

# The Happiness Machine, Ray Bradbury

## The Happiness Machine

On Sunday morning Leo Auffmann moved slowly through his garage, expecting some wood, a curl of wire, a hammer or wrench to leap up crying. 'Start here!' But nothing leaped, nothing cried for a beginning.

Should a Happiness Machine, he wondered, be something you can carry in your pocket?

Or, he went on, should it be something that carries you in its pocket?

'One thing I absolutely know,' he said aloud. 'It should be bright!'

He set a can of orange paint in the center of the workbench, picked up a dictionary, and wandered into the house.

'Lena?' He glanced at the dictionary. 'Are you "pleased, contented, joyful, delighted"? Do you feel "lucky, fortunate"? Are things "clever and fitting," "successful and suitable" for you?'

Lena stopped slicing vegetables and closed her eyes. 'Read me the list again, please,' she said.

He shut the book.

'What have I done, you got to stop and think an hour before you can tell me? All I ask is a simple yes or no! You're not contented, delighted, joyful?'

'Cows are 'contented,' babies and old people in second childhood are "delighted." God help them,' she said. 'As for "joyful," Leo? Look how I laugh scrubbing out the sink...'

He peered closely at her and his face relaxed. 'Lena, it's true. A man doesn't appreciate. Next month, maybe, we'll get away.'

'I'm not complaining!' she cried. 'I'm not the one comes in with a list saying. "Stick out your tongue," Leo, do you ask what makes your heart beat all night? No! Next will you ask, "What's marriage?" Who knows, Leo? Don't ask. A man who thinks like that, how it runs, how things work, falls off the trapeze in the circus, chokes wondering how the muscles work in the throat. Eat, sleep, breathe, Leo, and stop staring at me like I'm something new in the house!'

Lena Auffmann froze. She sniffed the air.  
'Oh, my God, look what you done!'

She yanked the oven door open. A great cloud of smoke poured through the kitchen.

'Happiness!' she wailed. 'And for the first time in six months we have a fight! Happiness, and for the first time in twenty years it's not bread, it's charcoal for supper!'

When the smoke cleared, Leo Auffmann was gone.

The fearful clangor, the collision of man and inspiration, the flinging about of metal, lumber, hammer, nails, T square, screwdriver, continued for many days. On occasion, defeated, Leo Auffmann loitered out through the streets, nervous, apprehensive, jerking his head at the slightest sound of distant laughter, listened to children's jokes, watching what made them smile.

At night he sat on neighbors' crowded porches, listening to the old folks weigh and balance life, and at each explosion of merriment Leo Auffmann quickened like a general who has seen the forces of darkness routed and whose strategy has been reaffirmed. On his way home he felt triumphant until he was in his garage with the dead tools and the inanimate lumber.

Then his bright face fell away in a pale funk, and to cover his sense of failure he banged and crashed the parts of his machine about as if they really did make sense. At last it began to shape itself and at the end of

ten days and nights, trembling with fatigue, self-dedicated, half starved, fumbling and looking as if he had been riven by lightning, Leo Auffmann wandered into his house.

The children, who had been screaming horribly at each other, fell silent, as if the Red Death had entered at the chiming of the clock.

‘The Happiness Machine,’ husked Leo Auffmann, ‘is ready.’

‘Leo Auffmann,’ said his wife, ‘has lost fifteen pounds. He hasn’t talked to his children in two weeks, they are nervous, they fight, listen! His wife is nervous, she’s gained ten pounds, she’ll need new clothes, look! Sure—the machine is ready. But happy? Who can say?’

Leo, leave off with the clock you’re building. You’ll never find a cuckoo big enough to go in it! Man was not made to tamper with such things. It’s not against God, no, but it sure looks like it’s against Leo Auffmann. Another week of this and we’ll bury him in his machine!’

But Leo Auffmann was too busy noticing that the room was falling swiftly up.

How interesting, he thought, lying on the floor.

Darkness closed in a great wink on him as someone screamed some thing about that Happiness Machine, three times.

The first thing he noticed the next morning was dozens of birds fluttering around in the air stirring up ripples like colored stones thrown into an incredibly clear stream, gonging the tin roof of the garage softly.

A pack of multibred dogs pawfooted one by one into the yard to peer and whine gently through the garage door; four boys, two girls, and some men hesitated in the driveway and then edged along under the cherry trees.

