

QATAR

Happiness Is a Winning
Lottery Ticket

Something strange was happening. It was late 2001, and a reclusive Arab sheikh was jetting around Europe from one art gallery to another, scooping up masterpieces—and paying top dollar. By some accounts, he spent \$1.5 billion in just a couple of years. If the sheikh showed up at an auction, other collectors didn't bother to place a bid. They knew they didn't stand a chance. "For him, the sky was the limit," bemoaned one collector.

Who was this mystery sheikh?

His name, it turned out, was Saud bin Mohammed al-Thani, a member of Qatar's royal family. His buying spree signaled that Qatar, a flyspeck of a nation, had arrived. Qatar was loaded.

As a student of happiness, I followed the sheikh's profligate ways with interest. Maybe the Bhutanese had it all wrong. Maybe the secret to happiness *is* money. Lots of money. And if money can buy happiness, or at least rent it for a while, then surely Qatar, by some measures the wealthiest country in the world, must also be the happiest. The clincher was that the word "Qatar," when written in Arabic script, resembles a sideways smiley face. Sort of, if you squint a little. Anyway, I decided to book a ticket to Doha, Qatar's capital.

Little did I know how the trip would shake my perceptions of happiness. I would leave Qatar a few weeks later with a very expensive pen, an intense appreciation for swim-up bars, and two

One grumpy writer.
Ten countries.
Will any of them make him happy?

Many authors have attempted to describe what happiness is; fewer have shown us *where* it is, what we can learn from the inhabitants of different cultures, and how changing your location can change your mood. Now in this enlightening book, Eric Weiner, a self-described mope and longtime foreign correspondent for National Public Radio, travels to some of the world's most contented places. Full of inspired moments and earned epiphanies, this riveting book will make you happier as you visit:

- India, where happiness and misery live side-by-side
- 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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One Grump's Search for
the Happiest Places in the World

ERIC WEINER

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THE GEOGRAPHY OF

Bliss

ERIC WEINER

Correspondent,

National Public Radio

"Laugh. Think. Repeat.

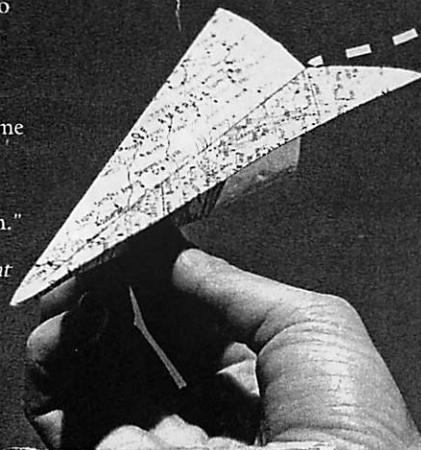
Repeatedly. If someone told me

this book was this good,

I wouldn't have believed them."

—Po Bronson, author of *What*

Should I Do with My Life?



unexpected conclusions: taxes are good, families are bad. But I get ahead of myself.

If you're going to investigate the relationship between money and happiness, it would be intellectually dishonest to do so on the cheap. I fly business class. I'm surprised to find myself alone in that section of the plane. Where are the Qataris? Certainly they can afford business class. Later, I discovered the Qataris were ensconced in the front of the plane, in first class; no Qatari would deign to fly mere business class.

With the entire section to myself, I am the center of attention. The flight attendants practically fall over one another proffering hot towels or serving me macadamia nuts warmed to the perfect temperature or inquiring whether Mr. Weiner would care for another glass of Brut. Why, yes, Mr. Weiner would.

The service on Qatar Airways is so fawning—borderline pornographic, really—that the pleasure of the experience, like all of my pleasurable experiences, is stained with a thin, filmy layer of guilt. Down there, a mere six miles below, are the less fortunate, lugging pails of well water, and if they are eating macadamias at all, they're probably served at room temperature. The horror!

I press a button on my infinitely adjustable Personal Seating System and swivel so I can peer at these poor souls. I see only desert. Sand, no people. A wave of relief washes over me. My guilt fades, though it doesn't disappear entirely. It never does.

Curiously, none of the flight attendants on Qatar Airways is from Qatar. Instead, they possess that ambiguously ethnic look prized by global news networks and international modeling agencies. The entire crew is from Someplace Else, but exactly which Someplace Else I couldn't say. That, I suspect, is the idea. Qatar Airways swaddles you in a fluffy bathrobe of luxury, hoping you don't reach the uncomfortable, inevitable conclusion: Qatar has outsourced its own airline.

It works. I couldn't care less that hardly any Qataris work

for Qatar Airways—an airline where no frill is too frivolous, no expense too expensive. Or silly. When we land in Doha, I am ferried from plane to terminal, a distance of about a hundred yards, in a BMW sedan that smells brand-new. I barely have time to sink into the leather seat and caress the wood trim when it's time to get out again. Why bother? Ahh, I was asking the wrong question. In Qatar, nobody asks why. Why? Because you can. That's why.

I clear customs and step outside the terminal building. I immediately run smack into a wall of heat. Heat has velocity. Anyone who managed to stay awake during high school physics knows that heated molecules move more quickly than cooler ones. But Qatari heat also has mass. It is a solid, a thing, that presses down on you. Much like gravity, only not as pleasant.

The heat, it turns out, is the only solid thing in Qatar. The rest of the nation is ephemeral, gaseous. Which makes perfect sense. Qatar is a nation built on gas. Underneath the sand, and in the warm waters of the Persian Gulf, lie the world's third-largest reserves of natural gas, enough gas to heat every home in America for the next hundred years.

Outside the terminal, waiting for a taxi, I am confronted by a collage of faces, in every hue imaginable: ruby red, pitch-black, ghost white, sunburned. Some faces are invisible, covered by a veil of black cloth. Qatar, like Saudi Arabia, follows the severe branch of Islam known as Wahhabism, and nearly all Qatari women cover themselves, in public, from head to toe. The Qataris, though, are quick to point out that they practice "Wahhabi-lite" and have considerably more fun than the Saudis. The women in Qatar, for instance, can drive and even vote.

The collage of faces is accompanied by a jumble of tongues: the singsong of Tagalog, the jackhammer rhythm of Tamil, and one that I find particularly misplaced—a New Jersey baritone. It's an off-duty U.S. soldier yucking it up with his pals. They are here as a respite from the war in Iraq. I can't help but feel sorry for them. Qatar is no Bangkok, the R-and-R spot for GIs during the Vietnam War. I see other westerners: pasty-skinned white guys in

shorts, with bellies that jut out over their belts like shelves. Oil and gas workers or, as it's universally pronounced, oilgas.

I'm staying at the Four Seasons Hotel. If one is serious about researching the nexus of money and happiness, one needs to be consistent. I step into the lobby, which is built with the scale and grandeur of a cathedral or, I suppose, a mosque. I make it only a few yards before I'm accosted by a small army of eager attendants, impeccably dressed in cream-colored blazers. They are cloyingly polite, escorting me to reception as if leading a bride down the aisle.

The attentiveness extends to the bathroom, where an attendant turns on the water for me and hands me a towel. Then he thanks me. For what? For urinating? It was no trouble, really. I do it all the time.

I decide to check out the hotel bar, which is called, imaginatively, Bar. I'm attended to by a waiter—Indonesian, I think, but can't be sure—whose movements are a study in efficiency and grace. Nothing is wasted.

I order a Scotch and the gazpacho. A few minutes later, he brings three crystal flutes, arranged in a sort of three-tiered, wedding-cake deal. I'm about to point out his mistake when I realize that, wait a second, this *is* my gazpacho.

As I eat—no, drink—my soup, I ponder the nature of happiness. We equate happiness with comfort, but is there really any connection? Is there a point where excess comfort actually dilutes our contentment? More prosaically, is it possible for a hotel to be too nice? And is it considered uncouth to slurp one's gazpacho through a straw?

The big question, though, is: What happens to a person's soul when he or she indulges in excessive, obscene—truly obscene—amounts of craven luxury? I didn't know the answer to that question, but my American Express card and I were determined to find out.

Ours is not the first era to equate money and happiness. The ancient Greeks, while contributing much to civilization, were not

above some good old-fashioned avarice. "The early Greeks spoke of the gods as... blessed or happy—not least because of their material prosperity," writes Darrin McMahon in his excellent history of happiness. And so it went. Throughout the ages and around the world, people paid lip service to that old saw about money not buying happiness and then proceeded to act precisely as if it does.

If you were to devise an experiment to study the relationship between sudden wealth and happiness, you would need to invent something like Qatar. Take a backward, impoverished spit of sand in the Persian Gulf, add oodles of oil, dollops of natural gas, and stir. Or imagine that you and your extended family are rich. Wildly rich. Now double that amount. Next, imagine that your family has its own country somewhere in the Arabian peninsula. That fairly describes Qatar. It is, in effect, less of a country and more of a family. A tribe with a flag.

Like all wealthy families, the Qatari family squabbles over money and privilege. Except instead of who gets the house in the Berkshires, it's who gets the palace in Doha and who gets to be foreign minister this year.

