

The good old days had problems too

A short book about believing life was better before and won't be again

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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 of mind, and it's a quiet one. Somewhere in your past there's a stretch of years that glows. A summer, a house, a job, a version of the country, a version of you. You go back to it in the car and in the bath and at the end of the pub conversation, and every time you come back the present looks a little greyer, and a sentence arrives that you've stopped noticing. It'll never be like that again.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the habit makes sense from the inside, and that the past you remember is real, and the people in it were real, and going back to them does you some good. The second is that the version of the past you visit has had its problems taken out. Not by you, deliberately, but by memory, which does this to everyone, in ways that have been measured, so that the bad fades faster than the good, the feelings get rewritten to match what you think now, and changes in you get read as changes in the world. The good old days had problems, and you had them, and you've forgotten, and the present is being judged against a past that never existed in that form. The third is practical. Put the problems back. Visit the past on purpose and with an end. And judge today from the same distance you judge nineteen ninety-six from, because in twenty years today is going to glow too, and it would be a waste to find that out only then.

This book doesn't ask you to stop loving what you loved, or to pretend things haven't changed, or to be cheerful about losses that are real. Some things were better. Some people are gone. Chapters

13 and 24 are about that, and they don't argue with it.

Two cautions.

If the past feels like the only place where anything was good, and the present has been grey for most of the day, most days, for two weeks or more, that isn't a habit of mind. It may be depression, and the NHS says to see a GP. Please do.

And if the good old days were good because of a person you've lost, some of what you're feeling is grief, and grief has its own shape and its own help, and chapter 13 says where.

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.

Nineteen ninety-six

There's a photograph on the fridge, or on your phone, of a summer. You're twenty-three, or thirty-one, or nine, and the light is doing something the light doesn't seem to do any more, and everyone in it is laughing, and two of them are dead now. You look at it while the kettle boils and you feel the thing you feel, which is warm and then sad, and then the sentence comes, quietly, in your own voice. It'll never be like that again.

Or it's not a photograph. It's a song on the radio in the car. It's a smell outside a bakery. It's a news story about something that's changed, and you say to the person next to you "it wasn't like this when we were young", and they agree, because they always agree, and the two of you spend a pleasant ten minutes in a decade neither of you can visit and come out of it feeling that the present is a poor thin thing and getting thinner.

These are invented, but I'd guess yours is close. Some words. **The good old days** is your phrase for the years that glow, whichever they are. **The golden version** is those years as memory hands them to you, with the problems taken out. **The whole record** is the same years with the problems put back. **The fade** is the process, which chapter 3 is about, by which the bad in a memory loses its charge faster than the good. **The sigh** is the moment the sentence arrives, it'll never be like that again, and the small drop that comes with it. **The decline story** is the wider belief that the world itself, and not only your life, has got worse. **A visit** is a spell in the past that you chose, that has an end, and that you come back from. **Living there**

is what this book is about instead. And **the same distance** is chapter 22's idea, that today deserves to be judged from as far off as you judge nineteen ninety-six.

Before you go on, do one thing. Take a piece of paper and write down the good old days. The years, the place, the people. Then, for each one, write down one thing that was wrong at the time. Not wrong in hindsight. Wrong then. The thing you were worried about that summer. The job you were stuck in. The person who wasn't speaking to you. The rent. The illness in the family. The relationship that was failing while the photo was taken. Take your time, because this is hard, and it's hard for a reason that chapter 3 explains. Most people who do this find that the problems were there, that they were serious, that they'd forgotten them entirely, and that the summer in the photograph was also the summer of something they'd have given a great deal at the time to be rid of.

Why the good old days feel true

Before I argue with the golden version, I want to be fair to it, because it's made of real things and it's doing something for you.

It really happened. You were there. The summer was warm and the friends were funny and the flat was yours and the country did feel a certain way. This isn't a fantasy. It's a memory, and memories are of things.

The feeling is real too. When you go back there, something in you warms, and that warmth is as real as any feeling you have in the present, and often stronger than most of them. A thing that produces a feeling that strong isn't nothing.

The present has real problems. You're not imagining them. You're older, some things hurt, some people are gone, prices are what they are, the news is what it is. Anyone pointing out the present's problems isn't being unfair.

Everyone agrees. Say "it was better then" in any pub in the country and heads will nod, and the nodding feels like evidence.

It's a comfort. On a hard evening, nineteen ninety-six is somewhere to go, and it's warm there, and nobody can take it from you.

And it keeps people alive. The ones in the photograph who aren't here any more are here in the golden version, and going back is going to see them, and giving that up feels like losing them twice.

There are needs under all this. To feel that life has had good in it. To be connected to people you've lost. To have somewhere warm to go on a cold evening. To make sense of change. Those are good needs and I'll show you that they're met better by the whole record than by the golden version, and that the visit does all of them without the sigh. What I'll show is that the golden version isn't the past. It's a picture of the past made by a process that removes problems, and that the present is being compared not to how things were but to how they've come to look.

"It really was better then"

Start with the belief that holds the whole thing up. Not that the past seems better, but that it was, and that your memory is simply reporting the fact.

Richard Walker, John Skowronski and Charles Thompson, in 2003, reviewed a body of research on how people remember their own lives, and drew two conclusions. The first is that people record more pleasant than unpleasant events in the first place. The second, and the one that matters here, is what they called the fading affect bias. The feeling attached to an unpleasant memory fades faster than the feeling attached to a pleasant one. You remember that the thing happened, but the sting goes out of it, while the warmth of the good memories stays. Over years, the effect is that a stretch of life comes to feel better than it was lived, because the bad in it has cooled and the good hasn't.

Their review also noted something worth holding onto. In people who were mildly depressed, the bias was disrupted. The bad didn't fade. So the fade isn't a flaw. It's a healthy mind's way of carrying its own history, and the people who don't have it are worse off. What it isn't is accurate.

Think about what this means for the summer in the photograph. The summer had a rent problem and a relationship problem and a job problem, and at the time they took up a fair amount of the summer. Twenty years on, the memory of the problems is still there if you go looking, which is why the chapter 1 exercise works, but the feeling has drained out of them. The warmth of the beach

hasn't drained. So when you go back, you get the beach at full strength and the rent at nothing, and that isn't the summer. It's the summer after the fade.

