

The next episode

A short book about watching far more television than you
planned because the next one starts by itself

unbry · Free to read, yours to keep

<https://unbry.com/read/the-next-episode>

First edition

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

Contents

1. Before you start
2. Just one more
3. Why the next one seems fine
4. "I decided to watch another"
5. "It's just one more episode"
6. "I need to know what happens"
7. "I'll just watch the first two minutes"
8. "It's relaxing"
9. "I can stop whenever I want"
10. "I'll finish the series and then stop"
11. "It's my time, I've earned it"
12. "I'm not tired"
13. "It's the only time we spend together"
14. "Everyone binges now"
15. "I can't sleep straight after anyway"
16. "I've paid for it, I should use it"
17. "Turning autoplay off is fiddly"
18. "I'd feel like I was missing out"
19. What the next one costs you
20. What it does to the show
21. Turn autoplay off

22. Decide the number before the first
23. The end of the evening
24. The decision
25. Weekends, the whole series on a Sunday, children, partners and
when the sofa is more than a habit
26. When it was midnight again
27. The credits roll
28. Notes

Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit. You sit down at half past nine to watch one episode. At quarter past ten the credits start, and before they've finished a countdown appears in the corner, and the next one begins, and you don't stop it. At twenty to midnight you're three episodes in, and tomorrow you're tired, and you say you'll stop earlier tonight, and you don't, because tonight the next one starts by itself too.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the habit makes sense from the inside. The show is good, the evening is yours, and the moment the countdown appears, continuing is easier than stopping. The second is that you didn't decide to watch the next one. A countdown did, and when people don't actively choose, the default chooses for them, and the default was set by someone who wants you to watch more. The cliffhanger at the end of each episode is built to produce a wanting that the next one resolves in its first two minutes. Heavy consecutive viewing goes with worse sleep and more tiredness through a mind that's still running when the head hits the pillow, where ordinary viewing doesn't. And the credits used to be where you stopped, and autoplay took them away. The third is practical. You turn autoplay off, you decide the number before the first episode, and you stop at the credits. Chapters 20 to 23 cover how.

This book doesn't ask you to watch less television, to give up the series you love, or to feel bad about a Sunday afternoon on the sofa. It asks you to be the one who decides how many, rather than a

timer in the corner of the screen.

Two cautions.

If the television is on until midnight because the quiet after it is unbearable, or because the day has nothing else in it, or your mood has been low most of the day for a fortnight, that isn't autoplay and this book isn't the answer. See a GP. The NHS has a two-week guide for low mood and it applies here.

And if your sleep is poor most nights whether or not the television is on, the NHS insomnia pages say when to see a GP, and it's worth reading them alongside this.

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.

Just one more

It's half past nine. The kitchen's done, the children are down, and you've got an hour before bed. You put on the drama, the one with the body in the lake, and you've said, to yourself or to the person beside you, one episode. It's good. At quarter past ten the detective opens a door and sees something and the screen goes black, and the credits start, and in the bottom corner a small box says the next episode will play in five, four, three.

You don't stop it. You didn't decide not to stop it either. The countdown reached nothing and the next one started, and you were still on the sofa, and by the time you'd thought about it the new episode was two minutes in and the thing behind the door had been explained and there was a new thing. At eleven the same. At twenty to midnight the third one ends and you switch it off, because it's twenty to midnight, and you go up, and you lie there with the lake in your head, and the alarm is at seven.

Tomorrow you're tired. Not ruined, just flat, and short with someone at work, and you say you'll stop at one tonight. At half past nine you put it on. One episode.

These are invented, but I'd guess yours is close. Some words. I'll use **autoplay** for the feature, because that's what it's called. **The countdown** is the timer in the corner. **The next one** is the episode that starts itself. **The cliff** is the ending built to make you want it. **The plan** is how many you meant to watch, which is usually one. **The overrun** is the episodes beyond the plan. **The credits** are the natural stopping point at the end of an episode, which autoplay

removes. **The stop** is a deliberate end, which you'll make in chapter 21. **The end time** is the hour the evening finishes, which chapter 22 sets. **A chosen binge** is several episodes decided in advance as an occasion, which is allowed and is chapter 24. And **the arousal** is the researchers' word for a mind that's still running at bedtime, which chapter 7 is about.

Before you go on, do one thing. For a week, keep a list. Each night, how many episodes you planned, how many you watched, what time the screen went off, and one word for how the morning felt. Don't change anything. Most people who do this find the planned column says one or two all week, the watched column says three, and the morning column has the same word down it.

Why the next one seems fine

Before I argue with the next one, I want to be fair to it, because there's nothing foolish in wanting to know what's behind the door.

It's good. The drama is well made. People spent years on it. Watching it is a pleasure, and pleasure at the end of a long day is not a thing to apologise for.

It's relaxing. The sofa, the lamp, the story. This is the hour when nothing's asked of you.

The cliff. The detective opened the door. You can't go to bed not knowing what was behind it. Nobody could.

It's your evening. An earlier book in this series is about staying up late for time of your own, and its point is that the need for that time is real. The next one is where the time goes.

Stopping is harder than continuing. At the credits, continuing requires nothing. Stopping requires finding the remote, pressing a button, getting up. Of course you continue.

Everyone does it. Ask anyone at work how they watched the thing with the lake. Three a night. Some did the whole series in a weekend.

It's a routine, by now. The sofa at half past nine and the screen off at twenty to midnight is the shape the evening has had for years, and a shape that old isn't a choice each night. It's the furniture of the evening, and moving furniture is work.

And it's only television. There are worse things to do until midnight.

There are needs under all of this. For pleasure at the end of the day. For rest. For time that's yours. For the story to be finished. Those are real, and the method later in the book meets them, because the method keeps the show and the sofa and the story. What I'll show is that the next one isn't giving you those things. It's giving you the first episode's pleasure and then two more that were chosen by a timer, and a morning that pays for them, and that the wanting you feel at the credits was built at minute forty-four by someone who knew exactly what it would do.

"I decided to watch another"

Start with the belief that the overrun was a choice. You wanted to see what was behind the door, so you watched on. That's a decision, and a person is allowed to make it.

