



Are You Happy?: A Childhood Remembered

Emily Fox Gordon

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An elegant dissection of how youthful happiness is lost, by a memoirist of great style and insight.

"The happiness of childhood is existential, not psychological," writes Emily Fox Gordon. *Are You Happy?* is an evocation of a peculiar and paradoxical kind of happiness-the happiness of an unhappy child. Gordon was a fatty, an academic failure, a schoolyard pariah, a disappointment to her highly educated parents. And yet her early life was, as she puts it, "a succession of moments of radiant apprehension." In a later age she might have been medicated and counseled and ferried from one appointment to another. But growing up in the college town of Williamstown, Massachusetts, in the fifties, she spent her days rambling through woods and meadows, rattling around in the basements of college buildings and dropping in on student acquaintances via the fire escapes of dormitories. She was free to be alone with her thoughts, to mumble observations and descriptions as she cultivated the writer's lifelong habit of translating experience into words.

In the hands of this exceptional stylist and rigorous, elegant thinker, we understand how happiness can be recaptured through telling the story of its loss. As Gordon grew older, she began to be aware of her charming mother's long, slow withdrawal into alcoholic depression. This was a new kind of observation, made from the outside. Having learned to assume this perspective, Gordon began to see happiness as something outside herself, something she could appropriate from the world and make her own. In *Are You Happy?* Gordon recounts how her childish view the world was lost, and of how that loss ended her childhood.

Depicted here is the evolution of a wise and perceptive child's self-awareness-and as such, it is an exemplar of the examined life.

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