

Bored is fine

A short book about filling every quiet minute with noise or
a screen, and what goes missing when you do

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First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can
contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

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Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit. There's a quiet minute coming, the walk to the car, the kettle, the queue, the shower, the last stretch before sleep, and before it arrives you've put something in it. A podcast, the radio, a screen, an audiobook. You'd have to think hard to name the last time you had ten minutes with nothing on, and if you sat in one now you'd feel a restlessness within the first minute and reach for something to end it.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the habit makes sense from the inside. The fill is pleasant, some of it is worth hearing, and the quiet is uncomfortable in a way that's been measured. The second is that the discomfort is a fact about the first few minutes and not a verdict on quiet, that boredom is a signal with a job and the fill silences it without doing the job, and that there are things which only happen in a mind with nothing put into it. Ideas finishing. The day being sorted. Noticing where you are. Those are the things that go missing, and they've been going missing for a while. The third is practical. One stretch of your day is quiet. Gaps under five minutes stay empty. Everything else you put on, you choose, and you listen to it. Chapters 19 to 22 cover how.

This book doesn't ask you to give up podcasts, radio or television, to meditate, or to sit in silence for an hour. It asks you to stop filling every minute by default, and to find out what arrives in the ones you leave.

Three cautions.

If quiet brings not restlessness but dread, or racing thoughts, or thoughts that frighten you, that isn't the itch this book describes and the book isn't the answer. Talk to a GP, or in England refer yourself to NHS talking therapies. The fill may have been doing a job for you that needs a better tool.

If you have tinnitus, sound in the background is part of how many people manage it, and nothing here asks you to remove it. The NHS has guidance on tinnitus and it's the guidance to follow, not this book.

And if the reason every minute is filled is that the unfilled ones have been low for a fortnight or more, that's a change in your health. See a GP.

The notes at the back give my sources and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

The headphones go in

You leave the house at ten past eight. Before the door has closed the headphones are in and the podcast is on, the one about history, or the one about the news, or whichever one is next in the queue. The walk to the car is four minutes. At the car the podcast comes through the speakers. At work you take the headphones out and, in the kitchen while the kettle boils, put them back in for the two minutes it takes. At lunch you're at the desk with a screen. At the post office there's a queue and the phone is out before you've joined it.

In the evening the radio goes on when you come in and stays on while you cook, though you couldn't say afterwards what was on it. In the shower there's a speaker. In bed there's an audiobook, set to stop after thirty minutes, and you're asleep before it does, and if you wake at three you put it on again. Somewhere in that day there was not one minute in which nothing was coming in. If you try to remember the last day that had one, you'll go back to spring, or a power cut, or being ill.

These are invented, but I'd be surprised if the shape were far off. Notice what's happened without anyone deciding it. Every quiet minute has a thing in it. Not because you chose each one, but because the fill has become what quiet is for, and a minute without it now feels like a minute with something wrong.

Some words. I'll call whatever goes into a quiet minute **the fill**, whether it's a podcast, the radio, a screen, an audiobook or music you're not listening to. A period with nothing on is **a quiet stretch**,

and a small one is **a quiet minute**. Sound on in the background that nobody is attending to I'll call **the hum**. The restlessness in the first minutes with nothing on is **the itch**. Where your mind goes when nothing's put in it is **the drift**. **What goes missing** is the things that only happen in quiet, and chapter 18 lists them. A podcast or programme put on to be attended to is **a chosen listen**. And the fill going on without a decision, which is most of it, is **the default**.

Before you go on, do one thing. Tomorrow, keep a list of every quiet minute that could have been. The walk, the kettle, the queue, the shower, the wait, the drive, the last stretch in bed. Next to each, write what went into it. At the end of the day, count the ones that stayed empty. For most people who do this, the count is zero, and the list is longer than they'd have guessed. That's the habit, on a page, and it's what the rest of the book is about.

Why the fill seems right

Before I argue with the fill, I want to be fair to it, because most of it is good and the people who fill every minute are usually the curious ones.

It's pleasant. A good podcast is good company. The radio in the kitchen makes cooking better. Music in the shower is one of the small joys of a morning.

It's learning. You know more about the Byzantine Empire than you did a year ago. You've heard interviews you'd never have read. The fill is an education you didn't have time for, fitted into minutes you weren't using.

It's company. A voice in your ear on a walk is a walk with someone. The house with the radio on is a house with people in it.

It's efficient. The walk to the car is four wasted minutes unless something's in them. The queue is dead time. The fill turns dead time into something.

Silence is awkward, alone as well as in company. A quiet room has a quality to it that you'd rather not sit in.

The mind goes to bad places. Left alone, it finds the thing you said in the meeting, the email you haven't answered, the worry about your mother. The fill keeps it somewhere better.

Everyone does it. Look down any street. The fill is what a modern head has in it.

It's habit. The headphones go in at the door because they've gone in at the door for years, and the hand that reaches for the radio in the kitchen is a hand that's reached for it since you moved in. Nobody decides the fill each morning. It's the shape the morning has.

And it's free, or nearly. There's more good audio available than you could hear in a lifetime, and it costs nothing to have it on.

There are needs under all of this. For pleasure in ordinary minutes. For learning. For company. For the mind not to go where it goes. Those are real, and the method later in the book keeps most of the fill for exactly those reasons. What I'll show is that the fill, as a default rather than a choice, meets the needs while quietly costing something that only quiet provides, and that the discomfort it's protecting you from is smaller and shorter than it feels, and has a job to do.

"Silence is uncomfortable"

Start with the belief that's true, because the rest of the book depends on being honest about it.

Timothy Wilson and colleagues, in 2014, ran eleven studies in which people were asked to sit alone in a room for six to fifteen minutes with nothing to do but think. Most didn't enjoy it. Given the choice, they preferred mundane external activities, and in one study, a good proportion chose to give themselves a mild electric shock rather than sit with their thoughts, including people who had earlier said they'd pay to avoid the shock. The researchers' conclusion was that most people would rather be doing something than nothing, even when the something is unpleasant.

An earlier book in this series, about the phone, uses this study to grant that empty moments are genuinely uncomfortable, and I'm using it for the same reason. The itch is real. You're not imagining it, and you're not weak for feeling it. A room with nothing in it produces, in most people, a restlessness strong enough that a shock seems preferable, and a walk to the car with no podcast produces a smaller version of the same thing.