Qatar is roughly the size of Connecticut. Unlike Connecticut, though, there is no old money in Qatar. Only shiny new money. Fifty years ago, Qataris eked out livings diving for pearls and herding sheep. Today, the only pearls they encounter are the million-dollar ones wrapped around their necks, and the only sheep they come across are the sheepskin seat covers on their new Mercedeses. Rarely before in history has one nation grown so wealthy so quickly.

By many of the measures we typically use to gauge human progress, life in Qatar has improved by leaps and bounds. People live longer, healthier lives—although obesity is an increasing problem. They are better educated and can afford to travel abroad (first class, of course) whenever they want. But these objective measures are not the same as the subjective measure we call happiness. Here the verdict is far from clear.

Qataris, like all *nouveau riche*, possess a strange mix of arrogance and insecurity. What they crave, most of all, is validation. Qatar is using money to accomplish this goal. Doha resembles one giant construction site. They are building forty-one hotels, 108 skyscrapers, and fourteen stadiums. And that is just in the next couple of years. No wonder the country suffers from a cement shortage.

I'm sitting in the lobby, staring at the domed ceiling. Blazered attendants of indeterminate nationality hover nearby, discreetly, just in case I might need something. Adrift in a faraway land, there is nothing quite as reassuring as the hermetic comfort of a five-star hotel. Long driveways, modern-day moats, separate you from the country out there. Once inside the sliding glass doors, life is air-conditioned in every sense of the word. The message is clear: Why leave this palace when everything you need is right here? Within the hotel compound, you can eat, drink, exercise, fax, e-mail, get married, have a massage, hold meetings, play tennis, go swimming, shop, get divorced, receive medical attention, book an airline ticket, and so much more. In the developing world, what we used to call the Third World, hotels serve as meeting grounds for the local elite. In Manila, I once reported an entire story for NPR without leaving my hotel. Everyone I needed to interview was in the lobby, sitting in high-backed chairs, sipping lime juice, smoking cigars, and trading gossip.

Yet here in this oh-so-nice hotel, where my every need is attended to instantly, sometimes before I even know I have such a need, I am not happy. What's wrong with me? After a while, a word pops into my head, and given my surroundings, it's an unexpected word. "Tomb." Yes, that's it. The hotel is a very nice, tastefully appointed, climate-controlled tomb. Tombs are for dead people. And I'm not dead yet.

I decide to call Lisa, an American who's been living in Qatar for the past year. She works for a major American university that

has set up a Doha campus, part of something called Education City. It is based on a simple and logically irrefutable premise: Why send Qataris to American universities when you can send the American universities to Qatar? Students get the same education and earn the same degree they would in the United States only without the frat parties or the theater groups or, for that matter, any fun at all.

I'm waiting for Lisa to pick me up. From my hotel window, I have a good view of the traffic below. You can tell a lot about a country by the way people drive. Getting someone behind the wheel of a car is like putting them into deep hypnosis; their true self comes out. *In vehicle veritas*. Israelis, for instance, drive both defensively and offensively at the same time, which is, come to think of it, the way Israelis do pretty much everything. A policeman in Israel once pulled me over. I couldn't imagine why. Was I speeding? No, he explained, I was driving too slowly. Not ridiculously slowly, mind you, just too slowly for a nation of maniac drivers. Miami is no better. (I seem to be drawn to places with bad driving.) Driving there is like driving a bumper car, and as for using your turn signal, don't. As humorist and Miami resident Dave Barry once quipped, it's "a sign of weakness." Miami drivers aren't passive-aggressive. They're aggressive-aggressive. Or take the Swiss. Normally, they are upright and boring but get them behind the wheel of a car and they become... upright and boring. Oh well. Sometimes people are exactly the way they seem.

Qataris, however, are in a league of their own. The State Department issues travel advisories for Americans venturing overseas. Normally, these warnings are reserved for dangers like terrorism and civil war, yet the State Department flags the driving in Qatar, which it describes as an "extreme sport."

A Qatari driver indicates he wants to pass you by getting within six inches of your rear bumper, flashing his high beams repeatedly, and honking loudly until you relent. If you still don't get the idea, he might rear-end you. Why? Because he can. The Qatari passport is like a get-out-of-jail-free card. One expatriate told me

that she was sitting at a traffic light when a Qatari rear-ended her. The judge deemed her to be at fault—again, mind you, she wasn't moving at the time. In Qatar, the foreigner is always at fault.

Foreigners living in Qatar react to the atrocious driving by either complaining constantly or by going native. Lisa, I soon learned, went native.

She's moving at a fast clip when she maneuvers her Audi up the hotel driveway. I step out of the Tomb and into the heat. I sweat, just for an instant, and it feels good. Physiological confirmation that I am indeed still alive.

Lisa is happy to see a new face. Doha, despite its wealth, remains a small town and suffers from the claustrophobia that afflicts all small towns.

"Have you noticed something about Doha?" asks Lisa, accelerating the Audi to an alarming rate of speed.

"You mean besides the absurd amount of money, the oppressive heat, and the bad driving?"

"No 7-Elevens," she says, cryptically. "Think about it. Where are the 7-Elevens?"

She's right. Doha has plenty of Starbucks and designer clothing stores but not a single 7-Eleven or any of the other convenience stores found in most affluent countries. Lisa has a theory. Doha has no 7-Elevens because Qataris have no need for the convenience of a convenience store. The servants—every Qatari has at least one—do the shopping, and, being servants, their convenience isn't anyone's concern.

Or take the case of a professor, another foreigner, who was teaching a class on business and the environment. One day, he told his students about hotels that have begun using ecofriendly laundry detergent. He was met with a sea of blank faces. Not only did the students fail to comprehend "ecofriendly," they were stumped by "laundry detergent" as well. They had never seen the stuff, barely heard of it. Laundry was something the servants did.

Most people who live in Qatar are servants, Lisa explains, as she nearly sideswipes an SUV. There is a clearly defined hierarchy

of servitude. At the bottom of the ladder are laborers from Nepal: ruby-skinned men with scarecrow bodies and a knack for scaling scaffolding without safety cables. You see them toiling in the brutal midday sun, not complaining one bit because, hey, it's better than being in Nepal. Next come the Indians. Darker skinned, they drive taxis and don't complain much either. Then, there are the Filipinos who, with their English-language skills, work in hotels and restaurants. "I'm also a servant," confides Lisa, accelerating through a red light. "Just a higher grade of servant."

Lisa and I arrive at the restaurant. I'm a bit shaken by her driving but think it best not to mention anything. We step out of her air-conditioned car into the solid heat, sweat for a few seconds, then enter the über-air-conditioned restaurant.

Life in Qatar is a continuous series of air-conditioned moments, briefly interrupted by unair-conditioned intervals. It is crucial that these intervals, otherwise known as the outdoors, be kept to an absolute minimum. Qataris accomplish this in imaginative ways. They are capable, for instance, of converting any store into a drive-through. It works like this: A Qatari drives up to a store, any store, and honks his horn repeatedly and forcefully. Within a matter of seconds, a Pakistani or Indian or Sri Lankan worker scurries outside into the blazing heat and takes the Qatari's order, then returns a few minutes later with the merchandise. The entire transaction takes place without once breaching the sanctity of the air-conditioned environment. At least for the Qatari driver, that is.

I read somewhere that Qatar is 98.09 percent desert. I wonder what the other 1.91 percent is. Mercedes, perhaps. The sand dunes can reach heights of two hundred feet and, due to the winds, are constantly migrating. Qatar, in other words, is never exactly the same from one moment to the next. No wonder people here feel so rootless. The ground—the sand—is literally shifting beneath their feet.

Deserts are not considered happy places. We speak of cultural deserts, deserts of the soul. Deserts are empty places, harsh and

unforgiving. Then again, wonderful, unexpected things sometimes bloom in the desert. Two of the world's great religions—Islam and Judaism—took root in the desert. Arab literature, in particular, is replete with homages to desert life. Ibn Khaldoun, the great Arab intellectual of the fourteenth century, wrote lovingly of desert people: "The desert people who lack grain and seasoning are healthier in body and better in character than the hill people who have everything." Khaldoun believed that the great curse of civilization is not war or famine but humidity: "When the moisture, with its evil vapors ascends to the brain, the mind and body and the ability to think are dulled. The result is stupidity, carelessness and a general intemperance." An accurate description, too, of the inhabitants of New York City during the dog days of August.

Over lunch, Lisa drops hints of a troubled past. I suspect alcohol and drugs, possibly in tandem and certainly to excess, but it seems rude to pursue it. I wouldn't be surprised, though. Places like Qatar attract people running away from something: a bad marriage, a criminal record, an inappropriate e-mail sent companywide, and other sundry unhappiness. Conventional wisdom tells us this doesn't work. We take our baggage with us. I'm not so sure. Travel, at its best, transforms us in ways that aren't always apparent until we're back home. Sometimes we do leave our baggage behind, or, even better, it's misrouted to Cleveland and is never heard from again.

After lunch, Lisa drops me off at the Tomb. I am immediately accosted by a platoon of jacketed attendants, inquiring about my day and whether I need anything, want anything, or anticipate needing or wanting anything in the near future. That's it. I do need something. I need to check out, and I need to check out now. I'm sure at some point down the road—when I am, say, dead—I will find a tomb very appealing indeed. But not now. Not yet.

I pack my bags and hand the well-dressed man at reception my credit card.