Eric Johnson and Daniel Goldstein, in 2003, published a short paper in Science about defaults. They compared countries where people are organ donors unless they opt out with countries where they're not unless they opt in, and found that the rate of donors was vastly different between them, not because the people differed, but because the default did. Where you had to act to be a donor, most people weren't. Where you had to act not to be, most people were. The paper's title asked whether defaults save lives, and its point was that when people don't actively choose, the default chooses for them, and that this happens even on decisions that matter enormously. I'm describing the paper from what's generally known about it, and the notes say so.

Now look at the countdown. Five, four, three. If you do nothing, the next one plays. Doing nothing is the default, and Johnson and Goldstein's finding is that doing nothing is what most people do. You didn't decide to watch another. You declined to intervene in a process that was going to play it anyway, and declining to intervene at quarter past ten on a sofa isn't a decision about television. It's inertia, and the countdown was designed around inertia, by people who'd read the same research.

A door that closes on its own unless held is a fair comparison for two sentences. Nobody who's walked through one thinks they decided to close it, and yet it's closed, every time.

Consider what the same evening would have looked like ten years ago, before autoplay. The credits rolled. The screen went to a menu. To watch the next episode you had to pick up the remote and choose it. That was the old default, which was stopping, and most people, most nights, stopped, not because they were disciplined but because the default was on their side. Nothing about you has changed since then. What's changed is which way the door swings.

So "I decided to watch another" is true of the first episode and false of the third. The first was a choice. The third was a countdown reaching zero on a sofa with a person on it, and the method in chapter 20 puts the door back the way it was.

"It's just one more episode"

Here's the sentence itself. Just one more. Said at quarter past ten, and again at eleven, and it's true each time, in the sense that one more is one more.

Emily Walton-Pattison and colleagues, in 2018, surveyed eighty-six people about their binge watching over the past week and about the psychology around it. People reported binge watching on about one and a half days a week on average. Their intentions and their expectations of what watching would bring accounted for some of the variation. But three other things accounted for more, separately. Automaticity, the extent to which the viewing happened without deciding. Anticipated regret, how much they expected to wish they hadn't. And goal conflict, how much the watching got in the way of something else they meant to do. It's a small study and it's a survey, and I'd hold the numbers lightly. The shape is the thing. The behaviour that people call one more episode is one that runs on automaticity, is accompanied by expected regret, and collides with other plans, and that's not a description of a choice repeated. It's a description of a pattern.

Look at your list from chapter 1. The planned column says one. The watched column says three. That's not three nights of choosing one more. It's one pattern, running every night, with the same sentence in it each time, and the sentence is what makes the pattern feel like a series of small decisions rather than one large one. "Just one more" is said at quarter past ten as if quarter past ten were a fresh moment. It's the same moment as last night's quarter

past ten, with the same countdown in it, and the same outcome, and calling it one more each time is what stops you seeing that it's the same three.

There's a second thing in the phrase, which is "just". Just one more is a sentence that minimises before it's finished. It's the size of the episode pleading its case, forty-five minutes, hardly anything, while the fact that it's the third and it's eleven o'clock is left out. The plan didn't say three. The plan said one, and the plan was right, and the sentence is how the overrun gets past it.

"I need to know what happens"

The cliff is the part you'd defend. The detective opened the door. Something was behind it. You can't sleep on that.

Consider when the wanting arrived. Not at half past nine. At quarter past ten, in the last two minutes of the episode, when the writers put the door there. The episode was constructed so that its final scene would produce, in you, a need to see the next scene, and the need was produced on schedule, and you experienced it as your own. It isn't yours in any interesting sense. It was made for you, at minute forty-four, by people whose job is to make it, and it would have been made in anyone sitting where you were.

Now consider when it's resolved. The next one starts, and within two minutes you know what was behind the door, and the need is gone, and you're watching an episode you hadn't planned to watch with the reason for watching it already spent. For the next forty-two minutes there's no cliff. There's a story, which is fine, and then at minute forty-four there's another door. The wanting is built, resolved and rebuilt on a cycle, and the cycle is the length of an episode, and the countdown sits exactly where the wanting peaks.

This is my reading of how episodes are made and not a finding from a study, but I don't think anyone who writes them would dispute it. The cliff is the mechanism by which a show that's designed to be watched in sequence gets watched in sequence, and it works on everyone, and it's supposed to.

Here's the thing about needing to know. It's true tonight and it'll be true tomorrow. The door will still be there at half past nine tomorrow, and what's behind it will be the same, and the two minutes that resolve it will be exactly as satisfying then as now. Nothing about the answer decays overnight. What does change is that tomorrow's version comes at the start of your evening, when you've got the time for it, rather than at the end, when you've got the alarm. Chapter 21 has a test for this, and it's simple. If you need to know, you can know tomorrow. The need survives the night. The sleep doesn't.

"I'll just watch the first two minutes"

There's a compromise the cliff offers, and it feels reasonable. You won't watch the next one. You'll just watch the first two minutes, to see what was behind the door, and then you'll switch off and go up.

Look at what's in the first two minutes of an episode built to follow a cliff. The door is opened, the thing behind it is shown, and the need from minute forty-four is met. Then, within the same scene, something else happens. A phone rings, a face changes, a car is seen outside. The writers know that the resolution of a cliff is the point at which a viewer might leave, and they've put a new hook in the same breath as the old answer, because a two-minute peek that satisfies is a viewer lost. The two minutes are built to prevent the very thing you're using them for.

So the peek isn't a peek. It's the next one, started, with a new reason to continue arriving before the old reason has been paid off, and a person who's watched the first two minutes is a person watching episode four with the remote on the far arm of the sofa. In my observation, and it's only observation, the two-minute peek ends at the credits of the episode it started, nearly every time, and the person who took it says "I just wanted to see" at twenty to midnight as though the wanting had been the plan.

The belief also gives away something about the cliff. If two minutes are enough to resolve it, the cliff was two minutes deep. It was never a thing you needed to sleep on. It was a small manufactured

question with a small manufactured answer, and the answer would be just as small at half past nine tomorrow, when it would come at the start of an evening rather than the start of a night.

