

## The Seasons of Happiness

### Winter

In the beginning was awareness, a sensation of comfort and warmth, of darkness. There were also experiences – sounds and sensations – but all were abstracted, from somewhere else. Where was this “somewhere”? Beyond the ambient softness, perhaps; yet, not even knowing what or where “here” was, life was simply beyond comprehension. A child in the womb just is, and little more.

Then one day the pleasant ululating dreams ceased. Being born was nothing like before. Sounds were louder, the gentle comfort replaced by a sudden and harsh reality of pain, of rough handling, of strange feelings on body and arms, and everywhere. As for the warmth, it had gone. A new life had stepped from a halcyon Utopia into a stark and chilly winter.

The concept of time was unknown. There were no days or nights, merely a progression through hunger to satisfaction, to sleep, to discomfort, and back to sleep. Reasons never mattered, only that needs were met. And they were, in particular by a familiar being, someone very close whom the child had known instinctively from its conception to now. In that knowledge, the infant discovered that winter was not as dark as it might have been.

There had always been sounds. Added to this were smells and tastes – all strange, some pleasant and acceptable, others bitter and repulsive. An awareness of light through closed lids gradually cleared as they opened to perceive images; blurred at first, gradually taking form. A face loomed above: a mother’s face which smiled with lips whispering sweet breath; and eyes sparkling with love from a heart the infant felt a part of and had lain near.

Life began in earnest through this eventful winter. Time still had no meaning, but every day was filled with new discoveries; while each tomorrow promised so much more; and this was wished for in an instant. When it came, it had passed to become another day, then another. A friend was made, a game played. Captivating arrays of shapes and colours lined the shelves of shops, grew in green parks, drove along grey, bitumen roads, and soared overhead through blue skies. This truly was a wonderful world, yet a winter it remained: for, in what was already known and had been learned, there was a yearning for something pending; and there lingered a feeling that this season, like the birth from which it came, was a precursor of a greater awakening that could not come soon enough.

### Spring

A new season had begun to wax, but so slowly that it was barely noticeable. Family life continued much as it had, yet there was an inexplicable feeling of some magical secret door soon to be unlocked. How soon, though? Until now, mentors had set restrictions, insisting what was best or otherwise for the child; yet apparently these same adults were not bound by their own rules. Age must have had a bearing because, with the advent of spring, the first milestone of a series marked the beginning of an unfamiliar road so far untravelled. This next journey, the child thought, must be to somewhere very special; was perhaps allied to a specific birth date permitting entry into the previously forbidden world of grown-ups.

That date must have come. The first hints of a change had been creeping in over a period. Recent shopping expeditions for new clothes seemed peculiarly important, more so than in the past. Around the home an air of anticipation tempered by apprehension heralded something different about to happen. Then, on a day when the child was usually escorted to a place of fun and face-painting, they passed it by, continuing on to a large, austere advanced seat of learning. Dressed exactly alike, children of the same age clung crying to parents at the gates of a courtyard milling with older strangers similarly attired. Some grown-ups appeared from the crowd and spoke kindly with the new arrivals before ushering them away from parents who merely stood and allowed this abduction without protest. Over-the-shoulder tearful pleas were met with indifference; and when the ones they had trusted all of their lives turned and walked away, a spring which had seemed so promising adopted an ugly guise.

Primary school it was called, and there were more rules, in particular some unwritten ones. Whichever grade the child was in determined the level of respect. Those of lesser years were looked down on; those above feared. Friendships formed among peers were forever today, not so strong tomorrow, and a day later friends occasionally became sworn enemies. These fickle, ever-changing relationships taught more of life than classroom lessons; and the social skills learned as a result would be totally necessary for approaching the secondary stage of education.

This proved much harder, closer to adulthood which many assumed they had already attained. Those who believed so knew everything there was to know; shunned criticism and advice; and declared themselves to be the new race which would right the wrongs of the past and have a damned good time doing it.

Drugs were readily accessible for those who knew where to look; and alcohol, an apparent pleasure still denied as it had been for so long, was suddenly, secretly obligatory. Sex education in school was laughable, considering most students knew more than their teachers. Passing the driving test was a licence to commit high-speed suicide on a newsworthy scale. Classical music was out, rock and heavy metal in; the louder the better. Whatever adults had taught was rubbish: this was the time of a new generation which was wild and bullet-proof.

There were many, however, who came to the eventual conclusion that some of what they had been taught might have merit. They graduated to university, acquired jobs, began careers and entered into relationships which often continued into later years. Life for them was not so much about living for the moment in the most outrageous way possible: their focus was on preparing for the next step. Soon enough, the spring of adolescence and experimentation was drawing to a close; and in the wake of those heady days, the season approaching was destined to be the cruise of a lifetime for the considerate ones who had already bought and paid for their tickets.