"Was everything satisfactory?" he asks, noting that I am checking out several days early.

"Oh, much more than satisfactory," I say. "Much, much more."

He gives me a slightly perplexed look before reverting to his corporate smile. A few minutes later, I'm checking into another hotel—no fleabag, mind you, but not a tomb, either. No one greets me at the lobby entrance. A good start. I notice that the ceiling paint is beginning to peel. There's a small crack in one wall. A wave of relief washes over me.

My new hotel, though, does possess one brilliant luxury: a pool with a swim-up bar. If there is any invention that makes one feel more decadent, more thoroughly leisured than a swim-up bar, I have yet to find it. As I dog-paddle up to this particular swim-up bar, I find myself speculating on the genesis of such a brilliant thing. I can picture the meeting, the young hotel executive's voice cracking, "And we could put a bar right in the pool and people, you see, could swim up to the bar and order drinks, right there, in the water." Then that painfully awkward moment, with the other young execs at the table eyeing the boss who says nothing for a really long time but eventually blurts out: "Brilliant. I love it." Yes, I'm sure that's the way it happened.

I'm sipping my Corona, waist-deep in water that is blissfully cool. Surprisingly cool, given that it's 120 degrees outside. It turns out that the water is cooled to a pleasant temperature. Even the swimming pools in Qatar are air-conditioned.

I'm letting the enormity of that concept sink in when I realize that Qatar seems oddly familiar, as if I've seen many Qatars before. Was I a desert nomad in a previous life? No, that's not it. Then it dawns on me. The entire nation of Qatar is like a good airport terminal: pleasantly air-conditioned, with lots of shopping, a wide selection of food, and people from around the world.

In transit. If two sweeter words exist in the English language, I have yet to hear them. Suspended between coming and going, neither here nor there, my mind slows, and, amid the duty-free

shops and PA announcements, I achieve something approaching calm. I've often fantasized about living in Airport World. Not one airport, mind you, like the Tom Hanks character in that movie, but a series of airports. I would just keep flying around the world, in a state of suspended aviation. Always coming, never arriving.

But here, in this airport lounge of a nation, my fantasy is less appealing. Humans, even nomadic ones, need a sense of home. Home need not be one place or any place at all, but every home has two essential elements: a sense of community and, even more important, a history. I had asked a Swiss man what the glue was that held his country together, given the linguistic, if not ethnic, diversity. Without hesitation he answered: history. Can history really do that? Is it that powerful?

Space and time, the two dimensions that we humans inhabit, are closely linked. "Landscape is personal and tribal history made visible," wrote the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan in his book *Space and Place*. What he means, I think, is that places are like time machines. They transport us back to years past. As Rebecca Solnit observes in her lovely, lyrical book *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, "Perhaps it's true that you can't go back in time, but you can return to the scene of a love, of a crime, of happiness, and of a fateful decision; the places are what remain, are what you can possess, are what is immortal."

That's why we feel so disoriented, irritated even, when these touchstones from our past are altered. We don't like it when our hometown changes, even in small ways. It's unsettling. The playground! It used to be right here, I swear. Mess with our hometown, and you're messing with our past, with who we are. Nobody likes that.

Qatar has a past, of course, but not much of one. One thousand years of history, roughly from A.D. 650 to 1600, are unaccounted for, simply missing. The country's more recent past is better documented, but it's quickly being erased by an unstoppable juggernaut of chrome and cement.

Stephen Ulph, a British academic, told me something that made me think about how the past shapes our lives, our happiness. Ulph

is an expert on the Arab world. He speaks Arabic fluently and travels to the Middle East often. He always enjoys his visits to the region's ancient cities—Cairo, Damascus, Beirut. But the oil-rich nations of the Persian Gulf leave him feeling empty.

"I visited Dubai, and all of the buildings seemed so new, like they were made of cardboard, barely there. Then I went home to London. And I never thought I'd say this about London—the weather is dreadful, you know—but I felt so much better. The buildings look solid, as if they go underground six stories."

Is that solidness a prerequisite for happiness? Does it ground us, keep us from floating off into the ether, into despair? Before we condemn the Qataris—or, for that matter, the Chinese, another nation that is quickly bulldozing its past—as uncouth *nouveau riche* with no regard for history, I want to tell you a story. It's about a temple I visited in Japan. It was a very old and beautiful temple. More than one thousand years old, my guide told me. How remarkable, I thought. I'd never seen such an old structure so perfectly preserved. The wood had hardly any splinters, and not a log was out of place. I read a plaque mounted on a small stand in front of the temple and, sure enough, the temple was built in the 700s. But then, I noticed a few more words, in smaller print. "Temple rebuilt in 1971."

What was going on? Were the Japanese trying to pull a fast one on unsuspecting tourists, pretending the temple was 1,200 years old when in fact it was fewer than forty years old? Not exactly. In many Asian cultures, what matters is not the age of the physical structure but the spirit of the place. Temples in Japan are routinely destroyed and rebuilt, yet people still consider them as old as the day they were first built.

This is not a semantic sleight of hand. It says a lot about how a culture relates to its past. It might even explain, for instance, why so few Chinese seem to mind that old neighborhoods in cities like Shanghai are being razed at a prodigious rate to make room for yet one more skyscraper (another reason, of course, being pure greed). The essence of the original structure remains, even if the physical building does not.

And while the Chinese may not venerate their old temples and houses, they do honor their dead. Ancestor worship is the Chinese way of staying connected to the past. Who are we to say that worshipping dead people is any better or worse than worshipping dead buildings?

Either way, an important ingredient in the good life, the happy life, is connecting to something larger than ourselves, recognizing that we are not mere blips on the cosmic radar screen but part of something much bigger. For some, a Victorian building, with its creaking staircases and tarnished molding, provides this connection. For others, it's giving a new cellphone, gift wrapped, to Uncle Wen who died twenty years ago but is still part of the family.

Bertrand Russell, the British philosopher, concludes his book *The Conquest of Happiness* by describing a happy person thus: "Such a man feels himself a citizen of the universe, enjoying freely the spectacle that it offers and the joy that it affords, untroubled by the thoughts of death because he feels himself not really separated from those who will come after him. It is in such a profound instinctive union with the stream of life that the greatest joy is to be found."

That's an awfully transcendental statement for a self-declared atheist. It reminds me of what Jonas Salk, inventor of the polio vaccine, said when asked what the main aim of his life had been: "To be a good ancestor." A comment like that can only come from a man profoundly aware of his place in the universe.

I'm no Jonas Salk, and half the time I can't find where I parked my car let alone my place in the universe, but lately I've been thinking a lot about this. If we view our lives as merely the seventy or eighty years (if we're lucky) we putter about on this planet, then they are indeed insignificant. But if, as that Buddhist scholar put it, "our parents are infinite," then maybe we are, too.

It occurs to me that I've been in Qatar for several days now and have yet to meet any Qataris. This is a problem. My journalistic instincts, honed over two decades, tell me that in order to probe the Qatari

soul it might be helpful to speak with actual Qataris. But where? The usual journalist's trick of interviewing the cabdriver wasn't working. He was invariably from India. Nor could I interview my waiter (Filipino) or the manager at hotel reception (Egyptian). No, I needed an introduction, an entrée into this tribal society.

I had a lead. A phone number for one Sami. He is a friend of a friend and works at Al Jazeera, the controversial Arabic TV network that's based in Qatar. Sami is not Qatari, but I bet he knows some. We agree to meet where everyone in Qatar meets: the mall.

Sami is dressed impeccably in a crisp suit and tie. We sit down at a café on the mezzanine level. I order a lime juice. Sami, tea.

Sami is ethnically Arab but raised in Britain and educated in the United States. He can swim equally well in both rivers, Arab and western. He is the kind of person, I know from experience, who holds the key to understanding a place. He is a cultural interpreter.

I ask Sami about tribal culture. It's a term that we in the west use often and not in a flattering way. Though we never quite say it, tribal culture is considered backward culture.

That's not the case here, says Sami. "Tribe" is just another word for family—a large, extended family. That term sticks in my mind. I wonder: Can a family be overextended? And, if so, is this just as painful as overextending your knee? Our families are our greatest source of love and support. They are also the ones who are, statistically, most likely to kill us. As Yi-Fu Tuan points out, "We cinch both our enemies and lovers." And so it is with families. They are our salvation and our ruin.

"Tribal values are like family values," continues Sami. Something to rally around during good times and bemoan the loss of during difficult times. And just as families distrust outsiders—don't talk to strangers, our parents warned us—so, too, tribes are wary of outsiders. You're either a member of the tribe or you're not. There's no in-between.

Tribal and corporate culture are actually very similar, Sami tells me. Both honor loyalty above all else and reward it generously,

be it with stock options or belly dancers. Both deal harshly with traitors, be it through layoffs or beheadings.

The American CEO is just like a Middle Eastern tribal leader, explains Sami: "If you worked at Time Warner, you wouldn't go to the CEO with a small problem. You know your place." And so it is with the country of Qatar. Everyone has access to the ruling emir—his palace door is always open—but they use that access judiciously.

"But why are the Qataris so gruff? Even rude at times?"