Now do the same for today. Today has a beach in it somewhere, and a rent problem, and both are at full strength because neither has had time to fade. So you're comparing a past with the bad cooled against a present with the bad still hot, and the past wins, and it will always win, and it would win even if the two were identical.

It really was good then. That's true. It wasn't better in the way the comparison says, because the comparison is between two different kinds of thing, and one of them has been through the fade. The rest of this book is about seeing the fade and correcting for it, and chapter 20 is about putting the problems back so that the two can be compared fairly.

"I remember it clearly"

You'd say the fade might be true of other people, but your memories of the good years are sharp. You remember what you felt. You remember being happy.

Linda Levine, in 1997, studied people who'd supported a presidential candidate who suddenly withdrew from a race. She asked them, at the time, how they felt about it. Months later, after the election, she asked them to recall how they'd felt at the time. The recollections had shifted, and they'd shifted in a particular direction. People remembered their past feelings as more in line with how they saw the candidate now. Supporters who'd stayed loyal remembered feeling less angry than they'd said at the time. Those who'd fallen away remembered feeling more so. The feelings hadn't been stored and retrieved. They'd been partly rebuilt from the present.

This is a single study of one event, and the notes say so. But the finding sits with a great deal of other research on memory, which is that remembering isn't playing a recording. It's reconstructing, and the reconstruction uses what you know and feel now as material. So "I remember being happy in nineteen ninety-six" is partly a report and partly a construction, and the construction is being done by a person who believes nineteen ninety-six was the good old days, and who is therefore building a happy memory to match.

You can feel the seam sometimes. A diary from the year, if you kept one, is startling to read, because the person writing it is worried about things you'd forgotten, and doesn't seem to know they're living in the good old days. Old letters do the same. So does a friend who was there and remembers it differently, and says "you hated that job", and you did, and you'd taken the hatred out.

I'm not saying you weren't happy. I'm saying that the sharpness of the memory isn't evidence of its accuracy, and that a memory of a feeling is the least reliable kind, and that the clearest, warmest memories are the ones most likely to have been rebuilt to fit the story. The chapter 1 exercise is a small correction. The diary, if you have one, is a bigger one. Chapter 20 is about going and getting the whole record from wherever it still exists.

"Everything's got worse"

The golden version has a wider form, and it's the one that gets talked about in pubs. Not that your life was better, but that the world was. Safer, kinder, simpler, more decent. Everything's got worse.

Richard Eibach, Lisa Libby and Thomas Gilovich, in 2003, looked at where that belief comes from. In survey data, they found that people who'd been through big personal changes, becoming a parent, a change in their money, were more likely to say the world had changed too, in things like crime and freedom. In experiments, they changed what people knew and found that the people then saw change in the world that wasn't there. And when they drew people's attention to the fact that they themselves had changed, the sense that the world had changed shrank, as long as people had the attention to spare to think it through. Their conclusion was that changes in the self get mistaken for changes in the world, and that this mistake helps produce the widespread belief that society is in decline.

Look at what's changed in you since the good old days. You've become a parent, perhaps, and a parent sees danger everywhere because a parent is supposed to. You've got older, and things that were exciting are now tiring. You know more, and knowing more about how things go wrong makes the world look like it goes wrong more. You've lost people, and a world with fewer of your people in it is a colder world, but it's colder for you, not in general. Every one of those is a change in the observer. Every one of them gets read as a change in what's observed.

There's a test you can run. Pick a thing that's got worse, and ask whether the person who made the observation has changed in a way that would make it look worse whether or not it was. Streets feel less safe. Are you walking them at midnight at twenty-five, or at seven with a pram at forty? Music has got worse. Are you listening to it the way you did at seventeen, all day, with nothing else to do? The answer won't always be that the world hasn't changed. Sometimes it has. But you'll be surprised how often the change is in the instrument.

Everything hasn't got worse. You've changed, and the world looks different through you, and the golden version is partly a portrait of the person you used to be, mistaken for a portrait of the times.

"People were kinder then"

Here's the most common form of the decline story, and the one that feels most like plain observation. People were kinder. More honest. Held doors. Knew their neighbours. Now look at them.

Adam Mastroianni and Daniel Gilbert, in 2023, gathered survey data from around twelve and a half million people, across at least sixty countries, going back seventy years, and asked one question of it. Do people believe that morality is declining? They do.

Everywhere, and in every year the surveys were taken, people said that others were less kind and honest than they used to be. Then the researchers looked at what people said about the morality of their contemporaries in each of those years. It hadn't changed. In nineteen fifty-five people rated the people around them at a certain level, and in twenty fifteen people rated the people around them at about the same level, and in both years they said things used to be better. The decline had been reported continuously for seventy years and had never shown up in the measurements of the present.

They proposed a mechanism made of two ordinary things. First, biased exposure. We hear disproportionately about bad behaviour, because that's what gets reported and repeated. Second, biased memory, which is chapter 3's fade. The bad we heard about in the past has cooled, the bad we're hearing about now is hot, so the present looks worse. And they tested two predictions. When people were asked about people they knew well, rather than people in general, the sense of decline shrank. And when asked about the period before they were born, it went. People don't think morality

declined between eighteen ninety and nineteen twenty. They think it declined during their own lifetime, whenever that was. The decline tracks the observer, not history.

I'd hold the mechanism loosely, because it's a proposed explanation and the notes say so, but the finding is hard to argue with. Seventy years of people saying the same thing about the same unchanging measurement is not seventy years of decline. It's a permanent feature of how the present looks from inside a human life.

People weren't kinder then. The people you knew well then, and the people you know well now, were and are about as kind as people are. The strangers you hear about have always been the worst of the strangers, because those are the ones you hear about, and the ones you heard about in nineteen ninety-six have had thirty years to fade.

"Young people today"

The decline story has a favourite target, and you've probably said it and probably heard your parents say it and possibly heard your grandparents say it about your parents. Young people today. They don't read. They don't respect anyone. They're not as sharp.

