, and pretty much anyone under the age of twenty-five, can see me for what I am. A counterfeit fashionista. The walking, talking equivalent of a Louis Vuitton knockoff.

My low point, the moment when I know all is lost, fashion-wise, comes in of all places a thrift store. Its name, like all Icelandic words, is impossible for foreigners to pronounce lest they risk total and irreversible facial paralysis, so for safety reasons I will not divulge it here. The store sells secondhand goods at firsthand prices, which in Iceland makes it a bargain hunters' paradise.

I find a particularly stylish scarf and go to pay for it. The young guy working the register is busy digging around for something; he bends over, exposing a good swath of underwear. I am shocked. Not by the unexpected display of undergarment—I've seen that before—but by the fact that it is cool underwear. Hip underwear. Fashionable underwear. A series of horizontal stripes—red, blue, and green, with a tasteful splash of purple—all nicely arranged on a brief. Good god, even their underwear is hip! Hipper than most of my outerwear. I stand there, staring at this Icelandic clerk's underwear for a while and then, I know, just know. I don't stand a chance in this country.

Iceland's hipness is endemic, afflicting not only the young but also the middle-aged. People like Larus Johannesson. He owns a small music store and a recording label. Everyone knows Larus. If I wanted to understand Iceland's rampant creativity, people told me, I must meet Larus.

We meet at his record store, a cozy hodgepodge of couches and CDs. Larus is wearing a plaid sports coat and black-rimmed

glasses, which he presses against his nose when making an important point. He has natural style. I like him anyway. Outside, a soft darkness has settled over the city.

Larus tells me that he used to be a professional chess player. Yes, I think, that makes sense. It explains the mind, clearly churning behind those hip glasses, and the endearing shyness, which I suspect he has worked hard to overcome. Icelanders are renowned chess players. Why? Once again, I'm told, it's because of those long winters. What else is there to do in the dark?

To say Larus has an eclectic background is like saying Roger Federer dabbles in tennis. In his forty-odd years, Larus has earned a living not only as a chess player but also as a journalist, a construction-company executive, a theologian, and, now, a music producer. "I know," he says, sensing my disbelief. "But that kind of résumé is completely normal in Iceland."

Having multiple identities (though not multiple personalities) is, he believes, conducive to happiness. This runs counter to the prevailing belief in the United States and other western nations, where specialization is considered the highest good. Academics, doctors, and other professionals spend lifetimes learning more and more about less and less. In Iceland, people learn more and more about more and more.

I ask Larus about the creative buzz in the Reykjavík air. Where does it come from—and how can I get some?

He presses his glasses against his nose.

"Envy."

"What about it?"

"There's not much in Iceland."

The lack of envy he's talking about is a bit different from what I saw in Switzerland. The Swiss suppress envy by hiding things. Icelanders suppress envy by sharing them. Icelandic musicians help one another out, Larus explains. If one band needs an amp or a lead guitarist, another band will help them out, no questions asked. Ideas, too, flow freely, unencumbered by envy, that most

toxic of the seven deadly sins. Once unleashed, writes Joseph Epstein in his treatise on the subject, "envy tends to diminish all in whom it takes possession."

This relative lack of envy is one sure sign of a Golden Age, says Peter Hall. Here he is describing turn-of-the-century Paris but could just as easily be describing twenty-first-century Reykjavik: "They lived and worked in each other's pockets. Any innovation, any new trend, was immediately known, and could be freely incorporated into the work of any of the others." In other words, the Parisian artists of 1900 believed in open-source software. So, too, do Icelanders. Sure, they compete, but in the way the word was originally intended. The roots of the word "compete" are the Latin *competere*, which means to "seek with."

Okay, I had found another piece of the puzzle. Minimum envy. But I still sensed I was missing something. How can it be that this flyspeck of a nation produces more artists and writers per capita than any other?

"It's because of failure," says Larus, pushing his glasses hard against the bridge of his nose.

"Failure?"

"Yes, failure doesn't carry a stigma in Iceland. In fact, in a way, we admire failures."

"Admire failures? That sounds...crazy. Nobody admires failure."

"Let me put it this way. We like people who fail if they fail with the best intentions. Maybe they failed because they weren't ruthless enough, for instance."

The more I thought about this, the more sense it made. For if you are free to fail, you are free to try. We Americans like to think that we, too, embrace failure, and it's true, up to a point. We love a good failure story as long as it ends with success. The entrepreneur who failed half a dozen times before hitting the jackpot with a brilliant idea. The bestselling author whose manuscript was rejected a dozen times. In these stories, failure serves merely

to sweeten the taste of success. It's the appetizer. For Icelanders, though, failure is the main course.

Larus tells me how it's perfectly normal for Icelandic teenagers to start a garage band and have the full support of their parents. These kids don't expect success. It's the trying that counts. Besides, if they fail, they can always start over, thanks to the European social-welfare net. This is a nation of born-again, though not in the religious sense.