The method's answer is the one from chapter 21's cliff test. Will I still be able to find out tomorrow? Yes. Then the credits are the stop, and the two minutes are tomorrow's first two minutes, and tomorrow's evening starts with the door and not with the alarm. If the peek is irresistible, the remote across the room and autoplay off make it cost a stand and a menu, and a stand and a menu is usually enough for the wanting to be seen for what it is, which is minute forty-four, still working.

"It's relaxing"

You'd say the whole point is rest. The evening in front of the drama is the one stretch of the day where you're not doing anything, and a book that wants to shorten it is a book against rest.

Liese Exelmans and Jan Van den Bulck, in 2017, surveyed four hundred and twenty-three adults aged eighteen to twenty-five about their viewing and their sleep. Four in five described themselves as binge viewers. Those who binge viewed more often had poorer sleep quality, more fatigue and more symptoms of insomnia. Ordinary television viewing, the same hours spread differently, wasn't associated with any of that. And when the researchers looked for the mechanism, they found it in what they called cognitive pre-sleep arousal, a mind that's still active when you lie down. The binge viewing went with the arousal, and the arousal went with the poor sleep, and the arousal explained the whole of the link. These were young adults and it was a survey, so it can't prove that the viewing caused the sleep, and the notes say so. But the pattern is the one to hold. It isn't television that goes with bad sleep. It's several episodes in a row, and the reason is that a mind fed three cliffs in an evening doesn't switch off when the screen does.

Viola Granow and colleagues, in 2018, surveyed nearly five hundred people about binge watching and wellbeing and found two things pulling in opposite directions. Watching several episodes felt recreational, and raised wellbeing, when it was experienced as the viewer's own choice and didn't get in the way of anything. When it collided with things the viewer meant to do, and

produced guilt, it lowered wellbeing. The same hours on the same sofa were rest or the opposite depending on whether they'd been chosen and whether they cost something.

Put the two together and look at twenty to midnight. The third episode wasn't chosen, chapter 3 is about that. It collided with bed, which you meant to go to at half past ten. It left your mind running the lake at midnight. On Granow's account it wasn't recreation, and on Exelmans's it's the pattern that goes with the tired morning. The first episode, at half past nine, chosen, ending at quarter past ten with time to wind down, was relaxing. The overrun wasn't. It was the opposite, wearing the first episode's clothes.

"I can stop whenever I want"

You'd say the countdown doesn't control you. You can press stop. You've done it. The remote's right there.

Look at what stopping used to require and what it requires now. Before autoplay, an episode ended and the screen went to a menu and stayed there. Stopping required nothing. It was what happened if you did nothing. Continuing required an act, finding the remote, choosing the next episode, confirming. The default was the stop, and the act was the next one. Autoplay reversed it. Now continuing requires nothing and stopping requires an act, and the act has to happen in a five-second window, against a countdown, at quarter past ten, on a sofa, by a person who's just watched a door open.

Johnson and Goldstein's finding from chapter 3 is that the side of that line people end up on is decided by which side requires the act. Not by whether they're able to act. Everyone in the opt-in countries was able to become a donor. Most didn't, because it needed a form. You're able to stop. Most nights you don't, because it needs a button, in five seconds, at the moment the show has made you least willing to press it.

"I can stop whenever I want" is true in the same way that "I could have filled in the form" is true. It describes an ability, and the research is about what abilities do when a default is pushing the other way, which is very little. The countdown isn't stronger than you. It's just positioned where you're weakest, and it doesn't need to be strong, because it only needs you to do nothing.

The method's answer is to move the line back. Chapter 20 turns autoplay off, and once it's off, stopping is the default again and continuing needs the act, and you'll find that you continue less, not because you've become stronger but because the door swings your way now. That's the whole difference, and it lives in a settings menu.

"I'll finish the series and then stop"

Some readers will grant everything and hold out for the end of the series. Four episodes left. Once it's done, the evenings go back to normal. The overrun is a temporary thing with an end date.

Ask when a series ends. The drama with the lake has eight episodes and a final scene that sets up the second series, because that's how series are made now, and the second series is already in the row underneath, and the countdown at the end of episode eight offers it. The end of the series is another cliff, larger, and the next one is a whole new set of doors.

And when the second series ends, there's the thing the row recommends, chosen for you by what you watched, and it's very like the thing you just finished, and its first episode ends on a door. The catalogue doesn't have an end. It's built not to, and every series in it is built to hand you to the next, and the plan to finish this one and stop is a plan with no place to stand, because there's no moment in the catalogue at which stopping is what happens next.

This isn't a criticism of the shows. Good series set up their next series. That's craft. It's a description of the shape of the thing you're inside, which is a sequence without a natural stop, and inside a sequence like that, waiting for the end is waiting for something the sequence is designed never to provide.

There's a smaller version, which is finishing the episode. You're twenty minutes into the third one and the belief says you've started so you should see it out. Twenty minutes in is twenty minutes into

an episode you didn't plan, and the remaining twenty-five buy you nothing but the next cliff. Stopping mid-episode feels wrong and is fine. The show will resume from the same second tomorrow, which is a thing television can now do and couldn't when the rule about finishing what you started was made.

So "I'll finish the series and then stop" has the order wrong. The stopping has to come first, as a thing you do at the credits, and then the series gets finished at a pace you set, one or two a night, over a fortnight, with the ending arriving on an evening when you can go to bed on it rather than at twenty to midnight with the alarm at seven. You'll still see what happens. You'll see it at a time you chose, which is the only way anyone has ever seen the end of anything and remembered it.

"It's my time, I've earned it"

The evening on the sofa is yours. The day was other people's, and the hour after the kitchen is the one hour that isn't, and if you want to spend it on three episodes, that's the point of having earned it.

An earlier book in this series is about exactly this, staying up late for time of your own, and its argument is worth borrowing. The need for time that's yours is real and not to be argued with. What's worth arguing with is the method, which is taking that time out of sleep, and the book's evidence is that time taken from sleep is paid for the next day at a rate that makes it poor value. I'll refer you to it for the sleep side and take one narrower point here.

The half past nine version of your time and the twenty to midnight version are different hours. At half past nine you're awake, the episode is chosen, and the pleasure is the pleasure of a good drama watched by someone who wanted to. At twenty to midnight you're tired, the episode was chosen by a countdown, and the pleasure is the resolution of a cliff you didn't ask to be left on, followed by forty minutes you'll barely remember. The first is earned time enjoyed. The second is earned time spent, by a timer, on something that costs you tomorrow.