John Protzko and Jonathan Schooler, in 2019, ran five preregistered studies with nearly three and a half thousand American adults, and found what you'd expect. Adults believe today's young people are worse than the young people of the past. Then they looked at who believed what, and found the pattern that matters. People who scored highly on respect for authority especially thought young people were less respectful. People who scored highly on intelligence tests especially thought young people were less intelligent. People who read a lot especially thought young people read less. Each person saw decline in the trait where they themselves stood high, and nowhere else.

The researchers proposed two mechanisms. One is that people notice the limitations of others where they themselves excel. A great reader notices non-readers the way a tall person notices low doorways. The other is the one this book keeps meeting, which is a memory bias. People project their present qualities onto their memory of the young people of their own youth. The well-read adult remembers the young people of nineteen ninety-six as readers, because the well-read adult was a reader, and their friends were, and everyone else has faded. Then they compare the

present's young people, all of them, hot, against a remembered youth that has been quietly edited to look like themselves, and a decline appears.

It's a finding about the trait and the observer and not about young people, and that's the point. The young people haven't changed in the ways the complaint says. The complaint has been made, the researchers note, for millennia, and if it were true, humanity would have run out of readers some time before the Romans.

You can catch yourself doing this and it's one of the easier ones to catch. When "young people today" arrives, ask which of your own qualities it's about. It will almost always be a quality you're proud of. Then ask whether the young people you actually knew in your own youth, all of them, and not just the friends who've survived the fade, had it either. They didn't. You were the young person of somebody's decline story, and here you are.

"Everyone I know feels the same"

There's a reason the golden version is hard to give up, and it isn't a private one. Everyone agrees. Say it at a dinner table and you'll be nodded at all round. If the world hadn't got worse, how would so many people have noticed?

Go back to Mastroianni and Gilbert's seventy years. In every one of those years, everyone agreed. In nineteen sixty the dinner tables agreed that things had got worse since the war. In nineteen eighty-five they agreed that things had got worse since the sixties. The agreement was total and continuous and the measurements of the present didn't move. So agreement isn't evidence of decline. It's evidence that the fade and the exposure bias work on everyone, which they do, because they're features of memory and of what gets reported, and not of one person's temperament.

Consider who's at the table. People roughly your age, who lived through roughly the same years, whose bad memories have faded on roughly the same schedule, and who have been exposed to roughly the same bad news. Of course they agree. They're running the same instrument with the same error. If you put a table of twenty-five-year-olds next to you, they'd agree with each other too, and the years they'd be mourning would be the ones you're calling the decline.

And consider what agreement is for at a dinner table. It's a way of being together, and the golden version is one of the most reliable ways of being together that adults have. "Do you remember when" is an invitation, and "it was better then" is the handshake, and

nobody's checking the claim because checking it isn't the point of the evening. That's fine. Chapter 21 is about visiting the past with other people, on purpose, because it's one of the good things the past is for. What it isn't is a survey.

There's a version of the pre-birth finding you can run at your own table. Ask the group whether things got worse between eighteen ninety and nineteen twenty. Nobody has a view. Ask whether they got worse between their own childhood and now, and everybody has a view and it's the same view. If the decline were in the world, it would be visible from anywhere. It's only visible from inside a life, looking back, and that tells you where it lives.

"I was happier then"

Leave the world alone and come back to you. Whatever the surveys say about strangers, you know your own life, and you were happier then. You can feel that you were.

Two things about that feeling. The first is that it's a present feeling about the past, made now, by the fade and the reconstruction from chapters 3 and 4, and that what it reports is how nineteen ninety-six feels to visit, not how it felt to live in. Those are different, and the difference is the whole book.

The second is what the person living in nineteen ninety-six was actually doing. They were worrying. About the rent, the job, the relationship, the thing with their mother, whether they'd ever amount to anything, whether the friend who'd gone quiet was cross with them. They were tired a lot. They had a bad back that year, or a bad flat, or a bad boss. They spent whole evenings on the sofa feeling that life was passing them by. You know this, because you've done the chapter 1 exercise, and the problems came back when you went looking. The person in the photograph was, on the day the photograph was taken, quite likely thinking about something that had nothing to do with the beach.

Here's a test. Imagine writing a letter to yourself in nineteen ninety-six, telling them they're living in the good old days. What would they say? In my experience of asking people this, the answer is some version of "you must be joking". They'd list their problems. They'd say that if these are the good old days then the future must

be dreadful, and they'd be wrong about that too, in the same direction, because in twenty years the future will have faded into its own golden version.

I'm not saying you weren't happy then. Some years are better than others and it's quite possible that one was better than this one. What I'm saying is that "I was happier then" is a comparison between a remembered happiness with the problems removed and a current happiness with the problems left in, and that isn't a comparison the present can win, and its losing tells you nothing about either year.

The person you were then wasn't living in the golden version. They were living in the whole record, the same as you are now, and they'd have been astonished to hear it called the good old days. Chapter 22 is about what that means for today.

"Nothing now will ever match it"

The sigh has a second half, and it's the half that does the damage. Not that it was good then, but that nothing now, or later, will be as good. The best has happened. What's left is the rest.

Notice what kind of statement that is. It sounds like a forecast, but it's a comparison, and it's the comparison from chapter 3. Today, hot, with its problems in, against nineteen ninety-six, cooled, with its problems out. Of course today doesn't match. Nothing could. If you took nineteen ninety-six itself, as it was lived, with the rent and the bad back and the friend who'd gone quiet, and put it next to the golden version of nineteen ninety-six, it wouldn't match either. The golden version beats everything, including the year it's a picture of.

There's a second unfairness in the comparison and it's worth naming. The golden version is made of the peaks. The wedding, the beach, the night everyone stayed up. The present is being judged on a Tuesday. Today is a Tuesday with a work thing and a dentist and a slightly disappointing lunch, and it's being set against the best afternoon of a whole decade, which is not a fair match, and the Tuesday from nineteen ninety-six that you don't remember, because it was a Tuesday, would have lost just as badly.