But look at what the study measured. Six to fifteen minutes. People who'd been told to sit and think, in a bare room, with the instruction that they should entertain themselves with their thoughts and nothing else. That's the itch at its worst, and it's a fact about the first minutes of quiet in a strange setting for people who weren't used to it. It isn't a fact about quiet as such, and it isn't a

verdict on what happens after the itch, because the study didn't run long enough to find out, and neither, if you've filled every minute for years, have you.

So the belief is right about the first minute and wrong about what it means. Silence is uncomfortable, at first, for almost everyone, and the discomfort is what the fill has been treating. What the fill has also done is make sure you never get past the discomfort to find out whether anything follows it. Chapter 16 is about how the itch behaves when you stay with it for a few minutes longer than Wilson's participants were asked to, and chapter 18 is about what turns up on the other side.

"My mind goes to bad places"

Here's the reason most people give when pressed. The trouble with quiet isn't the quiet. It's what the mind does in it. Left alone it goes to the meeting, the unanswered email, the mother, the thing that happened in 2019, and none of that is a good place to spend a walk.

Matthew Killingsworth and Daniel Gilbert, in 2010, used a phone app to ask thousands of people, at random moments through the day, what they were doing, what they were thinking about and how they felt. They found that people's minds were on something other than what they were doing almost half the time, and that when the mind was wandering, people were, on average, less happy than when it wasn't, whatever they were doing. A wandering mind, the title said, is an unhappy mind. The earlier book on the phone offers this as honest counter-evidence, and so do I. The drift often isn't pleasant. The bad places are real.

But look at what's in the bad places. The meeting. The email. The mother. Those aren't random unpleasantness. They're the day, and the week, arriving to be dealt with. The mind goes there because those are the things that need attention, and quiet is the first time all day that attention has been available. What the fill does isn't remove them. It postpones them. They're still there at three in the morning, when the audiobook has stopped and there's nothing left to postpone with, which is why three in the morning is where a lot of filled lives do their thinking.

There's a difference between the drift and the going over that an earlier book in this series calls a replay, and I'd ask you to notice which one you're avoiding. A replay is the same scene, again, with no new information. The drift is where the meeting gets filed, the email gets a first sentence, the worry about your mother becomes a plan to ring her. That's not a bad place. It's the day being sorted, and it feels unpleasant in the way that sorting does, and the fill has been standing between you and the sorting for long enough that the pile has grown.

Killingsworth and Gilbert's participants were unhappier while wandering, and I don't doubt it. What the study can't tell you is what those minutes were doing for them. Chapter 18 will suggest that some of what they were doing was work, and that a person who never lets their mind wander has a mind full of unfinished business that's found a slot at three in the morning.

"I'm learning something"

This is the belief that makes the fill feel like a virtue. It's not noise. It's a history series. An interview with someone who knows things. You're using the walk to become a better-informed person, and a book that wants the walk back is a book against learning.

I'd separate input from what happens to input, because the fill supplies the first and prevents the second.

Benjamin Baird and colleagues, in 2012, gave people a creativity problem, then a break, and then the problem again. During the break, some did a demanding task, some an undemanding one, some rested, and some had no break. The people who'd done the undemanding task, the one that let the mind wander, improved most on the problems they'd already seen. Not the ones who rested, and not the ones who worked hard at something else. The undemanding stretch was where the incubation happened, and it was associated with more mind wandering, not with more deliberate thinking about the problem.

Now apply that to the podcast. You've heard an hour about the Byzantine Empire, and it was excellent, and then the next episode started, and then the radio, and then the audiobook. At no point was there an undemanding stretch in which the hour could do anything. It went in and the next thing went in on top of it, and what you have is a great deal of input and very little that's finished forming. Ask yourself what you remember from last month's episodes. In my experience the answer is the feeling of having learned something and not much of the something.

A field that's never left fallow is a fair comparison for two sentences. It takes seed every season, and it yields less each year, and the farmer wonders why.

Learning isn't only hearing. It's hearing and then having a walk in which the heard thing turns into a thought of your own, or doesn't, and the walk is where the fill goes. A person who listens to one episode and then walks in quiet has learned more from it than a person who listens to three, because the first person gave the episode somewhere to go. The method in chapter 21 keeps the podcast and moves it to a chosen time, and chapter 19 gives it the quiet stretch afterwards. That's not less learning. It's the half of learning you've been skipping.

"It's just background"

Much of the fill isn't listened to. The radio in the kitchen, the television on in the room where nobody's watching, the playlist during work. It's background. It isn't taking anything from you because you're not attending to it.

Erin Westgate and Timothy Wilson, in 2018, set out a model of boredom that's useful here. In their account, boredom is what you feel when your attention isn't successfully engaged in something you value. The mismatch can go two ways. Understimulation, where there's not enough to engage with. And overstimulation, where there's too much, or it's too demanding, and attention can't settle. Boredom, on this model, comes from both, and the second is the one that a filled life produces without noticing.

The hum is a demand on attention. A radio talking in the kitchen is a voice, and voices pull at the part of the mind that processes speech, whether or not you've decided to listen. A television on in the room is movement and faces, and the eyes go to it. You're not attending to the hum. The hum is attending to you, in small tugs, all evening, and the result is a person who's slightly restless without knowing why, in a room that never quite goes quiet.

This is my reading of the model rather than a finding from it, and I'll say so. But it explains something that filled people describe, which is being tired in the evening in a way that doesn't match what they did, and being unable to settle to anything in a house

where something is always on. The hum feels like nothing and costs something, and the cost is attention paid in pieces to a thing you didn't choose to hear.

Background television deserves a paragraph, because it's the largest hum in most houses. A programme nobody is watching is a fill for a room rather than a person, and it does to the room what the podcast does to the walk. Conversations happen over it, and are shorter for it. Children learn that a room has a screen on in it. And nobody can say, at the end of the evening, what was on, which is the sign that it was hum and not a chosen thing.

The method doesn't ask you to switch it all off. It asks you to notice which of the sound in your day is being listened to and which is hum, and chapter 21 is about keeping the first and letting the second go quiet.

