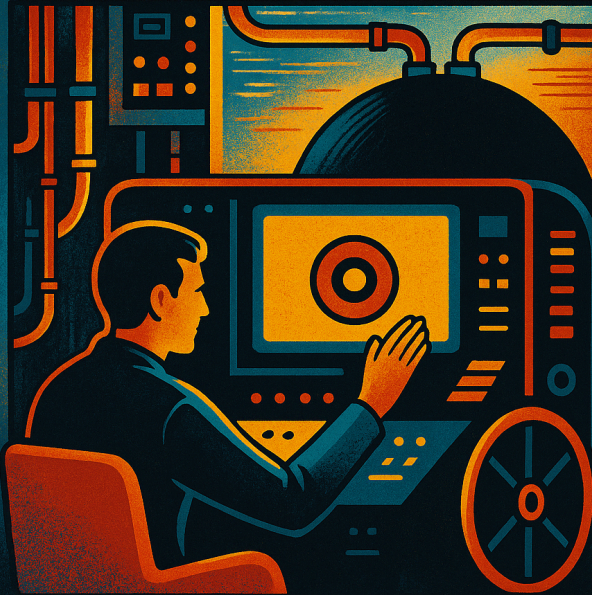


THE MACHINE STOPS



AN ADAPTATION

By E. M. Forster

Acknowledgment

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Language in this version of *The Machine Stops* has been modified with the assistance of ChatGPT, an AI language model developed by OpenAI, to suit a contemporary audience



The Machine Stops - An adaptation

By E.M. Forster, 1901

People live underground in a world where a powerful Machine takes care of all their needs. They rarely see each other in person and only communicate through screens. When Vashti, a well-known lecturer, gets a troubling message from her son Kuno—who has ventured outside their controlled environment—her orderly life starts to fall apart.

Part 1 - The airship

Imagine a tiny room, shaped like a hexagon — kind of like a honeycomb cell. No windows. No lamps. But somehow it glows with this soft, warm light. The air smells clean and fresh, even though there's no vent. Music's playing too, but there's no stereo or anything.

There's just a single armchair, right in the middle, next to a little desk.

Sitting there is a woman, pale-skinned and short, maybe five feet tall. The whole room belongs to her.

Suddenly, a bell rang.

She sighed, hit a button, and the music cut off.

"Ugh, *who now?*" she muttered, setting her chair rolling across the room — everything here worked by machines.

"*Who is it?*" she snapped, annoyed at yet another interruption.

But when she heard the voice through the speaker, her face softened into a smile.

"*Okay, okay, you win. Let's talk,*" she said. "*I've got about five minutes before my lecture on 'Music in the Australian Era' kicks off, so you're in luck.*"

She hit the privacy button, locking everyone else out. Then she turned off the lights, sinking the room into darkness.

"*Make it quick, Kuno!*" she called. "*I'm literally sitting here in the dark for you.*"

It took a few moments, but then the small screen in her hand started to glow, fading from blue to deep purple.

Finally, her son's face appeared.

"*Seriously, Kuno, you're the slowest person alive,*" she teased.

He gave her a small, serious smile.

"*I've been trying to reach you forever, Mum. You're always busy,*" he said. "*But this is important.*"

"So spit it out," she said. "Why not just send a message?"

"Because some things you need to say to someone's face. Or... almost face." He gave a small shrug. "I want—"

"Come on, what is it?"

"I want you to come visit me."

She stared at him through the screen.

"But I am seeing you," she said, confused.

"No, you're seeing a screen. It's not the same," Kuno said. "I want to talk to you — really talk to you — not through a bunch of wires and fake lighting."

She shifted uncomfortably.

"Don't talk like that about the Machine," she said.

"Why not?"

"You just don't," she said quickly.

"You talk about it like it's some kind of god," Kuno said. "You probably pray to it when you're upset." He leaned in closer. "But don't forget — people built it. Great people, sure, but still just people. It's amazing, but it's not everything. I need to see you — for real."

Vashti shook her head.

"I really don't have time for trips."

"The airship only takes two days."

"I hate airships," she said flatly.

"Why?"