Now run the fade forward. In twenty years, today will have cooled. The dentist will have gone, the work thing will have gone, the slightly disappointing lunch will have gone entirely, and what will be left is whatever was good in it, which you may not have noticed, because you were busy sighing about nineteen ninety-six. There

will be a photograph from this year on a fridge in twenty thirty-six, and someone will look at it while the kettle boils and feel warm and then sad, and the sentence will come. It'll never be like that again. About now. About the year you're currently writing off.

So "nothing now will match it" is true in the way that no live thing matches a photograph, and false as a forecast, because the forecast is being made by an instrument that can't see the present's good until the present has become the past. The good is there. It's hot and mixed in with the problems, the way nineteen ninety-six's was, and chapter 22 is about learning to see it before the fade does the work for you.

"It's harmless, it's just nostalgia"

Some readers will say I've made a small thing into a large one. Everyone goes back. It's a bit of warmth on a cold evening. It's harmless.

Tim Wildschut, Constantine Sedikides, Jamie Arndt and Clay Routledge, in 2006, ran seven studies on what nostalgia is and what it does. What people go back to, they found, is mostly themselves with people they were close to, or at big events, and the memories carry more good feeling than bad, and often have the shape of a hard time redeemed by a good outcome. What sets it off is negative mood, and one feeling in particular, which is loneliness. And what it does, in their experiments, is make people feel more connected to others, better about themselves, and better in general. Clay Routledge and colleagues, in 2011, added that nostalgia raises the sense that life has meaning, and that it does so through the feeling of being connected to people.

So the objection is half right, and I want to give it that. Going back isn't harmless. It's helpful. It's something a mind does when it's lonely or low, and it works, in the way that going to see an old friend works. It reminds you that you've been loved and that your life has had shape. I'd no more tell you to stop than tell you to stop seeing friends.

But notice what the studies describe. A visit. Someone goes back, is warmed, and comes forward again feeling more connected and more able to face the present. That's the function. Now notice what the sigh describes. Someone goes back, is warmed, and comes

forward again feeling that the present is a poor thin thing compared with where they've been. Same trip, opposite return. The difference is what you carry back, and living there, in this book's sense, is a visit that ends in the sigh rather than in the present.

The distinction isn't mine to invent. It's the difference between going to a funeral and living in the cemetery. The first is right and necessary and does you good. The second is what the golden version, left to itself, turns into, because it's triggered by low mood, and the sigh produces low mood, and low mood sends you back. Chapter 21 is about keeping the visit and losing the sigh. And if going back is the only thing that makes the present bearable, and has been for weeks, that's not nostalgia doing its job. That's the preface's paragraph about the GP.

"Things were simpler then"

Here's a version of the golden version that sounds like plain description. Life was simpler. Fewer choices, fewer screens, fewer things to keep track of. You could just get on with it.

Simpler for whom? In the golden version you're twenty-three, and life is simple because most of its complexity is being held by someone else. Your parents have the mortgage. The government is a thing on the news. Your health is a thing you have. You don't know what the job market is doing because you're not in it yet, or you're in it at the bottom, where the view is short. The simplicity you remember isn't a property of the decade. It's a property of being twenty-three, and the people who were forty-five in nineteen ninety-six did not find it simple. They found it exactly as complicated as you find now, and they were sighing about nineteen seventy-one.

Some of the simplicity is real, and I'll grant it. There were fewer channels, fewer ways to be reached, fewer decisions to make about things that used to make themselves. That's a change in the world and not in you, and chapter 5 doesn't deny that some changes are. But look at what the golden version does with it. It takes a real change in the number of small decisions and turns it into a general claim that life was easier, and life wasn't easier. Life had the rent and the bad back and the friend who'd gone quiet. It had a different set of complications, held by a different set of people, and you were on the easy end of the distribution because you were young.

There's a thing knowledge does that's worth naming. The more you understand how anything works, the more complicated it looks. At twenty-three you didn't know how the health service was funded or what a pension was or why your parents were tense about the car. Now you do, and the world hasn't got more complicated, but your view of it has filled in, and a filled-in view looks like a complicated world. Eibach's finding from chapter 5 is at work here too. The change is in the observer.

Things were simpler then because you were simpler then, and knew less, and held less. The whole record, if you go back and look, has your parents at the kitchen table with the bank statements, and that was the same world, on the same day, in the same house as your simple summer.

"I've lost the people who made it good"

This chapter is different from the others and I want to say so at the start. Some of the good old days were good because of people, and some of those people are dead, and when you go back, you're going to see them. That isn't a bias. That's grief, and this book has no argument with it.

Grief has its own shape and it doesn't follow the fade. The loss of a person can stay hot for years, and the warmth of the memory and the ache of the absence arrive together, and you wouldn't want it otherwise, because the ache is the shape the love takes now. If the good old days are mostly a way of being with someone who isn't here, then what you're doing when you go back is mourning, and mourning is right, and it takes as long as it takes.

The NHS pages on grief point to Cruse Bereavement Support, among others, for anyone who wants help with it, and say to see a GP if you're feeling increasingly low or anxious or the low mood has lasted more than two weeks. I'd add that grief for someone long gone can still be grief, and that it's never too late to get help with it, and that a lot of people who think they have a nostalgia habit have a grief they haven't been able to put down anywhere.

Here's where the golden version and the grief part company, though, and it's worth seeing. The grief is about the person. The golden version is about the era, and it borrows the person to make its case. "It was better then" becomes true because they were alive then, and the whole decade gets their glow, and the present gets judged as the time without them, which it is, but it also has other

people in it, some of whom are sitting next to you and would like to be seen. The golden version can crowd out the grief. Instead of missing one person, clearly, you find yourself missing a decade, vaguely, and the vagueness is easier to live in than the grief and does less for you.

So keep the person and lose the era. Miss them by name. Go and see them on purpose, which is chapter 21, and tell someone about them, which is what the visit is for. And let the rest of nineteen ninety-six be what it was, a year with them in it and with a great deal else, some of it bad, and let today be a year without them and with a great deal else, some of it good, and let the two years stop fighting over a loss that belongs to neither of them.

"I'm just being realistic"

There's a way of holding the golden version that presents itself as toughness. You're not sentimental. You're realistic. Things were better and they've got worse and you're the one prepared to say so.