"I'd be bored"

Here's the plain fear, and it's the title of the book. Take the fill away and you'd be bored, and bored is a bad thing to be.

John Eastwood and colleagues, in 2012, offered a definition of boredom that most researchers in the field now work from. Boredom is the aversive experience of wanting to engage in satisfying activity and being unable to. It happens when you can't get your attention to settle on anything, inside or outside your head, you're aware that you can't, and you blame the situation for it. That's what the itch is, in a laboratory's language. Wanting to engage, not managing to, and minding.

Shane Bench and Heather Lench, in 2013, asked what boredom is for, and argued from the evidence that it's a signal. Like other emotions, it has a job. When what you're doing has stopped being worthwhile, boredom makes it unpleasant to continue, pulls your attention off it and raises your readiness to look for something else. It's the feeling that says this isn't working, do something different. Without it, people would carry on with things that had stopped paying, and miss the things that would have.

Put those together and boredom looks different. It isn't a fault in you or a failure of the minute. It's a signal that your attention wants something to settle on and hasn't found it, and the signal has a job, which is to move you toward something worth doing. The fill answers the signal by silencing it. The podcast goes in, attention settles on the podcast, the boredom stops, and the job doesn't get

done, because the thing the boredom was pointing at, the unwritten thing, the unrun friend, the plan for the weekend that hasn't been made, is still there with nothing pointing at it.

A person who fills every quiet minute never hears the signal long enough to find out what it's pointing at. They know they're restless. They don't know what about, because the fill arrives before the restlessness has had time to become specific. Chapter 19's quiet stretch is partly about letting it. The itch, stayed with for a few minutes, usually turns into a thought about what you'd rather be doing, and that thought is boredom doing its job, and it's the thing the fill has been preventing.

So yes, you'd be bored. For a few minutes. And bored is fine, because bored is a signal, and a signal you can hear is worth more than one you've muffled.

"Boredom is a waste of time"

Even granting that boredom has a job, there's a belief that a bored minute is an empty one. Nothing happens in it. It's time subtracted from the day.

Sandi Mann and Rebekah Cadman, in 2014, ran two studies in which people were given something boring to do, copying numbers from a phone directory or reading them, and then a creative task, coming up with uses for a pair of cups. People who'd done the boring task first produced more ideas than people who hadn't. In the second study, the boring reading task did more for some kinds of creative work than the boring writing task, and the researchers suggested that daydreaming, which reading allows more of, might be the link. These were small studies, eighty and ninety people, with paper cups, and I'd hold the numbers lightly. But the direction fits Baird's incubation finding from chapter 5. An undemanding stretch, in which the mind is free to wander because the task doesn't need it, is where new ideas come from.

That's the opposite of empty. A bored minute is a minute in which the mind, having nothing to attend to outside, attends to the inside, and the inside is where the half-formed things are. The solution to the problem at work. The realisation about what you actually want to do about the house. The sentence for the difficult email. Those don't arrive during a podcast, because during a podcast the mind is attending to the podcast. They arrive in the shower, on the walk, in the queue, in exactly the minutes the fill has taken, and people

who've filled every minute for years say they've stopped having ideas, and wonder whether they've got older, and the answer is that they've got fuller.

There's a version of this in every trade. The writer who solves the chapter while washing up. The engineer who sees the fault in the car park. The parent who works out what's wrong with the child on the drive home with the radio off. None of them were working. They were bored, briefly, and the bored minute did what the desk couldn't.

So a bored minute isn't a waste. It's the only kind of minute in which some things can happen, and a day with none in it is a day in which those things didn't, and you'll have noticed the absence as a vague sense of not thinking as well as you used to, and put it down to something else.

"I don't have time to do nothing"

The efficiency argument is the one that sounds most adult. You're busy. The walk to the car is four minutes and the queue is ten, and those minutes were going to be lost anyway, so the fill turns waste into value. Doing nothing is a luxury for people with more time than you.

Look at the arithmetic. The walk to the car takes four minutes with a podcast on and four minutes without. The queue is ten minutes filled and ten minutes empty. The fill doesn't save any time. It spends the same time on something, and the question is only what that something is. Chapters 5 and 8 are about what the empty version would have been spent on, which is the sorting of the day and the arriving of ideas, and those aren't nothing. They're the work that doesn't get done at a desk because the desk has a screen on it.

There's also what "doing nothing" means. The person on a walk with no podcast isn't doing nothing. They're walking, and noticing the street, and letting the meeting file itself, and having the thought about the email. That's a full four minutes. The person with the podcast is walking and listening, and the listening has taken the slot that the noticing and the filing and the thought were going to use, and they'll need another slot later, and there won't be one, because every slot is filled.

The efficiency argument gets the direction wrong. A day with no quiet in it isn't a day that's used every minute. It's a day in which a whole category of work has had every one of its slots taken by

input, and the work has piled up, and the pile is what you're lying awake with. The four minutes to the car were never wasted. They were the only time the day had for the things that need no screen, and the fill is what wastes them.

There's a version of the efficiency argument that's about guilt rather than time. A quiet walk feels like idleness, and idleness feels wrong, and the podcast is a way of not being idle. I'd only say that the person who solves the problem in the shower wasn't idle, and that the guilt is a leftover from a picture of productivity that counts input and not output.

If you genuinely haven't got time to do nothing, that's the strongest reason in this book to leave the walk empty. The busier the day, the more it needs sorting, and the sorting happens in the quiet stretch or it happens at three in the morning, and one of those is four minutes on a pavement.

"The phone's the problem, not the podcast"

Some readers will feel that this book has the wrong target. The phone is the problem, everyone knows that, and there's an earlier book in this series about it. A podcast on a walk is a different thing. It's wholesome. It's what people did with the radio for a century.

I'd agree that the phone is worse in some ways, and the earlier book says why. One study it uses is worth borrowing. Dora and colleagues, in 2021, had eighty-three PhD students rate their tiredness and boredom hourly for a period while their phone use was logged. People were more likely to pick up the phone when they were tired or bored, and they reported more tiredness and boredom afterwards, not less. The phone answered boredom and produced more of it. That study was small and exploratory and about phones, and I wouldn't carry its numbers to a podcast.

