

Presents the World Premiere of ***THE HAPPY WOMAN***

A study guide



RESOURCE and BACKGROUND MATERIAL:

Written and compiled by Erica Kopyto with scene-by-scene breakdown by Hilary Sherman, Nightwood Theatre September 2011

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This document may be used for educational purposes only
This play is suitable for students ages 16 and up

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INTRODUCTION

“I watched them anxiously, these men who enjoyed with a quiet heart the sweetness of the evening. They did not look like criminals; the taste of beer and tobacco, the brilliance of the neon signs, the smell of young leaves – none of these aroused a sense of guilt in them.”

This is a quotation playwright Rose Cullis uses on the first page of her script in *The Happy Woman*. It comes from the novel by French existentialist Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Blood of Others*. This work is mainly concerned with themes of freedom and responsibility. It is through this lens that we might feel inspired to approach our analysis of this new Canadian script. *The Happy Woman* is getting its world premiere production with Nightwood Theatre at the Berkley Street Theatre in winter 2012.

The *Happy Woman* explores the theme of “the nature of happiness.” This play depicts a few months in the life of a seemingly typical, middle-class, white, North American family. Margaret, the matriarch of the family is anxiously awaiting the birth of her first grandchild. Her son Christian aims to pacify his wife Stasia who is beginning to unravel emotionally and cognitively as her pregnancy draws to a close. Christian’s sister Cassie is acting out on manic tendencies and is growing more unhinged. Is she merely a narcissist or is this a fair response to the family secrets she’s keeping under wraps? Her impulse to tell the truth conflicts with Christian’s desire to keep all things status quo as he prepares for fatherhood. Margaret seems oblivious to these conflicts as they come to a head and does her best to be “happy, happy, happy.” Margaret’s neighbour, BellaDonna keeps commentary throughout.

CHARACTERS

Margaret. She is in her early 60s and plump in a comfortable, buxom way. Imagine her in clean flower-print shirt-dresses, and embroidered sweaters. Margaret has worked very hard her entire life, and she suffers from some arthritic stiffness (which she never complains about).

BellaDonna: She is Margaret’s thinner, more pointed, neighbour. BellaDonna has had time to sit on the front porch and smoke. Her house is in a chronic state of disrepair.

Stasia: Margaret’s daughter-in-law. A classic femme. Young, delicate, pretty, and very pregnant.

Christian: The ‘Perfect Son’, and Stasia’s husband. He’s strong, virile, and handsome, but he has an “arty” looseness and alertness in his manner.

Cassie: Margaret’s vagrant daughter. She is – like her brother – strong, virile and attractive. She has large feet and hands, and a voluptuous, but agile figure that gives her an interesting androgynous quality. She tends to wear clothes that are tight, slight, and sexually suggestive.

Nurse: (can be played by BellaDonna) in white.

SETTING

Minimal. Some set pieces can be two-dimensional cardboard cut-outs propped up with wooden supports, or hanging from strings that are visible from the audience. Some pieces can be larger than life. Let there be a child's "play-acting" sensibility to the set.

THEMES

A number of themes will resonate with the audience of *The Happy Woman*. The nature of happiness, double standards between genders and classes, fairness of justice, mental illness, depression, gender and sexuality, imagery (apocalyptic), mothers and daughters; fathers and sons; truth vs. fiction; secrets and lies; gender and sexuality; being vs. performing; the role of shame, the nature of taboo.

CAST AND CREATIVE

Kelly Thornton- Director
Denyse Karn – Designer
Kinnon Elliott- Stage Manager
Joelysa Pankanea, Sound designer
Kim Purtell – Lighting
Erica Kopyto-Dramaturg

Ingrid Rae Doucet- Stasia
Charlotte Gowdy- Cassie
Barbara Gordon- Margaret
Maria Vaccratsis- BellaDonna
Martin Happer- Christian

ABOUT NIGHTWOOD THEATRE

As Canada's national women's theatre since 1979, Nightwood has launched the careers of many of the leading theatre artists in the country, creating a repertoire of Canadian Plays including Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, Djanet Sears' *Harlem Duet* and Sonja Mills' *The Danish Play*. Nightwood has won Canada's highest literary and performing arts awards and now, more than ever, our success proves the need for theatre that gives voice to women and celebrates the diversity of Canadian society. Nightwood is a national theatre and we remain actively engaged in mentoring young women and promoting women's place on the local, national and international stage.

KELLY THORNTON
(Director)



KELLY THORNTON has been the Artistic Director of Nightwood Theatre since 2001 and has been directing for the stage for over 20 years. In 2003 she was honoured with the prestigious Pauline McGibbon Award as well as being nominated in 2010 for a Siminovitch Prize in Theatre. At Nightwood she co-spearheaded Equity in Canadian Theatre: the Women's Initiative, a national study with Playwrights Guild of Canada and the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres, which examined the status of women in Canadian theatre. Directing credits at Nightwood include *The Danish Play* (which toured Aveny-Teatret, Copenhagen, Magnetic North Theatre Festival, Edmonton and National Arts Centre and was nominated for 2 Dora Mavor Moore Awards), *The List*, *That Face*, *Wild Dogs*, (both in association with Canadian Stage), *Bear With Me*, (Grand Theatre, Magnetic North tour), *Mathilde*, and the world premiere of *China Doll* (Governor General's Award Finalist). Other credits include *The Comedy of Errors* (Canadian Stage, Dream in High Park); *This Hotel* (Theatre Passe Muraille/Planet 88-6 Dora Mavor Moore Award nominations including Outstanding Direction); *So Many Doors* (Yukon Arts Centre/Sour Brides/Magnetic North, Vancouver); *Peep Show* (Buddies in Bad Times Theatre), *The Dumb Waiter* (SummerWorks), and *The Visit* (Alumnae Director's Award) among others. Her recent undertaking of Nightwood's 4x4 Festival and Directors Summit saw over 150 inter/national delegates descend upon Toronto to network, train and engage in a discourse on the nature of the director's practice. She has taught at various institutions and was recently named Associate Director of The National Theatre School of Canada's Directing Program. In 2008, Kelly was recognized for her commitment to training and mentorship of young women in the performing arts by being named a YWCA Woman of Distinction (Arts & Letters).



ROSE CULLIS
(Playwright)

ROSE CULLIS is a playwright/writer/performer who has had a number of her plays produced in Toronto, including *The Dinner Party* and *Baal* (both at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre), *That Camille Claudel Feeling* (Toronto Fringe), and *Pure Motives* (The Theatre Centre). A workshop production of a much shorter version of *The Happy Woman* was presented in *Summerworks* in 1994. Her plays and short fiction have been published in a variety of anthologies including *Outspoken*, *Two Hands Clapping*, *You're Making a Scene*, and *Red Light: Saints, Sluts & Superheroes*. She also does theme-based performances for festivals and cabaret nights. Rose Cullis is currently collaborating on a film script based on her short stories about growing up in Scarborough in the seventies. She has a Masters in

Environmental Studies and teaches English and Creative Writing in the Toronto District School Board.

INTERVIEW WITH ROSE CULLIS

1. Why do you write for the theatre?

I love theatre because it engages all of our senses in understanding who and what it is to be human. The experience is at once subtle and intense, analytical and visceral. It's very close to the way we engage in the world day-to-day – even in the sense of being in the presence of actors. When I see a play that moves me I feel changed by it; once I understand something theatrically, I never forget it.

2. Describe your process.

My process changes with the project. With *The Happy Woman*, I began with an image of an older woman I saw running a café in Spain with her two sons. Her sense of pleasure in life was so palpable that it fascinated me and I found myself thinking about the dilemma of happiness in this world. The main characters, the key conflict (Cassie has a secret she needs to tell), and the beginning, middle (the birth scene) and end (the counting of the toes) presented itself very early on. I thought at first that this version was the play, and that it was simply very truncated and condensed in style. When it became apparent that these sections were skeletal, I worked on it in an accordion-like fashion: pulling it open and adding the pieces to “win” what I knew had to happen.

Once I had the full-length play roughed out, I separated all the scenes into coherent units and started moving them around to ensure that the different kinds of scenes (monologues, Cassie's performances, scenes between characters that break the fourth wall in the way they're presented, and scenes between characters where the fourth wall is firmly intact) were evenly and rhythmically distributed. It felt like a musical concern. In this part of the process I also made a conscious effort to make sure I was withholding information to increase tension and interest, and paying attention to the audience's needs in terms of the coherence of the story, and a chance to recover after emotionally demanding scenes.

Nightwood's play development was critically important to the process of “adding flesh to the bones” of this piece. There were times when I really needed to hear it read aloud, and to hear the kinds of issues people were grappling with, in order to know where to go next. I think an important feature of that part of the process was the “question-based approach” that Kelly Thornton and dramaturg Erica Kopyto use. During workshop readings the actors (and any other participants) are encouraged to avoid any prescriptive comments or suggestions about the script, and I'm certain that *that* kept the spirit of the work intact. The development of a play can be a very delicate process and wrong turns can wreak havoc and even “kill” the work.

3. What are the main themes of the play?

While I worked on the play I was conscious of the following themes: the nature of happiness; sex and sexuality – particularly with respect to women's sexuality; the role of secrets and lies in maintaining social order; the logic of madness; the threat of apocalypse

due to human behavior.

4. Did you do any research?

For this play I relied a lot on intuition to guide the character's attitudes and actions, but research I've done in the past actively informs my work. I have a Masters in Environmental Studies and I've done a lot of reading in the philosophy of language, feminist-poststructuralist analysis, and critical theory. I love Foucault's analysis of power as creative and productive instead of simply repressive and coercive, and Judith Butler's ideas about gender as performance. For putting the finishing touches on this play I was very moved and inspired by a book called, *Ghostly Matters*, where author/sociologist Avery Gordon theorizes the way we can be haunted by people/events whose disappearance is orchestrated by dominant social norms and narratives.

5. How do you hope the play will affect the audience?

Although this play is not strictly grounded in realism, I share Hamlet's sentiment that theatre should hold "hold the mirror up to nature" and show "the very age and body of the time his (her) own form and pressure". I hope the characters are people we can believe in and care for, and I hope the audience will have a range of emotional responses and be moved to think about and understand the issues these characters are grappling with.

6. Do you think being a female playwright is different then being a playwright?

I think who tells the story is important, and I think it's important that women are able to tell their own stories. I'm not saying it's wrong for writers to imagine being other people/genders/ethnicities, but I do think that it's really, really important that people/voices that are oppressed aren't relying on "the kindness of strangers" for expression.

7. What kind of theatre excites you? What plays have really affected you?

I like it when theatre "grabs me by the throat". Theatre that excites me excites me – and that's hard to reduce to a "kind of theatre". Although I prefer to care about characters, for instance, I've often been very excited by plays that are very abstract or that seek to make us think instead of feel. What I like is room to respond. I'm annoyed when plays are produced to make a specific point that's predetermined – when the space for my agency has been obliterated in the name of creating me as a particular kind of agent. I'd like the work to have its own life and to spill out of the hands of whoever crafts it. That's the magic of art, to me.

8. What people have influenced you?

Jess Dobkin is a brilliant performance artist here in Toronto whose edgy, radical and exciting work was my inspiration for Cassie's performance scenes. In some cases Jess's performances are directly referenced in the play (e.g. the "clown family" Christian disapproves of, or the scene where Cassie is dressed like a disco ball). I feel very, very beholden to her for helping me understand the role of the body in performance art and for taking the risks she takes to make work that really challenges us.

I also want to note that I presented a thirty-minute version of this piece in *Summerworks*

in the early 90s. Brenda Anderson directed that production, and helped me see new colours and possibilities in the play. Veronika Hurnik, a Toronto-based actress who played Cassie, was also instrumental in helping me to keep the work close to the heart instead of driven by theory.