"I've earned it" is a claim about the first hour and it's true. The overrun isn't what you earned. It's what autoplay charged you, and the currency was the morning. If the evening is yours, the way to keep it yours is to be the one who decides how long it is, and chapter 22 is about an end time that's yours as well.

There's a version of this belief that's about fairness, that after a day of other people's demands you're owed something, and the something is the sofa for as long as you like. I'd only say that owed and enjoyed are different things, and that the third episode is owed and not enjoyed, and that the person you're taking it from is you at seven in the morning.

"I'm not tired"

At eleven, when the second one ends and the countdown starts, you're not tired. You were tired at ten. At eleven you're alert, and alert people don't go to bed, so you watch the third.

Anne-Marie Chang and colleagues, in 2015, had people read in the hours before bed, on some nights from a printed book and on others from a light-emitting device, and measured what happened. On the device nights, people took longer to fall asleep, felt less sleepy in the evening, produced less melatonin, had their body clocks shifted later, and were less alert the next morning. The study was of e-readers and not televisions, and the earlier book in this series on staying up late uses it with that caution, and so do I. But the direction is the point. A bright screen in the evening makes you feel less tired than you are and pushes the whole night later.

Add Exelmans's finding from chapter 7. Three cliffs in a row leave the mind running, and a running mind doesn't feel tired, it feels engaged, and engaged at eleven feels like proof that you had another episode in you. It isn't proof. It's the arousal, and the arousal is what the show is for, and it's what keeps you up and what's still running when you lie down.

So the tiredness at ten was true and the alertness at eleven was manufactured. The body had said, at ten, that it was ready, and the screen and the story overrode it, and the override felt like a second wind. The earlier book calls this the second wind and says not to

trust it, and I'd say the same. "I'm not tired" at eleven is the least reliable sentence in the evening, because it's said by a person under a bright screen who's just watched a door open.

The method's answer is to have the credits at quarter past ten be the stop, when the tiredness is still audible, rather than at twenty to midnight, when it's been shouted down. Ten o'clock you was right. Eleven o'clock you was watching television.

"It's the only time we spend together"

For couples, the sofa is the evening. Children down, kitchen done, the two of you and the drama. Take the episodes away and you've taken away the one stretch of the day you have together.

Look at what together consists of at twenty to midnight. Two people on a sofa, facing a screen, one of them asleep. The conversation happened, if it happened, in the gap after the first episode, when the credits rolled and someone said "God, what was behind the door" and someone else said "I reckon it's the brother", and then the countdown reached zero and the conversation stopped because the next one had started. The credits were where you talked. Autoplay took the credits.

Before autoplay, an episode ended and there was a menu, and the menu was where you looked at each other and decided. Another one? A cup of tea? Bed? That decision was a small conversation, and it happened every night, and it was one of the few moments in a day when two tired people checked in with each other about what they wanted. Now the countdown decides, and the checking in doesn't happen, and the evening is two people watching the same thing in parallel, which is a kind of company but not the kind the belief describes.

The method in chapter 20 gives the credits back, and with them the gap, and the gap is where the together happens. One episode, chosen, with the person beside you, and then a menu, and a

conversation about the brother, and a decision made by two people rather than a timer. That's more time together than three episodes in parallel, because it has the two of you in it.

The menu is also where the two of you decide whether it's this show at all. One of you loves the lake and one is watching it to be company, and the countdown never asks, and the menu does. "Do you actually like this?" is a question that gets asked at the credits and never during a countdown, and it's a better evening for being asked.

If the fear is that without the third episode the evening would have nothing in it, that's worth looking at, and it isn't a television problem. But most couples who try one episode and a conversation find the conversation was what they'd been missing, and that they'd been sitting next to it for years with the sound turned up.

"Everyone binges now"

Look around. Everyone watched the lake thing in a weekend. Three a night is how television is watched now, and a book that treats it as a problem is treating the present as a problem.

Exelmans's survey found that four in five of her young adults described themselves as binge viewers. So yes, it's how television is watched, at least by that age group in that place. The same survey found that the ones who did it most had the worst sleep, and that ordinary viewing didn't go with poor sleep at all. Normal and costless aren't the same, and the survey that shows how normal it is shows the cost in the same table.

The word is worth a sentence. Binge was a word for drinking, and it got attached to television by people who wanted to describe watching a series in a sitting, and then it got adopted by the services themselves, cheerfully, as a thing to do. A word that was a warning became a feature. I've used it where the research uses it and I'll use it as little as I can elsewhere, because a person on a sofa at twenty to midnight isn't bingeing. They're watching the next one because it started.

Children are where the normal costs most, and it's worth saying while we're on the subject. Lauren Hale and Stanford Guan, in 2015, reviewed sixty-seven studies of screen time and sleep in school-aged children and teenagers. Ninety per cent found screen time linked with worse sleep, mainly shorter and later. They were careful to say that causation isn't proven and that the studies have limits. But a child in a house where the television plays the next

one by itself is a child learning that this is how evenings end, and Hale and Guan's ninety per cent is what that tends to go with. Chapter 24 has more.

So everyone does it, and it costs everyone the same, and the fact that the cost is spread across a whole country doesn't make it smaller for you. It just means nobody remarks on it, the way nobody remarks on being tired on a Tuesday any more, because everyone is.

"I can't sleep straight after anyway"

Here's a belief that turns the overrun into a kind of hygiene. If you stop at quarter past ten, you're not going to fall asleep at quarter past ten. You'll lie there. So you might as well watch another one and go up when you're actually tired.

Exelmans's finding from chapter 7 is the answer, and it points the other way. The mechanism that linked heavy viewing to poor sleep was arousal before bed, a mind still running. The third episode doesn't make you tired. It makes you more aroused, and more aroused is why you'll lie there, and lying there is then used as the reason for the third episode. The belief describes the problem the overrun causes and offers the overrun as the cure.