"You have to understand, Eric. These are desert people. Life was tough back then. If you hiked for miles through the desert and you finally found someone with water, you wouldn't say, 'Excuse me, dear sir, but could you possibly spare some water?' You would just blurt out, 'Give me water, damn it, I'm dying of thirst!'" That's why, explains Sami, the contemporary Qatari barks at the Starbucks barista when ordering a grande latte. It's because of the desert.

It's not such a far-fetched theory. We are shaped not only by our current geography but by our ancestral one as well. Americans, for instance, retain a frontier spirit even though the only frontier that remains is that vast open space between SUV and strip mall. We are our past.

I take a sip of lime juice and ask Sami if he could help me meet some Qataris. You would think I had asked Sami if he could arrange lunch with the queen of England, rather than asking to meet the citizens of the very country I happen to be visiting at the moment. Sami brushes a speck of invisible dust off his shoulder before speaking.

"This is going to be tough, Eric. Let's see what we're dealing with. First of all, you're an American. Strike one. Also, you're a journalist. Strike two. And your name sounds awfully Jewish."

"Three strikes. I'm outta here?"

"I'll see what I can do. Give me some time." Then he gets up to leave.

The heat is growing worse every day. By 8:00 a.m., the sun glows bright orange in the sky and presses down on me mercilessly. By

noon, it is physically painful to stand outside for longer than a minute or two. The heat is just as debilitating as a blizzard. Only fools and foreigners venture outside.

I fit at least one of those categories, possibly both, and so I brave the midday sun to visit the souks in the old part of Doha, the not-yet-bulldozed part of town. One of the rare examples where Qataris value the old.

Inside the souk, the floors are pearly white. Everything is white, including the heat. I notice a McDonald's, which has been designed to blend in architecturally with its surroundings. It looks like... wait... yes, it looks like a mosque. A McMosque. I imagine a sign out front: Over one billion saved! I find this very, very funny. Yes, the heat is definitely getting to me.

I wander through a maze of shops, all run by foreigners. The names of the stores reflect the proprietor's home county: Mother India Tailors, Manila Barber Shop. I suppose this lends an international feel to the city, yet there is something undeniably wistful about it, a longing for home. The expatriates are the worker bees of the Qatari economy. They live here for twenty, thirty years—maybe they were even born here—but they'll never become Qatari citizens. It is a trade-off they readily accept, though it seems like a lousy one to me. Most leave their families back home until, finally, they retire, return home triumphantly, and build a large house. Just in time to die.

I stop for tea. A hot drink cools you more efficiently than a cold one, another one of the ironies of desert life. I pick up the local newspaper, the *Peninsula Times*. There's a picture of the emir meeting the outgoing Nepali ambassador. The newspapers carry the same picture every day, taken in the same ornate room, with the same gold-plated tissue box, only with a different official sitting across from the emir, looking uncomfortable as hell, while the emir, a man of not-insignificant girth, slumps in his chair, just hanging out. I turn the page. There's a story about a serious air-conditioner shortage. It's written in the same urgent, breathless manner that one might write about, say, a shortage of antibiotics.

The call to prayer, the Middle Eastern sound track, ricochets across the white marble. How many times have I heard this sound and in how many different countries? It's a beautiful thing, really; you don't have to be Muslim to appreciate the vocal talent of a good *muezzin*. These days, though, after the September 11 attacks, I find the beauty tinged with menace.

Muslims pray five times a day. This is what the Koran ordains. Why five times? Why not four or six? Only Allah knows, but when Islam sprouted in the Arabian desert some 1,400 years ago, one function the new religion served, intentionally or not, was to bring people together. The mandatory prayer got people out of their own tents and into bigger, communal tents and, eventually, mosques.

Some 1,300 years later, the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre metaphorically spat on the notion of communal bliss by declaring, "Hell is other people."

Sartre was wrong. Either that, or he was hanging out with the wrong people. Social scientists estimate that about 70 percent of our happiness stems from our relationships, both quantity and quality, with friends, family, coworkers, and neighbors. During life's difficult patches, camaraderie blunts our misery; during the good times, it boosts our happiness.

So the greatest source of happiness is other people—and what does money do? It isolates us from other people. It enables us to build walls, literal and figurative, around ourselves. We move from a teeming college dorm to an apartment to a house and, if we're really wealthy, to an estate. We think we're moving up, but really we're walling off ourselves.

My taxi driver has no idea where the Qatar National Museum is located and has to stop three times to ask directions. A sign, I think, that Lisa is right. She had claimed, over breakfast one day, that the Qataris had no culture.

I felt compelled to defend the Qataris, though I'm not sure why.

"That seems a bit extreme. Every country has a culture."

"Okay," she said. "They have no cuisine, no literature, and no arts. To me, that means no culture."

"But they have a Ministry of Culture."

"Yeah, they also have a Ministry of Justice. That doesn't mean they have justice."

She had a point. The only culture in Qatar, Lisa claims, is the kind that arrives on an airplane: artists and authors flown in fresh daily, the cultural equivalent of lobsters from Maine.

"Okay," I said, not ready to concede. "They have a museum. I've seen it on the map. If they have a museum, they must have a culture."

Lisa just smiled coyly and said, "Have you seen the museum?"

So here we are, at the museum. The first thing that strikes me about this squat concrete building is that it must be the only unair-conditioned building in the entire country. Is this, I wonder, an effort to simulate the hardship of Qatari life before the days of air-conditioning? The heat inside the concrete rooms is unbearable. Within seconds, rivulets of sweat form on my forehead and drip into my eyes, stinging.

Fortunately, there is little reason to linger. The exhibits are, in a word, pathetic. Lisa spots a glass case that houses a collection of what looks like camel toenail clippings. There's an exhibit of folk medicine, with the emphasis on the folk. A placard reads: "Cups were used to relieve high blood pressure, the symptoms of which are headaches and fainting." It's not clear if these symptoms were caused by the high blood pressure or the "cupping." A picture shows an old man, with giant ladles attached to his head and blood emptying into plastic cups. I believe in medieval times this was known as bloodletting.

One of the more interesting exhibits is a series of aerial photos of Doha, the same view taken in 1947, 1963, and 1989. In each successive photo you can see the city spreading like an ink stain.

We meander in the courtyard, where an alleged breeze stirs up the hot air. Maybe it's the heat or maybe it's the sad museum, but

it is here where Lisa tells me about her past. It is, in fact, much like Qatar's past: troubled, mercurial—and with large swaths of time unaccounted for. As Lisa unreels, I can't help but wonder: What if everyone had their own personal museum, actual buildings devoted to telling our stories?

The Museum of Lisa would be a bit depressing, much like the Qatar National Museum, only with air-conditioning and probably without the camel toenail clippings. One exhibit would feature the dusty plastic tumbler from which Lisa imbibed her first drink. Underneath, a plaque would read: "This is the authentic cup in which Lisa, age ten, mixed together Scotch, rum, and gin, acquired from her parents' liquor cabinet." Another exhibit would feature the actual bright-orange Pontiac LeMans convertible she hopped a ride in to run away from home at age fifteen. And look, over here—an exact replica of the rehabilitation center in Columbus, Ohio, that Lisa entered at age nineteen.

Next, if you walk this way, mind the bong, please, we enter the Early Tunisian Period. Lisa has sobered up and joined the Peace Corps. They send her to the North African nation of Tunisia. All is well but... oh, no... what's this? A picture of Lisa with a bottle of beer in each hand, a cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth. We must have entered the Relapse Era. The placard tells us that Lisa has fallen off the wagon and fallen hard. She's medevaced to Amsterdam, en route home, but she doesn't want to go, and Lisa never, ever does anything she doesn't want to do, so she resorts to one of her old tricks from the Street Urchin Era. She acts crazy. Roll the grainy video of Lisa at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport. "Excuse me, do you know the world is coming to an end?" she is saying, again and again to anyone who will listen and even to those who won't. The Dutch authorities lock her up in a psychiatric hospital. They give her medication, which Lisa deftly "cheeks," only pretending to swallow, another old trick from her runaway days. Finally, the Dutch give up and put her on a flight home to America. On the plane, she has sex in the lavatory with a long-haired guy she just met.

Hopefully, you leave the Museum of Lisa feeling the way I do about Lisa: warm and fuzzy and wishing her well as she heads toward a Golden Age replete with yoga classes and AA meetings. May Lisa be as lucky as Qatar. May she find huge reserves of natural gas deep beneath her sands.

As we walk back to the car, I wonder: What would my museum look like? I'm drawing a blank, and this disturbs me very much. Is the arc of my life so indiscernible, so amorphous, that no curator could tell my story under one roof?

"So was I right, or what?" asks Lisa.

Yes, I concede, she is right. Qataris have no culture. Frankly, I can't blame them. If you spent a few thousand years scraping by in the desert, fending off the solid heat, not to mention various invading tribes, you wouldn't have time for culture, either. Back then, life was too harsh for culture. Today, it is too comfortable for culture. "Creative cities, creative urban milieux, are places of great social and intellectual turbulence, not comfortable places at all," observes British historian Peter Hall.

The emir of Qatar, ruler of the land, is determined to do something about his country's missing culture. In true Qatari fashion, he plans to buy a culture and, while he's at it, some history as well. It sounds like a sensible plan. But there's a hitch. While it's true that money talks, it talks only in the future tense. Money is 100 percent potential. You can build a future with money but not a past.