"I hate looking at the Earth. It's just... ugly. Dust, water, stars... nothing inspiring about it."

Kuno smiled slightly.

"Actually, that's where I got an idea."

"Oh? What kind of idea?"

"Do you know the constellation — four stars making a rectangle, three lined up inside it, and three more dangling below?"

"No idea. I don't care about stars."

"Well," he said, "it looked like a man to me. The four corners — shoulders and knees. The middle stars — a belt. The bottom ones — a sword."

"A sword? Seriously?" she said, almost laughing.

"Yeah. People used to carry swords everywhere, you know. For hunting. Fighting."

She shook her head.

"Weird idea. But I guess it's original. When did you think of it?"

"On the airship..." His voice drifted off, and Vashti noticed he looked a little sad. Hard to tell — the Machine wasn't great at showing emotions.

"The thing is," he said, "I want to see those stars again. But not from a ship, through a tiny window. I want to stand on the ground and see them the way people did, thousands of years ago. I want to go to the surface."

Vashti blinked, stunned.

"Kuno, that's dangerous."

"Is it really? Come, Mum. Visit me. Help me understand why everyone's so scared of the outside world."

She hesitated, trying to find the right words.

"The Earth's surface is dead. Just dust and mud. No plants, no animals. You'd need a respirator or you'd freeze or suffocate in minutes."

"I know. I'll be careful."

Vashti still wasn't convinced. She chose her words carefully — Kuno could be stubborn, and she didn't want to start a fight.

"Besides," she said slowly, "it's against... the spirit of the age."

"Meaning, it's against the Machine?"

"Sort of," she admitted.

But before she could explain further, his image flickered — and disappeared.

She consulted the Book once more, her nerves steadily unraveling, and reclined into her chair, trembling. After a moment's hesitation, she directed the chair toward the far wall and pressed a button she rarely touched. Slowly, the wall parted, revealing a tunnel that curved gently out of sight, just enough to conceal its destination. If she chose to visit her son, her journey must begin here.

Naturally, she was fully familiar with the communication system. There was nothing mysterious about it. A car would be summoned; it would convey her down the tunnel to the lift connecting with the air-ship station—a system in use long before the universal adoption of the Machine. She had studied the civilization that had immediately preceded her own, that curious age which had misinterpreted the system's purpose and used it to bring people to things, instead of bringing things to people. How peculiar those old days seemed, when individuals would leave their rooms in search of fresh air, rather than simply refreshing the air mechanically! Yet despite her learning, she was afraid. She had not glimpsed the tunnel since the birth

of her last child. It curved, yes—but not quite as she remembered. It shone—but not quite as brilliantly as lecturers had suggested. Vashti was seized with the terrors of direct experience. She shrank back into her room, and the wall closed silently behind her.

"Kuno," she said, "I cannot come to see you. I am not well."

Immediately, a great machine descended from the ceiling; a thermometer was inserted between her lips, a stethoscope pressed against her heart. She lay powerless as cooling pads were applied to her forehead. Kuno, it seemed, had contacted her doctor.

Thus human emotions, despite the Machine's dominion, continued to stumble about blindly. Vashti drank the medicine that the doctor's machinery projected into her mouth, and the instruments retreated into the ceiling. Kuno's voice, low and anxious, was heard once more.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Better," she replied irritably. "But why do you not come to me instead?"

"Because I cannot leave this place."

"Why?"

"Because something tremendous may happen at any moment."

"Have you been to the surface of the Earth?"

"Not yet."

"Then what is it?"

"I will not tell you through the Machine."

She tried to return to her routines, but Kuno haunted her thoughts—Kuno as a baby, his birth, his removal to the public nurseries, her single visit to him there, his rare visits to her—visits that had ended when the Machine assigned him a room on the far side of the world. "Parents, duties of," declared the Book of the Machine, "cease at the moment of birth. P. 422327483." It was true. Yet there was something exceptional about Kuno, as there had been about all her children. And if he desired it, she must attempt the journey. Moreover, he had said something tremendous might happen. Foolishness, no doubt—but still, she must go.