9. Any other comments?

I'm really obsessed with the way sexuality is such a locus of concern for the reproduction of dominant power relations. Women today are "fired up", I think, to be sexier than ever in a "doll-like fashion" (no nipples, no pubic hair, ideally), for example, and the "slut" accusation still excuses the dehumanization of certain women. I'm not talking about "conspiracy theories" here, (because that doesn't really interest me), but about how the regulation of sexuality always appears as a primary technique for controlling people, so that "acting out" sexually (whatever shape that takes) is a clear sign that a system of repression is in place.

SCENE-BY-SCENE SYNOPSIS

Scene 1

It is early morning on a city street. Although it is an urban setting no cars can be heard, only birds. Margaret enters, pulling her shopping cart and looking happy. She begins to talk about the grandchild she is expecting and how excited she is. She reminisces about giving birth to her own first child and how young she was when it happened. BellaDonna, her neighbor, enters also with a shopping cart. She greets Margaret by saying she looks happy, but when Margaret points out what a beautiful day it is, BellaDonna replies that she's always afraid to be happy on beautiful days, because they don't last. Margaret replies that BellaDonna sounds like Margaret's daughter-in-law, Stasia. She reveals that Stasia has been predicting disaster for the entirety of her pregnancy. They discuss Stasia, saying that she's nervous but nice, then they talk about the different nature of sons and daughters. Daughters, BellaDonna asserts, will take care of you in your old age. Margaret seems unsure, and changes the topic to a discussion of a man who lives across the street from them. BellaDonna insists that he's good-looking, while Margaret will only admit that he used to be. They discuss how, despite apparently having a perfect family, he drank everything away. Margaret maintains that there was always something in his eyes that made her uncomfortable, a comment which BellaDonna uses to turn the conversation back to Stasia.

As they discuss her and the baby, Stasia enters the stage, in a different place from the two women. She seems worried, but does not speak as Margaret once again reflects on when her own son was born. The women are convinced that Stasia's worries are simply nerves, and that she is only making herself unhappy. Margaret reveals that she's shopping for dinner tomorrow, when everyone will be coming over. In discussing the menu, Margaret reveals that her daughter will also be joining them. The two women return to their praising of daughters, and how easy they are to raise, then Margaret leaves. After she's gone, BellaDonna confesses to the audience that she saw Margaret's daughter the previous night at a bar, drunk and surrounded by men. She adds that there's a rumour Stasia is going insane from the pregnancy, but ultimately says that it's none of her business to ruin Margaret's happiness, and leaves.

Scene 2

Stasia addresses the audience, convinced that something is wrong with her baby. Christian, her husband, enters and tries to pacify her, although a distance lies between them that prevents him from giving her physical comfort. Stasia tells him she had awoken from sleep because she had another nightmare, and is convinced that the dreams are her body's way of telling her that something is wrong with her baby. Christian tries to comfort her, but Stasia becomes more and more hysterical, relaying some of the horrible images that have been haunting her. She tells Christian about her dream, in which an old friend comes to visit, but has become ill and horribly disfigured. She asks Christian if he's afraid for their baby, but he reassures her that it was just a dream, and she and the baby will both be healthy. Stasia tells him that the first thing she'll do once the baby is born is

count its toes, then she finally closes the distance between them and clutches him, terrified. He holds her wordlessly.

Scene 3

A club scene: Christian and Cassie enter separately, the former dancing by himself, the latter drinking a beer. After watching him dance for a little while, Cassie joins Christian and they dance together. Then she pulls him away from the dance floor to greet him properly. She kisses him, and he lets her, though he observes that she's drunk. The two fall into an easy banter that clearly comes naturally to them, until Cassie asks whether Stasia knows that Christian is at the club. They talk about Stasia briefly, but Cassie is clearly uncomfortable and changes the subject. She tells Christian she wants to introduce him to someone. Christian seems willing, until he realizes that it's the married man that Margaret and BellaDonna were talking about in the first scene. When Christian becomes confrontational, Cassie accuses him of being jealous, and he claims he just knows a creep when he sees one. Cassie tries to defuse the situation by getting him to dance again, but he refuses, bringing the conversation back to her relationship with the married man. He tells her it's unhealthy, and accuses her of dressing like a hooker. Cassie defends herself, saying that he's just trying to make it seem like the whole situation is her fault.

Christian inquires about Cassie's life, worried that she has no future. She tells him she's not just a waitress, she's a performance artist. He retorts that she's just a stripper, because her performances almost always involve her taking off her clothes, or doing other things that seem obscene. She seems offended that he didn't like her performance, and he reminds her that it's just an act, and she has no real way to make money off of it. After more banter, she accuses him of being boring, and they fall into a slightly more playful exchange, though there is still a strong undertone of sexual tension. Eventually, Cassie retorts that his marriage is more of an act than her performance, which startles him. Christian says that Stasia thinks Cassie hates her, and Cassie responds that she just feels like a bully around her. She says that she wants to stop treating her badly, but she can't help it, and reminds Christian that she was bullied herself, and Christian tells her to be nice to Stasia, since she's so scared about the pregnancy. Cassie asks what she's scared of and Christian responds that he doesn't know and confesses that he doesn't really want to know. When Cassie challenges him he accuses her of always playing the victim, blaming their father for everything, to which Cassie retorts that he can't reinvent what their father was just because he's dead now. Christian returns to challenging Cassie about her life and her choices, but she shuts him down, telling him that his big brother act doesn't work with her.

Scene 4

Cassie enters the stage, wearing only high heels. Her body is painted to be the backdrop for the puppet show she is about to put on, as part of her performance. She speaks directly to the audience, telling them how shy she feels appearing this way, being both open and flirtatious. She talks about the set she has created on her body, then begins her show, narrating as she goes. She tells an adapted Hans and Gretel story, where both characters feel a strong attraction to each other but neither will act upon it. Her story ends

as they go into the forest, Gretel looking for unicorns and Hans just happy to be with Gretel.

Scene 5

Margaret sits at the table, preparing for dinner. BellaDonna sits in a chair on her porch, talking sometimes to neighbours or passers-by, and sometimes to Margaret. They both talk about the weather. Margaret talking about how she finally began her spring cleaning, BellaDonna discussing with a neighbour how warm it's been, and wondering if climate change is to blame. As BellaDonna comments on the habits and cultures of their various neighbours, Margaret pontificates on the meaning of "normal." She speaks of her now-deceased husband, Stephen, and calls him normal. She talks about how kind and gentle he was, while BellaDonna, in a different place, talks about how poorly Stephen treated Cassie and Christian.

Cassie enters, and tries to sneak up behind Margaret, but she hears Cassie and greets her. The two women reminisce about Cassie's childhood. Cassie tells her mother that they should start again and that she wants to be a baby again, but Margaret laughs it off, telling Cassie what an intense, emotional child she was. Cassie tells her mother that she doesn't know how to be an adult. She thinks and reflects on it, sharing with her mother how it feels to flirt and to be flirted with. Margaret responds, but is lost in the world of Cassie as a child, and her own courtship with her husband. Margaret tells Cassie that she needs to set down rules and stand by them, but she is clearly speaking from a vastly different time and world of experience from Cassie's. She tells a story about slapping a man for touching her in the movie theatre. Cassie is amazed, and comes to realize that she too has a great desire to lash out.

Christian enters, changing the mood. Cassie teases him, and Margaret orders her to stop. She leaves the room with the flowers Christian has brought her, and the two siblings begin fighting, first verbally and then physically. Margaret returns with the flowers, and speaks about their beauty, seemingly ignoring her children fighting, except to warn them not to break anything. Eventually, she enquires about Stasia, who enters the stage, and waits "outside" the house, preparing to enter. Cassie and Christian stop wrestling, and Christian says Stasia's not feeling well. Although she first insists that she shouldn't say anything, when Christian presses her, Cassie admits that she's not surprised Stasia cancelled, because of Stasia's evident paranoia. Outside, Stasia hears the remark and prepares to enter. Margaret tells Cassie that pregnancy is difficult, and that she should apologize, but she just insists that Christian deserves better. Outside, Stasia speaks aloud, preparing what she'll say when she enters. Cassie insists that if she were having a baby, she'd be ecstatic. Margaret answers the door, and Stasia enters.

Scene 6

The four sit eating dinner together. When Cassie comments that she thought Stasia was sick, Stasia tells her that she's had trouble sleeping. Cassie says that she's never had that problem, but Christian and Margaret disagree, with Margaret launching into another story about Cassie as a child. She mentions a medical issue that Cassie was diagnosed with, causing her nervousness. Christian swears, and Margaret threatens to wash his mouth out

with soap, as she did once when he was a child. They begin talking about the incident, and get close to disclosing some deep family secrets, but Margaret ignores them and returns to the story she was telling about Cassie. Stasia begins peppering Margaret with questions about child-rearing, which Margaret seems happy to answer, but eventually Stasia returns to her fear that something will be wrong with the baby. Cassie begins teasing Stasia, suggesting that maybe she has cause to be worried. Margaret and Christian try to stop her. Margaret begins apologizing for Cassie, saying that she's nervous herself, which is why she likes to tease people. Cassie leaves abruptly for a smoke.

Scene 7

Cassie is outside, sitting on BellaDonna's porch. BellaDonna is in her rocking chair. Cassie is complaining about the others, but BellaDonna reminds her how hard Margaret worked and Cassie agrees to go back inside. They begin talking about the neighbours across the street, where the man who Cassie is seeing lives. Cassie doesn't reveal to BellaDonna that she's seeing him. BellaDonna asks Cassie for a cigarette in what is clearly an old ritual for both of them. Then she begins asking about the dinner again. Cassie expresses sympathy for her mother, having to deal with such a badly behaved daughter, but laments that nothing she tells her sticks. BellaDonna explains that there are some things no mother wants to hear, turning the conversation back again to the man across the street. She tells Cassie to stop keeping secrets, then asks about Stephen's death day. Cassie reveals that it's coming up and that Margaret's planned a picnic. BellaDonna asks if Cassie misses her father but Cassie replies that she only misses the made-up version that's been created since he died. They talk about him, Cassie implying dark secrets, but never admitting anything. Eventually, she starts complaining about Christian and Margaret, clearly resentful of them for their apparent contentment. BellaDonna teases her, and the two women fall into what is clearly a pattern of practiced banter. Finally, Cassie breaks the humour by confessing that she's been looking desperately to find somewhere to channel her anger, but that every group and meeting eventually loses its appeal. BellaDonna challenges her, saying that everyone is angry at the state of the world and the state of their lives and warns her not to trust her feelings. Eventually, the two women return to their old familiarity.

Scene 8

Margaret, on stage alone, reflects (as she has clearly done many times) on the day her husband died. She explains that he always liked a bath in the morning and that she would run it for him before breakfast. She reflects on how pleasant it is to know someone else is in the house, from the little noises that they make. She remembers that she didn't notice when the little noises Stephen was making stopped and she didn't go to check on him right away because he hated to be disturbed. When she finally went to check on him, she tells the audience, he was already dead. The doctor told her it was a brain aneurysm, and that there was nothing anyone could have done. She tells the audience, maybe trying to convince herself, that he wasn't an easy man to live with, but he was a good man. She makes it clear that Cassie never believed her, she started fighting with her father when she got older. He wanted Cassie to be quiet, Margaret tells the audience, but Cassie needs to talk.