This hasn't stopped the emir from trying. He will soon open several new multimillion-dollar (and presumably air-conditioned) museums, celebrating Qatar's recently constructed past. I can imagine the billboards: "Your Cultural Heritage. Coming Soon!"

The emir of Qatar is not your typical Arab leader. He came to power in a family coup d'état, which seems fitting for a country that is basically a family business. He immediately established himself as a new kind of Arab ruler. A soft and cuddly authoritarian.

The emir is expert at playing a double game. Qatar is home to one of the largest U.S. military bases in the world—the United

States ran the 2003 invasion of Iraq from here. Qatar is also home to Al Jazeera, the fiery satellite TV channel that is best known for airing tapes of Osama bin Laden. Thus, the emir manages to be both pro- and anti-American at the same time. No easy feat.

The emir is, if nothing else, generous. He shares Qatar's vast oilgas wealth among his subjects. In fact, this is the ultimate welfare state. Gasoline sells for fifty cents a gallon, cheaper than water. Well, that's not quite true. Water in Qatar is free. So is electricity and health care and education. The government even pays a small salary to Qatari college students. When a Qatari man gets married, the government gives him a plot of land to build a house, an interest-free mortgage, and, to boot, a monthly allowance of roughly seven thousand dollars. And unlike in European welfare states, Qataris aren't burdened with high taxes. In fact, they aren't burdened with taxes at all. No income tax. No sales tax. Nothing.

You might think this is a wonderful thing, as I did at first. But a study conducted recently at the University of Oregon suggests otherwise. Researchers gave nineteen volunteers one hundred dollars and then had them lie on their backs and watch the money disappear, through a series of financial transactions that flickered across a computer screen. At the same time, the researchers scanned the participants' brain activity with an MRI machine.

In one experiment, the participants actively chose a good cause to donate their money to. When they did, two of the more primitive parts of the brain—the caudate nucleus and the nucleus accumbens—lit up. The truly surprising finding, though, is that even when the participants were forced to give up their money (to a good cause, they were told) the parts of the brain associated with altruism still fired. Not as much as when the choice was made voluntarily, but most economists would not have predicted any brain activity at all, at least not of the positive variety, when someone was forced to cough up money involuntarily—in other words, pay taxes.

What to make of this study? Should we wire everyone to an MRI machine to determine their appropriate tax bracket? I don't

think so, and the experiment had its shortcomings. In the real world, taxes aren't always seen as fair, and how they're spent is sometimes questionable. But clearly paying taxes is good. Mind you, I'm not saying that *high* taxes are good. I'm just saying that the concept of taxation is good, is necessary, for a healthy democracy. "Tax" is another word for vote. If a public worker is goofing off on the job, Qataris can't chastise him with that old standby, "Hey, I pay your salary, buddy." No, you don't. Qataris have neither taxation nor representation, and that's not a happy thing.

A call from Sami. Good news. He has arranged for me to meet a few Qatari friends at the Al Jazeera offices. I hop a cab and meet him outside the headquarters building. Except for the small mosque near the entrance, this could be any TV station. We head for the employee cafeteria. I'm impressed. Blond wood floors, Scandinavian furniture, and, mounted on the wall like a piece of modern art, a flat-panel TV. Al Jazeera is the emir's child, and the emir treats his children well.

Sami introduces me to his friends, all wearing white *dishdashas*, the long, flowing robes worn by Persian Gulf Arabs, with the standard accessories: cuff links, expensive watches, and Mont Blanc pens tucked into their breast pockets. Since the *dishdashas* are generic clothing, these accessories are the only way that Qatari men can flash their wealth. Their procurement is a vital part of life here.

Hands are shaken, coffee served, cigarettes lit. I decide to open the conversation by asking about the driving in Qatar. Why is it so bad?

There's a long pause.

"Next question," says one of the men, and everyone laughs.

"Actually," says another, "it's your fault, you Americans. We learned to drive by watching Hollywood films, car chases and whatnot. It's a macho thing."

Okay, enough chitchat. I screw up my courage and blurt out the big question.

"Are you happy?"

There is an uncomfortably long silence. Finally, one man says, an edge of irritation in his voice, "Why do you ask such a question?"

That question—are you happy?—the question we Americans chew on every day, every hour, is not entirely appropriate in a Muslim country like Qatar. I've noticed that people cringe slightly when I ask and politely try to change the subject. That's because happiness, bliss, is in the hands of Allah, not man. If we are happy, it is God's will and, likewise, if we are miserable it is also God's will. Are you happy? I might as well have asked these guys if they shaved their legs. I want to slink away.

"Okay, if you insist, yes, I am happy," one man finally says.

"There's no such thing as complete happiness," says a third man, puffing away on a cigarette.

"If you want to know true happiness, you should become a Muslim," says a fourth. "You should believe and know that everything is in the hands of God. You will get what Allah has written for you. Yes, you should become a Muslim if you want to know happiness."

The link between religion and happiness is a subject that could fill many bookshelves, and, indeed, it has. I will dip my big toe into this deep, deep reservoir by pointing out one statistic to emerge from the young science of happiness. People who attend religious services report being happier than those who do not. Why? Is it because of some transcendental experience, the religious part of the religious service? Or is it the service part, the gathering of like-minded souls, that explains this phenomenon? In other words, could these happy churchgoers receive the same hedonic boost if they belonged to a bowling league or, for that matter, the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan?

I don't think so. Consider this finding: People who say they agree with the statement "God is important in my life" report

being significantly happier than people who disagree with that statement, irrespective of their participation in organized religion. A happiness bonus—to put it in earthly financial terms—equivalent to a doubling of their salary.

I can hear the howls of protests from atheists. If belief in a delusional, dogmatic religion makes you happy, then it is not a happiness I want any part of, thank you very much. The atheists might be on to something. For one thing, the happyologists fail to take into account the moral underpinnings of happiness. A pedophile who reports high levels of happiness—say, a nine out of ten—counts exactly the same as a social worker who also reports being a nine on the happiness scale. Likewise, a suicide bomber, firm in his belief in Allah, might very well score higher than either the pedophile or the social worker. He might be a ten, just before blowing himself up and taking a few dozen innocents with him. Aristotle would clear up this moral confusion in an Athenian minute. Happiness, he believed, meant not only feeling good but doing good. Thus, the pedophile and the suicide bomber only *thought* they were happy. In fact, they were not happy at all.

Perhaps it is not the belief in God that makes us happier but belief in something, anything. How else to explain the fact that the happiest countries in the world—Denmark, Iceland, Switzerland, the Netherlands—are hardly religious at all? The citizens of these countries, though, clearly believe in something. They believe in six weeks of vacation, in human rights, in democracy, in lazy afternoons spent sitting in cafés, in wearing socks and sandals at the same time. Beliefs we may admire or, in the case of the sock-and-sandal combo, find utterly abhorrent. But they are beliefs nonetheless.

"So all I need to do is believe in Allah?" I'm careful to keep my tone nonconfrontational with the men from Al Jazeera. I am treading on treacherous, holy ground here. "I don't need to do anything else to be happy?"

"You need to make effort, but it is effort that matters, not result," says one man.

Islam, like other religions, maintains that if you want to be happy, put great effort into living a virtuous life and expect nothing, absolutely nothing. Divorce your actions from their results, and happiness will flow like oil.

The conversation winds down, and the men, one by one, start to fiddle with their Mont Blanc pens and glance at their diamond-encrusted watches. We say our goodbyes, and they leave me with these parting, slightly ominous words: "Religion is like a knife. If you use it the wrong way you can cut yourself."

A major turning point in human history occurred in the Dutch region of Flanders in the year 1445, though you won't read about it in most history books. Flanders is where the first lottery took place. The prize wasn't much—a goat's head and a date with a comely lass of virtue true, I presume—but the event marked a major shift, what I might call a paradigm shift if I were the kind of person who used terms like "paradigm shift." For the first time in history, a member of the unwashed masses could become instantly rich and without lifting a finger. Just like the landed gentry. Legalized prostitution and now this. The Dutch, once again, were on to something.

Lotteries have been popular ever since. Today, dozens of countries around the world have them. Who has not fantasized about winning the jackpot? Who hasn't imagined the exact moment when you walk into your boss's office on Monday morning and very politely, without a hint of malice, tell him to kindly fuck off and die? You don't work there anymore. You don't work *anywhere* anymore. You travel. You shop. You eat Doritos and watch *Seinfeld* reruns.

You wouldn't be one of those selfish lottery winners, though. Oh, no, you'd spread the wealth. Buy your mom that condo in Florida, your brother that sports car, and even throw a few thou-

sand to some worthy cause. Darfur, maybe. You wouldn't be one of those squanderers, either. No, sir, you'd be responsible. You'd invest. Eventually, after a few years, you might even do some work again. On Tuesdays. In the afternoon. Maybe. Yes, if you won the lottery, you would be, in a word, happy.

That's what Qatar thought, too. It has won the oilgas lottery, and it's no longer working at the doughnut shop. Like other lottery winners, Qatar spends a lot of time pampering itself and fielding calls from long-lost cousins and old high school buddies, only this time it's the United Nations high school. "Qatar, how the heck are you, it's your old pal Somalia. It's been toooooo long. We must do lunch."