Leo Auffmann, listening, knew what it was that had reached out and called them all into the yard.

The sound of the Happiness Machine.

It was the sort of sound that might be heard coming from a giant's kitchen on a summer day. There were all kinds of hummings, low and high, steady and then changing. Incredible foods were being baked there by a host of whirring golden bees as big as teacups. The giantess herself, humming contentedly under her breath, might glide to the door, as vast as all summer, her face a huge peach-colored moon gazing calmly out upon smiling dogs, corn-haired boys and flour-haired old men.

'Wait,' said Leo Auffmann out loud. 'I didn't turn the machine on this morning! Saul!'

Saul, standing in the yard below, looked up.

'Saul, did you turn it on?'

'You told me to warm it up half an hour ago!'

'All right, Saul, I forgot. I'm not awake.' He fell back in bed.

His wife, bringing his breakfast up, paused by the window, looking down at the garage.

'Tell me,' she said quietly. 'If that machine is like you say, has it got an answer to making babies in it somewhere? Can that machine make seventyyear-old people twenty? Also, how does death look when you hide in there with all that happiness?'

'Hide!'

'If you died from overwork, what should I do today, climb in that big box down there and be happy? Also tell me, Leo, how is our life? You know how our house is.

Seven in the morning, breakfast, the kids; all of you gone by eight-thirty and it's just me and washing and me and cooking and socks to be darned, weeds to be dug, or I run to the store or polish silver.

Who's complaining? I'm just reminding you how the house is put together. Leo, what's in it! So now answer: How do you get all those things I said in one machine?'

'That's not how it's built!'

'I'm sorry. I got no time to look, then.'

And she kissed his cheek and went from the room and he lay smelling the wind that blew from the hidden machine below, rich with the odor of those roasted chestnuts that are sold in the autumn streets of a Paris he had never known...

A cat moved unseen among the hypnotized dogs and boys to purr against the garage door, in the sound of snow-waves crumbling down a faraway and rhythmically breathing shore.

Tomorrow, thought Leo Auffmann, we'll try the machine, all of us, together.

Late that night he awoke and knew something had wakened him. Far away in another room he heard someone crying.

'Saul?' he whispered, getting out of bed.

In his room Saul wept, his head buried in his pillow. 'No...no...' he sobbed. 'Over...over...'

'Saul, you had a nightmare? Tell me about it, son.'

But the boy only wept.

And sitting there on the boy's bed, Leo Auffmann suddenly thought to look out the window. Below, the garage doors stood open.

He felt the hairs rise along the back of his neck.

When Saul slept again, uneasily, whimpering, his father went downstairs and out to the garage where, not breathing, he put his hand out.

In the cool night the Happiness Machine's metal was too hot to touch.

So, he thought, Saul was here tonight.

Why? Was Saul unhappy, in need of the machine? No, happy, but wanting to hold on to happiness always. Could you blame a boy wise enough to know his position who tried to keep it that way? No! And yet...

Above, quite suddenly, something white was exhaled from Saul's window. Leo Auffmann's heart thundered. Then he realized the window curtain had blown out into the open night. But it had seemed as intimate and shimmering a thing as a boy's soul escaping his room. And Leo Auffmann had flung up his hands as if to thwart it, push it back into the sleeping house.

Cold, shivering, he moved back into the house and up to Saul's room where he seized the blowing curtain in and locked the window tight so the pale thing could not escape again. Then he sat on the bed and put his hand on Saul's back.

'A Tale of Two Cities? Mine. The Old Curiosity Shop? Ha, that's Leo Auffmann's all right! Great Expectations? That used to be mine. But let Great Expectations be his, now!'

'What's this?' asked Leo Auffmann, entering.

'This,' said his wife, 'is sorting out the community property! When a father scares his son at night it's time to chop everything in half! Out of the way, Mr Bleak House, Old Curiosity Shop. In all these books, no mad scientist lives like Leo Auffmann, none!'

'You're leaving, and you haven't even tried the machine!' he protested. 'Try it once, you'll unpack, you'll stay!'

'Tom Swift and His Electric Annihilator—whose is that?' she asked.

'Must I guess?'

Snorting, she gave Tom Swift to Leo Auffmann.