But look at what's common to the phone and the podcast. Both go into a quiet minute by default. Both take the attention that the quiet minute would have had. Both prevent the drift, the sorting and the incubation that chapters 4, 5 and 8 described. The phone does it with more churn and the podcast with more content, and the podcast is better company, and neither leaves the minute empty. The habit this book is about isn't the phone. It's the filling, and a life in which every minute has a wholesome podcast in it is exactly as full as one in which every minute has a feed, and has exactly as little room in it for anything to form.

There's a way the podcast is harder to give up than the phone, and it's worth naming. The phone feels like a vice, so people are ready to hear that it costs something. The podcast feels like a virtue, and chapter 5 was about why that feeling protects it. Nobody's ashamed of listening to history on the way to work, and so nobody asks what the history is displacing.

So keep the podcast, and keep the distinction, and apply the method to both. The earlier book has the arrangements for the phone. This one has the arrangements for everything that goes into a quiet minute, and the podcast is on the list, not because it's bad, but because it's there.

"I need it to fall asleep"

The last fill of the day is the one people defend hardest. The audiobook, the podcast, the radio on low. Without it the mind races and sleep won't come, and a book that takes it away is a book that costs you your nights.

Two things, and then a concession.

The first is what the last quiet stretch of the day is for. It's the only stretch, in a filled life, where the day could be sorted, and chapter 4 is about why that sorting feels unpleasant and matters. If every waking minute has been filled, the mind arrives at bedtime with a whole day unfiled, and when the head hits the pillow the filing starts, and it feels like racing, and the audiobook goes on to stop it. The racing isn't a fault of the night. It's the day's sorting, arriving in the only slot left, and being postponed one more time, to three in the morning, where the audiobook goes on again.

The second is that the audiobook isn't a chosen listen. You're not attending to it. You're using it to drown the drift, and you couldn't say, in the morning, what happened in the chapter. That's the hum, in the dark, and the hum has the cost chapter 6 described, which is attention paid in pieces to a thing you didn't choose, at the one point in the day when attention should be winding down.

Now the concession. Some people do sleep better with sound, and the book isn't going to argue with your nights. If the audiobook works, keep it. What I'd ask is two changes. Make it a chosen listen, a chapter you want to hear, with a timer, rather than a hum that

runs until you're gone. And give the day a quiet stretch earlier, the walk home, the last ten minutes before bed with the light on and nothing playing, so that the sorting has a slot before the pillow and the pillow doesn't have to be it. Two earlier books in this series are about the evening and about three in the morning, and they're named in the notes. The short version is that a mind with somewhere to do its sorting sleeps better than one that's been fed input until the last second, and that the racing you're drowning is the sound of a day that never got a minute.

"I can't concentrate without background noise"

Here's an objection from people who work with music on, or in cafes, or with the radio in the next room. Silence is where their attention falls apart. Sound is how they focus. A book against sound is a book against how they work.

Two things. The first is that some work does go better with some sound, for some people, and I'm not going to dispute your desk. If a playlist gets you through the spreadsheet, that's a chosen sound for a chosen task and it's not what this book is about.

The second is that the desk isn't the walk. The fill this book is about is the default sound in the minutes that had no task in them, the walk, the kettle, the queue, the shower. Those minutes weren't asking for concentration. They were the minutes in which concentration could rest and the drift could happen, and the sound that helps you concentrate at a desk is doing something quite different in a queue, which is preventing the one kind of thinking the queue was good for.

So the test isn't the desk. Keep whatever helps you there. The test is the walk. Try the walk to the car with nothing on, four minutes, and notice that concentration isn't what's being asked of you, and that the itch you feel isn't a failure of focus. It's chapter 3's itch, the ordinary discomfort of a mind that's been used to input meeting a minute without any, and it passes.

There's a version of this belief that's worth taking more seriously, which is that for some people a quiet mind isn't restless but frightening, with racing or intrusive thoughts that sound has been keeping down. The preface said this and chapter 23 says it again. If that's you, the fill has been doing a job, and the job needs a better tool than a podcast, and a GP is where to find one. The method in this book is for the ordinary itch, and if what you meet in the quiet is more than that, please don't push through it on the strength of a chapter.

"It calms me down"

Some readers put the fill on for a reason that isn't boredom or company. It's nerves. The podcast on the walk to work keeps the dread about the day at bay. The radio in the kitchen keeps the evening from getting too quiet in a way that lets worry in. The audiobook at night is the difference between sleeping and lying there with the heart going. The fill is a calming thing, and taking it away is taking away calm.

I'd take this seriously, and I'd separate two versions of it.

The first is the ordinary one. The quiet minute has the itch in it, and the itch is unpleasant, and the fill ends it, and ending an unpleasant thing feels like calm. That's chapter 3's finding, and the calm is real, and it's the calm of not having to sit with the first three minutes. What the fill also does is make sure the three minutes never become four, and chapter 16 is about what happens at four. In my observation the itch, stayed with, turns into the drift, and the drift is calmer than the fill, because it's the mind doing what it does when nothing is coming in, rather than the mind being kept off something. The calm the fill gives is the calm of a lid. The calm on the far side of the itch is the calm of a thing that's been let out and turned out to be smaller than the lid suggested.

The second version is different and the preface named it. If what the quiet lets in isn't the itch but dread, or a heart that races, or thoughts you'd rather not have, then the fill has been doing a job, and it's a job that matters, and this book's method isn't the tool for it. Don't take the fill away from a mind that's using it to stay level

and expect the drift to arrive. See a GP, or refer yourself to NHS talking therapies, and let someone who knows the territory help you work out what the quiet has in it. The podcast can stay on until then. Chapter 23 says this again.

How do you tell which version you've got? The test is what the quiet contains at minute five. If it's restlessness that's fading and a thought about the email, it's the itch, and the method applies. If it's something that's climbing, and you'd describe it as fear rather than boredom, it's the second, and the method waits. Most readers of this book have the first. A few have the second and have been calling it boredom for years because boredom is the word the fill made available.

"It's company"

The voice in the ear is company. Alone in the house, the radio is people. On the walk, the podcast host is a friend who talks about interesting things and doesn't need anything back. A book that takes the fill away is a book that leaves you alone.