Again she pressed the unfamiliar button. Again the wall parted, and again she confronted the curving tunnel. Clutching the Book, she rose, tottered onto the

platform, and summoned the car. Behind her, the familiar walls of her room sealed shut. Her journey to the Northern Hemisphere had begun.

Of course, it was perfectly easy. The car glided up, containing armchairs exactly like her own. When she signalled, it halted, and she tottered into the lift. One other passenger stood within it—the first human being she had seen face-to-face in many months. Few people travelled anymore; science had made the whole Earth uniform. Why visit Peking if it was identical to Shrewsbury? And why return to Shrewsbury if it was identical to Peking? The body remained inert; only the soul was restless.

The airship service was a relic, sustained not from need but because dismantling it would have been troublesome. Airships still rose from the ancient ports of Rye and Christchurch, climbing into the crowded skies, docking empty at the southern wharves. Weather no longer mattered: the skies, whether sunlit or stormy, formed a vast, ever-turning kaleidoscope. Vashti's ship would depart at sunset or dawn, depending on the schedule, and would cross paths above Rheims with the ship between Helsingfors and Brazil. Every third crossing of the Alps, it would encounter the Palermo fleet behind. Night and day, wind and storm, tide and earthquake—these forces no longer troubled humanity. Man had tamed Nature. The old literature praising or fearing natural forces seemed now as foolish as fairy tales.

But as Vashti looked up at the ship's side—weather-stained and battered by the outside world—her old fears returned. It was not quite as the cinematophote had depicted it. It had a smell—not a strong or unpleasant one, but a smell nonetheless, unmistakably real. Even with closed eyes, she would have known that something new was near. Then she had to cross the gangway, enduring the stares of others. A man dropped his Book—not a disaster in itself—but no automatic system came to retrieve it, and the sacred volume lay abandoned. They came to a halt. Instead of picking it up, the man stared at his arm as though it had betrayed him. Someone muttered, "We shall be late," and they all moved forward, Vashti herself stepping upon the fallen pages.

Inside the ship, her anxiety grew. The accommodations were crude. A female attendant—an actual human attendant!—stood ready to receive orders. Although a moving platform eased the walk to her cabin, she was expected to step off and on. Some cabins were better than others; hers was not among them. Spasms of rage shook her. The glass valves had closed; she could not return. From the corridor's end, she glimpsed the lift, moving up and down—empty. Beneath those shining tiles lay tier upon tier of rooms, each containing a human being, and deep in that hive was her own abandoned cell. Vashti was afraid.

"O Machine! O Machine!" she murmured, caressing the Book for comfort.

Then the sides of the foyer blurred together, dreamlike. The lift disappeared, the fallen Book slid aside and vanished, the polished tiles seemed to flow like water, and

with a slight jolt, the airship broke free of its tunnel and soared above a tropical ocean.

It was night. She glimpsed the coast of Sumatra, its outline marked by lighthouses and the phosphorescent gleam of the sea. These too faded, and only the stars remained—stars that moved, swaying in the sky as the ship rose and fell. They seemed first to cluster in infinite depth, then to flatten into a ceiling that crushed all thought of vastness. Either way, they were unbearable.

"Are we to travel in the dark?" the passengers complained.

The attendant—negligent, perhaps, but human—switched on the lights and lowered the metal blinds. When these ships were first designed, there had still been a yearning to see directly; thus the numerous skylights. But now they were a nuisance to sophisticated passengers. Even in Vashti's cabin, a stubborn star pierced the blind, and restless, she slept fitfully until dawn.

Though the ship flew westward, the Earth spun eastward even faster. Science could prolong the night—but only briefly. The grand dreams of racing against the sun, of endless daylight through human speed, had been abandoned, along with other grand ambitions. Once, men had attempted it, sending aeroplanes piloted by their finest minds in endless circles around the globe. But the Earth always prevailed. Accidents multiplied. The Committee of the Machine had declared the contests illegal, mechanical blasphemy, punishable by Homelessness.

Of Homelessness, more must be said later.

The Committee was right. Yet in that last race against the sun, humanity had glimpsed its final passion for the heavens. With its failure, dawn, twilight, and the stars lost their influence over the human heart.