The psychologist Mihály Csikszentmihalyi wrote in his book *Flow*, "It is not the skills we actually have that determine how we feel but *the ones we think we have*" (emphasis added). When I first encountered that sentence, I reread it four or five times, convinced that it must be a misprint, or perhaps Csikszentmihalyi was strung out on consonants. He seems to be advocating a delusional outlook on life. If I think I'm a violin virtuoso but in fact I'm tone-deaf, aren't I fooling myself? Yes, but it doesn't matter, Csikszentmihalyi argues. Either way, we experience flow, a state of mind where we are so engaged in an activity that our worries evaporate and we lose track of time. Likewise, Martin Seligman, founder of the positive-psychology movement, discovered that happy people remembered more good events in their lives than actually occurred. Depressed people remembered the past accurately. "Know thyself" may not be the best advice after all. A pinch of self-delusion, it turns out, is an important ingredient in the happiness recipe.

It works for the Icelanders. There's no one on the island telling them they're not good enough, so they just go ahead and sing and paint and write. One result of this freewheeling attitude is that Icelandic artists produce a lot of crap. They're the first to admit it. But crap plays an important role in the art world. In fact, it plays exactly the same role as it does in the farming world. It's fertilizer. The crap allows the good stuff to grow. You can't have one without the other. Now, to be sure, you don't want to see crap framed at an art gallery, any more than you want to see a pound of fertilizer sitting in the produce section of your local grocery store. But still, crap is important.

There is almost a willful ignorance among Icelanders when it comes to the difficulties that lie ahead. Larus says this is by design. "Icelanders are ignorant, and that is our greatest strength. It's like walking through a minefield, but you don't know the mines are there, so you just plow ahead. I can't believe how naïve some of these young musicians and writers are. It's an amazing thing to watch."

I smile, though Larus can't possibly know why, can't possibly know how pleased I am to hear the word "naïve" used as something other than a pejorative.

Nearly twenty years ago, I had a run-in with the "n" word. I was twenty-six years old, a young man in a hurry. I desperately wanted to work at a big-time news organization, and, of course, nothing was bigger-time than *The New York Times*. To presume I had a shot at the paper of record was, at the very least, unrealistic and quite possibly delusional. I did not have the requisite pedigree—no Ivy League education nor fluency in foreign languages. No impressive oeuvre. No idea what the word "oeuvre" meant. Indeed, I had never worked at a newspaper before, any newspaper, let alone the august *New York Times*.

But I had a plan. I knew aviation—I had a private pilot's license and had written about small planes—so I tried to convince the *Times* they needed someone to write authoritatively about air travel. My timing was lucky. The paper's aviation reporter was about to retire.

I was summoned for an interview. Actually, a series of interviews, held at increasingly stuffy and intimidating venues, starting at the Harvard Club in New York and culminating at the sanctum sanctorum: the *Times* executive dining room.

As I sat stiffly in my padded leather chair, I tried to conceal my awe and nervousness. My interrogator was a courtly man named John Lee. His southern charms camouflaged a determined ruthlessness, and he did little to put me at ease. Lee didn't resort to stress positions or waterboarding but instead relied on a more old-fashioned interrogation technique: brute intimidation.

Aiding Mr. Lee in this endeavor was a roster of dead white men. Former Pulitzer Prize winners, they stared down at me reproachfully from the wood paneling of a nearby wall. "So, do you really think you are *New York Times* material?" I imagined them asking snidely. No, wait, that wasn't my imagination. That was John Lee.

"So, do you really think you are *New York Times* material?"

"Yes, sir, I do," I said, recovering nicely, I thought.

Lee wasn't the kind of man to take people's word for anything, and he certainly wasn't going to start with some twenty-six-year-old punk who had the audacity—the chutzpah!—to think he was a *Timesman*.

He asked me how I would go about investigating the big news story at the time, the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. I had absolutely no idea and bluffed my way through an answer. To be honest, I don't even recall what I said, but it must have been *Timesian* enough, for I made it to the next round: a trial assignment. I dutifully submitted the story and then... nothing. Three weeks went by and not a word.

I had all but given up on my future as a *Timesman* when I was walking down Second Avenue one morning and, as usual, picked up a copy of the paper at a newsstand.

"Jesus Christ," I shouted. Passersby gave me a wide berth, worried I might be some sort of religious nut. There was my story. On the front page. Granted, it was tucked way down in the lower right-hand corner, and my name was missing (bylines were reserved for staff members) but still. My story. On the front page of *The New York Times!*

Thus began my short but exceptionally eventful career at the newspaper of record. I was hired on a contractual basis, a sort of double-secret probation, owing to my young age and suspect pedigree. The implicit promise was that if I did well, I would make it on staff. I worked furiously, digging up the kind of stories that would land me on the front page. I stretched the boundaries of the aviation beat to its limits. I convinced my editors to let me write

about Latin American drug smugglers, since they used airplanes to ferry their illicit cargo. I wrote about terrorists, since they blew up airplanes. My suggestion that I write about the president of the United States, since he flew on an airplane, was quickly torpedoed, though my gumption was duly noted.

I shared a cubicle—a pod, we called it—with two other reporters. Floyd was a large man, in the horizontal sense, who wrote about the financial markets with real authority. Floyd had a habit of leaning back in his chair when talking on the phone, forcing me to retreat to the far side of the pod. There, I encountered my other podmate: Kurt. Kurt was an investigative reporter who operated in a world of shadowy intrigue. I'd hear Kurt on the phone saying things like "Snow White is in the castle," and he wasn't covering the Walt Disney Company. I didn't mind Kurt's code talk—it lent an air of mystery to the pod—but I did mind the way he paced constantly when he was on the phone, which was pretty much all the time, and the way his phone cord would occasionally wrap around my neck, cutting off the oxygen that my brain has always cherished.

