

Happiness — a mystery

and 66 attempts to solve it

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Introduction

Why 66?

I assume you know what I'm talking about. Right? I'll give you a minute to work it out.

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Welcome back. Hopefully you just looked again at this book's cover and noticed that the title contains the word 'mystery' and the subtitle is 'and 66 attempts to solve it'. Yet in the Contents list, there's a chapter called 'The 65 Days'. And 65 is the number that comes before 66. Is this pure coincidence, or is there a mystery to be solved?

Here is my recommendation: wherever possible, treat anything you can as a mystery. Why? Because mysteries make life better. I love mysteries, including the desperately-craving-an-answer part, more than I love their solutions. Definite answers shut down possibilities (like boring homework due in the next day that's going to take all evening to complete), while an unsolved puzzle ignites our imagination and invites us to think, 'What if it turns out to be something shocking and unguessable that will well and truly blow my mind?' Then, even though we have no idea what it is, we start to imagine how exhilarated we'll feel when we encounter that unimaginable, mind-blowing thing.

I love mysteries so much that I have a tendency to invent them where they don't exist. I've done this since childhood. Age 7, on a family holiday in Lytham St Anne's, I saw a car driving down a road about five seconds after another car had driven the same way. 'I wonder why that second car is chasing the first one?' I said to my parents.

They explained that there was no mystery to be solved. What I'd seen was simply one car driving down the road shortly after another. I refused to accept this hypothesis. I wanted and needed a better story.

I'm not going to dwell on The Two-Cars Mystery, because I never solved it. As a crime writer, I know that when one starts a book with a mystery, one has a duty to solve it by the end. That's not going to be possible in this case — not unless I go to Lytham St Anne's to investigate, and I refuse on principle ever to go there again. (It was supposed to be a seaside holiday, and guess what? The sea was not there — like, *at all* — for the whole time that we were. Where was it? I don't know: another mystery. There was a beach, and there were slightly damp mud-flats stretching as far as the eye could see, but there was no sea for me to swim in. I was too young to understand about tides, and I'm glad I didn't. I wouldn't have approved.)

If solved and never-to-be-solved mysteries are equally disappointing, it's clear what the ideal is: a puzzle that makes you want to hunt for its solution, happy in the knowledge that there's a fair chance of success.

I'm delighted to be able to present you with that very thing (hence the existence of this book) and I'd like to invite you to be my sidekick as I investigate the mystery of happiness. I should probably say 'mysteries', plural. What is happiness? How does one pursue and/or achieve it? Where is it to be found, and with whom?

If you noticed the 65/66 thing before I drew it to your attention, well done. You are perfect sidekick material. If you didn't, do not be disheartened — there's another significant clue in this introduction and you might have noticed that instead. If you haven't already, don't give up. (NB: There is no limit to how often you can read a book's introduction before proceeding to Chapter 1.)

Let's do a feasibility study before we start our investigation. Is the puzzle of happiness definitely solvable? Isn't it, rather, something that different people have opinions about, and there's no right answer? Well, if happiness is real, then it must be possible to define it and suggest ways to increase our chances of achieving it if we want to.

All right, you might say, but that's equally true of love or any other abstract noun. Or pies. Some people think a pie must have pastry covering its entire surface area in order to qualify for the description, while others believe that a stew in a dish with a pastry topping can legitimately be called a pie (those crazy fools! I bet they're the same people who book seaside holidays without any sea). So, why not investigate pies, or the meaning of love? Why happiness?

I was drawn to this specific mystery by my own personal happiness-related dilemma. That's also what led me to have my first ever one-to-one session with a life coach, and I'm going to invite you to be a fly on the wall at that session in a moment, so that you can experience the beginning of the mystery in the most authentic and direct way possible. After all, as any fan of the detective fiction genre knows, the main detective, the sidekick and the reader must all have equal access to the clues at all times. In this case, you're the sidekick *and* the reader, and I don't want to hear any complaints about that being too much work, okay?

Good. I'm glad we agree. Let's proceed to my first (but by no means last) session with a life coach, which contained a revelation so startling that it called into question my whole belief system about how the world works.