I'd take that seriously, because loneliness is real and the fill does cover it, and covering isn't nothing. But look at what kind of company a podcast is. It's a voice that can't hear you. It doesn't know you're there, doesn't ask about your day, doesn't notice when you go quiet. It's the experience of being with people without any of the things that being with people does, and a person who fills the house with voices can go a week without a conversation and not feel the absence, because the voices sound like the thing that's absent.

That's the cost. The fill covers the loneliness well enough that the loneliness doesn't get acted on. An earlier book in this series is about ringing people first, and its argument is that the quiet in a life is what tells you to ring someone, and a life with no quiet in it never gets the message. The podcast host is company in the way a photograph of a meal is dinner.

Compare the walk with a podcast to the walk with a friend. The second one is slower, and has pauses in it, and you hear about their week and they hear about yours, and you arrive knowing something about a person who knows something about you. The first arrives knowing something about the Byzantine Empire. Both

are pleasant. Only one is company, and the podcast has been standing in for the other so smoothly that the other has stopped happening.

Keep the radio in the kitchen if you like it. But if the reason it's on is that the house is too quiet without people in it, the answer to that is people, and the quiet is the thing that would have sent you to find them. Chapter 18 puts this on the list of what goes missing.

"Everyone's got headphones in"

Look down any street and the fill is what a head has in it. Headphones on the walk, screens in the queue, radio in every kitchen. It's normal, and normal isn't a problem.

Two things. The first is that normal describes the street and not the cost. The street is full of people who haven't had a quiet minute since spring, and that's normal now, and it's also a street full of people whose days aren't getting sorted and whose ideas aren't arriving and who are lying awake with the sorting at three. Normal and costless aren't the same, and the street can't tell you which this is.

The second is the children, because the normal is being learned. A child in a waiting room with a screen, a child in the car with a screen, a child at the table with a parent's phone propped against the ketchup, is a child learning that a quiet minute is a thing to be filled, at the age when what a minute is for gets decided. That child will grow up never having sat in a queue with nothing, and the itch, when it comes at twenty, will feel like an emergency, because it's never once been allowed to pass.

Children used to be bored. It was the ordinary condition of a long afternoon, and out of it came the games, the drawings, the walk to the friend's house, the reading of whatever was in the house. Bench and Lench's account of boredom as the push toward something new is a description of what a bored child does, and it's the thing

the screen in the waiting room prevents. A child who's never bored is a child who's never had to find the something, and finding the something is most of what a childhood is for.

I'm not going to tell you how to raise your children in a book about your own headphones. But if you want one reason to leave the walk empty that has nothing to do with you, it's that a child who sees a parent walk with nothing in their ears learns that it can be done, and that's a lesson the street isn't teaching.

"I've tried it and it was awful"

You may have tried this already. A walk with nothing on, a shower without the speaker, and it was every bit as unpleasant as chapter 3 said. Restless, twitchy, reaching for the phone that wasn't there, and you concluded that quiet isn't for you.

Go back to Wilson's participants. They were asked for six to fifteen minutes, cold, in a bare room, having filled every minute of their lives up to that point. That's the hardest version of quiet there is, and it's roughly what you tried. A fifteen-minute walk with nothing on, after years of fill, is the shock experiment without the shock, and the fact that it was awful is what the study predicted.

Two things follow. The first is that the itch is the beginning, not the whole. Wilson's studies stopped at fifteen minutes and so did your walk, and neither found out what happens after, because the itch was the exit. In my experience, and this is observation rather than a finding, the itch is loudest in the first two or three minutes and quieter by five, and by ten something else has usually turned up, a thought that finishes or a thing you notice, and the last five minutes of a fifteen-minute quiet walk are nothing like the first five. You've only ever had the first five.

The second is to start smaller. Not fifteen minutes. Three. The walk to the car, with nothing on, four minutes, once a day. The itch will come and you'll be at the car before it's got going. Do that for a week and the itch is shorter, because the mind has learned that quiet minutes end and nothing bad happens in them. Then the

kettle. Then the shower. Then, by the third or fourth week, a fifteen-minute walk that has the itch in the first three minutes and the drift in the rest.

The itch passes. It passes faster each time. And the awfulness you remember was the first five minutes of a thing you'd never done, and you stopped before the second five, and the second five is the point.

What the fill costs you

I've argued the mechanism. This chapter is the bill, and it's paid in a currency that doesn't show up anywhere, which is why it's gone unnoticed.

The ideas. Baird's incubation and Mann and Cadman's paper cups. A mind with no undemanding stretch in it is a mind with nowhere to finish anything, and the ideas that would have arrived in the shower didn't, and you've put the absence down to age or tiredness or work.

The noticing. You walk the same street twice a day and couldn't describe it. You haven't noticed the house that's been painted, the shop that's closed, the tree. Noticing happens in quiet, and the street has been going past a person listening to something else.

The day unsorted. Chapter 4. The meeting and the email and the mother arrive at three in the morning because there was no earlier slot, and the audiobook goes on, and they arrive tomorrow instead.

The sleep. A day that gets no sorting sorts itself at the pillow, and a pillow with an audiobook on it postpones it to three. Two earlier books in this series are about what that costs.

The capacity to be alone with your thoughts. Wilson's participants couldn't do fifteen minutes. A person who's filled every minute for years has lost, through disuse, an ability that most people had at eight, which is to be alone in their own head and find it bearable, and the loss is what makes the itch feel like an emergency.

The signal. Bench and Lench. Boredom was telling you that something needed changing, and the fill turned it off before it could say what. The job you should have left, the friend you should have rung, the thing you wanted to make. All of those were pointed at by a restlessness you never let become specific.

The people. Conversations over the hum are shorter. A partner who's spoken to over a podcast learns to wait for the episode to end, and then doesn't bother. Children talk to a parent whose ears are full and stop.

The taste for it. This one's slow. A person who's filled every minute for years has come to prefer the fill to the quiet, not because the fill is better but because the quiet has become strange. The preference feels like a fact about you. It's a fact about the last few years, and it reverses in weeks.

And the child watching, learning that a quiet minute is a thing to fill.

None of this is dramatic. It's the slow cost of a habit that feels like enrichment, and it's why the fill has gone unquestioned for so long.