Every six months, John Lee would summon me into his office, where he would look down his glasses, tug at his black dress socks, and tell me that I was doing fine, fine work. A solid B, perhaps even a B-plus, but not an A, and an A is what is expected of a *Times*man. Another six months' probation. I redoubled my efforts, convinced I would eventually make the cut. Until one day my world came crashing down.

Kurt came up to me, looking ashen.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Sneezy is in the forest."

"Kurt, just tell me in English. What happened?"

It turned out to be worse than any fairy tale. My name was mentioned in the daily editorial meeting, the one where the editors decide which stories to put on the front page of tomorrow's newspaper. The executive editor, Max Frankel, didn't like my story,

a ditty about air-traffic controllers. My work, he declared, was "naïve and unsophisticated."

If you're a journalist, especially a *New York Times* journalist, "naïve and unsophisticated" is the absolute worst thing anyone can say about you. Better if Frankel had called me a wife beater or devil worshipper. Anything but naïve and unsophisticated.

I was radioactive, and like all things radioactive I needed to be disposed of quickly and decisively. Sure enough, a few weeks later, I was let go. No, I wasn't let go. I was fired.

I now had plenty of time on my hands to ponder those fateful words: naïve and unsophisticated. The unsophisticated part didn't sting too badly; to be honest, there's probably some truth to it. But naïve? That hurt.

I never really got over the insult. Until now. Sitting here with Larus, in this pitch-dark speck of a nation, I could feel the wound cauterizing. Here was an entire nation of naïve people, and they seemed to be doing just fine.

Besides, what's wrong with being naïve? Wasn't Christopher Columbus naïve? Wasn't Gandhi naïve? Weren't the 1969 New York Jets naïve? The world, I now conclude, would be a far better place with a bit more naïveté.

In Iceland, Larus tells me, being naïve is okay because you can always start over. He has. Four times. We Americans also pride ourselves on being a can-do nation, where anything is possible. That's true, but the system is set up to discourage people from taking such leaps of faith. Leaving your job in America means giving up health insurance, working without a net. In Iceland, though, one person told me, "You never have to worry about falling into a black hole, because there is no black hole to fall into."

Larus is turning out to be as insightful as advertised, and I have more questions for him. I want to know about the elves and dwarves, the "hidden people" who supposedly live in boulders. I had heard that a majority of Icelanders today, in the twenty-first century, still believe in such craziness.

There was the story—a true story, people swore to me—about a road-construction crew working in southern Iceland. Things kept going wrong. Bulldozers broke down. Trucks wouldn't start. It's the hidden people, living in that boulder over there, someone suggested. We must be disturbing them. At first, the crew ignored these warnings, but things continued to go awry. Finally, they decided to arc the road around the boulder and, sure enough, the problems ceased.

Then there was the levelheaded Icelandic woman I met who one moment dismissed the notion of elves but the next moment told me how a ghost—"a very real presence"—once sent her fleeing her house into the cold outdoors. Stark naked.

I ask Larus, diplomatically, if he believes in these things. Larus pauses and gives me a wry smile that emanates from the corner of one eye, before pressing his glasses against his nose. Twice. This is going to be good.

"I don't know if I believe in them, but other people do, and my life is richer for it."

What the heck does that mean? Larus was playing the Sphinx. He wasn't going to reveal more. Indeed, it took me weeks of digging and asking and thinking before I figured out what he was talking about. Icelanders, not an especially religious people, occupy the space that exists between not believing and *not* not believing. It is valuable real estate. A place where the door to the unexplained is always left slightly ajar. Just in case.

I once visited this place. It was the early 1990s, when I was living in New Delhi, working as a correspondent for NPR. I awoke one morning to an unusual sound. Actually, it was the complete absence of sound—a deep and troubling silence that I couldn't explain. India is many things; quiet is not one of them. But quiet it was. No sing-song calls of the *subzi wallah*, pushing his wooden cart of vegetables. No clatter in the kitchen as my cook prepared breakfast. I stepped onto my balcony and saw a man carrying a tin milk pail and moving at a pace considerably faster than the requisite Indian dawdle. "Where are you going? Where is everybody?" I called to him.

"At the temple, sahib. Everyone is at the temple. It's a miracle."

"What's a miracle?"

But the man had already turned a corner and was out of earshot.

My journalist's instincts kicked in. India has more than its share of alleged miracles, but this seemed to be of a different magnitude altogether. I grabbed my tape recorder and rushed to the temple. From one hundred yards away, I could see a crowd gathering outside, swarming. Cars had stopped in front of the temple, causing a massive traffic jam in both directions. The crowd, seeing my microphone and white face, cleared a path for me. "What's happening?" I asked no one in particular.

"It's a miracle," said one man.

"Yes, I know it's a miracle. What kind of miracle?"

"The gods. They are drinking milk."

This was a new one. In my two years living in India, I had heard of holy water from the Ganges appearing from nowhere, of amazing healings of the infirmed. But gods drinking milk? I wondered if this was some clever new marketing campaign from the Dairy Farmers Association. I inched forward. Once inside the temple, I could see several people crouched over a statue of Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, pouring spoonfuls of milk onto it. Sure enough, the milk evaporated as soon as it touched the statue. I didn't know what to think but dutifully recorded it all and, later, broadcast a report on it.

