The Secret of Happiness

The Earth stood suspended in the heavens,
Favorably cooled from volcanic lashings,
Freshly washed from torrential downpours,
Finally done with tectonic gnashings.

In a rare moment in her still-new existence,
Before Mankind's lively lilt and lurch.
The Sun gradually rose above the horizon,
Even though the Moon hadn't left its perch.
"Top of the morning," said the Sun.
"Must I leave already?" pleaded the Moon.
"Oh, do stay a while," urged the Earth,
"Why must we three part so soon?"

A gentle breeze blew over the land,
Lazy tides rippled and churned the water,
The three enjoyed the pleasant silence,
As the day grew brighter and hotter.
"So, what now?" yawned the Moon,
"What next indeed?" echoed the Earth.
As she felt somewhere deep within,
The stirrings of life, a beginning, a birth.

“Only Time will tell,” replied the Sun,
The oldest and wisest of the three.
“Well, then, fetch him, why don’t you?”
Cried the other two with barely contained glee.
“Wish with me then,” replied the Sun,
As it glowed even more bright and gold.
And the Earth and the Moon wished hard,
That Time would bring itself into the fold.

The first second nothing happened,
The second one saw a tremor in space.
And with the ticking of the third one,
Emerged a voice without a face.
“Well?” said Time sonorously,
Reverberating through vacuum and air.
“What do you wish to know, pray tell?
What is the topic that merits my care?”

“I guess I was curious,” began Earth,
“Now that I’m a bit more stable.
What’s written in my future?
Can you see? Are you able?”
The Sun burned in approval,
The Moon waxed in agreement.
The Earth waited patiently,
For Time to make a statement.

“Life comes next,” Time began,
“A magic spark, an eternal mystery.
The most fundamental thing in the Universe,
The measuring sand of History.
At first it will be a single cell,
And then it will be a multitude.
They will multiply by dividing,
With neither complaint nor gratitude.

The Age of Plants will then begin,
Followed by the Age of Fishes.
And then the Age of Reptiles,
Creatures more appetites than wishes.
Then the Age of Birds and Mammals,
Feathery, furry, full of blood.
Interspersed with Ages of Ice,
Of glaciers, winters, many a flood.”

And then Time paused for an instant,
To mark the end (and beginning) of an era.
As what and who was to come next,
Would forever alter life on Terra.
“That was the Before,” continued Time,
“Now for the forever After.
Now for the creature called Man,
A being capable of tears and laughter.

He will evolve from the apes,
Descend to earth from the trees.
Learn to walk upright at last,
And conquer lands, skies, and seas.
He will order his day by the Sun,
And dream by light of the Moon.
He will make home all of Earth,
Not right away, yet quite soon.

He will start with Stone,
Move to Fire and Metal.
Embark on countless quests,
To prove valor and mettle.
Kingdoms will rise,
Empires will fall.
Ramparts reduced to rubble,
That once stood firm and tall."

"But why?" interrupted Earth,
"Why all this labor and toil?
This endless energy expended?
Why, it could make an ocean boil!"
The Sun and the Moon nodded,
United in their puzzlement.
What motivation this, they wondered,
A matter of some befuddlement.

“The pursuit of happiness,” said Time,
“A search that consumes him Night and Day.
A quest for contentment and meaning,
An amulet to keep existential horror at bay.
Because, you see, don’t you?
That unlike you three, he will die.
And, unlike all other living beings,
Sad that this fate he cannot defy.

“But isn’t it enough to just be?” wondered Earth,
“Isn’t Life the most precious gift of them all?”
“You would think so,” answered Time,
“But Happiness is a seductive siren call.
The tragedy of an evolved brain,
Driven by hedonia and dopamine.
The incessant craving and wanting,
A hunger, a thirst, urgent and keen.”

“How very sad!” the Moon exclaimed,
“It does seem a tad tragic,” chimed in the Sun,
“To constantly chase after a feeling,
Why, I hardly think that can be much fun!”
“But surely there must be a solution?” cried Earth,
Feeling saddened for this future tenant of hers.
All this seeking and searching and grasping,
A blessing? Surely not? More a curse?

“Well, many will assume it’s Money,” said Time,

“Because of all it can acquire and buy.

Clothes to wear, homes to own,

Cars to drive, planes to fly.

Buy, possess, rent, experience,

A veritable carnival of consumption.

Spending equals Happiness?

A precariously poised presumption.

How many meals can you eat in a day?

How many clothes can you wear at a time?

How many spirits can you drink in a night?

Do you see? Neither reason nor rhyme.

How many homes can you live in at once?

How many vacations can you take in a year?

How much much-ness is too much?

The answer isn’t ‘More’, I fear.”

“So then?” urged Earth gently,

Because she suspected Time knew.

Sensed some secrets unbequeathed,

An epiphany about to emerge anew.

“Well,” came Time’s reply,
“If I had to make an educated guess.
Eudaimonia or Meaning is the key,
Not Hedonia or Pleasure alone, I confess.
To be happy in a meaningful way,
Man must look for opportunities three.
Ideally unencumbered while doing so,
Operating with a will independent and free.

Yes, consumption can lead to Meaning,
If one can find a route to rejuvenate,
Or come upon a guidepost for growth,
Or a clear conduit to consolidate.”
“Must you speak in riddles?” queried the Sun,
“I’m too sleepy to comprehend,” yawned the Moon.
“Perhaps just a bit more clarity?” nudged the Earth,
Knowing Time might have to leave quite soon.

“First comes Rejuvenation,” began Time,
“Either through Repair or Reconnection.
When a purchase helps Man renew himself,
Facilitates a sort of course correction.
Repair helps him flee his stressors,
Lets him swim away to a temporary respite.
Reconnection helps him renew close bonds,
Keeps loved ones close and tight.”

“Next comes Expansion,” continued Time,
“Intellectual, Pragmatic, or Relational in type.
When a purchase helps Man grow in some way,
As if bud to bloom to fruit just ripe.
A purchase can broaden horizons of knowledge,
Or help Man acquire and hone a skill.
Maybe help forge a new relationship,
Or make an existing one deeper still.”

“And finally, Consolidation,” concluded Time,
“A little more abstract than the other two.
Via Crystallization and Contextualization,
Attempts an understanding pure and true.
Some purchases show Man his true self,
Either via intention or happy serendipity.
Others juxtapose him against larger things,
Time, people, places, cosmic infinity.”

“So that’s the key to happiness?” asked Earth,
“To renew, grow, and better understand?
To spend his all too brief existence,
In doing his best with Fate’s dealt hand?”
“Yes, young one,” said Time, “That’s it,
But you’ll see how hard it is to follow.
Many will choose Pleasure over Meaning,
A bitter pill, indeed, to swallow.”

“Well, I’m burning with questions,” said the Sun,
“I need time to reflect,” added the Moon.
“I do feel more grounded now,” sighed the Earth,
And Time replied, “Not a moment too soon.
For I must now leave you three,
Return to my vigil of infinite space.
I hope I was able to impart a flavor,
Of all the things about to take place.

What a piece of work is Man!
Noble in reason, but voracious of appetite.
An angel in action, infinite in faculty,
But too desirous of pleasure and delight.
True happiness combines pleasure with meaning,
Leavening each with the other in some measure,
And those who make this notion a lodestone,
Will discover contentment, that ideal treasure.”

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