## **Summer**

It was the time for making decisions and accepting responsibilities; to set out on the quest for whichever happiness a long, hot summer held in store. Some childhood dreams lingered and hopes were high. Those earlier restrictions dictated by age were no longer applicable and clichés tended to define attitudes: the days of wine and roses; the world is your oyster; who dares wins. Prospects were exciting and in abundance. It was simply a case of pick a card, any card. At least, that was how it started out.

Individuals who had been conscientiously dedicated to their education began their future careers; others who had not been so diligent discovered that graduation meant little in the real world unless subjects studied had been sufficiently understood to apply the basic concepts.

Employers were less interested in qualifications than they were in the ability to do the job. It seemed there were still rules; but this new set was less forgiving than the earlier ones defined by age. These were about adequate performance, or else... The cotton-wool environment of youth was now just a memory. School was out.

Pausing for a deep breath helped. Once the transitional shock was accepted, the opportunities became apparent. There were many more ladders to climb than had been realised. Stepping onto the one most suitable was not always easy, and for many it was trial-and-error; but eventually true vocations were stumbled upon; or if not, flitting from one job to another was a fun experience for those Jacks-of-all-trades.

Whatever the choice, money would be the guiding factor. The majority embraced compromise, finding a job which was tolerable, that put food on the table of growing families and paid the loans necessary to attain a satisfactory level of comfort. For budding entrepreneurs and future business tycoons, however, mere adequacy was insufficient. Their drive for more and more was a compulsion in itself and might lead to happiness, provided they were not too busy to recognise it in passing. The naturally-talented were drawn into sports arenas and the entertainment industry, perhaps managing to relive some of their younger dreams; and the successful achieved accolades that truly made their summer a delightful season.

Even die-hard adolescents were content to live lives of ease into their fifties and sixties, thanks to generous welfare donations funded by their former peers who, unlike them, were not averse to a hard day's work. All in their own way were being gifted the chance to laze on a sunny afternoon. When they decided to appreciate it was up to them; *if* they ever stopped to recognise it as a worthwhile option.

### **Autumn**

After so many years of wishing to be older, for whatever reason, the reality dawns that any age has its limitations, old age in particular; and no amount of wishing can reverse the natural process. Once this final season of life has arrived, the only way forward is to accept what is and will ever be.

Decades have gone by, almost a lifetime. The longest of journeys have, in many instances, been an arduous trek; but for those who have persevered in consideration of a final reward to come, they are ready for their well-deserved autumn. Whether earlier goals have been achieved is irrelevant now, because there is little time remaining to try again. Whatever has been acquired along the way will determine how this season can be approached.

As well as a time of reassessment, this is also one of reflection; initially anyway. Since childhood, age had been of consequence regarding what could or could not be done. For seniors, however, it is now a case of ability; because, although the mind might still be young, the body clearly is not. All of those tasks which had been put on the back-burner until retirement are still there gathering dust; unfortunately, some have been left too long. Among them are those plans on the "to-do-one-day" list: trips to make and places to visit; a new project to begin. With luck, some might still be achievable; others never will be this late in life.

With time to ponder, and being perhaps more philosophical and easier to please than in younger years, compromise, though disappointing, is obviously necessary and is eventually embraced. Thinking about it, there is plenty to do, including some fresh challenges that were, in the past, often regarded as merely the prerogative of the aged. So, life is starting again; but on a different plane.

Road trips are possible, as long as the original ideas incorporate an adjusted comfort factor. Extensive drives and sleeping rough along the way are not an option; but stopover motels are affordable as are roadhouse meals. For some, caravanning had always been the ultimate goal and could now be appreciated for more than just a two-week period. Retirement means no time restrictions and offers the luxury of spending months, possibly years travelling far and wide, sharing the experiences of similar grey nomads trekking the countryside. This is surely how autumn was meant to be.

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At some stage, even if the inevitable coming of it had not been admitted to before, the passing of years finally begins to take its toll. Sitting on the verandah watching the sun go down prompts the realisation that the end is nigh. For some reason time passes much faster now; and as it does, days grow shorter, and mornings and evenings are cooler. Although tolerable and so very pleasant, they seem to hint that a final bell is soon to ring.

As Nature draws the life-force of trees down to the roots, their leaves once green and lush turn to gold and fall, creating a farewell carpet on the soil below; a reminder of what was, and what will be again. Looking back, life has been mainly kind, certainly an experience not to have been missed. There were good times and some not-so good; but all in all there are few regrets and many happy memories. And as the autumn sun of one life begins to fade, another waits patiently somewhere for a new season of winter to begin.

So they are; so they will ever be: these wonderful seasons of happiness.

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