Very late in the day all the books, dishes, clothes, linens had been stacked one here, one there, four here, four there, ten here, ten there. Lena Auffmann, dizzy with counting, had to sit down. 'All right,' she gasped. 'Before I go, Leo, prove you don't give nightmares to innocent sons!'

Silently Leo Auffmann led his wife into the twilight. She stood before the eight-foot-tall, orange-colored box.

'That's happiness?' she said. 'Which button do I press to be overjoyed, grateful, contented, and much obliged?'

The children had gathered now.

'Mama,' said Saul, 'don't!'

'I got to know what I'm yelling about, Saul.' She got in the machine, sat down, and looked out at her husband, shaking her head. 'It's not me needs this, it's you, a nervous wreck, shouting.'

'Please,' he said, 'you'll see!'

He shut the door.

'Press the button!' he shouted in at his unseen wife.

There was a click. The machine shivered quietly, like a huge dog dreaming in its sleep.

'Papa!' said Saul, worried.

'Listen!' said Leo Auffmann.

At first there was nothing but the tremor of the machine's own secretly moving cogs and wheels.

'Is Mama all right?' asked Naomi.

'All right? She's fine! There, now...there!'

And inside the machine Lena Auffmann could be heard saying, 'Oh!' and then again, 'Ah!' in a startled voice. 'Look at that!' said his hidden

wife. 'Paris!' and later, 'London! There goes Rome! The Pyramids! The Sphinx!'

'The Sphinx, you hear, children?' Leo Auffmann whispered and laughed.

'Perfume!' cried Lena Auffmann, surprised.

Somewhere a phonograph played 'The Blue Danube' faintly.

'Music! I'm dancing!'

'Only thinks she's dancing,' the father confided to the world.

'Amazing!' said the unseen woman.

Leo Auffmann blushed. 'What an understanding wife.'

And then inside the Happiness Machine, Lena Auffmann began to weep.

The inventor's smile faded.

'She's crying,' said Naomi.

'She can't be!'

'She is,' said Saul.

'She simply can't be crying!' Leo Auffmann, blinking, pressed his ear to the machine. 'But...yes...like a baby...'

He could only open the door.

'Wait.' There his wife sat, tears rolling down her cheeks. 'Let me finish.'

She cried some more.

Leo Auffmann turned off the machine, stunned.

'Oh, it's the saddest thing in the world!' she wailed. 'I feel awful, terrible.' She climbed out through the door. 'First, there was Paris...'

'What's wrong with Paris?'

'I never even thought of being in Paris in my life. But now you got me thinking: Paris! So suddenly I want to be in Paris and I know I'm not!'

'It's almost as good, this machine.'



'No. Sitting in there, I knew. I thought, It's not real!'

'Stop crying, Mama.'

She looked at him with great dark wet eyes. 'You had me dancing. We haven't danced in twenty years.'

'I'll take you dancing tomorrow night!'

'No, no! It's not important, it shouldn't be important. But your machine says it's important! So I believe! It'll be all right, Leo, after I cry some more.'

'What else?'

'What else? The machine says, "You're young." I'm not. It lies, that Sadness Machine!'

'Sad in what way?'

His wife was quieter now. 'Leo, the mistake you made is you forgot some hour, some day, we all got to climb out of that thing and go back to dirty dishes and the beds not made. While you're in that thing, sure, a sunset lasts forever almost, the air smells good, the temperature is fine.

All the things you want to last, last. But outside, the children wait on lunch, the clothes need buttons. And then let's be frank, Leo, how long can you look at a sunset? Who wants a sunset to last?

Who wants perfect temperature? Who wants air smelling good always? So after a while, who would notice? Better, for a minute or two, a sunset. After that, let's have something else. People are like that, Leo. How could you forget?'

'Did I?'

'Sunsets we always liked because they only happen once and go away.'

'But Lena, that's sad.'

'No, if the sunset stayed and we got bored, that would be a real sadness. So two things you did you should never have. You made quick things go slow and stay around. You brought things faraway to our back yard where they don't belong, where they just tell you, "No, you'll never travel, Lena Auffmann, Paris you'll never see!

Rome you'll never visit." But I always knew that, so why tell me? Better to forget and make do, Leo, make do, eh?'

Leo Auffmann leaned against the machine for support. He snatched his burned hand away, surprised.