What goes missing

The subtitle of this book promises a list, and this is it. These are the things that only happen in a mind with nothing put into it, and they're the things a filled day doesn't have.

The thought that finishes. You've had the beginning of an idea a hundred times this year and the end of one rarely, because the end needs a quiet stretch to arrive in and the podcast started. Baird's finding is that the end comes in undemanding minutes, and you've had none.

The street. The house being painted, the neighbour you'd have said hello to, the light on the church at a quarter to eight. The NHS lists paying attention to the present moment among its steps to mental wellbeing, and I'd put it plainer. You live somewhere and you haven't seen it for a year.

The decision that arrives. Not the one you sit down to make, but the one that turns up in the shower, already made, because the mind had been working on it in the quiet and the quiet was where it could tell you. Filled people describe decisions as things they can't make. They can. They've just filled every slot in which the answer would have surfaced.

The memory of the day. A day sorted in the drift is a day you can remember. A day filled from waking to sleep runs together, and the weeks run together, and people say the year has gone fast, and the year went fast because none of it was filed.

The child's remark. Said in the car, over the radio, and not heard, and not repeated, because children learn quickly which remarks land and which don't.

Noticing how you are. Tired, hungry, flat, unhappy, fine. An earlier book in this series is about reaching for something at the first flicker of a feeling, and the fill is the most constant reach of all, because it arrives before the feeling has had time to become a feeling. A person who's never in quiet doesn't know how they are, and finds out at three in the morning or at the doctor's.

The signal, and what it points at. Chapter 7. The restlessness that would have told you the job's wrong or the friend's been unrung, silenced before it could.

And rest. Not sleep, but the ordinary rest of a mind that isn't taking anything in. The fill is input, and input is work for the part of you that processes it, and a day of unbroken input is a day with no rest in it, whatever the sofa says.

These are what goes missing. None of them is dramatic and all of them are yours, and the walk to the car is where you get the first one back.

One quiet stretch a day

The next three chapters are the method, and the method is small, because it asks for one thing to be taken out of the day rather than anything put in.

Pick one. The walk to the car. The shower. The kettle and the ten minutes around it. The drive home. Pick the stretch that's easiest to leave empty, not the hardest, because the first week is about finding out that a quiet stretch ends and nothing bad happens in it. For most people the walk is right. It has a beginning and an end and legs to keep the itch company.

Nothing on. Not quieter music. Not a calmer podcast. Nothing. The headphones stay in the bag, the radio stays off, the phone stays in the pocket with the screen dark. A quiet stretch with a thing in it is a filled stretch with a better excuse.

Ten minutes, or the length of the stretch. If the walk is four minutes, it's four. If the shower is eight, it's eight. Don't extend it. The point isn't endurance. It's that the stretch is empty, and an empty four minutes does the job an empty forty would, in a smaller way, and it's the smaller way that you'll do tomorrow.

Expect the itch. Chapter 3 said it's real and chapter 16 said it passes. In the first week it'll take most of the four minutes and you'll arrive at the car twitchy. That's the method working, because the itch is being allowed to happen and to end, and each time it ends the next one is shorter.

Let the drift. Don't direct it. Don't try to think about anything in particular or to think about nothing. Let the mind go where it goes. It'll go to the meeting and the email and the mother, as chapter 4 said, and that's the sorting, and it's what the stretch is for. If it goes somewhere useless, let it. It'll come back.

Notice one thing. Not as an exercise. Just once, on the walk, look at the street. There's a house, a tree, a person. You've been past them with a podcast on for a year. This is what goes missing, coming back, and the first time you see the street it'll be a small surprise.

If the stretch has to be shorter, make it shorter. A two-minute walk to the bus is a two-minute quiet stretch. The size doesn't matter in the first fortnight. The daily emptiness does.

Do it every day for a fortnight before anything else. The one stretch, empty, daily. Don't change the rest of the day yet. By the end of the fortnight the itch will be short and the drift will have produced at least one thought that finished, and that's the evidence you need for chapter 20.

Leave the small ones empty

Once the one stretch is working, there are the small ones. The queue, the wait for the lift, the two minutes for the kettle, the car park, the platform. These are where the fill is most automatic and least chosen, and they're the easiest to leave empty once you've decided to.

Gaps under five minutes stay empty. That's the rule. Anything shorter than five minutes isn't long enough to listen to anything properly and is exactly long enough for a thought to finish. A queue of three minutes with a podcast in it gives you three minutes of a podcast you'll have to rewind. A queue of three minutes with nothing in it gives you the end of the thought you started in the shower.

Headphones in the bag, not the pocket. The pocket is where the default lives. A pair of headphones in a coat pocket goes into ears without a decision. A pair in a bag has a step between it and your ears, and the step is where the decision happens.

Radio off by default. Walk into the kitchen and don't turn it on. If you want a programme, turn it on for the programme, and that's chapter 21. What you're removing is the hand that goes to the switch on the way past because that's what the hand does in kitchens.

The phone stays dark in a queue. The earlier book in this series on the phone has the arrangements for this. The short version is that the phone in a queue is the fill in its most concentrated form, and a

queue with a dark phone is the most ordinary quiet stretch there is, and was, until recently, what everyone did in queues.

Let the small ones be nothing. Not an exercise, not a practice. Standing in a queue looking at the shop. Waiting for the kettle looking out of the window. This is what the minutes were for before there was something to put in them, and it's what they're for now.

Expect the small ones to be easier than the big one. The itch in a two-minute wait barely has time to start. Once the one stretch has taught you that the itch passes, the small ones are almost free, and they add up to more quiet than the stretch does, because there are twenty of them a day.

Choose the fill

The book has spent a long time on what to take out. This chapter is about what to keep, and the answer is most of it, on one condition.

A chosen listen. A podcast you want to hear, put on at a time you've chosen, and listened to. Sat down, or on a longer walk you've set aside for it, with attention. That's not the fill. That's a thing you've decided to do, and it's as good as any other thing you've decided to do, and better than most.

With an end. A chosen listen has an episode, and the episode finishes, and the next one doesn't start on its own. Turn off the autoplay. The end of the episode is a quiet minute arriving, and it's the quiet minute in which the episode gets to become a thought, which chapter 5 said is the half of learning you've been skipping.