So end of story. Qatar is loaded and therefore happy as well.

Not so fast.

In 1978, psychologist Philip Brickman studied two groups of people. One group had just won the lottery and was now wealthy. Another group had been in accidents and was now paralyzed. Not surprisingly, shortly after these events, the lottery winners reported increased happiness, while the accident victims were less happy. But as Brickman tracked the groups, something wholly unexpected happened. The lottery winners soon returned to the same happiness levels as before they struck it rich. The paralyzed accident victims, meanwhile, rebounded to happiness levels only slightly lower than before their accident.

What was going on? Brickman surmised that, in the case of the lottery winners, they now derived significantly less pleasure from ordinary events like buying clothes or talking to a friend. What was once enjoyable was no longer so. Psychologists call this the "hedonic treadmill." Much like a regular treadmill, the hedonic treadmill makes you sweat and should be avoided at all costs. Unlike a regular treadmill, however, the hedonic variety is definitely not good for your health. It will drive you nuts, this infinite cycle of pleasure and adaptation. Interestingly, there are two notable exceptions to the hedonic treadmill. Noise and big breasts. Studies have found that we never really get used to loud noises, despite

prolonged exposure. Another study found that women who get breast implants never tire of the enjoyment it brings them, and presumably their companions feel the same.

Aristotle was right when he said, "Little pieces of good luck (and likewise of the opposite kind) clearly do not disturb the tenor of our life." And if the Brickman study is right, then big pieces of luck don't disturb the tenor of our life, either. Nothing does. Which invites the inevitable question: Why bother getting out of bed in the morning?

To answer that question, we need to step back. Lotteries are not really about money. They're about the intersection of luck and happiness. It's a busy intersection, prone to accidents. The ancient Greeks believed that happiness required a measure of good luck. Even Aristotle, who preached the need to lead a virtuous life, also believed in the necessity of luck: "For a man is scarcely happy if he is very ugly to look at, or of low birth, or solitary and childless, and presumably less so if he has children or friends who are quite worthless, or if he had good ones who are now dead."

Don't just take Aristotle's word for it, though. In every Indo-European language, the word for happiness is tied to the word for luck. The English word "happiness" comes from the old Norse word "*hap*," or luck. When we have a mishap, we've had a spell of bad luck. In modern German, the word "*glück*" means both "happiness" and "luck." In Aristotle's time, luck was bestowed by the gods. Today, that job falls to the good people at Powerball.

But, as the studies of lottery winners show, what at first looks like good luck may turn out to be its opposite. I recently came across this short article from a Pakistani news service.

Multan, March 16: A prisoner Haq-Nawaz, 70, died in New Central Jail Bhawalpur last evening when he was told that court has suspended his imprisonment and ordered to release him. When the jail authorities informed him that he was going to be released on Thursday, he could not con-

trol the happiness and his pulses [*sic*] stopped due to over-excitement. Haq-Nawaz's body was handed over to his relatives for burial.

I've hung that article on my refrigerator. A daily reminder to myself: Happiness can kill.

That evening, Lisa and I have dinner at the hotel's Indian restaurant. It is delicious and extremely authentic, which is not surprising given the fact that the entire staff probably arrived from Bombay yesterday.

We attempt to make some chitchat, but Lisa's fierce honesty streak gets in the way. And so, between the papadam and the biryani, she asks me, point blank, if I am happy in Qatar.

"Actually," I say, "I feel sad. Very sad. I can't explain it."

"That's because you need it, you love it."

"Love what?"

"Sadness. You are addicted to sadness."

She doesn't say it like it is some harebrained theory. She says it like it is fact. The earth is round. I'm addicted to sadness. Is such a thing even possible? I wonder. What sane person would crave something like sadness?

If it's true, if I am indeed addicted to sadness, I absolve myself of blame. Responsibility rests firmly with my brain. It is a flawed design. Worse than the 1975 Ford Pinto and just as dangerous.

Neuroscientists have discovered that the parts of the brain that control wanting and the parts that control liking are separate; they operate independently of one another and involve different chemicals. Neuroscientists know this the way they know everything else about how our brains work: by doing strange and often sadistic things to rats.

In the 1950s, Canadian researchers planted tiny electrodes

inside rats' brains and electrically stimulated a part of the brain known as the lateral hypothalamus. The rats loved it. The scientists then gave the rats tiny rat-sized levers to push that would allow them to stimulate their lateral hypothalamus all by themselves. The rats loved this even more. "Working for this reward, they [the rats, not the scientists] will ignore sexually receptive members of the opposite sex, food, or even water, in their single-minded quest for the hit," writes Daniel Nettle in his book *Happiness: The Science Behind Your Smile*.

A bit strange, you might think, but still within the realm of the explainable. Whatever those electrical currents are doing to the rats' lateral hypothalamus, it must be something awfully good, something the rats like a lot and therefore will do anything to repeat.

That's probably what the scientists thought, too, when they devised another experiment. They stimulated the rats' hypothalamus while they were eating. The results were surprising. The rats ate more food but, judging by their body language, weren't enjoying it—clear evidence, says Nettle, that "you can crave for something very much but take little or no pleasure in it once you had it." Anyone who has ever been hooked on cigarettes or watched *Nancy Grace* knows this intuitively.

Wanting things we don't like. If true, it pretty much demolishes the entire field of economics. Economists base their studies on the premise that rational human beings pursue things that will increase their "utility," economist-speak for happiness. Joe works overtime, hardly seeing his family, so he can save money to buy a new BMW. Therefore, the new BMW must increase Joe's utility, his happiness. What economists fail to take into account is that Joe is a moron. No, that's not entirely fair. Joe is not a moron; but Joe's brain clearly is. It's been wired in a way that compels Joe to chase after things that don't make him happy.

So much of human misery can be explained by this crazy way we're wired. We assume that our intense feelings of wanting something—a new car, winning the lottery—means that, once ob-

tained, these things will make us happy. But that is a connection that, neurologically speaking, does not exist. We are disappointed but don't learn from our disappointment because our software is flawed. It's not faulty data but faulty programming that is holding us back, and that is much harder to rectify.

Addicted to sadness. Lisa's words are still rattling around my head when my saag paneer arrives. The waiter insists on ladling it onto my plate and, I suspect, would cut it up and feed me if I asked. By doing so, he is increasing my comfort, yes, but also denying me the tactile pleasure of heaping the spinach and cheese onto my plate. But he is just doing his job, so I decide not to point this out to him.

Addicted to sadness. I still don't buy it. Sadness is not pleasurable. I neither want nor like it. No, Lisa is wrong this time. Or is she? Feeling sad is still feeling, in the same way that believing in drivel is still believing. Both mind-sets are preferable to the alternative: nothingness. Human beings will go to great lengths to avoid nothingness. We will conquer foreign lands, fly to the moon, watch cable TV alone in hotel rooms, shoot thirty-two people dead, compose beautiful music.

Addicted to sadness. As I tear off a piece of naan, it's starting to make sense. Certainly, I am sad. No disagreement there. And I do have my share of addictions. There's one in particular that springs to mind. My wife thinks I should seek professional help. Once she found me, late at night, furtively hunched over my laptop.

"What are you looking at?" she asked accusingly, as I quickly minimized the browser window.

"Nothing."

"It's not nothing. I saw you looking at a picture."

I was found out. Game over. I clicked the mouse and the picture filled the screen. There she was, in all her glory. A real beaut, too, zippers undone.

"Oh, God," my wife sighed in disgust, then grew silent.

I just sat there, my head hung in shame, waiting for her to say something else. Finally, she spoke.

"Why can't you look at porn like a normal guy?"

On the screen was a Billingham 335, a beautifully handcrafted British camera bag with double stitching and padded shoulder strap. Yes, my name is Eric, and I am addicted to bags. There, I said it. I feel better already.

Like all addictions, this one snuck up on me, unbidden. I'm not sure when I turned that corner from a merely enthusiastic interest in bags to a full-blown addiction. The signs were there. Like the time I opened a closet door and a pile of bags fell on my head, smothering me, cartoonlike. Or the time, in Tokyo, when I bought a five-hundred-dollar Gurkha briefcase and so feared the wrath of my annoyingly sane wife that I hid the bag in a coin locker at our local subway station for a good week or two before I could safely sneak it into our apartment, into the closet with the other bags.

Currently, my collection of bags ("collection" is my preferred term; it sounds normal) numbers sixty-four. Does that seem excessive to you? My wife thinks so. But she doesn't understand. She doesn't understand the tactile pleasure I derive from the feel of quality canvas against my naked skin. Doesn't understand the joys of thoughtful ergonomics, of a pocket located in exactly the right location, or a zippered compartment that holds my Filofax (another collectible) just perfectly. A well-designed bag is like a well-designed appendage, and just as necessary.

If I could be addicted to something as quotidian as bags, I realized as the waiter brought the masala chai, then certainly I could be addicted to something much weightier. Like sadness.

It's Wednesday at 3:00 p.m. I decide to do what any self-respecting Qatari would do at this time. I go to Starbucks. Qatari men are sipping lattes and smoking directly under the no-smoking sign, secure in the knowledge that no Filipino barista would dare ask them to obey the rules. In Qatar, the question isn't: What is the rule? But rather: Who's enforcing it?