Scene 9

In Margaret's kitchen, Cassie, Christian and Stasia are preparing for the picnic. Christian and Stasia are making devilled eggs, following Cassie's instructions. Christian is complaining, saying he'd rather do another job, as Stasia asks Cassie for help. Eventually, Cassie sends Christian to peel potatoes and joins Stasia in preparing the eggs. Instead of peeling potatoes, Christian stops working altogether. Cassie orders him to go find the potatoes; he protests that he doesn't know where they are. While their bickering becomes more and more sexually suggestive, Stasia starts having trouble with the eggs, breaking them while she's trying to scoop out the yolks. Stasia eventually bursts into tears. Christian is surprised that she's crying, and when he and Cassie can't get her to stop, he suddenly loses his temper with his wife. He regains his composure quickly, however, and tries to comfort her. Cassie offers Stasia tea and reassures her that they can make egg salad just as easily as devilled eggs. The scene ends with Stasia still unsure why she's crying, and wondering if maybe she's just happy and doesn't realize it.

Scene 10

BellaDonna stands alone, talking directly to the audience about Cassie. She says that Cassie first started coming to visit her when she was in her teens and that she'd like to sit around and just talk. Cassie confides in her, she explains, even though Cassie knows BellaDonna doesn't approve of many of the things she does. However, she says, Cassie knows better than to tell her what's going on right now. BellaDonna talks about how wrong it is to take another woman's husband, no matter what the man is like or what the woman is like. It seems as though she knows about Cassie's relationship with the man across the road, but as the scene ends, she tells the audience that as far as she's concerned, Stasia's the innocent in all of this and Cassie must know that that's the case.

Scene 11

Margaret enters the graveyard. Addressing the audience, she talks about how Cassie had a phase of night terrors when she was a child that Margaret couldn't fix. Cassie and Christian enter, setting up the graveyard. Stasia also enters, but in a different world. Cassie asks Christian about Stasia's emotional state, which gets Christian angry. Their conversation is inter-cut with Margaret talking about how much she enjoys picnics. Christian explains to Cassie about Stasia's bad dreams. He tells her that the previous night, Stasia even dreamed about their father, although she had never met him. While the others have their own conversations, Stasia begins to recount her dream of Stephen: a face slowly approaching her from a great distance. Cassie suggests that maybe Stasia is right and she is channeling Stephen, but Christian won't talk about it. Then the four come together to begin their picnic.

They unpack the picnic basket, Margaret exclaiming over everything they've prepared. Christian is trying to get everyone organized, but Cassie is constantly challenging his authority. While they argue, Margaret simply continues to praise the picnic, and Stasia seems to be lost in her own thoughts. They open the champagne, planning on having a toast to Stephen. Everyone turns to Christian, who promised to prepare a toast in

exchange for not having to cook. As he begins his toast, he is constantly interrupted by Cassie making sarcastic comments, by Margaret reminiscing and by Stasia asking questions. He begins to talk about wishes, but before he can share what he wishes for, the others cut him off and Cassie tells Margaret about Stasia's dream. Margaret is pleased to hear about it, and tells them that she dreams about him as well. She explains that she always agrees with him in dreams, and Cassie challenges her, suggesting that she never did anything else. Margaret claims that she stood up to him when she needed to, but Cassie and Christian are both skeptical. Christian tries once more to continue his toast. Cassie remains fairly quiet, until Margaret starts talking again about how patient he was, at which point she begins challenging them both again. They begin arguing about what he was really like and Stasia, clearly feeling left out, tries to contribute her own thoughts but is mostly ignored. Finally, everyone cooperates, and Christian is able to finish his toast.

Scene 12

The scene opens with BellaDonna directly addressing the audience. She's commenting on the clothing she sees young women wearing these days, and how inappropriate it would have been when she was young. She reflects that Cassie was the opposite: a complete tomboy. She comments that Margaret even let her run around without a shirt on until she started puberty.

On the other side of the stage, Cassie enters in a slip, with two mannequins and a martini, setting up for a show. Cassie begins talking about her childhood, and how she learned to create herself as a work of art. While she does her show, BellaDonna continues her commentary, expressing her opinions on the scandalous state of women's clothing. Cassie talks about her younger self discovering sexuality, putting nipples on her girl dolls and penises on her boy dolls. One mannequin is wearing a dress that completely exposes her breasts, showing painted on nipples like Cassie's childhood dolls. The other wears a dress slit so high that the pubis is entirely exposed. Cassie caresses the second mannequin, seducing it. She plays "Emergency" with it by making her hand run up and down its thigh. First her hand "is" a car, then an ambulance. Finally, she takes the dress off the mannequin and puts it on. BellaDonna finishes her monologue, saying that a woman who dresses like that gets exactly what she deserves.

Scene 13

The scene starts in darkness, until Stasia turns on a light. She and Christian stand onstage, but behaving as if they're in bed. Stasia thinks she's heard something and is suddenly afraid that there's someone under the bed. Christian is clearly frustrated and quickly begins to lose his patience with her, telling her to shut up. She tells him a story about being young and being convinced that someone was under her bed. He becomes more and more angry, and eventually covers her mouth to stop her talking.

Scene 14

BellaDonna is onstage alone, gossiping with the audience. She tells about one night in winter when Cassie and Christian were teenagers where she saw someone climbing out of

Cassie's window. She talks about how difficult life must have been for Margaret back then, working full time and taking care of the home, waiting on Stephen. She says that no matter how hard she tried to get Margaret to open up, she would never complain. She tells the audience that she thinks that innocent types like Margaret miss half of what's going on around them, but figures that Margaret might have known about Cassie's nighttime visitors anyway.

Scene 15

Stasia and Margaret are onstage, in different places, but talking to each other. Stasia is scared again; she's been having more nightmares and is starting to have trouble separating fantasy from reality, especially after the events of the previous scene. Margaret asks her what she's afraid of and she says she's afraid of human beings. Margaret advises her to always keep part of herself for her, that way no one can hurt her. She tells Stasia to always think of something that makes her happy and that will get her through.

Scene 16

Stasia, Christian and a Nurse all enter different parts of the stage. The nurse alternates between talking to the audience about how Stasia's raving and trying to coach Stasia through the birth. Stasia becomes more and more hysterical, imaging all the deformities the baby might be born with. Under the dialogue between Stasia and the Nurse, Christian murmurs reassurances, but it doesn't help. Finally, he and the Nurse move Stasia to the birthing table. Though she is terrified to give birth, she is overwhelmed by the need to push and the baby is born. The Nurse says it's healthy, but Stasia refuses to look at it.

Scene 17

Cassie stands, talking directly to the audience, as if they are her mirror. She explains that when she was very young, she didn't realize that all the parts of herself that she could see were connected, and disconnected from all the parts of everyone else. In her mind, having gone through this phase is what keeps her from being crazy because when she talks to herself, in her head, she knows that the person answering is just her. Crazy people, she believes, think someone else is in their head as well.

Scene 18

Cassie and Christian stand together on stage. Cassie reluctantly congratulates Christian, and tentatively asks about Stasia. At first it seems as though she's coping with it, but she soon admits that she can't deal with pretending to be happy and normal with Christian anymore. He explodes, telling her he's sick of having to be careful of her and that it's torture. She responds that he's the one torturing her, getting married, having a baby and pretending their father was perfect. She says she doesn't want to be alone with what she knows anymore and Christian tries to deflect, first pretending that he doesn't know what she means, then blaming her for what happened and what she's feeling. She tells him she's not keeping it a secret anymore and tries to leave. He stops her, telling her that he's too ashamed to face what happened and just wants to forget about it. She confronts him,

asking if blaming her is his way of coping with it, as if she was the only one who caused the problem. She finally reveals, through her attack on him, that they started having sex when she was around fourteen. He refuses to face it or talk about it, as she rants about what he must think of her, to blame her for what happened. Finally, she admits that she thinks about it everyday, and that she can't live with it being just her secret anymore.

Scene 19

Cassie is visiting Stasia, who's still in the hospital. They talk, Cassie clearly trying to be nice and keep the conversation light, until Stasia brings up the baby. She tells Cassie that she doesn't deserve to have a monster and that she hopes they're not keeping her baby in a cage. Cassie tries to assure Stasia that the baby is fine, but she won't listen and accuses Cassie of lying to her. At the end, even though Stasia isn't really listening, Cassie tells her that someday, this will just be a distant memory that won't hurt anymore, and she'll be able to comfort other people who are scared.

Scene 20

Margaret, Christian and BellaDonna all speak to the audience, from different worlds. All three are talking about Stasia's condition, and the treatments being attempted. BellaDonna is explaining how they came to her for advice, knowing that her husband had gone crazy near the end of his life. She tells the audience that the doctors want to try shock therapy and she thinks they should go ahead. The methods don't matter as long as the results are good. Margaret is trying to justify the decision, saying that childbirth is difficult but doctors are figures of authority and should be trusted. Christian is mostly concerned with how Stasia's sickness (and Cassie's sickness) affect him, constantly comparing the two in how "insane" they are.

Scene 21

Cassie enters, with an overhead projector. She's speaking to BellaDonna about the hate mail she's been receiving lately. She talks about how scared they make her feel, to know that someone hates her that much. BellaDonna responds that the hatred is justified, given that Cassie slept with "her" husband. At this point, it isn't clear who is sending the messages. Cassie begins putting the letters up on the projector. She has rewritten some of them in various ways, to see if a different appearance changes the meaning. BellaDonna reveals that she has heard from the woman (at this point it is fairly clear that it's the wife of the man across the street) many of the details of Cassie's encounter with her husband. Cassie is shocked and horrified by how much the man told his wife. Cassie then shows a self-portrait of herself as "Carrie," drenched in blood. She asks BellaDonna if she should tell her mother. BellaDonna replies that, given that the man's wife is threatening to tell Margaret herself, it looks like she has to.

Scene 22

Margaret and Cassie are onstage, Cassie is talking to Lily, Christian and Stasia's baby. It is revealed that Stasia will be returning home, since the shock therapy has apparently had

the desired effect. Margaret warns Cassie not to cause trouble when Stasia comes home, and to stop being destructive and confrontational with Christian. Abruptly changing the topic, Cassie reveals the conflict with the woman across the street, though she tells her mother that she just had a few drinks with the man. Margaret accuses Cassie of being desperate for indulging a man who clearly wants what he can't have. Cassie doesn't understand how that's desperate, but Margaret has already fallen back into her typical mode of being, concerned about damage control as if Cassie had just committed some kind of minor faux pas. Almost casually, when faced with Margaret's criticism, Cassie reveals that she and Christian had sex. Margaret responds as though she doesn't understand what Cassie is saying, although Cassie is being as clear as she can about it. Cassie reveals more and more details about what happened between them and how she feels about it, but Margaret just responds with justifications and willful ignorance. Cassie asks if Margaret knew and she says that their father thought they were too close. Margaret finally begins acknowledging what Cassie's saying, but makes it clear that she thinks the entire thing is Cassie's fault.

Suddenly, Cassie starts attacking Margaret, asking how she could have had sex with Stephen when he clearly didn't respect her at all. Margaret defends her position, and Cassie is unable to make her understand her point of view. Eventually, Margaret reverts back to being "the happy woman," telling Cassie that she's obviously just confused, because she was the most important person to Christian before he met Stasia, and that she shouldn't be so hard on herself. Margaret tells her that both she and Christian made mistakes, then goes back to talking about the man across the street. Cassie continues to press the issue, asking again if Margaret knew. Suddenly, Margaret loses her temper, yelling at Cassie that there's no way she would have guessed. She regains her composure, and talks again about how difficult this time has been, and that Stasia deserves their pity. Cassie agrees, and assures Margaret that she won't tell Stasia about her and Christian. The way Margaret responds, it is as though she has already forgotten about Cassie and Christian having sex, telling Cassie that she's sure Stasia already knows how close Cassie and Christian are.