1. A Session with a Life Coach

Her name is Katherine. I find her online, and see that she offers life coaching via Skype, which is brilliant and convenient, because she lives in America, and I live in Cambridge, England. I could have found an English life coach and met her in person, and indeed this is what I've always done in the past with psychotherapists, but for life coaching I wanted a bona fide American. Life coaching sounds so much like an American invention that I wasn't even willing to Google it to check that I was right. Just as seafood is often dodgy in restaurants that too far from the coast, I decided that American life coaching — coming straight from the source — had to be the best kind.

Katherine also has the advantage of looking exactly like my idea of what an American life coach should look like: bouncy hair, glossy make-up, good skin, a persuasive smile full of well-proportioned white teeth. She could easily be an extra in *Revenge*, playing a guest at one of Victoria Grayson's lavish parties. (*Revenge* is a brilliant TV drama set in the Hamptons, in case you haven't yet discovered it. And, no, I'm not going to put this in the footnotes because my love for this show is a clue that's going to matter later on. Also, there aren't going to be any footnotes. Whatever the answer to the question 'What is happiness?' might be, I can tell you now that it isn't footnotes.)

Not only does Katherine look perfect for my purposes, her office does too: white walls, cream blinds at the windows, light wood floors. On a white-painted table, a potted plant and a framed photograph, positioned far enough apart to suggest that one or both might be claustrophobic.

This is great. A life-coach's walls should be white and uncluttered, and any space inhabited by a life-coach should be mainly empty. I firmly believe in the innate superiority of minimalism. My house in Cambridge is full of messy piles of stuff that I'm too busy to sort out and my every wall is covered from top to bottom with badly-hung, brightly coloured paintings that probably clash with one another — but that's fine for me, because I'm a

flawed human in search of help. Also, I love looking forward to the big decluttering and sprucing up of my house that I keep promising myself as a future treat, when I finally have the time.

Framed and hanging above the table in Katherine's office, between the photograph and the plant, there's an inspirational quote: 'The pain you feel today is the strength you feel tomorrow'. I agree with the sentiment, and I'm pleased that Katherine has it on display. It's precisely what I'd hope to find in the immediate vicinity of an American life coach.

Fleetingly, I think of a house I once visited in suburban England that had motivational slogans stencilled on many of its walls. It also had, above the bath, a large tile with 'Bathe' painted on it and one saying 'Sit' directly above the loo. I remember thinking that I didn't want to be helped with my motivation by anyone who could fail to realise why putting the word 'Sit' above a toilet wasn't the best idea. Katherine would never have made that mistake.

'Let's begin,' she says. 'What do you need help with?'

It's ten o'clock at night in England; earlier in America. I'm nervous about the conversation we're going to have, in a way that I've never been when I've spoken to English psychotherapists face to face. Talking to an American life coach on Skype feels a little bit...not exactly sinful, but almost like a secret treat — like waiting until everyone's gone to bed and then scoffing a delicious leftover scone with jam and cream.

Life coaching, I have decided before trying it, is going to be more fun than therapy, which was fascinating but not always fun. I'm a big fan of life coaching already, having become addicted to many American life-coaches' podcasts. From these, I have learned the difference — in theory, at least — between coaching and psychotherapy. Therapy is focused on analysing and healing past pain. Life coaching, by contrast, seems to be much more forward-looking and definitely more jolly. It's all about getting the results you want in the best of all possible futures. Which is ideal for my present predicament, because my

problem isn't a lack of happiness. It's the opposite, in fact. Here's how my conversation with Katherine goes after she asks me what I need help with:

Me: Um...I think I might be too happy.

Her: Too happy?

Me: Yes. But in a way that could be a problem.

Her: Can you —

Me: Yeah, I'll explain. I've always had a happy temperament, just naturally. I wake up feeling extremely happy every day, unless there's a specific upsetting problem. But that's not often, so I'm basically happy most of the time. Even when there's a problem, I'm so good at deciding that it's a mild or easily-solved problem and making myself happy again that... I suppose what I'm saying is, I reckon I have some serious problems that I'm in danger of never solving because I'm happy in spite of them. So I don't suffer enough, which means I don't address the issues.

Her: Tell me about the serious problems.

Me: The main one is that I'm too busy and pressured. I mean...*incredibly* busy and pressured. All the time.

Her: What kind of busy? Work? Family commitments?