Music is playing. *We will, we will rock you*. But no one will be rocked here. There will be no revolution. People are too comfortable, and comfort is the revolutionaries' worst enemy. Qatar, like all countries flush with natural resources, suffers from the Curse of Oil. As *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman has shown, there's an inverse relationship between the price of oil and democracy. As the price of oil rises, moves toward democracy decline. The leaders of these oil-rich nations feel no compunction to relax their grip on power. Why should they? Everybody is comfortable, and therefore happy.

Or are they? Maybe they are slowly dying of psychic wounds, self-inflicted with a gold-plated knife that makes incisions so painlessly you don't notice them until it's too late. A comfortable, air-conditioned death.

In the nineteenth century, one hundred years before a country called Qatar existed, Emile Durkheim, the French sociologist, wrote of "anomic suicide." It's what happens when a society's moral underpinnings are shaken. And they can be shaken, Durkheim believed, both by great disaster and by great fortune.

The first part we understand. We expect those who suffer financial hardship to spiral into despair. But we don't expect dependency from lottery winners or citizens of oil-rich nations. Yet it happens. Most of us have, at one time or another, felt a strange and wholly unexpected flash of unease accompany good news: a promotion, say, or a sudden windfall. People are congratulating you, you know you should be happy, but you're not, and you can't explain why.

I struggle to find a table. Starbucks is crowded. A little too crowded for a Wednesday at 3:00 p.m. Don't these men have jobs? In fact, I later learned, they did have jobs, and they were, at that very moment, midlatte, earning full salaries. They are what's known here as ghost workers. People who don't show up for work but, owing to their tribal clout, collect a paycheck nonetheless.

Paid to hang out at Starbucks. It sounds like a great gig, a wonderful, caffeinated path to bliss. A traditional economist would agree. The ghost workers have eliminated a negative externality, work, while maximizing a desired commodity: leisure time. They still receive a salary, so therefore they should experience a net gain in utility—that is, happiness.

Except they don't. Several studies have found that unemployed people in Europe are significantly less happy than people with jobs, even though the laid-off workers still receive the equivalent of a full salary, thanks to the generous welfare system. This inconvenient fact pokes holes at notions that the good life is a languid one. In fact, researchers have found that people who are too busy are happier than those who are not busy enough. In other words, the playwright Noël Coward got it right when he observed that interesting work is "more fun than fun."

I sense a gnawing distance between myself and Qatar. I'm here, but am I really here? I need to think like a Qatari, to get inside their *dishdashba*, figuratively speaking, if only for a few minutes. But how? I'm not about to convert to Islam or take up smoking or drive like a maniac. Walking past the hotel gift shop, it dawns on me. I will buy a pen. Yes, a Ridiculously Expensive Pen. I've never owned a Ridiculously Expensive Pen, never felt the need. I'm certainly capable of mindless materialism, as my bag collection attests, just not when it comes to pens. It's treacherous territory, this materialism. Studies have found that materialistic people are less happy than people who are not. It's their attitude toward money, not their bank balance, that matters. And yet the allure of a nice pen or car or whatever is irresistible. They represent potential happiness. Despite ourselves, we believe they will change us.

Choosing a Ridiculously Expensive Pen is an exercise in intuition. There is no rationally correct choice. Unlike buying a car, safety is not an issue. As long as the pen doesn't explode in

your pocket or emit noxious gas like in a James Bond movie, it is a safe pen.

I test-drive several models, balancing each one between my thumb and forefinger to gauge its heft. Heft is very important when choosing a Ridiculously Expensive Pen. Too little isn't good. The pen feels cheap, which defeats the purpose. Too much heft, though, can result in strained hand muscles. Not good, either. The next criteria is appearance. I was going for understated absurdity. Last and, surprisingly, least, a Ridiculously Expensive Pen should be able to write. You'd be surprised how many don't do this very well. They leave splotches or fade in midstroke.

Finally, after much hemming and hawing, I find just the right Ridiculously Expensive Pen for me. A sleek Lavin with clean lines and a black matte finish. I use it immediately, to sign the credit-card slip. It performs admirably.

Moza al-Malki is a rarity in the Arab world—a firebrand and shameless self-promoter who also happens to be a woman. I had met her once before. I was doing a story on women in the Arab world. She was one of the first women to run for office. She was defeated soundly but still considers the experience a success. Moza possesses what, in a different cultural context, would be called *chutzpah*.

When I call, she remembers me, or at least pretends to; it's hard to tell with self-promoters like Moza. She agrees to meet with me.

I wait for thirty minutes, but she doesn't show up. Finally, I call her. She sounds agitated.

"Where were you?" she says.

"I was waiting for you at the Starbucks, like you said."

"Which one?"

It never occurred to me that there would be two Starbucks in the same shopping mall in a country that a few years ago barely existed. But indeed there are, and I was waiting at the wrong one.

Moza has already left this particular mall and has returned to her natural state: perpetual motion. She won't backtrack to the old mall, for Moza never backtracks. Instead, she suggests we meet at another mall, across town. This time she tells me to meet her at the Häagen-Dazs café, assuring me that there is only one.

When I arrive, Moza is waiting. Her face is uncovered, with wisps of jet-black hair poking out of her flimsy head scarf. She's pushing the limits of acceptable *hijab*, the Islamic dress code for women, and indeed is engaged in what many Qatari women would consider scandalous behavior: meeting a man who is not a relative in a public setting.

But Moza is not most Qatari women. She's been driving a car since 1983. Not a mind-boggling fact unless you consider that Qatari women were not allowed to drive until 1997.

"So many times the police caught me on the street. They would say, 'You're a woman. You're not supposed to drive.' And I said, 'What are you going to do? Take my license? I don't have a license.' They would say they were going to take my car, and I said, 'Fine, I have another car.' Then they would say, 'We're going to put you in jail' and I said, 'Wow! Jail. That's great. I can write three or four research papers while I'm in jail.'" It was at this point that the police officers usually let Moza go with a warning.

I order the raspberry sorbet. She gets a fudge waffle with low-fat vanilla ice cream on top. We chat about the dearth of bookstores, Qatari politics, her unsuccessful bid for local office, and, of course, whether she's happy.

"Oh, yes," she says, all bubbly. "On a scale of one to ten, I'm a ten. I travel around the world. Last month, I went to three conferences. They paid for all of my expenses, flew me first class, and put me in top hotels."

"So can money buy happiness?"

She pauses, staring into the pool of melted low-fat ice cream on her plate.

"No, not exactly. But luxury facilitates your happiness. It helps. You need money to travel first class, to go all around the

world to stay in luxury hotels. For me, this is part of my happiness. My great-grandmother was happy in a tent, but I couldn't be happy in a tent."

Then she tells me a story, a true story. A few days ago, a wealthy Qatari man purchased a lucky phone number for his cellphone. I was surprised to hear what the number was, 66666 (a lucky number in the Arab world), and even more surprised to hear the price: \$2.5 million. This caused a bit of a stir. This materialism, this dollar worship, has gone too far, some Qataris said. Moza, though, went on television defending the man. Everyone has their own idea of happiness, she said, and if this man was happy to spend \$2.5 million for a phone number, then who are we to argue?

"But there are worthwhile ways to spend money and silly ways," I say.

"It's up to them," counters Moza. "For them it is not silly. One of my friends just spent eight thousand dollars for a purse. It's a beautiful purse, from Saks Fifth Avenue, and it made her very happy."

I don't doubt that it did. But the latest social-science research, not to mention ancient Stoic philosophy, predicts that purse won't make Moza's friend happy for very long. Chances are she'll soon want a \$10,000 purse, then a \$15,000 purse to derive the same amount of satisfaction.

Moza and I say goodbye. She's so westernized in her outlook I almost slip up and give her a peck on the cheek. That would have made many people unhappy. She promises to fax me her résumé and latest articles. By the time I return to my hotel, they are waiting for me. A big, thick pile.

"Ahh, Eric," the voice on the other end of the line says, warmly, as if we're old friends. "I've been expecting your call."

Usually, I hate when people I've just met use my name like we're old high school buddies. But Abdulaziz does it naturally, endearingly. I like him already.

I've been told that he's someone I must meet. An introspective Qatari. He agrees to meet me later that day at a French pastry shop called Eli France, located in one of Doha's modern *souks*. When my taxi pulls up a few hours later, the *souk* looks an awful lot like what we in America call a strip mall. But I guess "souk" sounds more exotic than "strip mall."

I'm a few minutes early. I ask the hostess for a table for two. She freezes, speechless. After a moment, I realize the problem. I have not given her enough information. She needs to know who my dining companion will be: male or female. If it's a woman, she'll seat us in the "family section"—discreetly cordoned off from the rest of the restaurant where husbands, wives and their children can dine unmolested by the eyes of strange men. If my guest is a man, then she'll seat us in the singles section, reserved for men unaccompanied by their families. I revise my request and ask for a table for two men. She looks relieved and leads me to a small, marble-topped table. I order a lime juice and wait for Abdulaziz.

He arrives a few minutes later. His eyes are crinkly and bright and twinkle just a little when he talks. He orders Earl Grey tea. I notice that he treats the waitress respectfully, like a human being, not a servant.