Scene 23

Christian and Cassie are speaking to each other. Cassie has clearly just told Christian about her conversation with Margaret. Christian is furious that she betrayed his trust by revealing a secret that was his as well as hers. Cassie tells him that it barely registered on Margaret and she almost feels like she should tell her again just to try to make it sink in.

Scene 24

Margaret has woken up from a terrible dream and is crying. BellaDonna is close, responding to what Margaret says with reassurances and clearly wanting to comfort her. Most of the time, it seems that Margaret is talking to Stephen, not BellaDonna. She describes her dream, where she was the general of an army in a desolate, dystopian world. She heard the people suffering, and knew it was her fault. She begins reflecting on when she first saw Stephen, when they were in school. She describes it as the memory she returned to whenever things were difficult. She reminds herself again that Stephen was a good person, though it becomes more and more clear that her definition of good is

simply not doing anything “bad.” She talks about how children were crying in her dream, and that reminds her of Cassie as a baby. She wants to know what changed, but also says she doesn’t want to know. BellaDonna seems to support the idea that she shouldn’t know, but Margaret realizes that she can’t forget what she’s been told.

Scene 25

Stasia has finally arrived home from the hospital, and she and Christian are talking in their house. She is excited to be back and can’t wait to see Lily again. However, as soon as she starts talking about why her illness happened, Christian stops her. He tells her that everything will be fine, and they’ll have a perfect family. When she starts getting distracted or tries to interrupt him, he orders her to listen to him and not talk. He tells her that from now on, they need to only look at the future, and never at the past. He tells her that she shouldn’t talk about things that worry her anymore, because they only make her upset, and that if she does, he just won’t listen. Eventually, Stasia agrees to blindly obey what he is ordering, and Christian seems happy.

Scene 26

Cassie and BellaDonna are both onstage, conversing. Cassie is scantily dressed, and carrying a suitcase. BellaDonna starts asking her questions about her intention to leave, and Cassie tells her that she’s going to the big city, though her tone suggests that she’s joking around to avoid a serious conversation. BellaDonna tells her she’ll find new problems wherever she goes, but Cassie says that’s what she’s counting on. She reveals that when she told her family she was leaving, Christian seemed relieved, and even Margaret didn’t really try to talk her out of it. Cassie pulls out a portable “stage” for a puppet show, and begins narrating a show about a naked woman hitchhiking to the city. BellaDonna expresses her concern, but ultimately seems to understand Cassie’s decision.

Scene 27

Margaret, Christian and Stasia are all onstage. Margaret is holding the baby. They talk about Cassie, and Christian is convinced that she’ll come right back home again. Margaret comes and gives the baby to Stasia, who holds her nervously for the first time. Stasia is in raptures over how amazing Lily is. She tells the audience, as she did earlier in the play, that she’s going to count Lily’s toes like a “regular mother.” As she counts, there is a tension as both she and the audience are still scared something might be wrong. She falters at nine but Christian prompts her onwards, and she counts ten toes, then looks up, beaming.

HAPPINESS: EXPLORED

The Futile Pursuit of Happiness

By Jon Gertner

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If Daniel Gilbert is right, then you are wrong. That is to say, if Daniel Gilbert is right, then you are wrong to believe that a new car will make you as happy as you imagine. You are wrong to believe that a new kitchen will make you happy for as long as you imagine. You are wrong to think that you will be more unhappy with a big single setback (a broken wrist, a broken heart) than with a lesser chronic one (a trick knee, a tense marriage). You are wrong to assume that job failure will be crushing. You are wrong to expect that a death in the family will leave you bereft for year upon year, forever and ever. You are even wrong to reckon that a cheeseburger you order in a restaurant -- this week, next week, a year from now, it doesn't really matter when -- will definitely hit the spot. That's because when it comes to predicting exactly how you will feel in the future, you are most likely wrong.

A professor in Harvard's department of psychology, Gilbert likes to tell people that he studies happiness. But it would be more precise to say that Gilbert -- along with the psychologist Tim Wilson of the University of Virginia, the economist George Loewenstein of Carnegie-Mellon and the psychologist (and Nobel laureate in economics) Daniel Kahneman of Princeton -- has taken the lead in studying a specific type of emotional and behavioral prediction. In the past few years, these four men have begun to question the decision-making process that shapes our sense of well-being: how do we predict what will make us happy or unhappy -- and then how do we feel after the actual experience? For example, how do we suppose we'll feel if our favorite college football team wins or loses, and then how do we really feel a few days after the game? How do we predict we'll feel about purchasing jewelry, having children, buying a big house or being rich? And then how do we regard the outcomes? According to this small corps of academics, almost all actions -- the decision to buy jewelry, have kids, buy the big house or work exhaustively for a fatter paycheck -- are based on our predictions of the emotional consequences of these events.

Until recently, this was uncharted territory. How we forecast our feelings, and whether those predictions match our future emotional states, had never been the stuff of laboratory research. But in scores of experiments, Gilbert, Wilson, Kahneman and Loewenstein have made a slew of observations and conclusions that undermine a number of fundamental assumptions: namely, that we humans understand what we want and are adept at improving our well-being -- that we are good at maximizing our utility, in the jargon of traditional economics. Further, their work on prediction raises some unsettling and somewhat more personal questions. To understand affective forecasting, as Gilbert has termed these studies, is to wonder if everything you have ever thought about life choices, and about happiness, has been at the least somewhat naïve and, at worst, greatly mistaken.

The problem, as Gilbert and company have come to discover, is that we falter when it comes to imagining how we will feel about something in the future. It isn't that we get the big things wrong. We know we will experience visits to Le Cirque and to the periodontist differently; we can accurately predict that we'd rather be stuck in Montauk than in a Midtown elevator. What Gilbert has found, however, is that we overestimate the intensity and the duration of our emotional reactions -- our "affect" -- to future events. In other words, we might believe that a new BMW will make life perfect. But it will almost certainly be less exciting than we anticipated; nor will it excite us for as long as predicted. The vast majority of Gilbert's test participants through the years have consistently made just these sorts of errors both in the laboratory and in real-life situations. And whether Gilbert's subjects were trying to predict how they would feel in the future about a plate of spaghetti with meat sauce, the defeat of a preferred political candidate or romantic rejection seemed not to matter. On average, bad events proved less intense and more transient than test participants predicted. Good events proved less intense and briefer as well.

Gilbert and his collaborator Tim Wilson call the gap between what we predict and what we ultimately experience the "impact bias" -- "impact" meaning the errors we make in estimating both the intensity and duration of our emotions and "bias" our tendency to err. The phrase characterizes how we experience the dimming excitement over not just a BMW but also over any object or event that we presume will make us happy. Would a 20 percent raise or winning the lottery result in a contented life? You may predict it will, but almost surely it won't turn out that way. And a new plasma television? You may have high hopes, but the impact bias suggests that it will almost certainly be less cool, and in a shorter time, than you imagine. Worse, Gilbert has noted that these mistakes of expectation can lead directly to mistakes in choosing what we think will give us pleasure. He calls this "miswanting."

"The average person says, 'I know I'll be happier with a Porsche than a Chevy,' " Gilbert explains. " 'Or with Linda rather than Rosalyn. Or as a doctor rather than as a plumber.' That seems very clear to people. The problem is, I can't get into medical school or afford the Porsche. So for the average person, the obstacle between them and happiness is actually getting the futures that they desire. But what our research shows -- not just ours, but Loewenstein's and Kahneman's -- is that the real problem is figuring out which of those futures is going to have the high payoff and is really going to make you happy.

"You know, the Stones said, 'You can't always get what you want,' " Gilbert adds. "I don't think that's the problem. The problem is you can't always know what you want."

Gilbert's papers on affective forecasting began to appear in the late 1990's, but the idea to study happiness and emotional prediction actually came to him on a sunny afternoon in October 1992, just as he and his friend Jonathan Jay Koehler sat down for lunch outside the psychology building at the University of Texas at Austin, where both men were teaching at the time. Gilbert was uninspired about his studies and says he felt despair about his failing marriage. And as he launched into a discussion of his personal life, he swerved to ask why economists focus on the financial aspects of decision making rather than the emotional ones. Koehler recalls, "Gilbert said something like: 'It all seems so small. It isn't really about money; it's about happiness. Isn't that what everybody wants to

know when we make a decision?" " For a moment, Gilbert forgot his troubles, and two more questions came to him. Do we even know what makes us happy? And if it's difficult to figure out what makes us happy in the moment, how can we predict what will make us happy in the future?

In the early 1990's, for an up-and-coming psychology professor like Gilbert to switch his field of inquiry from how we perceive one another to happiness, as he did that day, was just a hairsbreadth short of bizarre. But Gilbert has always liked questions that lead him somewhere new. Now 45, Gilbert dropped out of high school at 15, hooking into what he calls "the tail end of the hippie movement" and hitchhiking aimlessly from town to town with his guitar. He met his wife on the road; she was hitching in the other direction. They married at 17, had a son at 18 and settled down in Denver. "I pulled weeds, I sold rebar, I sold carpet, I installed carpet, I spent a lot of time as a phone solicitor," he recalls. During this period he spent several years turning out science-fiction stories for magazines like *Amazing Stories*. Thus, in addition to being "one of the most gifted social psychologists of our age," as the psychology writer and professor David G. Myers describes him to me, Gilbert is the author of "The Essence of Grunk," a story about an encounter with a creature made of egg salad that jets around the galaxy in a rocket-powered refrigerator.

Psychology was a matter of happenstance. In the midst of his sci-fi career, Gilbert tried to sign up for a writing course at the local community college, but the class was full; he figured that psych, still accepting registrants, would help him with character development in his fiction. It led instead to an undergraduate degree at the University of Colorado at Denver, then a Ph.D. at Princeton, then an appointment at the University of Texas, then the appointment at Harvard. "People ask why I study happiness," Gilbert says, "and I say, 'Why study anything else?' It's the holy grail. We're studying the thing that all human action is directed toward."

One experiment of Gilbert's had students in a photography class at Harvard choose two favorite pictures from among those they had just taken and then relinquish one to the teacher. Some students were told their choices were permanent; others were told they could exchange their prints after several days. As it turned out, those who had time to change their minds were less pleased with their decisions than those whose choices were irrevocable.

Much of Gilbert's research is in this vein. Another recent study asked whether transit riders in Boston who narrowly missed their trains experienced the self-blame that people tend to predict they'll feel in this situation. (They did not.) And a paper waiting to be published, "The Peculiar Longevity of Things Not So Bad," examines why we expect that bigger problems will always dwarf minor annoyances. "When really bad things happen to us, we defend against them," Gilbert explains. "People, of course, predict the exact opposite. If you ask, 'What would you rather have, a broken leg or a trick knee?' they'd probably say, 'Trick knee.' And yet, if your goal is to accumulate maximum happiness over your lifetime, you just made the wrong choice. A trick knee is a bad thing to have."

All of these studies establish the links between prediction, decision making and well-being. The photography experiment challenges our common assumption that we would be happier with the option to change our minds when in fact we're happier with closure.

The transit experiment demonstrates that we tend to err in estimating our regret over missed opportunities. The "things not so bad" work shows our failure to imagine how grievously irritations compromise our satisfaction. Our emotional defenses snap into action when it comes to a divorce or a disease but not for lesser problems. We fix the leaky roof on our house, but over the long haul, the broken screen door we never mend adds up to more frustration.

Gilbert does not believe all forecasting mistakes lead to similar results; a death in the family, a new gym membership and a new husband are not the same, but in how they affect our well-being they are similar. "Our research simply says that whether it's the thing that matters or the thing that doesn't, both of them matter less than you think they will," he says. "Things that happen to you or that you buy or own -- as much as you think they make a difference to your happiness, you're wrong by a certain amount. You're overestimating how much of a difference they make. None of them make the difference you think. And that's true of positive and negative events."