Radio on for a programme, off after. The kitchen radio is fine when there's something on you want to hear. Put it on for that, and when it's finished, turn it off, and cook in the quiet. The hum is the radio left on after the programme, and the difference between the two is a hand on a switch.

Television as a thing you watch. A programme you sit down for, with the room's attention, is a chosen thing. A television on in the corner while the evening happens around it is the hum, and chapter 6 said what the hum costs. Watch, or off.

Music you're listening to. Music you've chosen, that you're attending to, is a pleasure and not a fill. Music on because silence felt wrong is the fill. The same album can be either. The test is

whether you'd notice if it stopped.

The test question. Before anything goes on, one question. Am I choosing this, or is this the default? If you're choosing it, put it on and enjoy it. If it's the default, leave the minute empty and see what turns up. Most people find that once they've asked the question, about a third of what they used to put on turns out to be chosen, and the other two-thirds was fill, and they miss the two-thirds less than they'd feared and enjoy the third more than they did.

The decision

You've got the argument and the method. What's left is to decide, and I'd like the decision to fit in one sentence.

One stretch of my day is quiet, gaps under five minutes stay empty, and everything else I put on, I choose.

Three parts.

The first is the stretch. The walk, the shower, the kettle, daily, with nothing on, for as long as it takes. Let the itch. Let the drift. Look at the street.

The second is the small ones. Under five minutes, nothing. Headphones in the bag, radio off by default, phone dark in queues.

The third is the choosing. Everything else can stay, as long as it's a chosen listen with an end, and not the default. The test question before the switch.

There's a form of planning that helps with rules like this, and it's been tested many times. Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran reviewed ninety-four studies of it in 2006. You decide in advance what you'll do and when, in the form "when this happens, I'll do that", and people who plan that way follow through much more often than people who only hold the intention. So write three.

When I leave the house for the car, I'll leave the headphones in my bag and walk with nothing on.

When I join a queue or wait for anything under five minutes, I'll keep the phone in my pocket and look at where I am.

When I reach for the radio or a podcast, I'll ask whether I'm choosing it, and if I'm not, I'll leave the minute empty.

What to expect. This is my expectation and not a finding. The first three days the walk to the car will be four twitchy minutes and you'll arrive feeling that you've been deprived of something. By the end of the first week the itch will be shorter and you'll have noticed the street once, and been surprised by it. In the second week a thought will finish on the walk, one that's been half-formed for a month, and you'll realise that this is where it was always going to finish. The queues will be easier than the walk, because they're short, and you'll find yourself looking at shops. By the third week the kitchen will be quiet by default and you'll turn the radio on for a programme and off after and notice that cooking in quiet is a different thing from cooking with the hum. The podcasts will still be there. You'll listen to fewer and remember more. And around a month in, on a walk, you'll be bored for a minute, properly bored, and it'll be fine, and something will turn up, and that's the book.

Commutes, running, chores, children, sleep and when quiet is more than uncomfortable

The rule holds for every quiet minute. Some need their own paragraph.

Commutes. A forty-minute train journey is long enough for a chosen listen and long enough for a quiet stretch. Do one each way, or the first half quiet and the second a podcast. A commute that's entirely filled every day is the largest daily loss of quiet most people have, and a commute with twenty quiet minutes in it is where a lot of the day's sorting can go.

Running and exercise. Music that carries you through a run is a chosen thing and I'd keep it. A podcast on every run is the fill. Try one run a week with nothing, and notice that the run has a rhythm of its own and that the ideas that arrive on it are different from the ones that arrive on a walk.

Chores. The washing up, the ironing, the garden. These are the undemanding tasks Baird's incubation study was about, and they're the natural home of the drift. A podcast on the washing up takes the one stretch in the evening that was doing the incubating. Try the washing up in quiet for a week, and see what arrives.

Children. Two things. The child in the waiting room with a screen is learning what chapter 15 said. And the child in the car with the radio off is a child who talks, and a parent who can hear them. The quiet in a car is one of the few places a child will tell you things, and the fill takes it.

Sleep. Chapter 11. If the audiobook works, keep it as a chosen listen with a timer. Give the day a quiet stretch earlier so the pillow isn't the first one. If sleep is a real problem, two earlier books in this series are about it, and a GP is the route for anything that's lasted weeks.

Tinnitus. The NHS says that if you have tinnitus you should not have total silence, that soft music or sounds can distract from it, and that loud background noise can make it worse. If that's you, the method's quiet stretch isn't for you, and the sound you keep on is treatment, not fill. Tinnitus UK has a free helpline on 0800 018 0527. Follow the NHS guidance and not this book.

When quiet is more than uncomfortable. The itch this book describes is restlessness. If what arrives in the quiet is dread, or thoughts racing so that you can't follow them, or thoughts that frighten you, or a low mood that's been there most of the day for a fortnight, that's not the itch, and the fill has been managing something that needs a better tool. See a GP, or in England refer yourself to NHS talking therapies. The method here is for ordinary minds meeting ordinary quiet, and it isn't a treatment for anything.

Attention difficulties. Some readers find every quiet minute intolerable in a way that goes with a lifetime of restlessness, distraction and difficulty finishing things. The NHS pages on attention deficit hyperactivity disorder describe this, and a GP is the route to an assessment. The method may still help, in smaller stretches, but the itch for someone with that pattern is a different size, and a book shouldn't pretend otherwise.

When you filled it again

It'll happen. A tired morning, a new episode, headphones in the coat pocket where they used to live, and the walk to the car will have a podcast in it before you've thought. You'll notice at the car.

One filled walk isn't the habit. The list from chapter 1 will show a fortnight of empty walks with one filled one in it, and last month every walk was filled. What happened is that the headphones were in the pocket and not the bag, and the default did what defaults do when nothing's in their way.

Take them out late. At the car, or halfway down the road, when you notice. The rest of the walk is quiet, and a half-quiet walk is half a walk's worth of drift, which is more than none. The method doesn't need the whole stretch. It needs the noticing, and you noticed.

Work out which minute got through. Was it the coat pocket? Then the headphones live in the bag from tonight. Was it a new episode you were excited about? Then that's a chosen listen, and it gets a time, sat down, this evening, with an end. Was it a bad morning that wanted company? Then chapter 14, and the company you actually wanted was probably a person, and the walk in quiet is where you'd have worked out who.