Thus, when dawn finally invaded Vashti's cabin—a rosy finger reaching past the blinds—she was furious. She attempted to adjust the covering, but it flew open completely. Through the skylight, she saw the trembling pink clouds and the deepening blue sky. The sun's radiance, a golden tide, poured down the walls. Unless she acted, it would touch her.

Horried, she rang for the attendant. The attendant, too, was aghast, but helpless. She could only suggest that Vashti change cabins, which she reluctantly prepared to do.

People were nearly identical everywhere, but the airship attendant had developed a peculiar bluntness. Her duty to speak face-to-face with passengers had eroded the normal mechanical distance. When Vashti stumbled, the attendant instinctively reached out to steady her.

"How dare you!" Vashti cried. "You forget yourself!"

Apologizing, the woman withdrew. Touching another person was unthinkable.

"Where are we now?" Vashti demanded.

"We are over Asia," the attendant answered, with awkward courtesy.

"Asia?" Vashti repeated. "Ah yes—the Mongols came from it."

Below them, the ruins of Simla—once a thriving city—lay exposed to the open air.

"Have you heard of the Mongols? Of Brisbane?"

"No, ma'am."

"Brisbane also once stood under the open sky," Vashti said coldly.

The attendant pointed to the looming mountains. "The Himalayas."

"Foolish name," Vashti muttered.

"They were once called the Roof of the World," said the attendant. "Only the gods, it was believed, could exist above them."

"How we have advanced, thanks to the Machine!" said Vashti.

"How we have advanced, thanks to the Machine!" echoed the man who had dropped his Book.

The day dragged onward. The passengers withdrew into their cabins, avoiding each other with a deep-rooted physical repulsion, longing for the comforting sameness of the Earth's underground hives. At midday Vashti glimpsed black, featureless mountains—the Caucasus—and closed the blind in disdain. At evening, she glimpsed a golden sea, dotted with islands and a lone peninsula.

"No ideas here," she murmured, and concealed Greece behind the blind.

Part 2: The Mending Apparatus

By a vestibule, by a lift, by a tubular railway, by a platform, by a sliding door—by retracing, in reverse, every stage of her outward journey, Vashti at last arrived at her son's room. It was, as she had expected, identical to her own. She might well have declared the visit a waste of time. The buttons, the levers, the Book resting upon the reading-desk, the temperature, the quality of the air, the precise level of illumination—every detail was the same. And if Kuno himself, flesh of her flesh, now

stood close at hand, what true gain was there in that? She was too well-bred to greet him with any physical gesture. Averting her eyes, she spoke, formal and detached:

"Here I am. I have endured the most terrible journey and greatly hindered the development of my soul. It is not worth it, Kuno, it is not worth it. My time is too precious. Sunlight almost touched me, and I encountered the rudest people imaginable. I can stay only a few minutes. Say what you must say, and then I must return."

"I have been threatened with Homelessness," said Kuno.

At this, she looked at him properly for the first time.

"I have been threatened with Homelessness," he repeated, "and I could not tell you such a thing through the Machine."

Homelessness meant death. It meant exposure to the air, which was fatal.

"I have been outside since I last spoke to you. The tremendous thing has happened—and they have discovered me."

"But why should you not go outside?" she exclaimed. "It is perfectly legal, perfectly mechanical, to visit the surface of the earth. Only recently, I attended a lecture on the sea; there—" "But why should you not go outside?" she exclaimed. "There is no objection to surface visits, provided they are undertaken in moderation, and with due care."

Kuno shook his head.

"It is not a question of permission," he said. "The surface of the Earth is only accessible if the Machine allows it. I made my own way—illegally. I broke through the ventilation shafts. I was curious. I wanted to see for myself."

She recoiled.

"You are mad!" she whispered. "You are mad!"

"The Machine forbids direct access," he continued, his voice calm. "It permits lectures, photographs, accounts. It does not permit experience. I disobeyed. I went out into the outer air."

Vashti covered her face with her hands.

"It is not allowed," she moaned. "It is not allowed. You must be punished."

"They are punishing me," he said. "I have been threatened with Homelessness."

There was silence.