Much of the work of Kahneman, Loewenstein, Gilbert and Wilson takes its cue from the concept of adaptation, a term psychologists have used since at least the 1950's to refer to how we acclimate to changing circumstances. George Loewenstein sums up this human capacity as follows: "Happiness is a signal that our brains use to motivate us to do certain things. And in the same way that our eye adapts to different levels of illumination, we're designed to kind of go back to the happiness set point. Our brains are not trying to be happy. Our brains are trying to regulate us." In this respect, the tendency toward adaptation suggests why the impact bias is so pervasive. As Tim Wilson says: "We don't realize how quickly we will adapt to a pleasurable event and make it the backdrop of our lives. When any event occurs to us, we make it ordinary. And through becoming ordinary, we lose our pleasure."

It is easy to overlook something new and crucial in what Wilson is saying. Not that we invariably lose interest in bright and shiny things over time -- this is a long-known trait -- but that we're generally unable to recognize that we adapt to new circumstances and therefore fail to incorporate this fact into our decisions. So, yes, we will adapt to the BMW and the plasma TV, since we adapt to virtually everything. But Wilson and Gilbert and others have shown that we seem unable to predict that we will adapt. Thus, when we find the pleasure derived from a thing diminishing, we move on to the next thing or event and almost certainly make another error of prediction, and then another, ad infinitum.

As Gilbert points out, this glitch is also significant when it comes to negative events like losing a job or the death of someone we love, in response to which we project a permanently inconsolable future. "The thing I'm most interested in, that I've spent the most time studying, is our failure to recognize how powerful psychological defenses are once they're activated," Gilbert says. "We've used the metaphor of the 'psychological immune system' -- it's just a metaphor, but not a bad one for that system of defenses that helps you feel better when bad things happen. Observers of the human condition since Aristotle have known that people have these defenses. Freud spent his life, and his daughter Anna spent her life, worrying about these defenses. What's surprising is that people don't seem to recognize that they have these defenses, and that these defenses will be triggered by negative events." During the course of my interviews with Gilbert, a close

friend of his died. "I am like everyone in thinking, I'll never get over this and life will never be good again," he wrote to me in an e-mail message as he planned a trip to Texas for the funeral. "But because of my work, there is always a voice in the back of my head - a voice that wears a lab coat and has a lot of data tucked under its arm -- that says, 'Yes, you will, and yes, it will.' And I know that voice is right."

Still, the argument that we imperfectly imagine what we want and how we will cope is nevertheless disorienting. On the one hand, it can cast a shadow of regret on some life decisions. Why did I decide that working 100 hours a week to earn more would make me happy? Why did I think retiring to Sun City, Ariz., would please me? On the other hand, it can be enlightening. No wonder this teak patio set hasn't made me as happy as I expected. Even if she dumps me, I'll be O.K. Either way, predicting how things will feel to us over the long term is mystifying. A large body of research on well-being seems to suggest that wealth above middle-class comfort makes little difference to our happiness, for example, or that having children does nothing to improve well-being -- even as it drives marital satisfaction dramatically down. We often yearn for a roomy, isolated home (a thing we easily adapt to), when, in fact, it will probably compromise our happiness by distancing us from neighbors. (Social interaction and friendships have been shown to give lasting pleasure.) The big isolated home is what Loewenstein, 48, himself bought. "I fell into a trap I never should have fallen into," he told me.

Loewenstein's office is up a narrow stairway in a hidden corner of an enormous, worn brick building on the edge of the Carnegie-Mellon campus in Pittsburgh. He and Gilbert make for an interesting contrast. Gilbert is garrulous, theatrical, dazzling in his speech and writing; he fills a room. Loewenstein is soft-spoken, given to abstraction and lithe in the way of a hard-core athlete; he seems to float around a room. Both men profess tremendous admiration for the other, and their different disciplines -- psychology and economics -- have made their overlapping interests in affective forecasting more complementary than fraught. While Gilbert's most notable contribution to affective forecasting is the impact bias, Loewenstein's is something called the "empathy gap."

Here's how it expresses itself. In a recent experiment, Loewenstein tried to find out how likely people might be to dance alone to Rick James's "Super Freak" in front of a large audience. Many agreed to do so for a certain amount of money a week in advance, only to renege when the day came to take the stage. This sounds like a goof, but it gets at the fundamental difference between how we behave in "hot" states (those of anxiety, courage, fear, drug craving, sexual excitation and the like) and "cold" states of rational calm. This empathy gap in thought and behavior -- we cannot seem to predict how we will behave in a hot state when we are in a cold state -- affects happiness in an important but somewhat less consistent way than the impact bias. "So much of our lives involves making decisions that have consequences for the future," Loewenstein says. "And if our decision making is influenced by these transient emotional and psychological states, then we know we're not making decisions with an eye toward future consequences." This may be as simple as an unfortunate proclamation of love in a moment of lust, Loewenstein explains, or something darker, like an act of road rage or of suicide.

Among other things, this line of inquiry has led Loewenstein to collaborate with health experts looking into why people engage in unprotected sex when they would never agree

to do so in moments of cool calculation. Data from tests in which volunteers are asked how they would behave in various "heat of the moment" situations -- whether they would have sex with a minor, for instance, or act forcefully with a partner who asks them to stop -- have consistently shown that different states of arousal can alter answers by astonishing margins. "These kinds of states have the ability to change us so profoundly that we're more different from ourselves in different states than we are from another person," Loewenstein says.

Part of Loewenstein's curiosity about hot and cold states comes from situations in which his emotions have been pitted against his intellect. When he's not teaching, he treks around the world, making sure to get to Alaska to hike or kayak at least once a year. A scholar of mountaineering literature, he once wrote a paper that examined why climbers have a poor memory for pain and usually ignore turn-back times at great peril. But he has done the same thing himself many times. He almost died in a whitewater canoeing accident and vowed afterward that he never wanted to see his runaway canoe again. (A couple of hours later, he went looking for it.) The same goes for his climbing pursuits. "You establish your turn-back time, and then you find yourself still far from the peak," he says. "So you push on. You haven't brought enough food or clothes, and then as a result, you're stuck at 13,000 feet, and you have to just sit there and shiver all night without a sleeping bag or warm clothes. When the sun comes up, you're half-frozen, and you say, 'Never again.' Then you get back and immediately start craving getting out again." He pushes the point: "I have tried to train my emotions." But he admits that he may make the same mistakes on his next trip.

Would a world without forecasting errors be a better world? Would a life lived without forecasting errors be a richer life? Among the academics who study affective forecasting, there seems little doubt that these sorts of questions will ultimately jump from the academy to the real world. "If people do not know what is going to make them better off or give them pleasure," Daniel Kahneman says, "then the idea that you can trust people to do what will give them pleasure becomes questionable." To Kahneman, who did some of the first experiments in the area in the early 1990's, affective forecasting could greatly influence retirement planning, for example, where mistakes in prediction (how much we save, how much we spend, how we choose a community we think we'll enjoy) can prove irreversible. He sees a role for affective forecasting in consumer spending, where a "cooling off" period might remedy buyer's remorse. Most important, he sees vital applications in health care, especially when it comes to informed consent. "We consider people capable of giving informed consent once they are told of the objective effects of a treatment," Kahneman says. "But can people anticipate how they and other people will react to a colostomy or to the removal of their vocal cords? The research on affective forecasting suggests that people may have little ability to anticipate their adaptation beyond the early stages." Loewenstein, along with his collaborator Dr. Peter Ubel, has done a great deal of work showing that nonpatients overestimate the displeasure of living with the loss of a limb, for instance, or paraplegia. To use affective forecasting to prove that people adapt to serious physical challenges far better and will be happier than they imagine, Loewenstein says, could prove invaluable.

There are downsides to making public policy in light of this research, too. While walking in Pittsburgh one afternoon, Loewenstein tells me that he doesn't see how anybody could

study happiness and not find himself leaning left politically; the data make it all too clear that boosting the living standards of those already comfortable, such as through lower taxes, does little to improve their levels of well-being, whereas raising the living standards of the impoverished makes an enormous difference. Nevertheless, he and Gilbert (who once declared in an academic paper, "Windfalls are better than pratfalls, A's are better than C's, December 25 is better than April 15, and everything is better than a Republican administration") seem to lean libertarian in regard to pushing any kind of prescriptive agenda. "We're very, very nervous about overapplying the research," Loewenstein says. "Just because we figure out that X makes people happy and they're choosing Y, we don't want to impose X on them. I have a discomfort with paternalism and with using the results coming out of our field to impose decisions on people."

Still, Gilbert and Loewenstein can't contain the personal and philosophical questions raised by their work. After talking with both men, I found it hard not to wonder about my own predictions at every turn. At times it seemed like knowing the secret to some parlor trick that was nonetheless very difficult to pull off -- when I ogled a new car at the Honda dealership as I waited for a new muffler on my '92 Accord, for instance, or as my daughter's fever spiked one evening and I imagined something terrible, and then something more terrible thereafter. With some difficulty, I could observe my mind overshooting the mark, zooming past accuracy toward the sublime or the tragic. It was tempting to want to try to think about the future more moderately. But it seemed nearly impossible as well.

To Loewenstein, who is especially attendant to the friction between his emotional and deliberative processes, a life without forecasting errors would most likely be a better, happier life. "If you had a deep understanding of the impact bias and you acted on it, which is not always that easy to do, you would tend to invest your resources in the things that would make you happy," he says. This might mean taking more time with friends instead of more time for making money. He also adds that a better understanding of the empathy gap -- those hot and cold states we all find ourselves in on frequent occasions -- could save people from making regrettable decisions in moments of courage or craving.

Gilbert seems optimistic about using the work in terms of improving "institutional judgment" -- how we spend health care dollars, for example -- but less sanguine about using it to improve our personal judgment. He admits that he has taken some of his research to heart; for instance, his work on what he calls the psychological immune system has led him to believe that he would be able to adapt to even the worst turn of events. In addition, he says that he now takes more chances in life, a fact corroborated in at least one aspect by his research partner Tim Wilson, who says that driving with Gilbert in Boston is a terrifying, white-knuckle experience. "But I should have learned many more lessons from my research than I actually have," Gilbert admits. "I'm getting married in the spring because this woman is going to make me happy forever, and I know it." At this, Gilbert laughs, a sudden, booming laugh that fills his Cambridge office. He seems to find it funny not because it's untrue, but because nothing could be more true. This is how he feels. "I don't think I want to give up all these motivations," he says, "that belief that there's the good and there's the bad and that this is a contest to try to get one and avoid the other. I don't think I want to learn too much from my research in that sense."

Even so, Gilbert is currently working on a complex experiment in which he has made affective forecasting errors "go away." In this test, Gilbert's team asks members of Group A to estimate how they'll feel if they receive negative personality feedback. The impact bias kicks in, of course, and they mostly predict they'll feel terrible, when in fact they end up feeling O.K. But if Gilbert shows Group B that others have gotten the same feedback and felt O.K. afterward, then its members predict they'll feel O.K. as well. The impact bias disappears, and the participants in Group B make accurate predictions.

