

sure. So why doesn't silence speak, why doesn't it speak? The mere thought made him choke on his bread. And from that moment on, he never uttered a word. He lived in fear of the violation of that collapse. This time the silence was different, respected by all. A conscious silence, not caused by poverty, nor patience, nor despair, but the most profound kind of silence, the most binding of all, a silence implemented without formal agreement. The widow and her three daughters, and the house which was a room. This was a new kind of silence. The blind reciter brought along this silence, with silence convincing himself that his companion in bed was always his legitimate wife, bearer of his ring, ever changing, unpredictable. Young and old, silken soft or callous and scaly, sometimes fat, at other times thin, whatever, this really was her business. Actually, all this was the business of those with sight and their sole responsibility.

For *they* alone possess the grace of certainty; *they* are capable of discernment; but the most *he* can know is doubt, doubt that can be removed only through the blessing of sight. So long as he is deprived of it, he will be denied certainty, for he is the one who is blind and there is no shame for the blind. 33

Or is there shame for the blind? 34

Translated from the Arabic by Mona Mikhail

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the situation of the widow and her daughters at the beginning of the story?
2. How does the blind *muqri* alter the balance of the household?
3. What accounts for the sexual deviation? Who must be held morally responsible? What is the meaning of the final sentence, "Or is there shame for the blind?"
4. In what ways does this story resemble a fairy tale or parable?



NAGUIB MAHFOUZ

Naguib Mahfouz is the Arab world's most prolific and famous novelist. His work has been translated into numerous foreign languages, and in 1988 he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Born in Cairo in 1911, Mahfouz has spent his entire life in Egypt. He graduated from Cairo University with a degree in philosophy, then worked as a civil servant for most of his career. Mahfouz is

an avid reader, and his work has been influenced by literary developments in Europe and North America, though it is uniquely Egyptian and highly original. In style it ranges from realism to experiments with allegory and stream of consciousness. Most of Mahfouz's writing focuses on the condition and state of mind of the Egyptian middle classes and reflects their conformity and disinclination to challenge authority. More recently, it documents the crisis of identity and conscience suffered by Egyptian intellectuals during periods of social turmoil and political dissatisfaction. Mahfouz's best-known work is Cairo Trilogy (1956–1957), which portrays the experiences of three generations of a Cairo merchant family during the turbulent first half of the twentieth century. It is a remarkable study of the social, political, and religious life of Egyptians during a period of rapid political and cultural change. He has also written numerous short stories which are frequently concerned—as is "The Happy Man"—with philosophic questions about what it means to be human.

The Happy Man

When he woke up, he found himself happy. That was most strange 1
compared with his habitual state of mind in the early morning. For he usually got up with a terrible headache from working late hours in his office at the newspaper, or with a hangover from too much eating and drinking at some wild party. The worries of the day before and the problems of the present day usually assailed him then, so that he dragged himself out of bed with great difficulty, trying to muster all his energy and face the troubles of life. But today he was unquestionably happy, overflowing with happiness. The feeling was so clear and intense that it imposed itself on his mind and senses. Yes, he was happy. If this was not happiness, what was it then? He felt all his organs were functioning in perfect harmony with each other and with the whole world around him. Inside him there was infinite energy and a tremendous capacity to achieve anything with great skill and confidence. And his heart was brimming with love for people, animals and things, with an overwhelming feeling of optimism, as if he had finally defeated fear, anxiety, sickness and death. Above all, there was the incomprehensible sensation which penetrated his body and soul, playing a delightful tune of joy, contentment and peace.

Intoxicated with this ecstasy, he savored it slowly and with a deep sense 2
of wonder about its mysterious source. There was nothing in his past to explain it or in his future to justify it. How did it come? How long would it last? Oh no, this must be just a fleeting mood which could never be permanent. For if it lasted forever, man would become an angel and reach the world beyond. Let him enjoy it now, live with it, treasure it, before it became a vague memory in the distant horizon.