Vashti could scarcely believe what she heard. To be Homeless meant not only death, but disgrace; to be cast out into the outer air, deprived of all the mechanisms on which life depended—it was a punishment so terrible that few dared even to think of it. Yet her son spoke of it quietly, almost with pride.

"I will tell you," he said, "what happened. I had an experience. I saw life. I saw something that was not made by the Machine—something real."

She shook her head, incredulous.

"Nothing is real except the Machine," she said. "The Machine is everything. You must have been dreaming."

"I was not dreaming," said Kuno. "I tell you, I have seen it. I have seen the stars from the surface. Not through a cinematophote or a lecture plate—but with my own eyes. I have breathed the air—a different air from this, raw and unfiltered. I have seen the sky, vast and terrible, stretching overhead."

She moaned again.

"How could you endure it?" she cried. "The cold, the darkness, the germs?"

"I endured it," said Kuno. "Because I had to know. Because something within me, something I cannot explain, drove me to it. I had to break free, if only for a moment."

"But it is all dust and mud!" she protested. "The surface of the Earth is only dust and mud. It is unfit for human life."

"It is glorious," he said simply. "It is glorious."

For a long moment neither spoke.

Then Vashti, mastering herself, said coldly:

"You are a fool. And you will be punished, as you deserve. The Machine is everywhere. You cannot escape it. It cares for us, it provides for us, it is all we need. There is nothing beyond it."

"There is," he said. "I have seen it. I know."

"There is," he repeated. "I have seen it. I know."

He leaned forward, speaking in low, urgent tones, as if he feared the Machine might overhear.

"I went up through the shafts," he said. "I found a place where the air was thin, and I forced a metal panel open. It was not easy. My muscles were weak from living so

long under the surface. But at last, I came out. I stood beneath the sky. I stood on the surface of the Earth.”

She shrank back against the wall.

“I saw a tree,” he continued. “Not a picture of a tree—a real tree, living, swaying in the wind. I touched it. The bark was rough under my fingers. I heard the leaves rustle above me. I felt the Earth beneath my feet. It was not dead, as they tell us. It was alive.”

“No!” she cried. “No! The surface is uninhabitable! It was ruined long ago! Only the Machine is alive now!”

“The Machine is dying,” said Kuno.

She stared at him, and for a moment, he pitied her. She was so small, so helpless, so bound to the system that enslaved them both.

“The Machine is breaking down,” he said. “It cannot be repaired. It was too complex, too vast. They do not understand it any longer. No one understands it. They only press the buttons and hope.”

She shook her head, stubborn.

“The Machine will save us,” she said. “It always has.”

He did not argue. He simply looked at her with sorrowful eyes.

“I have seen people who live on the surface,” he said. “They have escaped the Machine. They are free. They enjoy something greater than the Machine. They call it Life.”

She gasped.

“There is no Life outside the Machine!” she cried. “There cannot be!”

But Kuno only said, “You shall see.”

He fell silent. And Vashti, trembling, realized that she must return to her room quickly, before her soul suffered further contamination.

But already the Machine was failing.

The next day there was an unexpected stoppage. The music did not play. The food-tubes failed. People panicked, pressing buttons in vain. Repairs were slow. There were whispers of rebellion, of decay.

Vashti clung to her Book and prayed to the Machine. She prayed as one might pray to a god.

But the Book was useless now.

The lights flickered, dimmed, and finally went out. The air grew stale. The floors vibrated with the groans of failing engines. People, accustomed to isolation, rushed into the passages, crying out for help that did not come. They trampled each other in their terror.

The Mending Apparatus, that vast unseen force that had always restored order, was itself broken. It would never work again.

Vashti, suffocating, struggled toward her son. She stumbled through the darkness, calling his name.

At last she found him. He was waiting for her, calm amid the chaos.

“Kuno!” she gasped.

He caught her as she fell, and for the first time in her life, she felt another human being’s arms around her.

“My son!” she whispered.

And in that moment, as the Machine collapsed around them, Vashti saw—for the first time—what her life had lacked.

“I have been wrong,” she said, and died.

The final noises died away. The last engines failed. The last lights went out.

And far above, on the ruined surface of the Earth, free men and women gathered once more under the open sky.

The Machine had stopped.