What winding down needs isn't more episode. It's less input. An earlier book in this series on staying up late has the evidence on screens and the body clock, and chapter 11 here has Chang's finding that a bright screen in the evening delays sleep and dulls the morning. The stretch between the last credits and the pillow is where the arousal comes down, and it comes down in twenty minutes of something that isn't a screen, a kettle, ten pages, the kitchen tidied, a conversation about the brother. That's what chapter 22's end of the evening is for, and it's the thing the third episode replaces.

There's a version of this that's about routine. You've never gone to bed at half past ten and it feels absurd. I'd only say that the feeling of absurdity is the second wind talking, and that most people who try the credits at quarter past ten and twenty minutes of something

else find they're asleep by eleven within a week, and that the "I can't sleep straight after" turns out to have been "I can't sleep straight after three episodes", which is true and is a fact about three episodes.

And if it's true that you lie awake whatever you do, that's not autoplay and chapter 24 says so. The NHS insomnia pages say when to see a GP, and the method here won't fix insomnia, and shouldn't be asked to. It fixes the third episode, and the third episode is, for most people reading this, why they're lying there.

"I've paid for it, I should use it"

The subscription is fourteen pounds a month, and it's fourteen pounds whether you watch one episode or thirty, and there's a feeling that stopping at one is leaving money on the table.

Two things. The first is that the subscription is paid whether or not you watch, so the marginal episode costs nothing in money and something in sleep. Watching more to justify the fee is spending the morning to feel better about the fourteen pounds, and the fourteen pounds doesn't notice.

The second is that the catalogue can't be finished. There is more on the service than you could watch in a lifetime, and more added every week, and the sense that you should use it is a sense with no satisfaction available. A person who watches three a night to get value from the subscription is a person who'll watch three a night for ever, because the value is never got. The catalogue is designed to be inexhaustible, and treating it as a thing to be used up is treating a tap as a bucket.

Using it well means something else. It means watching what you chose, at a pace you set, and enjoying it, and chapter 19 is about how the pace changes the enjoying. A subscription used for one good episode a night, remembered, is a subscription used. A subscription used for three a night, blurred, is a subscription that's using you.

There's a version of this that's about the chosen binge, and I want to defend it before chapter 24 does. A wet Sunday with nothing on and a series you've been saving, four episodes back to back with a pot of tea, is a fine thing to do with a subscription, and nothing in this book is against it. The difference is that it was decided at lunchtime, on purpose, as an occasion, and the countdown had nothing to do with it. The subscription is for that. It isn't for twenty to midnight on a Tuesday.

"Turning autoplay off is fiddly"

The method's first step is a setting, and the objection to it is that the setting is buried and the menu is annoying and you'll do it at the weekend.

It takes two minutes per service. Settings, playback, autoplay next episode, off. On some devices it's in the account settings online rather than on the television. Two minutes, once, and the countdown is gone from every episode you'll ever watch on that service, and the credits come back, and the door swings your way. Chapter 20 has the general shape.

The fiddliness is worth a second look, though, because it isn't an accident. Autoplay is on by default, and turning it off is a few menus deep, for the reason Johnson and Goldstein's paper describes. The side that requires an act is the side fewer people end up on. If autoplay were off by default and you had to dig through menus to turn it on, most people would never see a countdown, and would watch less, and the services know that, and the setting is where it is. The two minutes it takes are two minutes the design has made as unlikely as it can.

That's the argument for doing it now, tonight, before the next episode rather than at the weekend. The weekend is where settings go to not get changed. It's two minutes, and after them the whole rest of the method gets easier, because the stop is the default again and you're no longer pressing a button against a timer every night.

If there are several services and several devices, do the one you watch most on first. The rest can follow when you next use them. And if a service won't let you turn it off, which some don't on some devices, then chapter 21's number and chapter 22's end time do the work instead, and the remote lives on the far side of the room, so that the act of continuing costs at least a stand.

"I'd feel like I was missing out"

Some of the overrun is about the conversation at work. Everyone's on episode six and you're on episode three, and there's a fear of being the one who hasn't seen it, and of the spoiler in the kitchen at eleven.

Two things. The first is that the show isn't going anywhere. It's on the service, it'll be there next month, and what's behind the door will be exactly as surprising next Tuesday as tonight, provided nobody tells you. The missing out is temporary and the show is permanent, and that's the wrong way round to be worried.

The second is what you'd be missing. A conversation about a drama, in which you say "I'm only on three, don't tell me", which is a conversation people have all the time and which harms nobody. Against that, three episodes a night to keep pace costs you the morning, every morning, for the length of the series, and the morning isn't on the service next month. You can catch up on the lake. You can't catch up on Tuesday's seven hours.

There's a shape to this fear that's worth naming. It treats the show as an event that's happening now, with a schedule, that you're behind on. That was true of television once, when episodes went out weekly and everyone watched at nine on a Sunday, and missing it meant missing it. It's not true now. The whole series is there, and nobody's behind, and the sense of a schedule is something the conversation at work supplies, not the show. The people on episode six aren't ahead of you. They're just more tired.

There's a related fear, which is that the show will be taken off the service before you finish it. That does happen, and rarely, and the answer is that a show you'd lose by watching one a night rather than three is a show you'd have watched in a fortnight either way, and the fortnight isn't the difference between keeping it and losing it. If a title's leaving, the service says so, and a chosen binge on a Sunday is the answer, not three every night.

If a spoiler is a real risk, say so, once, and people will hold off, because most people know what a spoiler does. And if someone tells you anyway, you'll have learned that the thing behind the door was the brother, and you'll watch episode four anyway, because the door was never the point of a good drama. The story is, and it's still there.

What the next one costs you

I've argued the mechanism. This chapter is the bill, and most of it is paid at seven the next morning.

The sleep. Exelmans's finding was that frequent binge viewing went with poorer sleep, more fatigue and more insomnia, through a mind still running at bedtime, and that ordinary viewing didn't. Three cliffs and a lake at twenty to midnight is the pattern the study describes. The NHS says adults need seven to nine hours, and a screen off at twenty to midnight with an alarm at seven is under the bottom of that, before you've fallen asleep.

The morning. Flat, short with someone, a coffee more than you'd have had. The earlier book in this series on staying up late is about what a tired day costs, and I won't repeat it, except to say that the day is where the cost lands and the evening is where it's incurred, and the two never meet, which is why the habit survives.