This is exciting to Gilbert. But at the same time, it's not a technique he wants to shape into a self-help book, or one that he even imagines could be practically implemented. "Hope and fear are enduring features of the human experience," he says, "and it is unlikely that people are going to abandon them anytime soon just because some psychologist told them they should." In fact, in his recent writings, he has wondered whether forecasting errors might somehow serve a larger functional purpose he doesn't yet understand. If he could wave a wand tomorrow and eliminate all affective-forecasting errors, I ask, would he? "The benefits of not making this error would seem to be that you get a little more happiness," he says. "When choosing between two jobs, you wouldn't sweat as much because you'd say: 'You know, I'll be happy in both. I'll adapt to either circumstance pretty well, so there's no use in killing myself for the next week.' But maybe our caricatures of the future -- these overinflated assessments of how good or bad things will be -- maybe it's these illusory assessments that keep us moving in one direction over the other. Maybe we don't want a society of people who shrug and say, 'It won't really make a difference.'

"Maybe it's important for there to be carrots and sticks in the world, even if they are illusions," he adds. "They keep us moving towards carrots and away from sticks."

TRUTH AND LIES: EXPLORED

The Truth About Lying

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If, as the cliché has it, the 1980s was the decade of greed, then the quintessential [sin](#) of the 1990s might just have been [lying](#). After all, think of the accusations of deceit leveled at politicians like Bob Packwood, Marion Barry, Dan Rostenkowski, Newt Gingrich, and Bill Clinton.

And consider the top-level Texaco executives who initially denied making racist comments at board meetings; the young monk who falsely accused Cardinal Bernardin of molestation; Susan Smith, the white woman who killed her young boys and blamed a black man for it; and Joe Klein, the *Newsweek* columnist who adamantly swore for months that he had nothing to do with his anonymously-published novel *Primary Colors*. Even Hollywood noticed our apparent deception obsession: witness films like *Quiz Show*, *True Lies*, *The Crucible*, *Secrets & Lies*, and *Liar, Liar*.

Leonard Saxe, Ph.D., a polygraph expert and professor of psychology at Brandeis University, says, "Lying has long been a part of everyday life. We couldn't get through the day without being deceptive." Yet until recently lying was almost entirely ignored by psychologists, leaving serious discussion of the topic in the hands of ethicists and theologians. [Freud](#) wrote next to nothing about deception; even the 1500-page *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, published in 1984, mentions lies only in a brief entry on detecting them. But as psychologists delve deeper into the details of deception, they're finding that lying is a surprisingly common and complex phenomenon.

For starters, the work by Bella DePaulo, Ph.D., a psychologist at the University of Virginia, confirms Nietzsche's assertion that the lie is a condition of life. In a 1996 study, DePaulo and her colleagues had 147 people between the ages of 18 and 71 keep a diary of all the falsehoods they told over the course of a week. Most people, she found, lie once or twice a day—almost as often as they snack from the refrigerator or brush their teeth. Both men and women lie in approximately a fifth of their social exchanges lasting 10 or

more minutes; over the course of a week they deceive about 30 percent of those with whom they interact one-on-one. Furthermore, some types of relationships, such as those between [parents](#) and teens, are virtual magnets for deception: "College students lie to their mothers in one out of two conversations," reports DePaulo. (Incidentally, when researchers refer to lying, they don't include the mindless pleasantries or polite equivocations we offer each other in passing, such as "I'm fine, thanks" or "No trouble at all." An "official" lie actually misleads, deliberately conveying a false impression. So complimenting a friend's awful haircut or telling a creditor that the check is in the mail both qualify.)

Saxe points out that most of us receive conflicting messages about lying. Although we're socialized from the time we can speak to believe that it's always better to tell the truth, in reality society often encourages and even rewards deception. Show up late for an early morning meeting at work and it's best not to admit that you overslept. "You're punished far more than you would be if you lie and say you were stuck in traffic," Saxe notes. Moreover, lying is integral to many occupations. Think how often we see lawyers constructing far-fetched theories on behalf of their clients or reporters misrepresenting themselves in order to gain access to good stories.

Of Course I Love You

Dishonesty also pervades our [romantic relationships](#), as you might expect from the titles of books like *101 Lies Men Tell Women* (Harper Collins), by Missouri psychologist Dory Hollander, Ph.D. (Hollander's nomination for the #1 spot: "I'll call you.") Eighty-five percent of the couples interviewed in a 1990 study of college students reported that one or both partners had lied about past relationships or recent indiscretions. And DePaulo finds that [dating](#) couples lie to each other in about a third of their interactions—perhaps even more often than they deceive other people.

Fortunately, [marriage](#) seems to offer some protection against deception: Spouses lie to each other in "only" about 10 percent of their major conversations. The bad news? That 10 percent just refers to the typically minor lies of everyday life. DePaulo recently began looking at the less frequent "big" lies that involve deep betrayals of trust, and she's finding that the vast majority of them occur between people in intimate relationships. "You save your really big lies," she says, "for the person that you're closest to."

Sweet Little Lies

Though some lies produce interpersonal friction, others may actually serve as a kind of harmless social lubricant. "They make it easier for people to get along," says DePaulo, noting that in the diary study one in every four of the participants' lies were told solely for the benefit of another person. In fact, "fake positive" lies—those in which people pretend to like someone or something more than they actually do ("Your muffins are the best ever")—are about 10 to 20 times more common than "false negative" lies in which people pretend to like someone or something less ("That two-faced rat will never get my vote").

Certain cultures may place special importance on these "kind" lies. A survey of residents at 31 senior citizen centers in Los Angeles recently revealed that only about half of elderly Korean Americans believe that patients diagnosed with life-threatening metastatic cancer should be told the truth about their condition. In contrast, nearly 90 percent of Americans of European or African descent felt that the terminally ill should be confronted with the truth.

Not surprisingly, research also confirms that the closer we are to someone, the more likely it is that the lies we tell them will be [altruistic](#) ones. This is particularly true of women: Although the sexes lie with equal frequency, women are especially likely to stretch the truth in order to protect someone else's feelings, DePaulo reports. Men, on the other hand, are more prone to lying about themselves—the typical conversation between two guys contains about eight times as many self-oriented lies as it does falsehoods about other people.

Men and women may also differ in their ability to deceive their friends. In a University of Virginia study, psychologists asked pairs of same-sex friends to try to detect lies told by the other person. Six months later the researchers repeated the experiment with the same participants. While women had become slightly better at detecting their friend's lies over time, men didn't show any improvement—evidence, perhaps, that women are particularly good at learning to read their friends more accurately as a relationship deepens.

Who Lies?

Saxe believes that anyone under enough pressure, or given enough incentive, will lie. But in a study published in the *Journal of [Personality and Social Psychology](#)*, DePaulo and Deborah A. Kashy, Ph.D., of Texas A&M University, report that frequent liars tend to be manipulative and Machiavellian, not to mention overly concerned with the impression they make on others. Still, DePaulo warns that liars "don't always fit the [stereotype](#) of caring only about themselves. Further research reveals that [extroverted](#), sociable people are slightly more likely to lie, and that some personality and physical traits—notably self-confidence and physical attractiveness—have been linked to an individual's skill at lying when under pressure.

On the other hand, the people least likely to lie are those who score high on psychological scales of responsibility and those with meaningful same-sex friendships. In his book *Lies!! Lies!!! The Psychology of Deceit* (American [Psychiatric](#) Press, Inc.), psychiatrist Charles Ford, M.D., adds depressed people to that list. He suggests that individuals in the throes of depression seldom deceive others—or are deceived themselves—because they seem to perceive and describe reality with greater accuracy than others. Several studies show that depressed people delude themselves far less than their nondepressed peers about the amount of control they have over situations, and also about the effect they have on other people. Researchers such as UCLA psychologist Shelley Taylor, Ph.D., have even cited such findings as evidence that a certain amount of self-delusion—basically, lying to yourself—is essential to good mental health. (Many playwrights, including Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neill, seem to share the same view about truth-telling. In *Death of a Salesman* and *The Iceman Cometh*, for example, lies are life sustaining: The heroes become tragic figures when their lies are stripped away.)

Detecting Lies

Anyone who has played cards with a poker-faced opponent can appreciate how difficult it is to detect a liar. Surprisingly, technology doesn't help very much. Few experts display much confidence in the deception-detecting abilities of the polygraph, or lie detector. Geoffrey C. Bunn, Ph.D., a psychologist and polygraph historian at Canada's York University, goes so far as to describe the lie detector as "an entertainment device" rather than a scientific instrument. Created around 1921 during one of the first collaborations between scientists and police, the device was quickly popularized by enthusiastic newspaper headlines and by the element of drama it bestowed in movies and novels.

But mass appeal doesn't confer legitimacy. The problem with the polygraph, say experts like Bunn, is that it detects [fear](#), not lying; the physiological responses that it measures—most often heart rate, skin conductivity, and rate of respiration—don't necessarily accompany dishonesty.

"The premise of a lie detector is that a smoke alarm goes off in the [brain](#) when we lie because we're doing something wrong," explains Saxe. "But sometimes we're completely comfortable with our lies." Thus a criminal's lie can easily go undetected if he has no fear of telling it. Similarly, a true statement by an innocent individual could be misinterpreted if the person is sufficiently afraid of the examination circumstances. According to Saxe, the best-controlled research suggests that lie detectors err at a rate anywhere from 25 to 75 percent. Perhaps this is why most state and federal courts won't allow polygraph "evidence."

Some studies suggest that lies can be detected by means other than a polygraph—by tracking speech hesitations or changes in vocal pitch, for example, or by identifying various nervous adaptive habits like scratching, blinking, or fidgeting. But most psychologists agree that lie detection is destined to be imperfect. Still, researchers continue to investigate new ways of picking up lies. While studying how language patterns are associated with improvements in physical health, James W. Pennebaker, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Southern Methodist University, also began to explore whether a person's choice of words was a sign of deception. Examining data gathered from a text analysis program, Pennebaker and SMU colleague Diane Berry, Ph.D., determined that there are certain language patterns that predict when someone is being less than honest. For example, liars tend to use fewer first person words like I or my in both speech and writing. They are also less apt to use emotional words, such as hurt or angry, [cognitive](#) words, like understand or realize, and so-called exclusive words, such as but or without, that distinguish between what is and isn't in a category.

While the picture of lying that has emerged in recent years is far more favorable than that suggested by its biblical "thou shalt not" status, most liars remain at least somewhat conflicted about their behavior. In DePaulo's studies, participants described conversations in which they lied as less intimate and pleasant than truthful encounters, suggesting that people are not entirely at ease with their deceptions. That may explain why falsehoods are more likely to be told over the telephone, which provides more anonymity than a face-to-face conversation. In most cases, however, any mental distress that results from telling an everyday lie quickly dissipates. Those who took part in the diary study said

they would tell about 75 percent of their lies again if given a second chance—a position no doubt bolstered by their generally high success rate. Only about a fifth of their falsehoods were discovered during the one-week study period.

Certainly anyone who insists on condemning all lies should ponder what would happen if we could reliably tell when our family, friends, colleagues, and [government](#) leaders were deceiving us. It's tempting to think that the world would become a better place when purged of the deceptions that seem to interfere with our attempts at genuine communication or intimacy. On the other hand, perhaps our social lives would collapse under the weight of relentless honesty, with unveiled truths destroying our ability to connect with others. The ubiquity of lying is clearly a problem, but would we want to will away all of our lies? Let's be honest.

SCRIPT EXCERPTS

Scene One

(The sound of the kind of canned, “new age” music: a tranquility tape. There must be singing birds on the track – maybe even loons - and even though the setting is a city street, we hear no cars. It’s early morning.)

Margaret enters upstage. She wears a powder-blue sweater and a knee-length skirt, panty-hose, and flats. She has tight home-spun curls, and is pulling a shopping cart. She stops downstage, takes out a handkerchief, and mops her face. She listens to the birds singing, and takes a deep satisfied breath.)

Margaret. Happy. Happy. Happy.

The air is so sweet today. Tender.

As tender as a new baby.

I can’t believe I’m going to be a grandmother!