Abdulaziz's father was a schoolteacher, a job that no Qatari today would consider worthy. His father owned a car, but not much of one. Maybe it would start in the morning, maybe not. Doha at that time consisted of one road and a few houses. Qataris cleaned their own homes, raised their own children. Life was harsher than today but sweeter.

Then came the boom in the 1980s, and everything changed. First, a Sheraton hotel, shaped like an Egyptian pyramid and just as revered. Then, other hotels, condos, office buildings, all built by a growing army of foreign workers, wearing identical blue jumpsuits and happy to be earning three or four times what they could back home. Then came the maids, the cooks, the nannies, and others whose sole purpose was making life for Qataris more comfortable.

"Now we search for happiness in the wrong way. People equate happiness with money." Money, he has concluded, not only is the root of all evil but is the root of all unhappiness as well.

"Qataris complain a lot. They think the government should make their lives easier. If the government asks people to pay for electricity—even a tiny amount—they complain. If they try to tax them, just a little bit, they complain. And the government is to blame, too. This government thinks the only way to make people happy is by giving them money—and that is stupid. I would gladly give up half my salary for a better system."

Abdulaziz relays a joke making the rounds in Doha.

One man says to his friend, "Did you hear about the criminals who kidnapped the rich man's eight-year-old son? They couldn't collect ransom because the rich man didn't notice the son was missing."

"Big mistake," says the other man. "They should have kidnapped the maid. That way, the rich guy would have noticed that someone is missing."

A generation of Qatari children is being raised by nannies who don't speak their language and have no authority to discipline them. Boys are cherished and spoiled. "Once they reach thirteen or fourteen years old, the family doesn't try to discipline them anymore. They won't monitor their behavior in public. It's a living hell for the teachers, who often are foreigners with no real authority. These young men don't listen to anyone. Not even the police," says Abdulaziz.

It doesn't sound like a recipe for happiness, I concede. But the diversity in modern Qatar, the people living here from all over the world, surely that is a good thing. Surely that adds some spice to desert life.

"Not really," says Abdulaziz, sipping his tea. "Look at it from the point of view of a Qatari. You are only 20 percent of the population in your own country, so every day you are confronted by a sea of foreign faces. You need these foreigners to make your country run, otherwise all this wealth is useless. But you resent them,

exactly as much as you depend on them. This multiculturalism, it looks beautiful from far away. But not from close up.”

“What would happen if Qatar simply asked all the foreigners to leave?”

“The country would collapse. We need these people. For God’s sake, even our judges are foreigners. Imagine that. Our judges are foreigners!”

I ask Abdulaziz about the tribal nature of a country like Qatar. We know that families are important to our happiness. And, again, what is a tribe but an extended family? So, therefore, you’d think a tribal society like Qatar would be very happy, especially when you factor in the free-flowing money that makes life so easy, so comfortable.

Tribal life is nurturing, agrees Abdulaziz. It’s a safety net, but the net is wrapped around their necks and strangling them.

“Here, you are constantly on guard, afraid to do or say anything wrong because you are always being watched.”

“By the secret police?”

“No,” says Abdulaziz, laughing softly at my ignorance, “by your own family.”

He continues, “Let’s say you want to marry a foreigner or even someone from another tribe. You will find life very difficult. It can be done, but you have to launch a kind of political campaign. A feast must be held, minds must be changed.”

In Qatar, your position within the tribe trumps money or education. Despite all of the changes to Doha’s skyline, all of the fast-food joints, the country is socially stagnant. You will die with exactly the same status with which you were born. Nothing you do matters. What matters is your name.

With that information, Abdulaziz can determine someone’s standing, their place within the tribe, their income level. He grabs a napkin and, plucking a pen (a nice pen, I notice, but not a Mont Blanc) out of his breast pocket, draws a series of concentric circles.

“This is Qatari society,” he says, pointing to the napkin. “And

these are families, or tribes,” indicating the circles. “In the middle, of course, are the al-Thanis, the ruling family.”

“And where do you fit in?”

He draws an X, close to the center. I’m surprised how close. Judging from his discontent, I would have pegged him for an outsider. I decide not to mention this and move on to another subject.

“All this wealth. Does it make people happy?”

“No, not really. You need enough money to have your dignity. Beyond that, it won’t make you happy.”

I note his use of the word “dignity.” Not enough money to buy your comfort or your security but your dignity or, to extrapolate slightly, your honor: the driving force in the Arab world. We liberated males in the west are not beyond its pull, either. The Wall Street executive working an eighty-hour week in hopes of boosting his million-dollar salary is motivated by an insatiable need for honor, for the respect of his herd.

We finish our drinks and head next door to Jarir’s, Qatar’s only bookstore of any size. Abdulaziz, a man of obviously great intellectual curiosity, is embarrassed by the paucity of selection here. A few American self-help books, which make me feel right at home, and a bestseller from Saudi Arabia called *Riyadh Girls*, Arab chick lit. There is nothing, though, that could remotely be called Qatari literature. “Money can’t buy culture,” says Abdulaziz, contradicting the philosophy of his government and sounding an awful lot like Lisa.

“But it can buy a lot of artwork,” I say, referring to the sheikh who scooped up all of those masterpieces.

Abdulaziz lowers his voice. We are now talking about a member of the royal family; discretion is required. “The problem is that he confused the buying he was doing for the national museum with the buying he was doing for his own personal collection.” Hundreds of millions of dollars were squandered, all at the expense of the Qatari taxpayer. That is, if Qataris paid tax.

"No rules," continues Abdulaziz. "This guy was given a billion dollars to spend and no rules."

No rules and yet, within one's tribe, too many rules. What a horrible way to live. Not for the first time, I feel sorry for Abdulaziz, living here in this gilded sandbox. He senses this, I think, and tells me how he had once planned to immigrate to Canada, but not now. Not after the attacks of September 11. Not with a name like Abdulaziz.

It's time to leave. He offers to drop me off at my hotel. A few minutes into the drive, Abdulaziz's cellphone rings. My Arabic barely exists, but my ears perk up when I hear the word "*mushkala*": problem. "*Mushkala*" is a very popular word in the Middle East. Usually, it's used during, say, a tense moment at a checkpoint. "*Ayn mushkala*," no problem, your driver will assure you. Translation: big problem. Very big problem.

"Eric," says Abdulaziz, after hanging up. "What do you do when a problem weighs so heavily on you, so heavily you don't know if you can keep on living? What do you do?"

The question throws me, makes me squirm in my seat. I am touched that Abdulaziz has confided in me, given that I'm not exactly a member of the tribe, not his tribe anyway. But my other tribal affiliation is interfering with my humanity. The tribe known as journalist. Like all tribes, this one has strict, though unspoken, rules. Rule number one: Take freely from the people you interview, consume their stories and their pain, but never, ever give anything in return. Don't give money (that makes sense) and don't give friendship or advice either. Yet that is exactly what Abdulaziz is asking of me now.

So I wing it. I decide to tell Abdulaziz a story. (My tribe approves of stories.) As stories go, it is rather lame, and I'm not even sure it relates to Abdulaziz's question. But it's a start.

I was home listening to NPR when I heard a familiar voice, a colleague who also works as a reporter for the network. She had woven a small masterpiece. A story that was pitch-perfect. My old nemesis, professional envy, kicked in. God, I thought, her life is

perfect. So together. Everything is going swimmingly for her, while I am drowning in a sea of irrelevance. I sent my friend an e-mail, telling her how much I liked her story and adding, breezily, without a trace of envy, that I hoped life was good.

Thanks, she wrote back, but no, life was not good. Just yesterday, her three-year-old son had been diagnosed with a rare, debilitating disease.

I felt like a fool. I had misread reality, once again failing to realize that, as the Hindus say, all is *maya*, illusion. Things are not as they seem. We humans do not know a damn thing. About anything. A scary thought but also, in a way, a liberating one. Our highs, our accomplishments, are not real. But neither are our setbacks, our *mushkala*. They are not real either.

Abdulaziz absorbs my story in silence. I'm not sure what he's thinking, and I doubt if my story has helped. He never tells me what his *mushkala* is, and it doesn't feel right to ask. Finally, he says, "I see what you mean. Thank you." I can't tell if he's just being polite.

Abdulaziz drops me off at my hotel. By now, I have downgraded to something approaching a fleabag. I've learned my lesson. Comfort is best when interspersed with moments of great discomfort. Here, there is no cloying bevy of attendants, just a Pakistani guy with hair growing out of one ear who mans the front desk and, if I ask nicely, can procure a cold beer. Tonight, I need two.

I keep thinking about something Abdulaziz said. When he's feeling down, he said, he talks to his God. Not prays but talks, that's the word he used. I liked how that sounded. Talking comes naturally to me. Praying does not. Of course, Abdulaziz's God is Allah. Not exactly my God. I wonder: Who is my God? No obvious answer springs to mind. Over the years, I have been spiritually promiscuous, dabbling in Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and even occasionally Judaism. None, however, could qualify as my full-time faith, my God. Then, suddenly, His name pops into my mind and His is not a name I expected. Ambition. Yes, that is my God.

When Ambition is your God, the office is your temple, the

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,