He ate his breakfast with great appetite, looking from time to time with a bright, smiling face at Am Beshir who was serving the food. The old man became increasingly surprised and anxious, because his master did not normally look in his direction except to give orders or ask questions. Then he said to him:

"Tell me, Am Beshir, am I a happy man?"

The man was embarrassed, since the master was for the first time addressing him as a companion or friend. After moments of uneasy silence, he replied:

"My master is happy with God's gifts and blessings."

"Do you mean that I must be happy with my excellent position, beautiful apartment and good health? Is this what you mean? But do you really think I am a happy man?"

"My master exerts himself beyond human endurance and often gets angry in heated discussions with other people."

He interrupted him with a loud laugh and asked:

"What about you? Don't you have any worries?"

"Of course. Nobody lives without worries."

"Do you mean that perfect happiness is impossible?"

"Well, this is the nature of life."

How could Beshir, or anybody else, imagine his wonderful state of happiness? It was something strange and unique, as if it were his own private secret of all people on earth.

In the conference room at the newspaper, he saw his greatest rival in this world turning the pages of a magazine. The man heard his footsteps but did not raise his eyes. No doubt he somehow glanced quickly but tried to ignore him for his own peace of mind. In regular meetings they often disagreed violently and exchanged the harshest words until they were on the verge of fighting. And only last week he was shamefully defeated by his rival in the union elections, which was a terrible blow to his pride that filled him with bitterness and darkened his vision. But here he was now approaching his enemy with a pure and carefree heart, intoxicated with that wonderful happiness, overflowing with tolerance and forgiveness, as if he were another man who conveyed the promise of a new friendship. And without feeling awkward, he smilingly greeted him. Taken by surprise, the man raised his eyes in wonder and for moments remained silent until he could collect himself and answer the greeting briefly, as if he did not believe his eyes and ears. He sat close to him, saying:

"The weather is gorgeous today."

"Oh yes."

"It's the kind of weather that fills the heart with deep happiness."

The man looked at him cautiously and intently, then mumbled:

"I am glad that you're happy."

He said laughingly:

"It's happiness beyond comprehension."

The other replied hesitantly: 23
 "I hope that I will not spoil your mood at the meeting of the editorial board today." 24
 "Oh, never. My opinion is well known to everybody. But I don't mind if the members accept your view. This will not spoil my happiness at all." 25
 "You have changed considerably overnight." 26
 "In fact, I am happy beyond comprehension." 27
 "I bet your son has changed his mind about staying in Canada for good." 28
 He chuckled and said: 29
 "No, my friend, he has not changed his decision." 30
 "But that was your greatest source of grief." 31
 "Oh, yes. I have pleaded with him again and again to come back in order to relieve my loneliness and serve his country. But he told me that he intended to start an engineering business with a Canadian partner, and even invited me to join him there. Let him live where he likes. But here I am—as you see—happy, unbelievably happy." 32
 "This is unique courage on your part." 33
 "I don't know what it is, but I am happy in the full sense of the word." 34
 Yes, this was happiness, rich and touchable, firm like absolute power, free as the air, violent as a flame, fascinating as the scent of flowers. Yet this unnatural feeling could not last forever. 35
 The other man, attracted by his friendliness, said amicably: 36
 "In fact, I always regarded you as a man with a violent nature that caused you a good deal of suffering." 37
 "Really?" 38
 "You don't know the meaning of compromise. You live intensely with your nerves, with your whole being, fighting fiercely as if any problem were a matter of life or death." 39
 "Yes, that's true." 40
 He accepted this criticism tolerantly, as though it were a little wave in his infinite ocean of happiness, and with a bright smile on his face, asked: 41
 "Then, you believe that there should be some balance in my approach to events?" 42
 "Certainly. Take, for example, our discussion yesterday about racism. We share the same opinion, and the issue is worthy of enthusiasm to the point of anger. But what kind of anger? It should, in a sense, be intellectual, abstract anger. Not the anger that would fray the nerves, cause indigestion and raise blood pressure. Right?" 43
 "That is very clear to me now." 44
 His heart would not release a single drop of its joys. Racism, Vietnam, Angola, Palestine . . . no problem could invade the fortress of happiness which surrounded his heart. Whenever he remembered a problem, his heart chuckled joyfully. It was, so to speak, a gigantic happiness, indiffer- 45

ent to any misery, always smiling in the face of suffering. He wished to laugh, to dance, to sing, spreading his infinite mirth over problems of the world.