I was so young – so young when I had my son. I had no idea how young I was! My skin was still white and pink and freckled. I had no wrinkles. Not a single one. This big belly ball I have now was flat again, just months after I had him.

And he was lovely - with long legs and arms. I can still feel his soft cheeks pressed against mine, and his breath panting in my ear. When he got hungry he’d press his mouth against my chin and suck there. I love that! You can nuzzle their cheeks and they’ll turn toward you with their soft, wet, mouths wide open.

Happy. Happy. Happy.

(BellaDonna enters from a different direction, pulling the muffled sounds of traffic in with her. She also pulls a full cart behind her, sloppily put together.)

BellaDonna: You look happy today.

Margaret: Who wouldn’t be happy on a day like this? The sky is turquoise. The birds are glittering in the trees. Listen to them.

BellaDonna: I’m always afraid to be happy on days like this. They don’t last. Before you know it, it’s a hot, dusty afternoon, and everything is a little sad and tawdry. I can’t stand knowing what’s coming.

Margaret: You sound like my daughter-in-law, Stasia! She’s been expecting a disaster the whole time she’s been pregnant. And look at her! She’s beautiful. Perfect.

When my first baby fluttered in my belly, I felt like I was flying. *She* took the first kick and turned it into a club-foot.

BellaDonna: She's a nervous girl.

Margaret: (pleasantly) A little skittish, maybe.

BellaDonna: She's a nice girl.

Margaret: (nodding in agreement) There was that *tiny part* of me that wasn't *quite sure*...just at first...

(she laughs) I feel badly that I felt that way.

BellaDonna. Mothers always feel that way.

Margaret. That's true!

BellaDonna. Especially with their sons.

Margaret. Oh. (nodding) Sons are special.

BellaDonna. Special.

Margaret. Special. You know what a son is like.

BellaDonna. Nudge, nudge. Wink, wink. They'll break a mother's heart.

Margaret. But they don't mean to. It's in their nature.

BellaDonna. It's the way men are. Now, a daughter...

Margaret. ...yes! – a daughter...

BellaDonna. She'll take care of you in your old age.

Margaret. And a daughter-in-law...

BellaDonna ...Yes?...

Margaret. Remember that man that used to come to the cafe? The one that lives across the street from us now.

BellaDonna The good-looking one?

Margaret. Well, he *used to be* good-looking.

BellaDonna: He's still pretty good-looking.

Margaret: He had everything: a pretty woman that adored him, a bright and beautiful daughter, youth and health. But it wasn't enough. He drank it all away. He'd sit up at the bar with a worm twisting in his eyes.

He always made me feel uneasy.

BellaDonna: Like he'd sprung a leak. I couldn't watch him.

Margaret: You can see it in the eyes.

BellaDonna: Your daughter-in-law has beautiful eyes.

Margaret: She does, doesn't she?

(Stasia enters downstage left in a nightgown and robe – in a different world. She stands still, with her hand on her belly, twisting her hair and looking out.)

BellaDonna: Maybe the baby'll have her eyes.

(Margaret claps a hand over her mouth with pleasure at the thought of it. Stasia claps a hand over her mouth at the same time, with a look of horror on her face. Margaret laughs. Stasia goes back to twisting her hair.)

Margaret. My son's eyes were wide open when he spilled out. He looked so serious. I can still remember him tightly wrapped in blankets – winding his head around from side to side to see the room.

BellaDonna: When's the baby due?

Margaret: In another month or so. But poor Stasia. She's so anxious.

She convinced herself it would happen early.

BellaDonna: The way some people make themselves unhappy!

Margaret. You have to be careful with expectations. You have to learn to let the sun shine and the wind blow.

BellaDonna: It's true. It's true.

Margaret: (cheerfully) She'll learn.

BellaDonna: So you're going to the market?

Margaret: They're all coming for dinner tomorrow.

BellaDonna: What are you making?

Margaret: I'll stuff some chickens and roast them till the flesh falls off the bones, and the dressing inside is pressed enough to slice. That's the way my daughter likes it.

BellaDonna. Your daughter!

Margaret. Yes, my daughter.

BellaDonna. A daughter is a blessing.

Margaret. They're easier to raise than boys.

BellaDonna. Oh you know what boys are like!

Margaret. But it's so good to be able to please the people you love so easily. A roasted chicken. A baked pear. What a wonderful thing love is.

BellaDonna: I hope your day's as good as your morning.

Margaret: Thank you. You're a good neighbour.

(Margaret exits. BellaDonna turns to the audience.)

BellaDonna. How can I tell her that I saw her daughter last night in a bar, laughing too loudly in the middle of men? Her mouth was a smear, and her eyes were crashing open like shutters in a wind.

(She bends in to whisper to the audience.)

And there's a rumour that her daughter-in-law's going mad with this pregnancy. Completely bonkers. That happens to some women. It's the hormones.

(And then gesturing offstage to the Margaret)

But if she insists on being happy, who am I to ruin it for her?

(End of scene)

Scene Five

(A large rough-hewn table. Margaret is trimming green beans as big as her forearms, and putting them into a pot. She wears an old soft white cotton apron trimmed with lace. She hums as she works. Outside, children can be heard playing, and there's a muted sound of birds, traffic, planes and occasional sirens.

BellaDonna is sitting in a metal outdoor rocking chair on her front porch downstage right; it would be great if it creaks. She waves at people going by, and speaks to them, as well as to the audience and Margaret – although Margaret and BellaDonna are in two different

spaces.)

BellaDonna. (speaking to a neighbour) Hello Theresa! It's a hot evening isn't it?

Margaret. I did some spring cleaning today. The time had come. All winter long the house needed it – and I wondered if I'd ever have the energy to do it all again.

Then I woke up this morning, and heard the chirruping birds. And my throat was full and my arms were strong, and I made a plan.

BellaDonna. Climate change. You think so? Why not?

We're doomed, anyway. The earth's full of garbage, the water's running out. All the people in charge are corrupt. Soon it's gonna get ugly. What can we do?

Margaret. So I swept and mopped the main rooms this afternoon. I kept the windows and doors open – and the cats ran in and out. They were delighted. Afterwards, I stood in the living room with my mop in my hand and just felt...grateful.

I feel like the summer has entered this little house. I love the gleam of a fresh mopped hardwood floor, the bicycle wheels whirring by my open windows, the sound of footsteps falling on the sidewalks.

BellaDonna. There's Mr. Nguyen.

Margaret. (correcting her pronunciation, without looking up from her task) Nguyen!

BellaDonna. Nu-yen. Such a gentle man! But you'd think he'd have learned how to put on a pair of shoes by now.

Margaret. ...if you haven't got anything nice to say...

(She drops a bean on the floor and leans down to get it, grunting with the effort. She looks at it and blows on it and puts it back in the pot.)

BellaDonna. I don't know what this neighborhood is coming to. The people across the street squat with scissors to cut their grass! They squat in the grass!

Margaret. Normal. Normal. Normal. It's a wonderful thing to be normal. And it's not as easy as it looks either. You have to work hard to get normal right. You have to pay attention to what's expected. You have to get up early and be patient when the going gets tough. You have to learn to smile when you're bored, and to keep working when you're tired. There's no room for whiners! You have to be hardy to be normal.

BellaDonna. There's that new Turkish couple. They love walking that baby together outside, but I bet *she* serves *him* hand and foot behind closed doors.

Those women are like slaves! I don't know why they put up with it.

Margaret. My husband, Stephen, was such a normal man! He had warm hands, a rough face, a big belly and good friends. He'd work hard all week and putter around the house on the weekends. He liked his toolbox.

BellaDonna. Men like toolboxes!

Margaret. He felt lucky to eat well and to sleep in when he got the chance.

(She pats a curl and smiles. Bella Donna shouts.)

BellaDonna. You boys! Get off the lawn!

Margaret. His dreams were simple. A home was all he wanted: some children, a hard-working woman like me. And he was so patient!

BellaDonna. I've never met a more impatient man.

Margaret. When the children had tantrums he picked them up and held them till it was over, with his face in blossom. He pitied them. He knew how hard it was to be human.

BellaDonna. My Joey learned to stay away from him. We used to pity those kids. He'd order them around. She'd stand on the stoop, beaming.

(Lights dim on BellaDonna as Cassie enters stealthily and sneaks up behind her mother and covers her eyes with her hands. Margaret immediately knows who it is.)

Margaret: What are you up to?

Cassie: How did you know it was me?

(Cassie claps her hands over her mother's ears.)

Hear no evil.

(Margaret keeps snapping beans. Cassie covers her eyes again.)

See no evil.

(Margaret keeps snapping beans and laughs.)

Margaret. I can't see.

(Cassie claps her hands over her mouth.)

Cassie. Speak no evil.

(Margaret licks Cassie's palms and Cassie drops them and laughs and wipes her hands on her mother's apron.)

Remember when I was little and I used to chase you around to lick you?

Margaret. (peacefully) Like a little dog.

Cassie. I'd lick your hands, and climb on your lap and lick your face.

Margaret. You always liked to torture me.

Cassie. It was so much fun.

Margaret. My sister and I used to do that to each other when we were little. We'd lick our hands and chase each other around the house screaming. I don't know why; it made us gag. I hated the thought of her saliva on me.

(Cassie takes a deep breath.)

Cassie. It smells so good in here.

Margaret. Good! I like the house to smell good when you come in.

Cassie. I could smell it outside! It smelled like home.

Margaret. Home is where the heart is!

Cassie. I used to lie in my bedroom and listen to you chopping onions or mushrooms and then I'd smell them frying them in butter...I loved that. Sometimes it was early morning...

Margaret. ...if it was a special day...

Cassie. ...and sometimes it was late afternoon. Maybe I'd fallen asleep for a while. Maybe I'd taken a nap in my room for a while. I'd wake up and listen. Listen!

(Pause. They hear children playing.)

You always had the radio on. Let's turn it on.

(Cassie turns the radio on. It's "Tom Jones" or something equally exaggerated. Cassie dances in an intentionally silly way. Then, she wraps her arms tightly around her mother and holds on while Margaret works.)

Let's start again. I want to be your baby again.

Margaret: You! I couldn't do it again!

You were such a funny, strange little baby. So intense. You screamed and laughed and cried and roared. Your tantrums were so huge, people knocked on our doors for an explanation. I used to have to leave the room to laugh.

(Margaret disentangles herself, wipes her hands on her apron, and turns off the radio. She continues to do tasks while she talks to Cassie. Sometimes Cassie remembers to help.)

Cassie. To laugh?

Margaret. I felt sorry for you, but the expression on your face was so intense, it made me laugh. I don't know why.

(Margaret stops and looks at Cassie. Cassie looks away.)

What's the matter?

Cassie. Nothing.

I think I just don't like being grown up.

Margaret. (laughs) You'll get used to it.

Cassie. I can't do it right.

Margaret. Can't do what right?

(- but Cassie's thinking -)

You haven't changed. When you were a child I never knew anyone so sensitive. I remember when you saw a picture of a starving child at the museum. None of the other children paid any attention to it. They ran around looking for the dinosaurs. I found you standing in front of it; paralyzed with horror. "What's the matter with that little boy?" you asked me.

You were so sweet.

Cassie. I can't work it out. I'm a rabid, compulsive flirt. But it's not good. It's a strange, hungry thrill. It doesn't land. It doesn't settle anywhere.

It's feels ecstatic. But I hate it. I hate what I do. I hate how strangely obedient I get.

Margaret. Then don't do it.

Cassie. It feels good, but it doesn't feel good.

Margaret. I don't know. I never gave myself away like that. When I married your father I was there beside him. When he kissed me, something inside me sprang back.