That evening, with life slowly returning to normal, I switched on the TV. The newscaster, a pretty woman wearing a sari, was recounting the day's events. The "milk miracle," as it was now dubbed, had begun that morning at a temple in the Punjab. Word had quickly spread to all parts of India—and eventually to Hindu temples in Britain and Hong Kong. Life in India had ground to a halt, as government workers abandoned their posts to witness the miracle. The TV now filled with images of ecstatic believers like those I had seen earlier in the day.

The program then cut to an interview with a physicist who explained that the "miracle" was actually the result of capillary action,

which made it appear as if the statues were drinking milk. It was not a miracle at all but simple high-school physics. Later, I sat down for an interview with Kushwant Singh, a founding member of the Indian Rationalists Association. "Once again," Singh told me, "we Indians have made complete asses of ourselves."

Indian officials were less blunt, but I suspect they, too, were concerned what the "milk miracle" said about a country that was on the verge of becoming a major economic power, not to mention a nuclear one. What did I think? I honestly don't know, but now, years later, I know what Larus would say: I don't believe in such miracles, but others do, and my life is richer as a result. This twilight of half belief is, I think, not a bad space to inhabit.

Larus has to get going, something about a new band with a great sound. He writes down a phone number and hands it to me. "This is my friend Hilmar. You must, absolutely must, meet him. He's a Heathen."

"He's a what?"

"A Heathen."

Silly me. I thought Heathens had gone the way of dinosaurs and warm meals on airplanes.

As Larus gets up to leave, I can think of only one question, my default question. "Is he happy, this Heathen?"

"Oh, yes, very much so."

And so it came to pass that a few days later I found myself sitting down for an afternoon coffee with Hilmar the Happy Heathen.

I had never met a Heathen before. I didn't know what to expect, so I decided to do what journalists call reporting, academics call research, and normal people call reading. Paganism, it turns out, was the original Icelandic religion before a mass conversion in the year 1000. That was largely seen as a business decision, and Icelanders have never been particularly good Christians. They attend church if someone is born or wed or dies, but otherwise they are, as one Icelander put it, "atheists with good intentions."

The more I learn about Hilmar, the more I am intrigued. Hilmar—whose last name I will not even attempt to write, let alone pronounce—is the head of the Heathen faith in Iceland. Sort of the Chief Druid. He officiates at Heathen weddings and funerals. Hilmar is no ordinary Heathen, though. He is a musically talented one. He's composed dozens of scores for films and was an early mentor of the pop star Björk.

My first contact with Hilmar the Happy Heathen is by e-mail, a small irony that makes me smile. He says he's busy—possibly with human sacrifices, I suspect—and can't meet for a few days.

Finally, the day arrives and we meet at my hotel lobby. Hilmar walks in and introduces himself with a hardy, Heathen handshake. He has a fuzzy, unruly beard and kind eyes. Around his neck is a small silver pendant: the hammer of Thor, the Norse god. We sit down at a nearby café and order drinks. Me green tea. Him cappuccino. Funny, I think. I didn't know that Heathens drank cappuccino.

Hilmar is shy, almost painfully so. He looks down when speaking, which he does in a barely audible murmur. I keep leaning closer to make out the words. He's wearing a heavy green coat, which he leaves on during our entire conversation.

Hilmar seems like a man from another time. I've met people like this before. People whom I can easily picture walking down the streets of Elizabethan London or turn-of-the-century New York. It's not only their appearance—a walrus mustache, for instance—but their body language and verbal tics that make them seem chronologically out of place. I place Hilmar in the early 1800s. I can picture him composing his music by lamps fueled by whale blubber.

As I said, Hilmar's life revolves around his two loves: paganism and music. I'm unsure how to broach the former, so I start by asking about the music.

When Hilmar was eight years old, he'd listen to a relative, a professional musician, play the violin. He practiced ten hours a day. This struck young Hilmar as too much work. How could he

be a musician and not work so hard? he asked his relative. Become a composer, was the reply. And so Hilmar did. He's dabbled in other fields over the years but keeps coming back to his music. Haunting, beautiful music.

Hilmar operates at the level of the sublime. The quotidian—parking his car, paying his bills—doesn't interest Hilmar at all. So invariably he parks poorly and forgets to pay his bills.

I ask Hilmar how he feels when he's composing music.

"I lose track of time when composing. It is a blissful activity. You are doing something you couldn't imagine doing. It is bigger than yourself. You are enlarging yourself."

These are the classic signs of flow, as defined by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi. The line between the actor and the act blurs and, in some cases, disappears entirely. There is no dancer. There is only dancing. Flow is not the same as happiness. In fact, when we interrupt flow to take stock of our happiness, we lose both.

Hilmar also says that when he's composing music, the mathematical centers of his brain are fired. At some point in the creative process, the musical score becomes a puzzle to be solved, a mathematical puzzle. Personally, I've never associated math and happiness, but they seem linked in Hilmar's mind.