Look at what realism would require. It would require the whole record. A realistic account of nineteen ninety-six has the rent in it and the bad back and the friend who'd gone quiet and the general election you were furious about and the job you hated. A realistic account of today has the dentist and the work thing and also whatever was good this week, which there was, whether or not it's registered. Realism is putting both years on the table with everything in them and looking. The golden version does the opposite. It takes one year's problems out and leaves the other's in, and calls the result a clear-eyed view.

The realistic person, in other words, is the one who does the chapter 1 exercise and keeps doing it. Who, when the sigh arrives, asks what was wrong that summer, and answers honestly. Who reads the old diary and winces. Who, when the pub agrees that things have got worse, says "have they, though" and means it as a question. That's harder than the golden version, and it's the tough-minded position, and it doesn't feel like it because the golden version has taken the word realism for itself.

There's a reason it has. The decline story has a serious air. Saying things have got worse sounds like the view of someone who's seen a lot and isn't fooled, and saying things are about the same sounds naive. Mastroianni and Gilbert's seventy years of people saying the

same thing suggest it's the other way about. The people who said things had got worse in nineteen sixty were wrong by the measurements, and the ones who said it in nineteen eighty-five were wrong by the measurements, and there's no obvious reason to think the current batch have got lucky.

I'm not asking you to become cheerful about the present. I'm asking you to be realistic about the past, which is where the realism has been missing. The whole record is the realistic one. It has the good in it, all of it, and it also has the rent, and a person holding both is seeing more than a person holding either.

"If I let the past go, I lose it"

Some readers will feel the argument as a threat. If the golden version goes, the past goes with it. The summer stops glowing. The people in the photograph get smaller. This book is asking for a loss.

Two things. The first is that the fade isn't erasure, and neither is the correction. Walker's review found that the feeling drains from bad memories, not that the memories go. The good memories keep their warmth. Putting the problems back doesn't take the warmth out of the beach. It puts the rent next to it. You'll still have the beach at full strength. You'll also have a truer picture of the summer, and a truer picture is more of the summer, not less.

The second is that the visit is the thing that keeps the past, and living there is what wears it thin. Go back to Wildschut's finding in chapter 11. What nostalgia does, when it works, is connect you to the people in the memory, and make you feel that your life has had shape and meaning. That's keeping the past. What the sigh does is turn the same memory into an instrument for measuring the present, and a memory used as a ruler stops being a memory. You stop seeing the friend on the beach and start seeing the fact that you don't have friends like that now, which isn't true, and isn't about the friend.

So the choice isn't between keeping the past and letting it go. It's between two ways of keeping it. The golden version keeps a picture with the problems cut out and uses it to make today look bad. The whole record keeps everything, the beach and the rent and the

friend and the friend's own problems that summer, and visits it, and comes back. The second is more of the past and it costs you less.

There's one more thing. The people in the photograph had problems, and taking their problems out of the picture takes something out of them. The friend who's dead now was, that summer, worried about money and in love with someone who wasn't interested, and that was part of who they were, and the golden version has cut it. Chapter 19 is about this. For now, notice that putting the problems back gives you back the whole person, and not the poster of them, and that the whole person is who you miss.

"The best years are behind me"

The sigh has a version that's about age rather than about any particular year. You're forty-eight, or fifty-five, and the shape of life seems clear. It went up, it peaked, and now it goes down, and the good old days were the peak.

David Blanchflower and Andrew Oswald, in 2008, looked at wellbeing across the lifespan in data on around half a million people in America and Western Europe, with a method designed to separate the effect of age from the effect of which generation someone was born into. What they found, on average and holding other things constant, was not a peak and a decline. It was a U. Wellbeing was relatively high in youth, fell through the thirties and forties to a low point in middle age, and rose again after. They found the same shape in Eastern Europe, Latin America and Asia, in seventy-two countries, and in measures closer to clinical ones, including reported depression and anxiety in a million people in the UK.

I'd hold this loosely. It's an average over a great many lives and yours is one life. Later researchers have argued about the shape and the notes say so. But the finding is worth putting next to the sigh, because the sigh is a forecast and the forecast is a straight line down, and the best evidence on the average shape of a life doesn't draw that line. It draws a dip and a rise. And the dip, if you're forty-eight, is roughly where you're standing.

Here's what that means for the golden version. The years you're mourning may be higher than now on the curve, and now may be the low point, and the sigh may be reporting a real difference. But the sigh's second half, that nothing later will match it, is being made from the bottom of a U by someone who can't see the other side. People in their sixties and seventies, on average, report wellbeing that people in their late forties would be surprised by, and the people in their late forties don't believe it, because from where they're standing the only visible direction is back.

I'm not promising you a happy old age. Some lives don't follow the average, and illness and loss can take the curve anywhere. What I'm saying is that "the best years are behind me" is a claim about the future made with a very specific bias, from a very specific point on a curve, and that the evidence on the curve doesn't support the shape the sigh assumes. The best years might be behind you. On the average, they're not, and the person saying they are is standing in the one place the view is worst.

"I can't help comparing"

You'd agree with all of this and say it doesn't help. The comparison runs on its own. The song comes on, the sigh arrives, and you didn't decide anything.

It runs on its own the way any habit does, which is on a trigger, and triggers can be seen. Here's a rough list, and yours will differ. A song from the years. A photograph. A smell. A news story about something that's changed. Someone your age saying "do you remember". A young person doing something you find baffling. Being tired. Being alone on a Sunday afternoon. Wildschut's finding in chapter 11 adds two that you might not have listed, which are low mood and loneliness, and they're worth noticing because they mean the comparison arrives most reliably when you're least able to argue with it.

An earlier book in this series is about comparing yourself with other people, and its method is to notice the moment of the comparison and ask a question of it. The same works here, and the question is "what was wrong that year". Not as a way of spoiling the song. As a way of putting the whole record next to the golden version at the moment the golden version is making its case. The song can play. You can enjoy it. And while you're enjoying it you can remember that the year it came out was the year of the bad flat, and the song is still good, and the year is now the whole year.