Me: Mainly work. Everything else is manageable, or it would be if it wasn't for work.

Her: What's your job?

Me: I'm a writer. I write contemporary crime novels, psychological thrillers. And I also write...have you heard of Agatha Christie's famous Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot?

Her: Of course.

Me: Well, for the past few years I've been writing new Hercule Poirot novels as well as my other crime novels. I also wrote a self-help book about how holding grudges can be good for you, and created a podcast to go with it, and once you have a podcast and people like it and want more, you have to think about series 2 and series 3 — and maybe you can't ever stop? Not that I want to, but...you know. And recently, I agreed to create and run a Crime and Thriller Writing Master's Degree programme at Cambridge University, and I'm just about to launch a coaching programme for writers called *Dream Author*, and I've co-written two murder mystery musicals and toured one of them around literary festivals, and there's a lot more of that coming up... And, I mean, I absolutely love doing all these things. That's why I do them all. I keep saying yes to new, exciting projects, and I'm really happy to be doing them. *And* I make sure I spend lots of time with my family, just hanging out, and doing the things I love doing, like swimming, seeing friends.

Her: It all sounds great to me. Are you sure there's a problem?

Me: I mean...not entirely, but I think there is, yes.

Her: What is it, then? You say you have time for your family and for relaxing...

Me: Yes. I've never been willing to sacrifice the rest of my life, no matter how much I love my work.

Her: I'm still not clear what the problem is.

Shit. Is it possible that I don't have a problem? Am I a fraud, wasting the time of a life coach who could be helping someone in greater need of her services? No, no. Calm down. There's definitely a problem. I'm not on this Skype call under false pretences.

Me: It's easiest to describe if I give you specific examples. Like...the other day, I was properly, genuinely pleased when I worked out a way of washing my face and brushing my teeth at the same time. I saved between 7 and 10 seconds by thinking of them as one process instead of two and washing my face *around my toothbrush*.

Her: Okay...

Me: I thought, 'Amazing! I've saved 10 seconds. Then I opened my wardrobe to find clothes to put on — I was going to do a talk at a literary lunch that day — and all my clothes were mixed up and crammed into my wardrobe in a chaotic way. I don't have time to sort out my clothes, buy new ones, throw away old ones. Those things are neither work nor fun, so I never do them. I knew I had at least three tops and two pairs of trousers that would be ideal for the literary lunch, but I couldn't see

them because of the wardrobe chaos. They were probably in the laundry room, but that's in the basement — two flights down, too far away. You must think it sounds crazy: someone who doesn't have time to go to her own laundry room, who gets stressed even thinking about it, and so picks a totally unsuitable outfit for a literary lunch just because it's the one that happens to fall out of the cupboard.

Her: It does sound a little strange. But this was only one day, right?

Me: No! I never have enough time to go to the laundry room. At least three times a week I realise haven't seen this or that garment for months or years, and I consider going down to the basement to look for it, but there's always a pressing deadline I'd miss if I did: for a podcast episode, an interview, an article, a conference call. Always something.

Her: So how do you normally get your clean laundry?

Me: My husband brings it upstairs for me. He doesn't work. He has time to go to the laundry room as often as he wants. Anyway, when I looked in my wardrobe and saw no clothes I could easily reach and wanted to wear, my heart started to beat faster. In situations like that — and more than half of each day is like that for me, with time marching on and all the things I need to do piling up in my brain — I go into my race-against-the-clock mentality, which would make sense if I was someone who, I don't know, worked in a counter-terrorism unit, whose job was to defuse bombs or something. But I'm a writer! My life shouldn't be like this. I know it shouldn't. Looking into my wardrobe that morning, I could feel the frustration set in as my regained-time advantage drained away. I actually thought, 'Fuck, now I'm going to lose the 10

seconds I saved by merging face-washing and teeth-brushing into one task instead of two.' I spend a lot of my life feeling like that guy from *The Bourne Identity* who has to keep running all the time or else he might die.

Her: Why would it matter if you took a few more minutes to get dressed?

Me: Because in order to stay afloat with all the things I've committed to do — all the things I really want to do — I have to do a certain number of tasks every day, and it's more tasks than I can do in a day unless I'm constantly trying to save minutes and seconds. Unless I'm in *Bourne Identity* mode. My life has been like this for so long, it's become my automatic way of being.