The plan, broken nightly. Walton-Pattison's participants reported anticipated regret alongside their viewing. That's the feeling at the countdown of knowing you'll wish you hadn't, and watching anyway, and a plan broken every night with the breaking foreseen is a small daily lesson that your plans don't hold, and it generalises.

The guilt. Granow's finding was that watching which collided with other goals and produced guilt lowered wellbeing rather than raising it. The overrun collides with bed every night. The guilt is the morning's first feeling, before the tiredness, and it's attached to a thing that was meant to be rest.

The evenings that were one thing. Three episodes is the whole evening. There was no book, no bath, no conversation in the credits, no early night. The evening had one thing in it and the thing was chosen by a countdown.

The shows themselves. Three in a row blur. Ask yourself what happened in episode two of the thing you finished last month, and notice that you know what happened in the series and not what happened in the episode, because the episodes were watched as one long thing at the end of a day. Chapter 19 is about this, because it's the cost that's closest to what you wanted from the show, and the one the overrun takes most directly.

The remote. This sounds small and isn't. A person who's spent years not pressing stop against a countdown has practised, a thousand times, letting a default decide, and defaults are everywhere, and the practice generalises. The countdown is a small nightly lesson in not intervening, and it's been learned.

And the child, if there's one, who's learning how evenings end.

What it does to the show

There's a cost that lands on the drama itself, and it's the one that persuades people who love television, because it's about the loving.

Amit Kumar, Matthew Killingsworth and Thomas Gilovich, in 2014, ran four studies on what people get from anticipating things, and found that waiting for an experience was itself pleasurable, more so than waiting for a possession, and that the anticipation was part of the value of the experience and not a delay before it. An earlier book in this series uses this for buying. I'm using it for episodes, because an episode is an experience, and the wait for the next one is part of what it gives.

Think about how television used to be watched, and I don't mean this as nostalgia. An episode ended on a cliff, and you had a week. In the week you thought about the door. You talked about it. You had theories. The wanting that the cliff produced lasted seven days and was, on Kumar's account, a pleasure of its own, and when the next episode came the resolution landed on a week of anticipation and meant something. Now the cliff is resolved in the two minutes after the countdown, and the anticipation lasts five seconds, and the pleasure that was in the wait is spent before it's felt.

That's what three in a row does to a show you love. It takes the part of the show that happened between episodes, the wondering, the talking, the looking forward, and removes it, and what's left is the episodes, consecutively, at the end of a tired day, blurring into one.

The show becomes content, which is a word for television that's consumed rather than watched, and the difference between the two is the week.

You don't have to wait a week. One a night is enough to give the cliff somewhere to go. The door opens at quarter past ten, the credits roll, and you go to bed with the door in your head, and it's there in the morning as a small pleasant question, and at half past nine tomorrow you sit down knowing you're about to find out, and the finding out lands on a day of low-level looking forward. That's the show as it was made to be watched, and it's more show than three in a row, not less, because it includes the part the countdown deletes.

People who try this say the same thing, which is that they'd forgotten how good the drama was. They hadn't forgotten. They'd been watching it in a way that removed the good part.

Turn autoplay off

The next three chapters are the method, and this one is a settings menu, which makes it the shortest and most effective chapter in the book.

Every service. Each one has the setting somewhere. Usually under playback, or account, or preferences, and it's called autoplay next episode, or play next automatically, or something close. Off. Do the one you watch most first, tonight, before the next episode.

Every device. The setting on the television may not carry to the tablet or the laptop or the phone. Check each one you watch on. Two minutes each.

The previews too. Most services also autoplay trailers when you hover over a title in the menu. That's a smaller version of the same door, and it's usually in the same settings screen. Off.

What comes back. The credits. An episode ends and the screen shows the credits and then a menu, and stays there, and nothing happens until you do something. That's the stop, restored as the default, and Johnson and Goldstein's finding is that once it's the default, it's where most people end up most nights. You'll be one of them, not because you've changed but because the door has.

Do it now, not at the weekend. Chapter 16 said why. The setting is placed where it's least likely to be changed, and the weekend is the place changes go to not happen. Two minutes, now, and the rest of the method gets easier from tonight.

If it can't be turned off. Some services on some devices don't allow it. Then the remote goes on the far side of the room before the episode starts, so that continuing costs a stand, and chapters 21 and 22 carry the weight.

Expect nothing to feel different, and then notice. The first night the credits will roll and the menu will appear and you'll sit there for a moment, and then you'll do the thing you'd have done ten years ago, which is decide. Most nights the decision will be bed. Some nights it'll be another episode, and that's fine, because it was you.

Decide the number before the first

Autoplay off gives you the stop. This chapter is about deciding, before the evening starts, where it goes.

Say the number before the first episode. One, or two. Out loud if there's someone there, in your head if not. "One tonight." The number is the plan, and a plan said before the show starts is a plan made by a person who isn't yet under the cliff.

The stop is the credits of the last one. When the credits of the episode you said roll, that's the end. Not the first two minutes of the next, to see what was behind the door. The credits. The cliff is designed to make the credits the hardest place to stop, and that's exactly why they're the right place, because a stop that happens there is a stop that holds.

The cliff test. When the door opens and the need to know arrives, ask one question. Will I still be able to find out tomorrow? The answer is always yes. The show doesn't move. The need survives the night and the sleep doesn't, and that's the whole test.

Two on a Friday, if you like. The number can vary by night. Two on Friday and Saturday, one in the week. What matters is that it's decided before the episode and not during the countdown.

When the number's reached, do the next thing. Not sit in the menu. Stand up, screen off, kettle. The credits are the stop and the kettle is the thing after the stop, and a stop with a thing after it holds better than one that's just a silence with a remote in it.

Say it to whoever's on the sofa with you. If you watch with someone, the number is said to them, and it's said before the first one and not during the credits of the last, when one of you has already reached for the remote. Two people who've both said "one" are harder for the door to move than one person who's said it to themselves. And if the other person wants two, you can watch one and go up, and that's allowed, and it's easier than you think after the first time.

Pick the show for the number. A drama with a door at the end of every episode is a one-a-night show. A comedy with episodes that end where they end is a two-a-night show. Knowing which you're sitting down to is part of saying the number, and part of why the number holds.