And be fair about the size of it. A filled walk is four minutes of a podcast. Last year it was every minute of every day. The habit hasn't returned. It came round once, found headphones in a pocket, and used them, and the pocket is the thing to fix, not you.

No streaks. Don't count empty days. Count quiet stretches, and let one filled walk be one line in a list that's mostly empty. The fill will come back for a walk now and then for the rest of your life, and each time you'll notice sooner, and the noticing is the skill.

The headphones stay in the bag

You leave the house at ten past eight, some months on. The headphones are in the bag, where they live now, and the walk to the car is four minutes of the street. The house at the corner has scaffolding on it, and you noticed that on Tuesday, and today you notice the scaffolding's gone. Somewhere around the second lamp post the thing about the email finishes. You've had the first half of it for a week. The second half arrives on the pavement, whole, and you'll type it at your desk in three minutes.

The kettle boils in a quiet kitchen. The queue at the post office is a queue, and you look at the shop opposite, which has changed hands, and the man in front of you says something about the weather and you answer. In the car, the radio's off, and your daughter tells you about a thing at school that she wouldn't have told you over a programme, and you hear it, and ask a question, and she answers that too.

The podcasts are still in the app. You listened to one last night, sat at the kitchen table with a cup of tea, the whole episode, and when it ended the next one didn't start, and you sat for a minute with the episode in your head and then went to bed with the audiobook set to twenty minutes, and were asleep at eleven, and didn't wake at three. You remember the episode. You couldn't have said that a year ago about any of them.

There was a bored minute on Thursday, in the car park, properly bored, with the itch in it, and you stood there and were bored, and after a minute it turned into a thought about the friend you haven't

rung since spring, and you rang her that evening, and that's what bored is for.

None of this is a transformation. You filled a walk last week without noticing until the car, and took the headphones out and finished the walk in quiet. The radio still goes on some evenings because you want it, and off when the programme ends. You listen to about a third of what you used to and could tell someone what was in it. And the year, so far, has gone slower than the last one, in the sense that you can remember it, and you've put that down to the quiet, because there's nothing else it could be.

If you take one thing from this book, take this. Tomorrow, leave the headphones in the bag and walk to the car with nothing on, and look at the street. That's the whole method. Everything else is detail.

Notes

This book gives general information about an everyday habit. It isn't medical or psychological advice, and it's no substitute for a GP or a therapist who knows you. The NHS guidance I mention is for England as I found it in September 2026. Nothing in this book is a treatment for anything.

I've kept sources out of the chapters where I could so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Unless I say otherwise, I read the published summary of each paper and not the full text. I checked each paper for a retraction or correction notice in September 2026 and found none. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes chapters 1, 2, 9, 12, 14, 19, 20, 21, 24 and 25. The walk to the car, the kettle, the post office queue, the shower speaker and the audiobook at night are invented.

Before you start. The NHS page "Tinnitus", for the advice against total silence. The NHS pages on depression, for the two-week guide, and on stress, for self-referral to talking therapies, as verified for earlier books in this series.

Chapter 3. Wilson, Reinhard, Westgate, Gilbert, Ellerbeck, Hahn and colleagues, "Just think: the challenges of the disengaged mind", Science 345, 2014, pages 75 to 77. Eleven studies. Used in the earlier book *The phone can wait*. The chapter's claim that the finding is about the first minutes and not about quiet as such is my reading.

Chapter 4. Killingsworth and Gilbert, "A wandering mind is an unhappy mind", *Science* 330, 2010, page 932. Used in the earlier book on the phone as counter-evidence, and here too. The account of the drift as the day being sorted is mine. The earlier book on going over things is It's already over.

Chapter 5. Baird, Smallwood, Mrazek, Kam, Franklin and Schooler, "Inspired by distraction: mind wandering facilitates creative incubation", *Psychological Science* 23, 2012, pages 1117 to 1122. Used in the earlier book on the phone. The extension from a laboratory break to a walk after a podcast is mine.

Chapter 6. Westgate and Wilson, "Boring thoughts and bored minds: the MAC model of boredom and cognitive engagement", *Psychological Review* 125, 2018, pages 689 to 713. The claim that the hum is a demand on attention is my reading of the overstimulation route and not a finding from the paper.

Chapter 7. Eastwood, Frischen, Fenske and Smilek, "The unengaged mind: defining boredom in terms of attention", *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 7, 2012, pages 482 to 495. Bench and Lench, "On the function of boredom", *Behavioral Sciences* 3, 2013, pages 459 to 472. Both are theoretical papers with reviews of evidence. The claim that the fill silences the signal without doing its job is mine.

Chapter 8. Mann and Cadman, "Does being bored make us more creative?", *Creativity Research Journal* 26, 2014, pages 165 to 173. Two small studies, eighty and ninety people, which the chapter says. Baird and colleagues as above.

Chapter 10. Dora and colleagues, "The effect of opportunity costs on mental fatigue in labor/leisure trade-offs", Royal Society Open Science 8, 2021, as verified in full text for the earlier book on the phone. Eighty-three PhD students, exploratory, and the chapter says so.

Chapter 11. The earlier books on the evening and the night are You were tired at ten and Nothing gets solved at three in the morning.

Chapter 13. Wilson and colleagues as above. The two versions and the minute-five test are mine.

Chapter 14. The earlier book on loneliness and ringing people is Ring them first.

Chapter 15. Bench and Lench as above.

Chapter 16. Wilson and colleagues as above. What I say about the itch after five minutes is my observation and not a finding.

Chapter 17. Baird and colleagues, Mann and Cadman, Wilson and colleagues, and Bench and Lench as above. The rest is mine.

Chapter 18. The NHS page "5 steps to mental wellbeing", for paying attention to the present moment. Baird and colleagues as above. The earlier book on reaching for something at the first flicker of a feeling is The feeling will pass without help. The list is mine.

Chapter 22. Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", Advances in Experimental Social Psychology 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119. The rule hasn't been tested as a package, and what I say to expect is my expectation and not a finding.

Chapter 23. The NHS page "Tinnitus" as above, including the Tinnitus UK helpline. The NHS pages on depression, stress and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder as verified for earlier books. Baird and colleagues as above.