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THE SUN WILL COME UP TOMORROW

Marcia DeSanctis learns to feel gratitude for the little things

One day in January, the sun appeared. It's not so unusual in the rural corner of New England that I call home, where there are an average of 196 sunny days a year. Except that this winter we have endured months of snow and sub-zero temperatures. So sun was a big deal. There was happiness in the valley, and for a moment, in me. Then the all-too-familiar crept back: the feeling that the permafrost seems to have sapped my sanity and ability to accomplish one meaningful thing. And what I really need is a jaunt to the Maldives or a carpenter to fix my roof.

How difficult it is to find enduring solace in a moment of happiness, and try to focus on what there is – heat, blankets, healthy children, a fridge groaning with food and a sun in the heavens – rather than what is lacking. From that morning of bliss, I reverted to being an ungrateful wretch.

Happiness seems to be fleeing by nature. Perhaps 'we' are to blame – writers like me who effuse on how you can't live without those groovy cork platforms, or how toned thighs will improve your life. From fairy tales to advertising, the message is often that change – and the acquisition of stuff – will bring happiness in its wake. But they don't.

"Nowhere in history has anyone been better off if they change their hair colour or have more money," says Dr Catherine Birndorf, a psychiatrist and co-author of *The Nine Rooms Of Happiness* (Voice, £15.43). "We all know that if you hit the jackpot, it won't really change you. You may be happy for a moment, and worry less because you can pay your bills. Or buy a weekend home. But there's nothing sustainable about it."

There are plenty of terms for this syndrome. The writer Tal Ben-Shahar calls it the 'arrival fallacy'. I'll be happy *when*. Fill in the blank: I get married, have a baby, get that job, quit that job. Lose the weight. Get to Barcelona. Get my nose fixed. My roof fixed. But ultimately, none of these external goals will permanently change a thing. Researchers call it the 'hedonic treadmill' – the phenomenon that once you've got used to the next level of money or status or achievement, you reach a new norm, which, too, becomes unsatisfying. So while your baseline gets upped, so does your desire for more. And true happiness? Forget it.

"All of us at times believe that there is some happiness destination to reach, but it's to our own detriment," says Birndorf. "Sure,

you can live in this fantasyland, but you'll be wasting a lot of time. You're not on this earth all that long." The key, she says, is to be aware of what we tend to fail to acknowledge – a great meal, a bunch of violets, a flash of sunshine. Yes, we should still have goals and even ambition, and work hard and save up for a coveted chandelier or Caribbean cruise. But there's a lot to be gained from recognising those exquisite moments, and appreciating that you have a roof at all.

"There's strong evidence that people who are grateful, or who are trained to be more grateful, are happier," says Gretchen Rubin, author of the bestseller *The Happiness Project* (HarperCollins, £12.99). Recently my friend, writer Abigail Pogrebin, convinced me to start a gratitude journal. "At the end of every day now, I think about what's gone right," she says. "It makes me realise that, tomorrow, there will also be something to be grateful for too. And that

was a revelation." So I tried to notice those fleeting events. Hearing a favourite song, drinking good wine, watching my daughter score in a basketball game – these moments now deserved recognition. The first day, I wrote simply, "I built a fire. I'm grateful that I have a fireplace in my house."

Frankly, it felt a little soppy. But these moments will accumulate, adding up to a life that isn't half bad. To focus on what I have rather than what is missing seems to sweep in that other indicator of happiness: hope.

We practise futility when we defer happiness to change and the acquisition of things. Living in the moment is all we really have. So for now, I try to close that book each night knowing that no matter what tomorrow brings, there will be a bright spot to acknowledge. I also know the sun will come up. That alone is something to celebrate. →

"Living in the moment is really all we have"