Cassie. Any time *anybody* flirts with me, I collapse. I'm amazed.

Margaret. You're a beautiful girl.

Cassie. Even women. Last night this beautiful woman was flirting with me, and I couldn't believe it!

She had a head full of dark curls and these large hands.

(Margaret turns and faces Cassie.)

Margaret. Listen to me. I think I know what's going on.

Set down some rules and stick to them.

Cassie. I couldn't believe she wanted me. She was so attractive.

Margaret. You have to be careful with men.

Cassie. But she was a woman. It was so exciting to be giving that power to a woman!

Margaret. Believe me! I went on a date with a man who had the wrong idea about me when I was your age.

Cassie. You were married by my age.

Margaret. (impatient with the distinction) *Around* your age.

We went to a movie. In the darkness I felt his hand like a clamp on my thigh. I stood up and slapped his face.

Cassie: You slapped his face!?!

Margaret. You bet.

Cassie. Right there in the theatre?

Margaret. Right there in the theatre.

Cassie. I can't imagine slapping somebody's face.

Margaret. It was over in no time.

Cassie. What did he say? What did he do?

Margaret. He apologized.

Cassie. I wanna slap a man's face.

Margaret. That's not the point.

Cassie. I wanna *bite* someone!

Margaret. Cassie!

Cassie. I'm angry. I feel so angry! But I don't know why.

I think I've been giving too much away. But then I think: it's the giving that's beautiful, isn't it?

Margaret. It's the *give and take* that's beautiful. Don't forget that.

(Enter Christian downstage, carrying a bouquet of huge oversized flowers. He speaks the first line out to the audience, as if he isn't in the room and directly addressing his sister.)

Christian. How's my favourite sister?

Cassie. Grinding my teeth.

(Cassie sees Christian standing downstage, and sneaks up and pinches his bottom.)

Christian. Ow!

Margaret. Cassie!

Christian. Ow!

Margaret. Leave your brother alone! Give me those beautiful flowers.

You're such a perfect son!

Christian. You're a perfect mother.

Cassie. Perfect. Perfect. Perfect. It's all so perfect.

Margaret. And so it is. Cassie! - Behave yourself.

(Margaret takes the flowers and exits. Christian looks at Cassie, and starts to back away.)

Christian. Give it up!

Cassie. You give it up!

Christian. Back off!

(But Cassie pursues him, and they rough-house. The wrestling gets as intense as dogs fighting, but they try to keep the noise down.)

Cassie. Mr. Perfect.

Christian. Lost Cause.

Cassie. Candy Apple.

Christian. Cheap Trick.

Cassie. *Don't* you call me Cheap Trick!

(Her determination intensifies and they continue wrestling. They pause in intimate poses, panting. The Happy Woman re-enters, with the giant flowers in a vase. She holds the flowers in front of her, and ignores the rough-housing.)

Margaret. Look!

Cassie. Get off!

(- but she holds him)

Margaret. Aren't they beautiful?

Don't you two break anything.

Christian. Let go!

(- but he doesn't. The Happy Woman puts the flowers on the table, and fusses over the arrangement. She speaks, without looking at Cassie or Christian, who are still grunting and struggling.)

Margaret. Where's Stasia?

(On that note the wrestling slows down and stops. Stasia appears upstage with the sound of children playing on the street – as if she's listening and preparing for an entrance – which she is – but outside, on the street. Cassie and Christian pause for a moment, entangled in one another, and then slowly begin standing up.)

Where's Stasia?

Christian. She isn't feeling well.

(He's brushing his clothes off now. Cassie makes a deprecating sound.)

What?

Cassie. Nothing.

Christian. Say it.

Cassie. My lips are sealed.

Christian. She isn't feeling well. She sends her love.

(Cassie makes a noise. Stasia hears her this time. The sound of children playing. They're like tropical birds.)

What?

Cassie. I didn't say anything.

I shouldn't say anything.

Margaret. No, you shouldn't.

Christian. What?

Margaret. (to Cassie) If you haven't got something nice to say, don't say it at all.

(Pause. Christian looks from his mother to his sister.)

Christian. Just say it.

Cassie. OK.

Margaret. No.

Cassie. OK. I'm not surprised "your wife" didn't come. Everybody knows that Stasia's a totally paranoid hypochondriac.

(Stasia hears her comment.)

Margaret. *I don't!*

Cassie. It's true. She's a mad cow! – and she's got you by the "short and curlies".

Margaret. Cassie!

Christian. (with dignity) I think it's a little more complicated than that.

(Cassie shrugs.)

Margaret. It's not easy to be pregnant. Different people react differently.

Cassie, apologize.

Cassie. I just think that he deserves better.

Christian. I love her.

Margaret. That's what counts!

(Stasia practices her entrance directly to the audience, as if she's trying something out in front of a mirror.)

Stasia. Hi. (She clears her throat.) I decided to come after all.

Cassie. If I was gonna have a baby I'd be laughing, and spending all day thinking up names to drive you crazy with.

Stasia. (apologetically) I didn't feel like being alone - as it turned out.

Christian: You *can't* have my baby.

Margaret. I'm sure Cassie wouldn't want to!

Stasia. (Looking at her belly.) I guess there's a way I'm not really alone!

(This thought is not a comfort to her.)

Margaret. Is that someone at the door?

Stasia. (to the audience.) Hi. I'm feeling better, so I came.

I hope it's OK.

(She tilts her head. Smiles. End of scene.)

Scene Eight

(Margaret is onstage, alone. The sound of the kind of birdsong you hear very early in the morning, just as the sun is coming up.)

Margaret. The mind is so strange. It repeats things over and over. Like finding your tongue back on that sore spot again.

I wake up, and in my mind, it's that mid-summer morning again. Soft and warm. I'm opening the kitchen window, and there's a lovely cardinal outside – as big as a crow.

Such a pretty song! (She stops and listens: a cardinal chirrup.)

That day, Stephen was upstairs having a bath, as usual. He liked to take a bath first thing, and he liked a bath, not a shower. I'd run the water for him and go down and make us breakfast.

I love that sense that someone you love is in the house. I could hear him turning. The water slapping up against the side of the tub. Stephen.

And then...sound stopped.

And nothing. I don't think I even noticed at first.

But after a while, I *did* notice that he hadn't come down, and I didn't hear him moving around upstairs. The house was silent.

I thought, "what's he doing up there?" And I waited. I feel badly now, that I waited.

And the house *did have* a strange stillness. I could sense that. But I didn't like disturbing him in his bath. Stephen had rules. That was one of them. He got annoyed.

I could understand his feelings.

But finally, I had to check on him. In reality I don't think I waited that long. I wish I hadn't waited at all, but I just kept making up reasons for the silence. Maybe he was in the bedroom, and I'd never noticed how quiet that can be. Maybe he was shaving...but without water?

I walked up the stairs and my heart was pounding in my mouth. I called his name. Nothing. Then, I pushed open the bathroom door and there he was...still in the tub. And he was gone.

His eyes were fixed. Staring. It was Stephen, but it wasn't.

And in a strange and horrible way, the whole thing reminded me of this portrait of Marat's murder I saw once in an art book in elementary school. I got strangely obsessed with it. Fascinated. Guilty about how I felt. I was about nine years old. I'd sneak into the library and get it down from the shelf and open it up and stare at it. A body in a bathtub. The blue-white skin.

It was an aneurism, the doctor said. Nothing we could do. What will be, will be.

I mean "death"! You have to laugh.

I like the old myths - the idea of crossing a river and you can't get back. I don't think this is it. I think there must be another world somewhere – and here, in this form, we forget about that other world on the other side.

I talk to Stephen all the time. He's a comfort to me. He wasn't an easy man, but he was a good man. I say to Cassie: he didn't beat me, he didn't drink, he didn't sleep around –

He had his demons.

He had a temper. Things overwhelmed him. Sometimes he came home from work, and he needed to vent. *Now* I realize the kids were scared – but I didn't realize it at the time.

I wasn't scared.

He and Cassie fought when she got older. Oh, they fought. I tried to convince him that she was just being a teenager – but he couldn't understand how she could talk back and say the things she said to him. He thought it was a sign of disrespect. Especially from a daughter.

He wanted her to be quiet and listen. But Cassie needs to talk. Cassie has opinions.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Who is the happy woman?
2. *The Happy Woman* explores the theme of "the nature of happiness". Cassie can't be happy unless she is able to speak openly about her experiences. How important is openness in intimate relationships? Are you sympathetic to Cassie's quest?
3. Another theme that emerges in this play concerns "knowing vs. not-knowing". During the picnic on her father's death-day Cassie accuses Christian and Margaret of lying about the past. How does Margaret manage to evade truths that disturb her? What strategies does Christian employ? Compare and contrast Margaret and Christian's relationship to "truth-telling"?
4. Near the end of the play Margaret wakes up from a bad dream and is forced to know something she doesn't want to know. What does Margaret "know" by the end of the play?
5. Why is Cassie a performance artist? How does this make sense in the context of her life?
6. When Cassie and Christian finally talk openly about their dynamic, Cassie accuses Christian of blaming her for what happened between them. Does he? Why does she feel this way? How does this encounter explore the theme of gender and sexuality?
7. Cassie comments to Margaret that Stasia's experience of madness has a certain logic to it? What might she mean by this? How does Stasia's obsession about having a monster mirror the secrets in the house?
8. Stasia is "haunted" by Margaret's dead husband, Stephen. At one point in the play she asks him, "What do you want?" What might Stephen want?
9. Trace the apocalyptic imagery. How does the specter of the apocalypse relate to the theme of knowing vs. not-knowing in the play? How does it inform the theme of "the nature of happiness"? Are there some things that are better not to know? How are all of us like "the happy woman"?
10. In the age of the internet and reality TV do cultural taboos still exist? How easy is it to discuss phenomena like mental illness and incest? How should society broach these topics?
11. Why doesn't BellaDonna tell Margaret what she knows?
12. Is Margaret still happy at the end of the play?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- 1. Reading and discussion activity:** What is the meaning of the quotation that appears at the beginning of the published script?
- 2. Creative writing project:** Playwright Rose Cullis reveals that the beginning, middle and end of her play have been with her a long time and that much of her process has been filling in those gaps. Try writing a short story or play in just three scenes, a beginning, middle and end. What is the essence of what you are trying to share with your readers? What is useful to include and what can be left out?
- 3. Discussion Activity:** After reading the section “Happiness: Explored,” discuss in small groups if the pursuit of happiness is a worthwhile one. Is there a particular age group, status or gender which is afflicted with this pursuit more than others? Try making a list of songs, poems or novels that deal with happiness.
- 4. Discussion Activity:** After reading the section “Truth and Lies: Explored,” discuss in small groups the importance of truth telling in society today. Is it ever OK to tell lies? Is lying to ourselves different then lying to others? What sort of consequences could we be at risk of experiencing if we blindly seek the truth?
- 5. Be a Critic:** After seeing the production, collect reviews that appear in the papers. Do the critics agree with one another or does their opinion differ? In what ways are their comments helpful and for whom are they helpful. What did they like and not like? What qualities must someone possess to be a critic? Write your own review of the play. An excellent guide to writing a review can be found on the Theatre Ontario website
http://theatreontario.org/content/play_reviews.htm

RESOURCES AND LINKS

Guide to Writing a Theatre Review

http://theatreontario.org/content/play_reviews.htm

The Futile Pursuit of Happiness by Jon Gertner

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/07/magazine/the-futile-pursuit-of-happiness.html>

The Truth About Lying

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/199705/the-truth-about-lying>

The Blood of Others by Simone De Beauvoir, Penguin Books, 1964.

Nightwood Theatre website

www.nightwoodtheatre.net