Hilmar is a successful Heathen but not an ambitious one. His goals today remain what they've always been: to compose his music. To own a good sofa. To read good books. Hilmar owns many books, even by Icelandic standards. The other day, when he came home with a wheelbarrowful, his five-year-old daughter looked him in the eye and implored, "Please, Daddy, please, no more books!" Hilmar has a stock answer to those who criticize his excessive book buying. "It is never a waste of time to study how other people wasted time."

Hilmar has an opinion about Icelandic love of verse ("There is nothing that an Icelander can't turn into poetry"), and he has an opinion about the heroic failure that Larus and I had discussed. It's true, Icelanders do love a good failure, and, even more, he says, they indulge in "enjoyment of misery." I think I know what

he means. Misery is like a gamy piece of meat: not particularly nourishing, certainly not tasty, but still it's something to chew on, and that's better than nothing. I've been chewing on my misery for about forty years now.

Finally, I screw up the courage to ask Hilmar about his Heathenism. Was he born a Heathen or did he convert?

It turns out that Hilmar didn't so much convert to Heathenism as Heathenism converted to Hilmar. It was the early 1970s, and young Hilmar was searching for meaning. By chance, he met Joseph Campbell, the great scholar of myths. Campbell convinced Hilmar that his future lay in his past. Iceland had a rich tradition of mythology, embodied in a book known as the Eddas. Hilmar was smitten. He liked the idea of connecting to his past, of a religion with no revealed truths, no shalls and shallnots. He read and reread the Eddas, joining the small band of other Icelanders who went on to revive a religion that had been dead for the past thousand years.

Hilmar wants to make a few things clear. The ancient Vikings didn't rape and pillage, at least no more than anyone else of their day. Those were stories drummed up by Irish settlers who wanted to discredit the newly arrived Vikings. Heathenism is a peaceful religion, based on a love of the earth, the spirit of the place, he tells me. There are many gods, and the Eddas contain fantastical tales of one-eyed giants performing miracles.

"Hilmar," I say, "you seem like a levelheaded, rational guy. Do you really believe these stories?"

Hilmar pauses for a moment before answering, and it's not the answer I expect.

"Well, I suppose it could be a muddle of thought, but everyone needs a belief system, in order to have these transcendental moments."

This is incredible. Here is the head of the Heathen faith of Iceland telling me that the entire religion might be a "muddle of thought." That's like the pope saying, "Well, the Bible might be a bunch of hogwash, but hey, it's something to believe in." Yet

that is exactly what Hilmar is saying. It's not what we believe that makes us happy but the act of believing. In anything.

"So has anything bad ever happened to you, any setbacks?" I ask.

Hilmar thinks for a moment, scratching his fuzzy beard. "Yes, I was once fucked over by my manager who left me broke, starving in a flat in London. But I was young enough to enjoy it. I guess you could say I am fatalistic, but in a happy sense."

Hilmar has some time on his hands, so we brave the flying ice and walk to a bookstore. It's called, simply, The Book, and it is a temple of random erudition. Subjects and languages are arranged in no discernible order. A book, in Icelandic, about chess strategy sits next to a book, in English, about gardening.

Hilmar is a regular here. He starts expertly searching among the disarray for a copy of the Eddas for me. And not just any copy. "There are a lot of bad translations out there," he warns. He keeps looking until he finds a good one.

Back in my hotel room, I open the book, the muddle of thought, and begin to read. First, the introduction, by one Jesse Byock, a professor of Icelandic and Old Norse studies at UCLA: "Unlike the gods of Greek and Roman mythology the [Norse gods] rarely quarrel among themselves over the control of human or semi-divine heroes, nor do they enjoy the complacency of immortality. Their universe is constantly in danger, and their actions frequently have unanticipated consequences."

Wow. In ancient Iceland, even a god's life was tough. Why bother being a god, if you can't enjoy the complacency of immortality? Isn't that the whole point of divinity?

I read on. A lot of the tales are hard to follow even in this, a good translation. I find a section called "Sayings of the Wise One." This appeals to me. Fortune-cookie Heathenism. There is advice for travelers:

*Who travels widely needs his wits about him.
The stupid should stay at home.*

And for drinkers:

*A man knows less the more he drinks,
Becomes a muddled fool.*

But my favorite is this gem:

*It is best for man to be middle-wise,
Not over cunning and clever
The learned man whose lore is deep
Is seldom happy at heart.*

Middle-wise. It had never occurred to me that we could be too wise, too learned. Leave it to some Heathens to teach me this life lesson.

I'm sitting at a café called Cultura. It is one of Reykjavík's few international hangouts, an eclectically decorated place where the hummus is served by Spanish waiters. Completing the international tableaux is the young man sitting across from me: an American named Jared Bibler. He's lived in Iceland for the past two years.

Jared is beaming—there is no other word for it—and his lips are curled into a chronic grin. He looks happy, annoyingly so.

"So, Jared," I say, opting for the direct approach, "what the hell are you doing in Iceland?"

Jared chuckles, his grin blossoming into a full-fledged Cheshire smile. "Sometimes life takes you somewhere," he says enigmatically.

To fully understand the riddle that is Jared Bibler, you need to know something about international aviation. Iceland happens to lie directly on the North Atlantic air corridor. That means people jetting between New York and, say, London, fly directly over Iceland, just as people jetting between New York and Los Angeles fly directly over Kansas. Iceland, in other words, is a flyover country.