Write the plan on the list. The list from chapter 1 has a planned column. Fill it in before the episode, not after. A number written down at half past nine is a number you'll see at quarter past ten.

Expect the cliff to be loud for a week. The door will open and the need will arrive and it'll feel like an emergency. Ask the question. Stand up. By the second week the need arrives and you notice it and it's smaller, because you've found out, six or seven times, that it was still there in the morning and that the finding out was better for the wait.

The end of the evening

The number handles the episodes. This chapter is about the evening they sit in, because the evening is where the alarm at seven gets decided.

An end time. The earlier book in this series on staying up late has this as its method and I'll give the short version. Pick the hour the evening ends, work back from the alarm and the seven to nine hours the NHS says adults need, and treat the hour as fixed, the way the alarm is. If the alarm is seven, the end time is somewhere between ten and half past, and the episode fits inside it or it doesn't.

Count back from the end time to the first episode. If the end time is half past ten and an episode is forty-five minutes, one episode starts at nine forty at the latest and two start before nine. That's the arithmetic that turns the number into a start time, and it means that the sofa at half past nine has room for one.

The last credits are the signal. When the credits of the last planned episode roll, the evening's ending has started. Screen off. Kettle. Whatever the twenty minutes before bed are made of in your house. The credits become the thing that begins the end of the day, which is what they were before the countdown took them.

Something after. A book, ten pages. A bath. The kitchen tidied. A conversation about the brother. The end of the evening needs a thing that isn't a screen, because the earlier book's evidence is that

the screen is what pushes the night later, and twenty minutes of something else is the difference between lying there with the lake and falling asleep.

Falling asleep in front of it. Some readers don't overrun. They fall asleep during the second episode and wake at one with the menu on and go to bed cold. That's the same habit with a different ending, and the end time is the fix. If you're asleep by the second episode, the tiredness at ten was right, and the second episode was never going to be watched. Stop at one and go up awake.

Expect the end time to feel early. For a week or two, half past ten will feel like a child's bedtime. That's the second wind talking, and the earlier book is about not trusting it. By the third week, half past ten will feel like the end of an evening, because it will have become one, and the morning will have stopped being a thing you brace for.

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.

Autoplay is off. I decide the number before the first episode, and I stop at the credits.

Three parts.

The first is the setting. Every service, every device, tonight. The countdown gone, the credits back, the stop restored as the default.

The second is the number. Said before the first episode. The stop at the last credits. The cliff test when the door opens.

The third is the evening. An end time, worked back from the alarm. The last credits as the start of the ending. Something after that isn't a screen.

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 sit down to watch something, I'll say how many episodes before I press play.

When the credits of the last one roll and I want to know what happens, I'll ask whether I can find out tomorrow, and stand up.

When the screen goes off, I'll put the kettle on and read for ten minutes before bed.

What to expect. This is my expectation and not a finding. The first night with autoplay off, the credits will roll and the menu will appear and you'll feel a small absence where the countdown was, and you'll sit for a moment and then decide, and most nights the decision will be bed, and it'll be quarter past ten, and it'll feel early. The cliff will be loud for the first week. You'll stand up during it, and the standing up will feel like leaving a room mid-sentence. By the second week you'll have found out, six times, that the door was still there in the morning and that you'd spent the day pleasantly wondering, and the cliff will start to feel like part of the show rather than an emergency. The mornings will change first and most. You'll notice it around the third week, a Tuesday that isn't flat. And somewhere in the first month you'll finish the series, on a night you chose, at a time you could go to bed on, and you'll remember the ending, which you haven't done with a series in years.

Weekends, the whole series on a Sunday, children, partners and when the sofa is more than a habit

The rule holds every night. A few situations need their own paragraph.

Weekends. The number can be two, or three, when the alarm isn't at seven. The end time moves with the morning. What doesn't change is that the number is said before the first episode and the stop is at the credits, because a Saturday that ends at two in the morning is a Sunday spent recovering, and that's a chosen thing only if it was chosen at nine.

The chosen binge. A wet Sunday, a series you've been saving, four episodes and a pot of tea, decided at lunchtime. That's an occasion and this book is for it. The difference from the Tuesday overrun is that it was chosen in advance, as a whole, by a person who wasn't under a cliff, and that it ends at a time you set. Say the number at lunchtime, four, and stop at four, and it's the best kind of afternoon.

Children. Hale and Guan's review found screen time linked with worse and later sleep in ninety per cent of the studies of children and teenagers they looked at, with the caveat that causation isn't proven. Autoplay off on every device children use is the single largest thing you can do for their bedtimes, because a child can't be expected to stop against a countdown when adults can't. And a child who watches a parent say "one, and then bed" and do it is learning how evenings end, which is the lesson chapter 13 said the house is teaching either way.

Partners. If one of you wants the third episode and the other wants bed, autoplay off gives you the conversation at the credits that chapter 12 described, and the conversation is where two people decide, and two people deciding is what a shared evening is. If one of you always wants more, that's a thing to talk about at a different hour, and an earlier book in this series is about raising things.

Different shows. Some episodes have no cliff, and stopping is easy, and some are built entirely of cliffs, and stopping is hard. The number holds for both. For the second kind, the cliff test in chapter 21 is the tool, and the remote across the room is the backup.

When the sofa is more than a habit. If the television is on until midnight because the quiet after it is unbearable, because there's nothing else in the evening, or because the day is something to be got to the end of, that isn't autoplay. It may be low mood, and the NHS's guide is that low mood most of the day for two weeks is a reason to see a GP. Turning autoplay off won't hurt, but it won't be the answer, and the answer is worth having.

When sleep is the problem whatever you watch. If the nights are bad with or without the television, if you lie awake for hours or wake early most nights, the NHS insomnia pages say when to see a GP and what's offered. The method here helps at the edges. It isn't a treatment for insomnia, and a book shouldn't pretend to be.

When it was midnight again

It'll happen. A new series with a door at the end of every episode, a Friday that felt like a Saturday, autoplay quietly back on after an update, and it'll be midnight and you'll have watched four and the alarm will be at seven.