Her: All right. Then I agree, you have a problem.

Shit. An American life coach with bouncy hair and bright white teeth and walls thinks I have a problem. This is terrible. I feel worse, because now my problem is official — made so by a wellbeing professional — and I have no time to solve it.

Still, there's always an upside: it's nice to be proved right.

Me: Thank you! After I got dressed, in clothes that were totally unsuitable and that I didn't want to wear, I went to walk downstairs and at the top of the stairs, do you know what thoughts were running through my head? 'What planning can I do on my way down the stairs that will save me time when I get the ground floor? I'm starving, but my train leaves in 15 minutes and the station is 6 minutes walk away. Is there any way I can make scrambled eggs at the same time as putting my laptop and charger in my bag?'

Her: That sounds very stressful.

Me: It was. It *is*. My life is, and I can feel it not doing me any good. When I'm in non-work mode, watching telly with the family or swimming, I'm not like that at all. But the rest of the time is *all* like that.

Her: All *Bourne Identity* running around, full of stressed-out energy?

Me: Yup. When I finish talking to you, after our hour is up, it'll be 11 o'clock English time, and I won't be able to go to bed and sleep. I have to finish two things and hand them in by 9 tomorrow morning. Then I'll have to rewrite my To-Do list again, because, as happens every day, I haven't done half the things that were on it because I ran out of time. I haven't had a weekend off work for several years — seriously. Last year, there were only 8 days that I didn't work: Christmas Day, and the 7 days of my summer holiday, when I went to Greece with my family.

Her: I have trouble believing that you're as happy as you say you are, when you're so overloaded with work. That sounds like an impossibly pressured life. You said you spend lots of time with your family, relaxing — are you sure that's true?

Me: Yes. Every day, between around 6.30 pm and 10.30 pm, I'm with my family, not working. But then when they all go to bed, I do between two and five hours more work. I have to, or else all the things I have to do won't get done. But then I also resent having to live in this ridiculous *Bourne Identity* way, so I do quite a lot of skiving off, to escape the tyranny.

Her: Tyranny?

Me: Yes, that's what it feels like. I feel really tyrannised by the amount of work I have to do and the time I have in which to do it. And then the deadlines get closer, and I feel even more oppressed and tyrannised. And I genuinely want to write or do or commit to each individual thing! I love doing literary events all over the country and abroad, and being commissioned to write articles, and writing musicals with my friend Annette. I love all of it. I just feel as if I need an extra, I don't know, 7 years or so in order to do all these things in the best and happiest way, without all this seconds-saving, heart-pounding pressure.

Her: Do you sometimes make yourself ill by working too hard?

Me: No, not often. I'm really good in high-pressure situations. But I also think it's quite possible that I could have a breakdown tomorrow. I mean, why wouldn't I? Some times I'll be chatting to my mum and she'll say something quite innocent like, 'Do you want me to post that for you? I can easily nip to the post office tomorrow.' And I can barely wrap my mind round the implausible fact that *I have a very close relative who can easily nip to the post office*. I find myself thinking, 'That free-and-easy life style must be possible for me too. If she can have that kind of life, then so can I.' But I don't have it — not yet. None of my days, ever, contain a spare five minutes for post-office-nipping, and I live approximately forty footsteps from my nearest post office. If I want to go there, I have to enter it as an item on my schedule, with a precise amount of time allocated to it.

Her: Could there be a really simple solution to all of this?

Me: There is. I need to take on less work. Commit to doing fewer things, stop putting so much in my schedule. I know that. I'm an enthusiast with lots of energy and an unrealistic belief in my ability to beat the odds with regard to how much work can be done in how little time. I need to plan more realistically, look after myself better and do less.

Her: Okay, great. So you have a problem and you have a solution.

Me: I can take on less from now on, and I will in future, but that doesn't help me in the short to medium term because...

At this point I break off. I can't bring myself to tell her that I'm over-committed and over-scheduled until the end of 2021.