'So now what, Lena?' he said.

'It's not for me to say. I know only so long as this thing is here I'll want to come out, or Saul will want to come out like he did last night, and against our judgment sit in it and look at all those places so faraway and every time we will cry and be no fit family for you.'

'I don't understand,' he said, 'how I could be so wrong. Just let me check to see what you say is true.' He sat down inside the machine.

'You won't go away?'

His wife nodded. 'We'll wait, Leo.'

He shut the door. In the warm darkness he hesitated, pressed the button, and was just relaxing back in color and music, when he heard someone screaming.

'Fire, Papa! The machine's on fire!'

Someone hammered the door. He leaped up, bumped his head, and fell as the door gave way and the boys dragged him out. Behind him he heard a muffled explosion. The entire family was running now. Leo Auffmann turned and gasped, 'Saul, call the fire department!'

Lena Auffmann caught Saul as he ran, 'Saul,' she said. 'Wait.'

There was a gush of flame, another muffled explosion. When the machine was burning very well indeed, Lena Auffmann nodded.

‘All right, Saul,’ she said. ‘Run call the fire department.’

Everybody who was anybody came to the fire. There was Grandpa Spaulding and Douglas and Tom and most of the boarders and some of the old men from across the ravine and all the children from six blocks around. And Leo Auffmann’s children stood out front, proud of how fine the flames looked jumping from the garage roof.

Grandfather Spaulding studied the smoke ball in the sky and said, quietly, ‘Leo, was that it? Your Happiness Machine?’

‘Some year,’ said Leo Auffmann, ‘I’ll figure it and tell you.’

Lena Auffmann, standing in the dark now, watched as the firemen ran in and out of the yard; the garage, roaring, settled upon itself.

‘Leo,’ she said, ‘it won’t take a year to figure. Look around. Think. Keep quiet a little bit. Then come tell me. I’ll be in the house, putting books back on shelves, and clothes back in closets, fixing supper, supper’s late, look how dark. Come, children, help Mama.’

When the firemen and the neighbors were gone, Leo Auffmann was left with Grandfather Spaulding and Douglas and Tom, brooding over the smoldering ruin. He stirred his foot in the wet ashes and slowly said what he had to say.

‘The first thing you learn in life is you’re a fool. The last thing you learn in life is you’re the same fool. In one hour, I’ve done a lot of thinking. I thought, Leo Auffmann is blind!

‘...You want to see the real Happiness Machine? The one they patented a couple thousand years ago, it still runs, not good all the time, no! but it runs. It’s been here all along.’

‘But the fire—’ said Douglas.

‘Sure, the fire, the garage! But like Lena said, it don’t take a year to figure; what hurned in the garage don’t count!’

They followed him up the front-porch steps.

‘Here,’ whispered Leo Auffmann, ‘the front window. Quiet, and you’ll see it.’

Hesitantly, Grandfather, Douglas, and Tom peered through the large windowpane.

And there, in small warm pools of lamplight, you could see what Leo Auffmann wanted you to see. There sat Saul and Marshall, playing chess at the coffee table. In the dining room Rebecca was laying out the silver. Naomi was cutting paper-doll dresses. Ruth was painting water colors.

Joseph was running his electric train. Through the kitchen door, Lena Auffmann was sliding a pot roast from the steaming oven. Every hand, every head, every mouth made a big or little motion. You could hear their faraway voices under glass.

You could hear someone singing in a high sweet voice. You could smell bread baking, too, and you knew it was real bread that would soon be covered with real butter. Everything was there and it was working.

Grandfather, Douglas, and Tom turned to look at Leo Auffmann, who gazed serenely through the window, the pink light on his cheeks.

‘Sure,’ he murmured. ‘There it is.’ And he watched with now-gentle sorrow and now-quick delight, and at last quiet acceptance, as all the bits and pieces of this house mixed, stirred, settled, poised, and ran steadily again. ‘The Happiness Machine,’ he said. ‘The Happiness Machine.’

A moment later he was gone.

Inside, Grandfather, Douglas, and Tom saw him tinkering, make a minor adjustment here, eliminate friction there, busy among all those warm, wonderful, infinitely delicate, forever mysterious, and ever-moving parts.

Then smiling, they went down the steps into the fresh summer night.

The end