Suddenly he felt that the office was too small for him; he had no desire to work. The mere thought of his daily work was treated with absolute indifference and contempt, and he failed completely to bring his mind down from the heaven of bliss. How could he write about the trolley bus which sank in the Nile, when he was intoxicated with all this terrifying happiness? Yes, it was terrifying, coming as it did from nowhere, violent to the point of exhaustion and paralyzing his will. Besides, it was now midday and the feeling still possessed him without any sign of diminishing at all. He left his papers blank on the desk and started pacing his room, laughing and snapping his fingers. 46

He had a moment of anxiety which did not sink deeply inside him, but floated as an abstract thought on the surface of the mind. It occurred to him to recall deliberately the tragedies of his life in order to test their effect on his present mood, hoping they might help him regain some equanimity or at least reassure him that this happiness might eventually fade away. He recreated in his memory, for example, the death of his wife with all its tragic circumstances. But the event seemed to him as a series of movements without meaning or effect, as if it happened to another woman, the wife of another man, in a remote age of ancient history. The recollection even had a pleasant effect on him so that he smiled and could not help laughing loudly. 47

The same thing happened when he remembered the first letter he received from his son, declaring his intention to emigrate to Canada. And when he started to review mentally the bloody tragedies of the world, his chuckles became so loud they might have been heard in the other offices or even in the street. Nothing could touch his happiness. The memories of grief floated softly like gentle waves touching the sands of the shore. Then he left his office and the whole building, without a note of apology for not attending the editorial meeting. After lunch, he went to bed for the usual nap, but felt that sleep was impossible. There was no sign of its approach in this bright, boisterous world of joy that kept him wide awake. He must have some rest and tranquillity, some inertia, some numbness in his senses. But how? Finally he left his bed and started humming a tune while pacing his apartment back and forth. And he said to himself that if this state of mind and feeling lasted longer, he would become totally incapable of sleep or work or grief. It was time to go to the club, but he did not feel like meeting any of his friends. There was no sense in these endless talks about public affairs or private worries. And what would his friends think of him if they found him laughing at the most serious matters? No, he did not need anybody; he had no desire for conversation. It was essential for him to sit by himself or walk for miles to release some of this tremendous energy. He must think deeply of what happened to him. How did this 48

fabulous happiness assault him? For how long could he carry this intolerable burden? Will this feeling deprive him forever of his work and friends, of his sleep and peace of mind? Should he yield to it and drift with the current? Or should he seek an outlet, through mental effort, strenuous work or professional advice?

He felt a little awkward when he was called to the examination room in the office of his friend, the eminent doctor. The physician looked at him smilingly and said:

"You don't seem to have any sickness." 50

"I didn't come to you because I am ill but because I am happy. Yes, I am extremely happy," he replied hesitantly. 51

There was a moment of silence charged with anxiety and surprise. 52

"It's a very strange sensation which I cannot define in words. But it's quite serious." 53

The doctor laughed and said jokingly: 54

"I wish your disease would be infectious." 55

"Oh, don't take the matter lightly. As I told you, it's very serious." 56

Then he started to tell the story of his happiness from the moment he got up in the morning until this visit for advice. 57

"Did you take any liquor or drugs or tranquilizers?" 58

"No, nothing of this sort at all." 59

"Maybe you have achieved something valuable in terms of work, love or money?" 60

"No, nothing of this sort either. Actually, in my life there is much more cause for sadness than happiness." 61

The doctor examined him very carefully, then said, shrugging his shoulders in wonder: 62

"You are in perfect health. I can give you some sleeping pills, but you must consult a neurologist." 63

The same thorough examination was carried out by the other specialist, who then said to him: 64