There's a second move, and it's for the sigh itself. When "it'll never be like that again" arrives, add one word. Yet. Or add a question. Like what, exactly? The sigh is vague on purpose. It's comparing

today to a feeling, and a feeling can't be argued with. Ask it for specifics. What was it like, that you're saying it'll never be like again? Warm, with friends, on a beach, with no responsibilities. Two of those are available this summer. One of them isn't and never will be and wasn't as pleasant at the time as it sounds, because no responsibilities meant no money.

You can't stop the comparison arriving. You can stop it finishing. The golden version needs you to accept its account of the year without checking, and the check takes four seconds, and it's the question. That's the whole of chapter 20's method, applied at the moment it's needed, and after a month of it the sigh gets shorter, because it's stopped being allowed the last word.

What the golden version costs you

I've argued the mechanism. This chapter is the bill, and it arrives quietly, which is why it's been allowed to run.

The present, unlived. Every hour in nineteen ninety-six is an hour not spent in the only year you can actually do anything in. The golden version doesn't just dim the present by comparison. It takes time from it, and the time is the thing that in twenty years you'll wish you'd had more of.

The people beside you. The friend on the beach has been compared, silently, with everyone you've met since, and everyone since has lost, because the friend on the beach has no problems and the people since have them. Your partner has been compared with the person you loved at twenty-three, who never left the toothpaste lid off because you never lived with them. Your friends now have been compared with your friends then, who've been edited into the most fun people who ever lived. Nobody can compete with a photograph, and the people who are actually here have been quietly losing to one for years.

Your children, if you have them, hearing the decline story. A child who grows up being told the world has got worse learns that the world they've been given is a poorer one, and that the good time was before they arrived. That's a heavy thing to hand a child, and Mastroianni and Gilbert's seventy years suggest it was handed to you, and it wasn't true then either.

The mood. The sigh isn't neutral. It's a small drop, and it comes several times a day, and several small drops a day is a mood, and Wildschut's finding that low mood triggers the going-back means the mood sends you back for more. That's a loop, and it runs downward.

The decisions. A person who believes the best is behind them makes different choices from a person who doesn't. They don't start things. They don't move, or change jobs, or make new friends, or learn the instrument, because what would be the point when the point has passed. Chapter 16 is about how wrong the forecast tends to be, and this is what acting on it costs.

And the past itself, which is chapter 19.

What it does to the past

There's a cost that lands on the good old days themselves, and it's the one I'd most like you to see, because the golden version is supposed to be how you keep them.

The golden version flattens. Every time you go back and the problems aren't there, the year gets a little smoother, until what you're visiting isn't a year but a poster of one. The beach, the light, the laughing. A summer that was three months long and had a hundred days in it becomes one afternoon, and the afternoon becomes an image, and the image gets thinner each time it's used, until "nineteen ninety-six" is a sentence you say rather than a place you go.

The people in it flatten too, and this is the part that should bother you. The friend on the beach was a person, with a money problem and an unrequited love and a habit of being late and a laugh you can still hear. The golden version has kept the laugh and cut the rest, and what's left isn't them. It's a prop in your picture of your own youth. The dead deserve better than to be props, and so do the living who've been edited the same way, the parents who were, that summer, tense about the car, and are remembered as a calm warm presence in a kitchen because the tension has faded and the warmth hasn't.

And the visit itself decays. Going back should be seeing an old friend. In the golden version it becomes a ritual, the same three images, the same sigh at the end, and rituals stop working. You go

back more and get less, and the getting less feels like further proof that the good is gone, when what's gone is the detail, because you've been visiting a poster.

Putting the problems back restores all of this. The summer gets its hundred days again. The friend gets their money problem and their bad love affair and becomes someone you could have a conversation with, which is what you want. The parents get their tension and their bank statements and their kindness in spite of it, which is a truer and more loving picture than the calm warm kitchen. The year gets to be a year.

If the past is the thing you're trying to keep, the golden version is the wrong way to keep it. The whole record is heavier and more mixed and has things in it you'd rather not see, and it's the past, and the other thing isn't.

Put the problems back

The next three chapters are the method. This one is the chapter 1 exercise, made permanent, and it's the hardest of the three because it works against the fade.

One page per golden year. Take the years that glow, and give each one a page. At the top, what you remember. The beach, the flat, the people. Then a line, and under it the problems column. What was wrong that year. Aim for five. Rent, work, health, a relationship, a worry that took up evenings. You'll get two easily and the other three will need the steps below.

Go to the record. Diaries, if you kept them. Letters and emails and old messages. Photographs, and not the one on the fridge but the fifty on the hard drive around it, which have the bad haircut and the tired face and the flat that was smaller than you remember. Bank statements if you've got them, which tell you what you were worried about better than memory does. The record exists somewhere, and it wasn't made by the fade.

Ask someone who was there. A friend, a sibling, a parent. "What was going on for me that summer?" They'll remember things you've cut, because they didn't have your reasons for cutting them, and some of what they say will be uncomfortable, and that's the whole record arriving.

Write the problems as they were, not as they turned out. The job you hated turned out fine, because you left it. Write the hating, not the leaving. The problems column is what the year felt like to live

in, and living in it, you didn't know how it would end.

Don't take the good out. This isn't a demolition. The beach stays. The point is a page with the beach at the top and the rent underneath, so that when the golden version makes its case, the page is there to answer it. The good old days had problems too. That's the title of the book and it's the whole of this chapter.

Do it once, then keep it. The pages go somewhere you can reach. When the sigh arrives and you can't remember what was wrong that year, which you won't be able to, because that's the fade, you go and look. The looking takes a minute and it's the correction.

Visit, don't live there

The past is for going back to. Wildschut's studies said so, and I believe them, and this chapter is about going back in the way that does the work and not in the way that ends in the sigh.

Choose it. A visit starts with a decision. Put the record on, get the album out, ring the friend who was there. Living there starts with a trigger and a drift. The difference in the first second decides how it ends, because a chosen visit has a purpose and a drift doesn't.

Take someone. Wildschut's finding was that nostalgia does its best work socially, connecting you to the people in the memory and, I'd add, to the person you're remembering with. Go back with the friend who was there, or tell someone who wasn't. "Let me tell you about that summer." The story told to a person is a visit. The images run alone in the car are living there.