Icelanders, like Kansans, I imagine, are not especially fond of those looking down at them from thirty-five-thousand feet. But a few years back an executive at Icelandair, the national airline, came up with a brilliant idea. Stopovers. Say you're flying between New York and London. Icelandair will let you stop in Reykjavík for a few days at no extra charge. The plan worked, attracting mostly budget travelers who have a few days to spare.

In the spring of 2002, Jared, a recent college graduate living in Boston, bought one of the Icelandair stopover tickets and, on his way back to Boston, spent three days in Reykjavík. Back home, Jared's friends asked about his trip to Europe. All he could talk about, though, was his few days in Iceland. Jared was in love with Iceland—deeply, madly, irretrievably in love. And like most people in love, Jared was insufferable. He couldn't shut up about Iceland and how great it was. Soon his friends stopped asking about his trip to Europe.

Jared was determined to return to Iceland, not as a tourist but as a resident. He made some phone calls, friends of friends of friends. Did anyone know anyone in Iceland? Nothing. Then, finally, a nibble. The Iceland Chamber of Commerce put him in touch with a two-person software company that was looking to expand into a three-person company. Jared flew to Iceland for the interview. They took Jared out to lunch, at a trendy restaurant called Vegamot. It was a Saturday afternoon and, right there and then, with the noon sky chocolate-black, they offered Jared a job.

And so it was that Jared Bibler, a young man who never thought he would live outside the United States, who until recently couldn't find Iceland on a map, packed his belongings and moved to Reykjavík. "I just had a feeling," he tells me, dipping a pita wedge into his hummus, "that life was better here."

Jared senses my skepticism and, unprompted, elaborates. "Look, we're living in an unprecedented age of mobility. You can determine how your life plays out by deciding where you live. You really can get away from yourself, or at least away from your past.

But Americans, when they think of moving somewhere, they think of North Carolina or North Dakota. They don't think of Canada. Or Iceland."

Okay, I concede, we've all had that urge to pack it up and move to some faraway place. Usually, though, that faraway place involves a white sandy beach or, at the very least, sunlight. Why Iceland?

"I just love it here."

"Yes, but what do you love about it here?"

Jared takes a deep breath and then, with measured passion, tells me what he loves about Iceland. I am writing it all down, barely able to keep up.

He loves the way hot water spouts from the ground like geothermal gold. He loves the way people invite you over for coffee for no particular reason and talk for hours about nothing in particular. He loves the way Icelanders call their country, affectionately, "The Ice Cube." He loves the fact that, without even trying, he already knows three members of Parliament. He loves the way on a brisk winter day the snow crunches under his feet like heavenly Styrofoam. He loves the choirs that line the main shopping street in December, their voices strong and radiant, turning back the night. He loves the fact that five-year-olds can safely walk to school alone in the predawn darkness. He loves the magical, otherworldly feeling of swimming laps in the middle of a snowstorm. He loves the way, when your car gets stuck in the snow, someone always, always stops to help. He loves the way Icelanders applaud when the plane lands at the international airport in Keflavík just because they're happy to be home. He loves the way Icelanders manage to be tremendously proud people yet not the least bit arrogant. And, yes, he loves—not tolerates but actively loves—the darkness.

Most of all, Jared loves living in a culture that doesn't put people in boxes—or at least allows them to move freely from one box to another. A year after joining the software firm, he switched

to banking—a move that would have been unthinkable in the United States. “They would have said, ‘You’re a software guy, what do you know about banking?’ But here people just figure it will work out.” Which is another thing Jared loves about Iceland: the attitude that no matter what, no matter how bleak life seems, things will always work out. And they usually do.

Jared doesn’t love everything about Iceland. The smallness of the place renders it claustrophobic and prone to cronyism; women are so independent minded they won’t allow him to open a door for them. That drives him nuts. But these are quibbles. Jared Bibler is happy in Iceland, happier than he’s ever been.

It’s not as if Jared just sat back and let Icelandic bliss wash over him like a geothermal mud bath. He’s worked at it. He learned to speak Icelandic, learned to enjoy Icelandic food (except for rotten shark; no one learns to like that). I notice that Jared uses “we” and not “they” when referring to Icelanders.

Jared, in other words, displays all of the symptoms of someone who has “gone native”—the term used to describe foreign correspondents, diplomats, and other expatriates who fall in love with a place so fully they cross the line between what anthropologists call a “participant-observer” and simply a participant. Those who have gone native are easy to identify. They speak the local language, get the local humor. They wear the local dress. In some cases, they develop immunities to local microbes. I remember meeting an Englishman who had lived in India for so long he could actually drink the tap water and not die.

The term “gone native” is almost always used disparagingly by those who have not. Yes, we diplomats and journalists are supposed to learn the local language, eat the local food, know the lay of the land. But only up to a point. We’re expected to maintain a certain professional distance. The gone-natives are seen as weak souls, traitors of a sort, who should have known better. Going native is like marrying the girl you had a fling with during a drunken Mardi Gras party. Likewise, our time abroad is supposed to be a fling. Nothing more.