Me: I have lots of things to write and deliver that I've already committed to, and...obviously I could write to various people and say, 'Sorry, I'm not going to be able to do this after all.' But I don't want to. I want to do everything I've planned to, but I also want to be able to enjoy my leisure time and family time, and lately I've been feeling almost as if my work is stalking me when I'm trying to relax. It's always there, crouching on top of my brain, lurking in the shadows like an oppressive...

Her: Tyrant?

Me: I was going to say 'Stalker'. But yes. Tyrannical stalker.

Her: Yet you say you're happy.

Me: Yes. I'm *very* happy. There is one small blight on my happiness, which is what we've been discussing. It doesn't make me unhappy, but I'd like to solve the problem. I want to get rid of this feeling that my work is kind of...taunting and bullying me even during my non-working hours, and I don't want to remove it by cancelling any of my commitments. I never used to feel this way.

Her: You can easily remove the negative feelings you're having, without cancelling any thing.

Me: I can? How?

Her: If you didn't feel stressed, oppressed, tyrannised, bullied and stalked by your work commitments, would you be perfectly happy?

Me: Yes! I really would.

Her: Then you easily can be.

Me: How? How do I solve the problem? Because — and I *am* happy in spite of it, I really am — but I have a strong sense that if I don't solve the problem, some big unhappiness might be coming my way at some point fairly soonish. That's just a hunch, but...it's there.

Her: Do you know that you don't ever have to change your circumstances in order to feel better or happier?

Me: Oh! Yes, I mean, kind of. I listen to lots of life-coaching podcasts, so I know that our feelings are caused by our thoughts, not by our external circumstances, but —

Her: Yes. And all of our thoughts are optional. Always. You are choosing to think that your work commitments are stalking you and oppressing you. You needn't think any of that.

Me: Oh, my God. Are you saying...

Her: If you dropped that thought — that belief that your work is a tyrant, bullying you — how would you feel? If you didn't believe that *at all*? If you thought instead, 'I have plenty of time for everything I want to do. There's no pressure. There's no rush.'

Me: I can't believe I've heard this mentioned so many times on life-coaching podcasts, but I've never thought to apply it to my own situation. I thought —

Her: You thought it was just the truth, right? It's an objective fact that you don't have enough hours in the day? It's an objective fact that your work's oppressing you and stalking you, even during your leisure time?

Me: Yes! I didn't even think to question it.

Her: Well, you should, because it's not the truth. It's just a story you're telling yourself and you're choosing to believe it. If you want to be happier than you are now, and solve your problem, nothing needs to change about your life situation. Only your thoughts need to change. Choose new thoughts: 'In future I might commit to fewer projects, but for now, I'll pursue all my projects happily, unhurriedly, and knowing that I always have enough time. My work isn't a problem. I have no problems.' If you practice thinking thoughts like that, you'll be fuelled by a calmer energy. You'll feel less stressed, *and* be able to get more done. Then you'll understand on a deeper level — through experience, which is the best teacher — what you only understand intellectually now: none of us have any problems that we don't create with our own thoughts. Changing your thoughts solves everything, always.

Listening to her say this with such conviction, I feel sudden movement in my brain — like a dragging followed by a pop, then a sensation of something dissolving. Then spinning. When my mind settles, I feel lighter and want to giggle. I think, 'It can't be that simple'. This is almost exactly how I feel when I reach the end of a brilliant crime novel and experience that moment of 'Oh, wow — that's it! How could it be so simple and right, and yet I didn't see it at all?'

Can it be as simple as Katherine says it is? Just change my thoughts about my situation, without changing my actual situation? I already feel much more cheerful about the work I have to do before I go to sleep tonight. I have plenty of time. I'm not even that tired.

Two hours later, I've done the two pieces of work that are due in at 9 tomorrow morning — unhurriedly and without resentment. As I worked, I understood, thanks to Katherine, that I was only doing these things because I wanted to, because I'd chosen to. No one and nothing is tyrannising me. How stupid of me to have allowed that belief to set

up camp in my mind, like a little Mr-Brocklehurst-from-*Jane-Eyre*, sadistically trying to make me feel as bad as possible. It was my thoughts about the work that were the oppressive stalker-tyrants, not the work itself. My work is amazing. I love it. And if I don't love my Mr Brocklehurst thoughts, I can change them. I already have.

Have I just discovered the one and only secret of how to be perfectly happy forever?