Take the whole record. Tell the story with the rent in it. "We were completely broke and Sam was in love with that awful man and we went to the beach anyway." That's a better story and a truer one and it gives the people in it their problems back, which is chapter 19's whole point. The golden version makes for a short story. The whole record makes for a good one.

Give it an end. A visit is over when the record finishes or the story's told. Then you come forward. If you find yourself still there an hour later, in the third replay of the same afternoon, you've stopped visiting.

Come back with one thing. As you come forward, say one thing about today that's good. Not to be positive. To carry the visit's warmth into the year that can use it, which is the way back that Wildschut's participants made and the sigh doesn't. "That was a good summer, and this one has the allotment in it." That's the whole difference between a visit and living there, in one sentence, at the door.

Watch for the low-mood visit. Wildschut's triggers were low mood and loneliness. When you notice you've gone back on a grey Sunday without deciding to, that's information about the Sunday, not about nineteen ninety-six. The answer is often a person, now, rather than a person then, and the phone is closer than the album.

Judge today from the same distance

This is the chapter that turns the argument round, and it's the one most people find changes things.

Ask what will glow. Take today, or this year, and ask what the golden version of it will contain in twenty years. The fade will run. The dentist will go and the work thing will go and what will remain is whatever was good, so find it now. The allotment. The child at this age, who won't be this age again. The friend you see on Thursdays. The kitchen you complain about, which in twenty thirty-six will be "the old kitchen" and missed. There's a photograph being taken this year that will be on a fridge in twenty years, and you can guess which one.

Write today's good bit. One line, most days, of the thing that will survive the fade. Not a gratitude exercise, and I'd avoid the word. A record, for the same reason the problems column is a record. In twenty years the golden version of now will have taken the problems out. The line keeps the good in, so that the whole record of now exists somewhere too.

Write the letter from the future. Once, on a quiet evening, write to yourself from twenty thirty-six, looking back at this year as the good old days. What does the letter miss? What does it say it would give anything to have back? Most people find the letter easy to write and hard to read, because it's true, and because it makes clear that the present is somebody's golden version already. It's just that the somebody is later.

Compare like with like. When the sigh compares today with then, put today's Tuesday next to then's Tuesday, or today's best afternoon next to then's. Not the Tuesday against the beach. The golden version cheats on this every time and the correction is to notice which two things are being compared and pick two that match.

Judge the people at the same distance too. Your partner, seen from twenty years off, will be a person you were lucky to have, with faults that have faded and a laugh you can still hear. You can see them that way now, if you choose the distance, and it changes the evening.

Say the sentence forwards. "It'll never be like this again." Said about today, it's true, and it's not a sigh. It's the reason to be here.

The decision

You've got the argument and the method. What's left is to decide, and this time you can do it in one sentence.

Put the problems back, visit and come back, and judge today from twenty years off.

Three parts.

The first is the whole record. One page per golden year, with the problems column filled from diaries, photographs and the people who were there. Kept where you can reach it for the moment the sigh arrives and you can't remember what was wrong.

The second is the visit. Chosen, with a person, with the whole record in the telling, with an end, and with one thing about today carried back through the door.

The third is the same distance. Today's good bit written down. The letter from the future written once. The Tuesday compared with the Tuesday. The sentence said forwards.

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 the sigh arrives, I'll ask "what was wrong that year" and answer it before I do anything else.

When I notice I've gone back without deciding to, I'll say one good thing about today and then decide whether to stay.

When someone says "it was better then", I'll say "some of it was" and name one thing that wasn't.

What to expect. This is my expectation and not a finding. The problems column will be hard to fill the first time and will fill itself the second, because once one problem is back the others come with it. The first chosen visit with the whole record in it will be a better evening than the last twenty drifts. The letter from the future will make you cry, in a useful way. By a fortnight, the sigh will be arriving with its own answer attached, because the question will have become a reflex. By a month, you'll catch yourself at the dinner table saying "it wasn't, though", and being surprised by how much you enjoy the argument. The past won't glow less. It'll glow the same and be bigger, and today will have started to glow a little, early, before the fade has had to do it for you.

Real losses, illness, a country that has changed, the better job, the better marriage, and when it's more than the past

The rule holds every day. Some cases need their own paragraph, and some of them are cases where the sigh is partly right.

Real losses. Chapter 13 said it and I'll say it again. If the good old days had someone in them who's gone, missing them isn't the habit. Keep the person, by name, and let the era go. If the missing hasn't eased at all in a long time, or has got heavier, the NHS grief pages point to Cruse Bereavement Support and to a GP, and both are for you.

Illness. If the good old days are the years before your body changed, the comparison has something real in it, and I'm not going to argue that a bad hip is a bias. What I'd say is that the golden version has still taken the problems out of the well years, which had their own, and that the whole record of now has good in it that the hip hasn't reached. Both are true. The rule applies to the parts it applies to.

A country that has changed. Some things about the country are different and some are worse, and this book takes no view on which. What it says is that "everything's got worse" is a claim about the measurements and the measurements don't show it, and that "this particular thing has got worse" is a claim you can check, and should, one thing at a time, against the record rather than the feeling. Argue about the things. Not about the era.

The better job. If you had a job you loved and now have one you don't, the comparison may be fair. Put the problems back anyway, because the job you loved had a boss and a commute and a Sunday-night feeling too, and then ask what the loved job had that this one lacks, specifically, because that's a thing you can go and look for, and a decade isn't.

The better marriage. If a past relationship glows, remember chapter 18. You never lived with the toothpaste lid. The golden version of a person you loved at twenty-three is the most edited thing in the whole record, and the person beside you is competing with a photograph. Put that person's problems back with particular care.

When it's more than the past. If the present has been grey for most of the day, most days, for two weeks or more, and the past is the only place with any colour in it, that's the NHS's guide for seeing a GP about low mood, and the method in this book is not a substitute. Nostalgia is triggered by low mood, and a mind that's been low for weeks will go back constantly, and the going back isn't the problem. See a GP. The problems column can wait.

When you spent Sunday in nineteen ninety-six again

It'll happen. A grey Sunday, a song, the album, and three hours later you surface with the sigh fully formed and the afternoon gone and the person you live with wondering where you've been.