"Your nerves are in perfect shape." 65

"Don't you have any convincing explanation for my condition?" 66

"I'm sorry, there is absolutely nothing wrong with your nerves." 67

Whenever he heard the same reply from other specialists, he laughed, then apologized laughingly for his laughter, as if that was his way to express anxiety and despair. He felt very lonely in the company of this overwhelming happiness, without a friend or guide to help him. Suddenly he remembered there was the office of a psychiatrist across the street. But he did not trust these psychiatrists, in spite of his knowledge of the nature of psychoanalysis. Besides, he knew quite well that their treatment extended over long periods of time, so that they became almost constant companions of their patients. And he laughed when he remembered their 68

method of treatment by free association to reveal the neuroses buried in the subconscious mind. While his feet were leading him to the doctor's office, he was still laughing, especially as he visualized the man listening to his strange complaint of happiness, when he usually listened to people complaining of hysteria, depression, anxiety or schizophrenia.

"To tell you the truth, doctor, I came to you because I am happy beyond comprehension."

And he looked at his face to see the effect of his words, but the doctor kept his calm. Hardly had he started to tell his story when the man stopped him with a gesture of his hand, and asked quietly:

"It is an overwhelming, strange, exhausting sort of happiness?"

He looked at him in amazement and was about to say something when the doctor resumed:

"It's happiness that would make you incapable of work, tired of friends and unable to sleep. And whenever you face any suffering you burst out laughing."

"You must be a mind reader."

"Oh no, nothing of this sort, but I see similar cases at least once a week."

"Is it an epidemic?"

"I didn't say that. I don't even claim that I have been able, so far, to trace a single case to its original cause."

"But it's a disease?"

"All the cases are still under treatment."

"But you are undoubtedly convinced they are all abnormal?"

"Well, in our field this is a necessary hypothesis."

"Did you observe a sign of insanity or emotional disturbance in any of them?" he asked anxiously. And he pointed to his head in fear, but the doctor said with certainty:

"No. I assure you they are all sane in the proper sense of the word. But you will need two sessions every week. You shouldn't worry or grieve . . ."

Worry, grief? He smiled and the smile widened on his face until he burst out laughing. Then his resistance collapsed completely and he could not control his tears.

Translated from the Arabic by Saad El-Gabalawy

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the main character's condition when he wakes up? What is unusual about his experience?
2. What happens when the main character goes to work? How does his

frame of mind differ from his normal disposition? How does he test his experience? What does he learn from the physician, neurologist, and psychiatrist?

3. What is the meaning of the end of the story? What philosophical issues does the story raise about human experience?
4. Why is the main character unnamed? Is the allegorical style appropriate? Why or why not?



ALIFA RIFAAT

Alifa Rifaat (b. 1930) is considered an important new voice in Egyptian literature. She is in her early sixties and lives in Cairo with her family. The widow of a police officer, she spent most of her married life in the Egyptian countryside, an experience that provides the basis for much of her writing. To date, she has published two collections of stories in Arabic and a selection of her work has appeared in English under the title Distant View of a Minaret (1983). Her stories have been included in several recent anthologies. "Another Evening at the Club" explores male/female relations in a modern postcolonial setting.

Another Evening at the Club

In a state of tension, she awaited the return of her husband. At a loss to predict what would happen between them, she moved herself back and forth in the rocking chair on the wide wooden verandah that ran along the bank and occupied part of the river itself, its supports being fixed in the river bed, while around it grew grasses and reeds. As though to banish her apprehension, she passed her fingers across her hair. The spectres of the eucalyptus trees ranged along the garden fence rocked before her gaze, with white egrets slumbering on their high branches like huge white flowers among the thin leaves.

The crescent moon rose from behind the eastern mountains and the peaks of the gently stirring waves glistened in its feeble rays, intermingled with threads of light leaking from the houses of Manfalout scattered along the opposite bank. The coloured bulbs fixed to the trees in the garden of the club at the far end of the town stood out against the surrounding darkness. Somewhere over there her husband now sat, most likely engrossed in a game of chess.

It was only a few years ago that she had first laid eyes on him at her