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STUMBLING ON HAPPINESS

DANIEL GILBERT

*Stumbling
on Happiness*

DANIEL GILBERT



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For Oli, under the apple tree

One cannot divine nor forecast the conditions that will make happiness; one only stumbles upon them by chance, in a lucky hour, at the world's end somewhere, and holds fast to the days, as to fortune or fame.

Willa Cather, "Le Lavandou," 1902

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS IS THE PART OF THE BOOK in which the author typically claims that nobody writes a book by himself and then names all the people who presumably wrote the book for him. It must be nice to have friends like that. Alas, all the people who wrote this book are me, so let me instead thank those who by their gifts enabled me to write a book without them.

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Now let's go stumbling.

July 18, 2005
Cambridge, Massachusetts

FOREWORD

How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is

To have a thankless child.

Shakespeare, *King Lear*

WHAT WOULD YOU DO right now if you learned that you were going to die in ten minutes? Would you race upstairs and light that Marlboro you've been hiding in your sock drawer since the Ford administration? Would you waltz into your boss's office and present him with a detailed description of his personal defects? Would you drive out to that steakhouse near the new mall and order a T-bone, medium rare, with an extra side of the really *bad* cholesterol? Hard to say, of course, but of all the things you might do in your final ten minutes, it's a pretty safe bet that few of them are things you actually did today.

Now, some people will bemoan this fact, wag their fingers in your direction, and tell you sternly that you should live every minute of your life as though it were your last, which only goes to show that some people would spend their final ten minutes giving other people dumb advice. The things we do when we expect our lives to continue are naturally and properly different than the things we might do if we expected them to end abruptly. We go easy on the lard and tobacco, smile dutifully at yet another of our supervisor's witless jokes, read books like this one when we could be wearing paper hats and eating pistachio macarons in the bathtub, and we do each of these things in the charitable service of the people we will soon become. We treat our future selves as though they were our children, spending most of the hours of most of our days constructing tomorrows that we hope will make them happy. Rather than indulging in whatever strikes