One Sunday isn't the habit back. It's a Sunday. The fade has had twenty years to build the golden version and the problems column has had a month, and on a grey day with nobody about, the old thing got there first. That's what old things do.

Put one problem back. Now, before the evening. Go to the page for the year you've been in, or if there isn't one, make it, and write down one thing that was wrong that year. Just one. The rent, the job, the friend. It takes a minute and it breaks the poster, and the afternoon becomes a visit with a late return rather than a lost one.

Work out which trigger did it. Was it the Sunday, and the greyness, and being on your own? Then chapter 21's last paragraph, and the phone. Was it the song, and the drift that followed? Then the question, next time, in the first four seconds. Was it a piece of news about something that's changed? Then chapter 5's test, and the instrument.

Say one good thing about today. The Sunday isn't over. There's an evening in it, and someone in the house, and the way back from chapter 21 can still be taken, late.

No streaks. Don't count days without the sigh. Count visits with a return, and let one lost Sunday be one line in a month that's mostly returns. And notice, because it's the whole book in one observation, that the afternoon in nineteen ninety-six left you lower than you went in, and that's not what the past is supposed to do for you, and it isn't what it does when you visit it properly.

A Tuesday in twenty thirty-six

There's a photograph on a fridge, some years from now. It's of a Tuesday this year. You're in a kitchen you complained about, with a child who was small that year and isn't now, or a friend you saw on Thursdays, or a dog that's gone, and the light is doing something the light doesn't seem to do any more, and everyone in it is laughing.

You look at it while the kettle boils and you feel the thing you feel, warm and then sad, and the sentence starts to come. And then you remember. That Tuesday had a dentist in it. That year had the work thing and the money worry and the friend who went quiet in the spring. You were tired a lot. You spent whole evenings on the sofa feeling that the good years were behind you, and you were wrong about that, and the photograph is the proof, and you've got the page to prove the rest.

So you don't say the sentence. You say the other one. "That was a good year, and so's this one." And you go and find the person who's in the house, and tell them about the Tuesday, with the dentist left in, and the two of you spend ten minutes in a year you can't visit and come out of it warmer, and the present is where you come out.

None of this is a transformation. The good old days still glow. Nineteen ninety-six is still a good summer, and the friend on the beach is still dead, and you still miss them, by name, and some Sundays you still go back without deciding to and have to put a

problem back to get out. The pub still agrees that things have got worse, and you still say "some of it has", and name one thing that hasn't, and enjoy the argument more than you expected to.

What's changed is small. The sigh arrives with its answer attached. The past has its problems back and is bigger for it. And today has started to glow a little, early, before it had to, because you've learned to look at it from twenty years off and see what the fade will leave.

If you take one thing from this book, take this. Tonight, take the year that glows most, and write down one thing that was wrong with it. That's the whole method. Everything else is detail.

Notes

This book gives general information about an everyday habit of mind. It isn't medical advice or bereavement counselling, and it's no substitute for a GP or a counsellor who knows you. The services I mention are for the UK as I found them in September 2026.

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, 10, 12, 14, 17, 19, 20, 22, 25 and 26. The photograph on the fridge, the summer of nineteen ninety-six, the dinner table, the diary and the Tuesday in twenty thirty-six are invented.

Before you start. The two-week guide for low mood is from the NHS pages on depression and on grief, as verified for this and earlier books in the series.

Chapter 3. Walker, Skowronski and Thompson, "Life is pleasant, and memory helps to keep it that way!", Review of General Psychology 7, 2003, pages 203 to 210. A review. The comparison of a cooled past with a hot present is my way of putting their finding.

Chapter 4. Levine, "Reconstructing memory for emotions", Journal of Experimental Psychology: General 126, 1997, pages 165 to 177. One study of one political event, with 227 supporters at the first

wave and 147 at the second. The chapter's wider claim about memory as reconstruction is the general view in the field, and Levine's is the study I'm resting on.

Chapter 5. Eibach, Libby and Gilovich, "When change in the self is mistaken for change in the world", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84, 2003, pages 917 to 931. Survey and experimental data. The instrument test is mine.

Chapter 6. Mastroianni and Gilbert, "The illusion of moral decline", *Nature* 618, 2023, pages 782 to 789. Archival and original data on around 12.5 million people in at least 60 nations over at least 70 years. The mechanism is the authors' proposal and the chapter says so. The years 1955 and 2015 are illustrative of the span and not figures from the paper.

Chapter 7. Protzko and Schooler, "Kids these days: Why the youth of today seem lacking", *Science Advances* 5, 2019, eaav5916. Five preregistered studies of 3,458 American adults. The two mechanisms are the authors' proposal.

Chapter 8. Mastroianni and Gilbert as above. The table test is mine.

Chapter 11. Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt and Routledge, "Nostalgia: content, triggers, functions", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 91, 2006, pages 975 to 993. Seven studies. Routledge, Arndt, Wildschut, Sedikides, Hart, Juhl, Vingerhoets and Schlotz, "The past makes the present meaningful: nostalgia as an existential

resource", Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 101, 2011, pages 638 to 652. Six studies. The distinction between a visit and living there is mine and the studies don't draw it.

Chapter 13. The NHS page on grief, bereavement and loss, fetched in September 2026, names Cruse Bereavement Support among sources of further support and gives the two-week guide for seeing a GP.

Chapter 15. Walker and colleagues, and Wildschut and colleagues, as above.

Chapter 16. Blanchflower and Oswald, "Is well-being U-shaped over the life cycle?", Social Science and Medicine 66, 2008, pages 1733 to 1749. Around 500,000 people in the main data, with further analyses in 72 nations and in mental health measures. The U-shape has been disputed by later researchers on method and on which countries show it, and the chapter says "on average" and "held loosely" for that reason.

Chapter 18. Mastroianni and Gilbert, and Wildschut and colleagues, as above. The rest is mine.

Chapter 21. Wildschut and colleagues as above. The method is mine.

Chapter 23. 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 24. The NHS grief and depression pages as above. No claim is made about the effectiveness of any bereavement service.