And yet, over the years I’ve met so many people like Jared who seem to be more at home, happier, living in a country not of their birth. People like Linda in Bhutan. She and Jared are refugees. Not political refugees, escaping a repressive regime, nor economic refugees, crossing a border in search of a better-paying job. They are hedonic refugees, moving to a new land, a new culture, because they are happier there. Usually, hedonic refugees have an epiphany, a moment of great clarity when they realize, beyond a doubt, that they were born in the wrong country.

For my friend Rob, that moment came late at night, at a truck stop in Billings, Montana. Rob, who is British, was young and backpacking around the world. By the time he made it to Billings, he was flat broke. His plan was to spend the night at the truck-stop diner and figure things out in the morning.

Rob ordered a cup of coffee; he had only enough money for one. A few minutes later, the waitress came around, carafe in hand, and was about to pour another cup when Rob put up his hand and said, “Sorry, I don’t have any more money.” The waitress smiled gently at Rob and said two words, two words that would change Rob’s life: “Free refills.”

Free refills. Unlimited. Gratis. For Rob, those two words spoke volumes about the incredible bounty, the generous soul, that is America. And suddenly, sitting there in a grimy truck stop in Billings, flat broke and jittery from excess caffeine, Rob realized, beyond a doubt, that he had found his place, what Tennessee Williams called “the home of the heart.”

A few years later, Rob moved to Boston. Soon, he joined NPR and we became colleagues. Rob still has his British accent, of course, but I don’t hear it. I hear an American.

Social scientists have been investigating this phenomenon. They call it “cultural fit,” and it explains a lot about happiness. Like people, each culture has its own personality. Some cultures, for instance, are collectivist; others are individualistic. Collectivist cultures, like Japan and other Confucian nations, value social harmony more than any one person’s happiness. Individualistic cultures, like

the United States, value personal satisfaction more than communal harmony. That's why the Japanese have a well-known expression: "The nail that sticks out gets hammered down." In America, the nail that sticks out gets a promotion or a shot at *American Idol*. We are a nation of protruding nails.

One research project examined the personalities of Japanese and American college students. First, they determined if each student was more individualistic or collectivist in demeanor. Did they value words like "personal achievement" or words like "group harmony"? Then they measured the students' happiness, their subjective well-being. The Japanese students who had individualistic leanings (American leanings, that is) were less happy than the students with more collectivist personalities. In other words, those with a good cultural fit were happier than those without.

What to do with this information? Should we administer cultural-compatibility tests to high school students, the way we used to test for career compatibility? I can imagine the phone call from the school guidance counselor. "Hi, Mrs. Williams, we've tested little Johnnie and determined that he would fit in perfectly in Albania. He'd really be much happier there. A flight leaves at 7:00 p.m. Should I go ahead and make that booking for you?"

Of course not. Just because the culture fits doesn't mean we should wear it, and, besides, every society needs its cultural misfits. It is these people—those who are partially though not completely alienated from their own culture—who produce great art and science. Einstein, a German Jew, was a cultural misfit. We all benefit from Einstein's work, whether he was happy or not.

The last time I saw Jared was at another café. It was 4:00 on a Friday afternoon. I ordered beer; Jared a cappuccino. He needed to stay awake and sober. He was driving north, to the edge of the Arctic Circle, for a ski trip with his colleagues. He was in no real hurry, though, and our conversation unspooled, easy and relaxed. Outside, the sky had turned a deep charcoal-black. "I don't know," said Jared, staring into his cappuccino as if the swirls of

foam and espresso held the answer to all of life's riddles. "I just had a feeling I'd be happy here."

I'm beginning to get into this darkness thing. I'm not yet embracing it, but we're edging closer, darkness and me. Cold has its virtues. Without cold, there would be no coziness. I learned this living in Miami, where coziness is in short supply, along with sane driving. Also, the darkness makes it easy to feel like you've got a jump on the day. How cool is that? You get that ahead-of-the-sun feeling, a feeling normally reserved for stockbrokers and doughnut makers, simply by getting out of bed before noon.

Maybe I have started to turn Icelandic. Well, not really Icelandic. I can still pronounce only two Icelandic words safely, but I have started to appreciate the deep coziness. I feel like I've fallen off the map yet am, oddly, in the center of the universe at the same time. I'm running into people I know, just like a local.

I'm at Kaffitar, my favorite café. I like the way the walls are painted blues, reds, and other soft primary colors. I like the way the baristas yell out, in a singsong voice, when a latte or cappuccino is ready.

I can hear Ragnar, an Icelandic artist I met earlier, laughing, cackling at another table. Ragnar has a brightly colored scarf flung around his neck. He is snapping his fingers with one hand and gesturing with the other. But there is something wrong with the scene, something not right. I can't put my finger on it. Then suddenly it dawns on me. Ragnar is happy. Ragnar is an artist. These two facts do not normally go together. Artists, real artists, are supposed to suffer, and suffering is generally not a happy state of mind.

The Myth of the Unhappy Artist has persisted for a long time. Nineteenth-century English poets like Byron and Shelley died young. More recently, singers like Jimi Hendrix and Kurt Cobain did their bit to promulgate this myth.

Iceland puts this silly myth out of its misery once and for all. I met dozens of artists and all of them were, for the most part, happy. I remember what Hilmar had said when I asked him if he was happy. "Yes, but I cherish my melancholia."

Magnus, the sunburned penguin, said something very similar.