One night isn't the month. The list from chapter 1 shows a month of ones and twos with a four in it, and last year the four was every night. What happened is that the door swung the wrong way for one evening, usually because the setting had reverted or the number wasn't said, and the habit did what it does when the arrangement has a gap in it.

Check the setting tonight. Updates turn autoplay back on more often than you'd think, and a countdown appearing where there wasn't one is the first sign. Two minutes, off again.

Work out which cliff got through. Was it a series with a harder cliff than usual? Then the remote goes across the room for that one. Was it the number not said, because you sat down without thinking? Then the number gets written on the list before the first episode for a fortnight. Was it a partner who wanted more and you went along? Then chapter 24's conversation at a different hour.

And be fair about what a four is. It's a night's sleep short, and a Tuesday that's flat, and that's the whole of it. Last year that was every night and it had no name. Now it's a thing that happened

once, that you noticed at midnight, that has a cause you can find and fix in two minutes, and a Tuesday you'll get back on Wednesday.

No streaks. Don't count nights without an overrun. Count the mornings that weren't flat, and let one midnight be one bad Tuesday in a month of ordinary ones. The morning is the measure. The evening will look after itself once the door swings your way.

The credits roll

It's half past nine, some months on. The kitchen's done and the children are down and you put on the drama, the new one, the one with the lighthouse. You say "one" to the person beside you and they say "one" back, and it's good, and at quarter past ten the keeper finds the letter and the screen goes black and the credits start, and nothing happens. The menu appears and stays there. You look at each other. "It's the daughter," they say. "It's not the daughter," you say. You put the kettle on.

You read for ten pages, in bed, with the letter in the back of your mind as a small pleasant question, and you're asleep by eleven, and the alarm at seven is an alarm and not an ambush, and Tuesday isn't flat, and at some point in the afternoon you think about the letter and look forward to half past nine, which you haven't done with a programme since you were a child and things were on once a week.

The list is in the kitchen drawer. The planned column and the watched column say the same thing most nights, one or two, and the morning column has a different word in it from the one it used to have. There was a four in it a fortnight ago, on a Friday, with a series that had a door at the end of every episode and an update that had turned the countdown back on, and you noticed at midnight and turned it off again on Saturday and didn't make anything of it.

Last Sunday it rained and you watched four episodes of the thing you'd been saving, with a pot of tea, decided at lunch, and stopped at four, and it was one of the better afternoons of the year. The subscription is still fourteen pounds. You use it more than you did, in the sense that you remember what you watch.

Your daughter, who is eleven, asked last month why the television stops now, and you told her, and she rolled her eyes, and on Thursday you heard her say "one, and then bed" to herself on the landing with her tablet, and you didn't say anything, which is a kind of thanks.

None of this is a transformation. The cliff still arrives at quarter past ten and still says what it says. You still stand up in the middle of it, most nights, with the door in your head, and the standing up still feels like leaving a room mid-sentence, and you've stopped minding, because the room is there in the morning and the morning is yours.

If you take one thing from this book, take this. Tonight, before the episode, find the setting and turn autoplay off, and say how many before you press play. That's the whole method. Everything else is detail.

Notes

This book gives general information about an everyday habit. It isn't medical advice, and it's no substitute for a GP or a sleep clinic that knows you. The NHS guidance I mention is for England as I found it in September 2026. No streaming service is named and none is recommended or criticised.

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, 5, 6, 8, 9, 12, 15, 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 25 and 26. The drama with the body in the lake, the lighthouse, the countdown, the partner on the sofa and the seven o'clock alarm are invented.

Before you start. The NHS pages on depression, for the two-week guide, and on insomnia, for when to see a GP, as verified for earlier books in this series.

Chapter 3. Johnson and Goldstein, "Do defaults save lives?", Science 302, 2003, pages 1338 to 1339. PubMed holds no summary of this paper, and the description of its organ donation comparison is from general knowledge of a widely cited paper, which the chapter says. The application to a countdown is mine.

Chapter 4. Walton-Pattison, Dombrowski and Presseau, "Just one more episode': frequency and theoretical correlates of television binge watching", *Journal of Health Psychology* 23, 2018, pages 17 to 24. Eighty-six people, a survey, which the chapter says is small.

Chapter 7. Exelmans and Van den Bulck, "Binge viewing, sleep, and the role of pre-sleep arousal", *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine* 13, 2017, pages 1001 to 1008. Four hundred and twenty-three adults aged eighteen to twenty-five, a survey, which can't establish cause, as the chapter says. Granow, Reinecke and Ziegele, "Binge-watching and psychological well-being: media use between lack of control and perceived autonomy", *Communication Research Reports* 35, 2018. A survey of 499. The application of both to twenty to midnight is mine.

Chapter 8. Johnson and Goldstein as above. The account of the old default is my description of how the technology worked.

Chapter 10. The earlier book in this series on staying up late is *You were tired at ten*.

Chapter 11. Chang, Aeschbach, Duffy and Czeisler, "Evening use of light-emitting eReaders negatively affects sleep, circadian timing, and next-morning alertness", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112, 2015, pages 1232 to 1237. E-readers, not televisions, and the chapter says so. Used in the earlier book on staying up late. Exelmans and Van den Bulck as above.

Chapter 13. Exelmans and Van den Bulck as above, for the 80.6 per cent. Hale and Guan, "Screen time and sleep among school-aged children and adolescents: a systematic literature review", *Sleep*

Medicine Reviews 21, 2015, pages 50 to 58. Sixty-seven studies, with the causation caveat the chapter repeats.

Chapter 18. Exelmans and Van den Bulck, Walton-Pattison and colleagues, and Granow and colleagues as above. The NHS insomnia page, for seven to nine hours. The earlier book on staying up late as above.

Chapter 19. Kumar, Killingsworth and Gilovich, "Waiting for merlot: anticipatory consumption of experiential and material purchases", Psychological Science 25, 2014, pages 1924 to 1931, as verified for the earlier book You didn't want it yesterday. The application to episodes is mine.

Chapter 22. The earlier book on staying up late as above, for the end time and the second wind. The NHS insomnia page as above. Chang and colleagues as above.

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. Hale and Guan as above. The NHS pages on depression and insomnia as above. The earlier book on raising things with a partner is Say it this week.