"You nurture your little melancholia, and it's like a buzz that makes you feel alive. You snap yourself a little bit, and you feel this relief of how fragile life is and how tremendously fragile you are."

"So you can have this melancholia and still be happy?"

"Absolutely!"

Modern social science confirms what the sunburned penguin says. The psychologist Norman Bradburn, in his book *The Structure of Psychological Well Being*, describes how happiness and unhappiness are not opposites, as we often think. They are not two sides of the same coin. They are different coins. It is possible, in other words, for a happy person to also suffer from bouts of unhappiness, and for unhappy people to experience great moments of joy. And here in Iceland, it seems, it is even possible to be happy and sad at the same time.

Profundity is a funny thing. Sometimes it is absent in the expected places—Ivy League universities, for instance—but smacks us upside the head in the most unexpected of venues.

It is my last night in Iceland, and I am determined to stay up late enough to experience the weekend debauchery in all its drunken splendor. I head to a bar that Jared had recommended. It's 9:00 p.m., and only a handful of people have shown up, yet already the bar is smoky. It is, I think, the smokiest room I've ever been in, as smoky as a room can be without the room actually being on fire.

I order a shot of Blue Opal, a popular drink based on an even more popular candy. It tastes like a Halls cough drop that has been marinating overnight in vodka.

Something about the smoke-filled bar, or perhaps the vodka-infused cough drop, gets me thinking about Nietzsche. Usually, Nietzsche gives me a headache. But one thing he said keeps bubbling up to my consciousness, like a geothermal spring. The measure of a society, he said, is how well it transforms pain and suffering into something worthwhile. Not how a society avoids pain and suffering—for Nietzsche, a deeply troubled man himself (he went insane in his latter years), knew that was impossible—but how it transforms it. The Icelanders have done a good job of not only surviving on this odd moonscape but also transforming their suffering into something worthwhile. Happy, even.

I meet a woman named Sara. At least I think she is a woman. The first thing she says to me is, "People are always mistaking me for a man or a lesbian." I can see what she means. Sara's hair is cropped short, her face is square and mannish.

Sara says she is "not a sunlight person." One of her favorite things to do is go swimming at 6:00 on an especially cold morning and do laps with the steam rising above the water. "It's even better if it's snowing," she says. Sara does a mean imitation of both American tourists ("Hey, Harvey, is that my coofee or yows?") and mental patients. The former she encountered regularly at the national park where she worked during summers, the latter at the psychiatric ward where she currently works. I like Sara.

The conversation, naturally, turns to happiness. When I tell people about my project, everyone asks the same two questions: How can you measure happiness? How can you even define it?

"I'm not sure," I reply. "How do *you* define it?"

Sara thinks for a moment then says, "Happiness is your state of mind and the way you pursue that state of mind."

Aristotle said more or less the same thing, though he didn't say it in a smoky Icelandic bar frequented by androgynous women. How we pursue the goal of happiness matters at least as much, perhaps more, than the goal itself. They are, in fact, one and the same, means and ends. A virtuous life necessarily leads to a happy life.

I walk out of the bar, pushing past a crowd of people entering.

It's 4:30 a.m., and the morning is still young. I stumble home and collapse onto my bed. For once, I am grateful for the darkness.

I recently came across a great ad for Dos Equis, the Mexican beer. There's a photo of a man in his late fifties, cigar in hand and looking vaguely like Hemingway. On either side of him are two younger women, gazing admiringly. (And, oh, yeah, some beer, too.) The man has this look in his eye, this I-know-things-about-life look. The text reads: "Being boring is a choice. Those mild salsas and pleated khakis don't buy themselves."

And so it is with happiness. When the talk of genetics and communal bonds and relative income is stripped away, happiness is a choice. Not an easy choice, not always a desirable one, but a choice nonetheless.

Faced with a brutal climate and utter isolation, Icelanders could have easily chosen despair and drunkenness. The Russian option. But instead these hardy sons and daughters of Vikings peered into the unyielding blackness of the noon sky and chose another option: happiness and drunkenness. It is, I think, the wiser option. Besides, what else is there to do in the dark?

Chapter 6

MOLDOVA

Happiness Is Somewhere Else

All of this happiness is starting to bum me out. As the German philosopher and fellow malcontent Schopenhauer once said, "Because they feel unhappy, men cannot bear the sight of someone they think is happy."

Exactly. What I need, what will cheer me up, is a trip to an unhappy place. According to the Law of Relative Happiness, such a place will boost my mood since I'll realize there are depths of misery to which I have not yet sunk.

Such a place, too, could lend valuable insights into the nature of happiness. We know a thing by its opposite. Hot means nothing without cold. Mozart is enhanced by the existence of Barry Manilow. And happy places owe their station, at least in part, to the unhappy ones.

Yes, I need to travel to the dark side of the planet, some place not merely a bit blue, a bit down in the dumps, but truly and deeply miserable. But where?

Iraq immediately jumps to mind. Now, there is an unhappy place, as the daily carnage on my TV screen attests. But Iraq's unhappiness says more about the nature of war than it does about the nature of happiness. I dig up my notes from the World Database of Happiness. Let's see. A few African countries certainly qualify as miserable, and I briefly consider hopping the next flight to Zimbabwe. But African misery, too, is easily diagnosed, though the remedies may prove elusive.